Literature as testimony: textual strategies and contextual frameworks in Fatima Bhutto’s *Songs of Blood and Sword*

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Four years ago I set out to trace my father’s life. I opened dusty boxes filled with newspaper clippings, letters, diaries and official documents kept and collected by various members of the family over a forty-years period … documents, both written by hand and officially typed, served to build a political as well as a personal chronology (Bhutto 2010, 8–9).

This excerpt from Fatima Bhutto’s *Songs of Blood and Sword: A Daughter’s Memoir* provides a glimpse of the self-consciousness and the ardent toil with which Bhutto commemorates the controversial past of her father, Mir Murtaza Bhutto, the eldest son of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who after his father’s assassination by Zia-ul-Haq (1924–88) the military dictator organised armed resistance against the dictator while being in exile, and later returned to Pakistan to join politics but was assassinated under dubious circumstances. To build this ‘personal and political chronology’, Bhutto mentions her reliance on a vast body of external sources ranging from personal letters to official documents. On the one hand, the reference to the close familial connection establishes the personal motivation to ‘open dusty boxes’ and on the other hand, her dependence on these external sources exhibits her consciousness to be historically accurate. Through her memoir she recreates her father’s past from a daughter’s perspective, rewrites the political history of her country and comes to terms with the self-conscious act of mediating the personal
memories with political history. Indeed, through a close reading of Songs, this article engages with significant questions regarding testimony, its literary representation and the contextual challenges faced by the writer of such work. I analyse different textual strategies and contextual frameworks in Fatima Bhutto’s memoir Songs of Blood and Sword to understand how testimony, in particular transgenerational testimony, is shaped by different contexts, how witnessing functions within a literary text and how different narrative modes can allow testimony to transcend its own spatio-temporal bounds. Is testimony in its very structure compatible with traditional forms of narrative or storytelling? Does literary testimony have an impact on the political consciousness of a society at large?

Published in 2010, Bhutto’s Songs, while focusing on one man’s murder from a familial perspective, puts this murder in parallel with greater political crises in Pakistan. Indeed, within the tradition of anglophone Pakistani literature, Songs is one of the few to position a personal testimony of violence and extrajudicial killing within a larger discourse of national history since the Partition of British India (1947), a constant string of political crises with various dictatorships in the country, the onslaught of War on Terror (2001 to date), the rise in extrajudicial murders as a means of counterterrorism and Drone War (2004 to date). Songs presents a highly interesting case in the contemporary literature of testimony. Firstly, positioning her memoir as an intermediary between familial and political concerns, Bhutto shows how literary testimony conjoins the personal and the political, the historical and the subjective aspects of lived experience. Secondly, the context of her gender, class and the retrospective authorial position creates a more ambivalent and somewhat alternative testimony which diffuses the official and dominant narrative of Pakistani history. Thirdly, its polyphonic discourse, and its use of other documents such as diaries, letters and family photos, not only makes it stand out in the tradition of Pakistani literature written in English but also constitutes a good example of how the multiple contexts of testimony affect the form and style of a narrative. Finally, Songs is also an example of a growing tradition of anglophone Pakistani literature aimed at a more global audience.

The theoretical framework for this reading is informed by theories of testimony and literature by Jacques Derrida, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, Michael G. Levine, Ana Douglass and Thomas Vogler, Maria Delaperrière, Marianne Hirsch, and Michael Richardson. Their insights into the complexity of testimonial literature and the role of the author as a witness, will guide my analysis of Fatima Bhutto’s Songs. This article
relies on the critical concepts usually employed to understand the Holocaust testimony. Although the specificity of the Holocaust as a traumatic historical event cannot be denied, the critical and philosophical engagement to understand witnessing can function as a strong threshold to study other testimonies with different personal and political ramifications. As Hirsch emphasises in a detailed study of the concept of ‘postmemory’:

The beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century – after the brutal dictatorships in Latin America; after Bosnia, Rwanda, and Darfur; during the aftermath, globally, of the events of September 11, 2001; and in the midst of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict – the Holocaust can no longer serve simply as a conceptual limit case in the discussion of historical trauma, memory, and forgetting (Hirsch 2012, 18).

Though not a ‘limit case’, the discussion of testimony in literature as provided by scholars mentioned above can help formulate a more intersecting framework to understand different and sometimes divergent historical traumas in parallel.

**Songs of Blood and Sword: an overview**

*Songs* chronicles the intertwined histories of the Bhutto family and Pakistani society. Bhutto draws the trajectory of her grandfather’s political career and his later assassination. She also breaks the silence surrounding her father’s political activism, his exile and murder. She explains how her grandfather Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, using his nationalist and socialist views, became the most popular politician in Pakistan during the 1960s. Later on, he became the fourth president (1971–73) and the ninth prime minister (1973–77) of Pakistan. Quite soon, however, Z. A. Bhutto emerged as a very controversial figure especially during his presidency both in national as well as international politics. Some of the leading causes for this controversial image were his promise for land reforms against the feudal system, nationalisation of industries in Pakistan, founding of the nuclear programme and a stronger emphasis on the Islamic brotherhood. Moreover, the Indo-Pak wars of 1965 and 1971 made explicit the vulnerable geopolitical condition of the newly independent country. The two Indo-Pak wars laid down the basis of the cold foreign policy between India and Pakistan and further shaped
the international alliances during the Cold War era, whereby China was inclined towards Pakistan and America relied on India for their individual geopolitical goals. The civil war between East and West Pakistan over the election results of 1971 resulted in East Pakistan’s separation into Bangladesh. Z. A. Bhutto became the president of a very demoralised society. His adherence to the nuclear programme in Pakistan, in spite of severe international criticism, the rise of Pashtun, Sindhi, and Baloch nationalism and his non-conformist attitude to the military junta of his time played a key role in his overthrow through a military coup. Thus, in July 1977, General Zia ul Haq dissolved the assemblies and Bhutto was put in jail for allegedly planning a murder of a political opponent. For the next two years, his sons, Murtaza Bhutto and Shahnawaz Bhutto, travelled throughout the world to appeal for justice. Meanwhile, at home Z. A Bhutto, without a chance for fair trial, was hanged under dubious circumstances in 1979 and even his dead body was not returned to the family. As a reaction, both sons, while already in exile, organised an armed resistance against the military dictator. In her memoir, Bhutto includes a comment by the British-Pakistani journalist and writer Tariq Ali, to confirm this version of the events: ‘The failure to win diplomatic support from government around the world played a big part in convincing Murtaza that the only option was armed struggle’ (Bhutto 2010, 176). Later on, the younger son Shahnawaz was found dead under suspicious circumstances. Grounding herself on an interview with the French lawyer, Jacques Vergès, Bhutto holds Benazir responsible for this murder. Murtaza lived in exile until Zia ul Haq was killed in an airplane crash. During his exile, Al-Zulfikar (a militant insurgency organization formed in 1979), controlled by Murtaza, hijacked a Pakistan International Airlines flight and diverted it to Kabul in 1981. In the memoir, Bhutto provides another explanation of this hijack claiming that Salamullah Tipu who joined Al-Zulfikar without Murtaza’s approval was behind the entire planning of the hijack. In 1993, Murtaza came back to Pakistan to launch his political career but this time found another rival in his own sister, Benazir, who, after coalescing with the military establishment responsible for their father’s assassination, became the first woman prime minister of a Muslim country. Murtaza openly criticised Benazir and her husband Asif Ali Zardari’s corruption, nepotism and foreign policies. On 20 September 1996, Murtaza was killed in a police encounter. While the official report states that the police was forced to open fire in response to the attack by Murtaza’s guards, Songs provides a contradictory testimony: her father was killed brutally under a well-planned operation. As his sister Benazir
was in power, Fatima Bhutto puts the burden of ethical responsibility on the seemingly irresponsible state. Beyond this personal and familial terrain, the author puts her father’s murder in parallel with the political unrest of the 1990s in Karachi. Many have called this time a period of civil war resulting in the killing of almost 2000 people in 1995 alone. Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali further describes this as a time of ‘virtual civil war between the security forces of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto’s government and a heavily-armed, ethnically-based political party, the Muhajir Qaumi Mahaz (MQM, or Muhajir National Front), which claims to represent the interests of Karachi’s six million Muhajirs [refugees from India at the time of partition]’ (Yacoobali 1996).

Since the enforcement of Police Act 1861, the police departments of British India and Post-Independence India and Pakistan have used methods of extrajudicial killing, or fake encounters (Rumi 2018). Ever since its independence, the Pakistani authorities have never really tried to do away with the Act as it serves to use the police for the vested interests of a corrupt political system. In the wake of terrorism, the same method has been used by the military authorities as a counterterrorist measurement (Rumi 2018). Storytelling in such a scenario gains supreme importance. In this larger context, extrajudicial killing is not merely killing the ‘other’, it causes double indemnity by killing without giving a legal right of trial or of being heard. Thus the narrative of the ‘other’ is always at risk of extinction – a forced extinction.

**Bhutto as transgenerational witness**

In the absence of the person killed extrajudicially, the next generation witness is responsible not only to narrate his or her own memories about the life of that person but to ensure that some kind of verbal justice is done through the act of storytelling. In this context, the role or the ambiguous nature of transgenerational witnessing needs deeper perusal. What modes of representation are employed by a transgenerational witness for the act of storytelling? How is the act of transgenerational witnessing shaped? How does the transgenerational witness mediate between the witnessing of first-generation’s trauma and his or her own suffering that comes with this encounter? What emotional and subjective interests are at stake in claiming to use the agency of personal, familial witnessing? A witness is one who sees or experiences an event first-hand and subsequently makes a statement about the event. Many scholars define a witness in somewhat similar ways; a witness is ‘a witness to the
truth of what happened during an event’ (Felman and Laub 1992, 80) or the one ‘who was present and is able to testify from personal observation’ (Gordimer 2009, 66) or the one whose figure is ‘credited with a special (typically moral) responsibility’ (Gelfert 2014, 17). ‘[A Witness and testimony] must first be singular, whence the necessity of the instant: I am the only one to have seen this unique thing, […] – you must believe me because I am irreplaceable. When I testify, I am unique and irreplaceable’ (Blanchot and Derrida 2000, 40). The ‘experience’ of the witness in the most corporal as well as figurative way is the gap which makes him different from others. The communication of this gap transforms the witness from victim to survivor. However, a transgenerational witness might seem less authentic as her witnessing relies on her own experience and the experiences of the others. Moreover, in a very literal sense, the transgenerational witness, or a witness speaking on behalf of another generation might be seen as lacking first-hand experience of things she describes. James Young while discussing Art Speigelman’s *Maus* provides an alternative understanding by emphasising that the transgenerational witness by writing the story of his memories of another generation provides a ‘new story “grounded” in a directly perceived reality, that of the “events of transmission” in the form of the artist’s memory of the witness’s memory in the form of “original interviews”’ (Douglas and Vogler 2003, 46). The transgenerational witness mediates between his experience and the experiences of the others on the one hand and the collective traumatic past and the present audiences on the other hand. In Hirsch’s words, to be the postmemory or transgenerational witness ‘is to be shaped, however, indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. This is, I believe, the structure of postmemory and the process of its generation’ (Hirsch 2012, 5).

*Songs* is clearly an example of transgenerational witnessing. The very title of the memoir sheds some light on her position as a witness: *Songs of Blood and Sword: A Daughter’s Memoir* points to the limitations as well as the strengths of her testimony. First, as the title promises a careful configuration of ‘songs’ of personal and political struggles in different generations, the subtitle ‘daughter’s memoir’ emphasises a break in the usual patrilineal legacy; rather than a son, it is a daughter who claims or inherits the past of her father and builds a present reality around it. The reference to a familial bond might also function as a universal appeal to the emotion of the reader. This familial bond also has its limitations. The cover photo confirms this notion: Bhutto is standing
near a window looking through the blinds. She looks outside with a sombre and serious expression and holds her posture with much dignity and without excessive emotion. Like the subtitle, this position brings out her role as an intermediary: while as an observer she only has an outsider’s perspective on her father’s personal experiences, as a daughter she is nevertheless located in an intermediate position between inside and outside. The Bhutto household provides a mediation between her father’s private experiences and the outside space of party politics. By positioning herself in this space, she promises a privileged access to the reality of her father’s life and death. Clearly, her perspective is formulated through a careful mediation of a deeply personal and shared experience and a generational remove facilitated through time and space. What Michael G. Levine says about Spiegelman’s *Maus* is applicable to Bhutto’s experience:

> The subtitle of the first volume of *Maus: My Father Bleeds History*, conveys a sense not only of physical injury, but of psychical wounding and emotional anguish. It suggests that the literally unbearable pain of the first generation will have spilled over somehow into the next, that the still unassimilated historical experience of the father will have bled through the pages of the “survivor’s tale” drafted by his son (Levine 2006, 1).

While narrating her father’s personal and political legacy, Bhutto also writes self-consciously about this *spilling over*. Born in Kabul, and later spending her early childhood in Syria given her father’s exile, she mentions the awareness of homelessness in the form of a double displacement:

> I knew we were landless; I knew I came from somewhere else, somewhere I had never seen. Papa played old Sindhi folk songs, ‘Ho Jamalo’ usually, when he felt like remembering the sounds of his home. He used ajraks, the traditional Sindhi block-printed shawls, as table-cloths and he cooked achar gosht much too spicily (Bhutto 2010, 271).

In an indefinite period of exile, her father resorts to Sindhi (Province of Sindh: the birthplace of the Bhuttos) folk music and food as reminders of a distant homeland. However, Bhutto was neither born in Pakistan nor had she visited it as yet. She nonetheless shares the experience of homelessness and exile with her father without ever knowing the absent home. The *achar ghost* (pickled meat), the *ajrak* (block printed Sindhi shawls)
and the Sindhi folk song *Ho Jamalo*, sung in the praise of a nineteenth-century folk hero, Jamalo Khoso Baloch, serve two different purposes here; for Murtaza they refer to the past memories of lived experience whereas for Bhutto these are absences which in turn inform her own lived experience of connecting with her father's political exile and emotional solitude. Apart from this sense of exile and statelessness, she also inherits the constant fear, uncertainty and sense of danger from her father both literally and figuratively. These fears are given vent many times in the memoir. For instance, through the following comment about insomnia, ‘as a young insomniac, something of a Bhutto family curse, I would be scared to sleep by Papa with my very own personalised bogeyman’ (269); or when she remembers the browbeaten self of her father after her uncle’s death, ‘Papa was totally distraught. I had never seen him so overwhelmed by sadness before and would never again, not like this … Papa’s eyes welled with tears. There was nothing to break the silence … “I’m sad”, he said to me as I shifted uncomfortably next to him’ (267–8). In this passage, Bhutto registers not only her father’s trauma but also the more inherited and submerged trauma of a young girl compelled to witness her father’s political and personal isolation. This transgenerational *spilling over* is not one dimensional in Bhutto’s case. In fact, she refers to an incident when her unconscious memory of her uncle’s dead body is reconfirmed by the memories of her mother. She was only three years old when she saw her uncle Shahnawaz Bhutto’s dead body. Later on, her mother tells her about her childhood behaviour related to this memory:

“It stayed with you for a long time,” Mummy tells me twenty three years later … “You remembered seeing your uncle face down on the carpet and nobody imagined how much it had affected you, but one afternoon, months later, you found your father napping in the bedroom in Damascus and he was lying down like Shah had been, on his stomach, his face covered, and you shook him awake, crying and screaming at him to get up. That’s how we knew. You thought he was dead, like Shah” (267).

This example exhibits the two-dimensional nature of the trans-generational witnessing. In witnessing, forgetting is as significant as remembering. Clearly, the impetus of forgetting comes from avoiding the childhood trauma of facing unnatural death. The posture of a dead body stays as a sign of something horrific and inexplicable. This gesture of forgetting is captured through her mother’s remembering. Thus,
Bhutto’s act of remembering the past depends on her own memories and the memories of others. However, as will be delineated in the later section of this analysis, her ‘witnessing’ also depends on different sources such as the interview with her father’s driver, close friends and even political opponents as well as other personal and official documents. Therefore, her testimony is not limited to what she bore from one generation to another but is inclusive of what her individual witnessing could not incorporate – thus making her testimony transgenerational.

The context of gender, class and authorial position in *Songs*

How is the position of the witness and the act of writing one’s experience shaped, limited or challenged by different contextual frameworks such as class, gender, familial bonds? What role does the testimonial context play in shaping the text, as well as its reception? Testimonial literature and memoir demand a special attention to context. Unlike other forms of literature, testimonial writing is always burdened with the awareness of the traumatic experience situated outside the text, the unique way in which the witness perceived the event and the retrospective understanding with which he or she writes about it. Such a text therefore, always manifests the twofold significance of contextual frameworks. On the one hand, there are the ‘tricks of time and memory’ (Douglas and Vogler 2003), ‘the necessity of fiction’ (Fussell 1996), ‘the lie and the perjury’ (Blanchot and Derrida 2000) playing their role in an individual’s attempt to recount events as they happened years or decades ago. On the other hand, the testimonial writing shows the urgency of communicating the specificity of an experience; what Phillip Dwyer, while analysing the role of storytelling in testimony, calls the necessity of recalling one’s experiences in writing (Dwyer 2017, viii). This experience is situated in different contexts such as sociopolitical milieu, gender, race, ethnicity, class and many other frameworks which specify the position of the witness. Therefore, the meaning and purpose of testimonial writing is tied with the context that bears it. Thus in the case of a memoir or a testimony, the context and text continuously undergo what Felman refers to ‘the contextualization of the text and the textualization of context’ (Felman and Laub 1992, xv).

This synthesis of context and text shapes Bhutto’s *Songs*. The contexts of gender, class and authorial position make her testimony ambivalent, polyphonic and intertextual at the formal level. Her
testimony is informed by divergent sometimes contradictory perspectives of an apologist daughter, an educated upper-class woman and a self-conscious writer. Although seeking empathy by claiming a universal familial bond of a daughter, the daughter, nonetheless, is an upper class educated woman who with the privilege of education and class can empower her perspective as a dissenting voice. Bhutto navigates these tensions by incorporating other voices and testimonies within her memoir. Whenever her familial bond limits her potential of first-hand experience, she resorts to documents, diaries, letters and other intertextual references. While these documents provide further information necessary to her story, they also lend credibility and authority to her account. Indeed, along with her own memories and the memories of her dear ones, Bhutto establishes her authority as a witness by drawing on other sources, shaping the text into a collage of different external sources and personal memories. She often draws from her grandfather’s letters to her father and from Murtaza’s diaries, letters, newspaper clippings. She also publishes excerpts from Venceremos, a magazine established in 1966 by Murtaza aimed at young Pakistanis to create political and social awareness in them. In this way, she positions her literary testimony within the writings of her own family. For example, she refers to If I am Assassinated (1979), written by her grandfather during his imprisonment. In this book, he appeals for justice to the international community and rebuts the charges made against him. The enduring value of his testament lies in its pithy analysis of Pakistani military establishment and political corruption which is relevant even today. Bhutto includes long excerpts from this text in her own memoir, but also comments on its quality and currency as follows:

*If I am Assassinated* was not simply a tract on innocence and justice; it was like his letters – detailed, thorough, and resounding in its eloquence and force. Zulfikar weaves in an analysis of the political coalition that rose against him, the non-aligned movement, and General Zia ul Haq’s Afghanistan connections (Bhutto 2010, 154).

While Zulfikar managed to write the book in prison, Bhutto emphasises the somewhat less known role of her father in getting the manuscript published: ‘Papa knew the book by heart, he could quote from it citing page numbers. I never asked why and in all those years Papa never mentioned his role in its publication’ (154). Following this apologist tradition within the family, Bhutto and her father also reflected on writing a book about his life:
“You should write a book,” I said. Papa laughed loudly and threw his hands up in the air. “I can’t write a book while I’m alive. They would never let me come out into the open with the things I know.” “What do you mean? You have to do it – write a book about your life, Papa…” “No, I can’t. You’ll do it for me. You can write a book on my life” (22).

This excerpt again places Bhutto’s memoir in an already established tradition of literary dissent within her family. It also suggests that she fills the gap her father left by not writing about his life experiences. All in all, these intertextual references to texts by her grandfather and father perform different functions within the text. On the one hand, these references establish the literary tradition of dissent within her family and work as exemplary precedent to her writing. But these references as well as the collage of different sources help to perform another function of creating another picture of her father. In the din of political rivalries, Murtaza’s image was tarnished by his terrorist past. A terrorist is literally the political ‘other’ of the responsible statesman. Bhutto, in order to bring her father out of this ‘political othering’, does provide him with a story as well as a revised history. She projects him as a loving and obedient son (as an evidence to his obedience to Z. A. Bhutto, she produces an excerpt of a letter from Z. A. Bhutto to Murtaza in which he guides his son to go to Afghanistan for help in case of his death), as a responsible and kind father and as a morally upright brother (as even after the death of Zia ul Haq he does not want to sabotage the political career of his sister). Only when he realises the complete political failure of his sister as a prime minister, he decides to go back to Pakistan and join politics. Moreover, Murtaza shows much more political insight (at least the way Bhutto chooses to write about him) than his female counterpart in the family, Benazir. In this way, Bhutto’s memoir is not only a passive rendition of the past of her father, rather it actively reconnoitres the way in which her father as the silenced other is given speech.

In spite of her desire to present her father in a different light, as a conscientious writer she is still able to criticise the political choices made by her father. For example, while discussing how her father organises an armed resistance against the military ruler in Pakistan, Bhutto manifests the ambivalent position of a daughter who wishes to write that book which praises her father sufficiently and an educated woman writer who can see the loopholes within patriarchal forms of violence:

But now I can finally understand the danger that followed my father and Uncle Shah for most of my childhood; it suddenly all makes
sense and while his are not the choices I would make now, I feel secretly proud of my father for abandoning the offer of a bland but comfortable exile in London to fight what he believed was an unjust system (218).

Similarly, at another occasion, while she discusses the attempt made by the Kabul-based organisation of the Bhutto Brothers to kill Zia ul Haq, she comments, ‘But it was irresponsible nonetheless. The attempt on Zia’s life, carried out soon after the PIA hijacking, only created a space, and a legitimate one at that, for Zia and the junta to react against the Bhuttos’ (237).

Finally, she also gives vent to the motivation behind writing this memoir as follows:

I wanted to understand my father. I wanted to break the taboo of talking about what happened in Afghanistan. […] It wasn’t enough just to love him, regardless of his choices. I had to dig deeper and understand what happened through retrospective lenses. My reverence for my father did not change, but my method of questioning did. […] My choice not only gave me the tools to understand a period that had been mythical for me growing up, but also gave me the added benefit of distance when working to understand a history that had deeply personal consequences (203).

In this way, understanding (not necessarily agreeing with) her father’s choices is the aim of writing this memoir. Clearly, this understanding also gives her (and by extension the reader) a better grip on the history of Pakistan and provides a means to analyse the rampant violence rooted within a patriarchal set up from a woman’s perspective.

Apart from the reference to works by her paternal relations, she puts her work in line with other writers and intellectuals who wrote against the oppressive power structures. For example the title of the memoir is taken from Poem of the Unknown:

In you nestles songs of blood and sword
In you the migrating birds
In you the anthem of victory
Your eyes have never been so bright (i)

The poem, written by the Iranian journalist, poet, and persecuted communist Khosrow Golsurkhi (1944–74), conveys the resistant and
dissenting tone of the whole memoir. This tone is further strengthened when Bhutto notes in the introductory pages: ‘Milan Kundera once said that the struggle of people against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting; this is my journey of remembering’ (10). Thus by giving reference to writers dissenting the dominant narrative through their writings, Bhutto quite explicitly creates literary precedents for her own narrative of resistance. Inevitably, perhaps, most of these references are written by men. Thus, building her narrative on the existing male narrative: both her paternal narratives as well as the authorial judgements of male journalists and writers, she adds her own voice to the long-standing familial and literary tradition. Hence, her witnessing is informed by her role as a daughter, as an upper-class educated woman and as an author who is part of a tradition of critical testimonies, both in terms of the works of her own grandfather and father and in terms of the writings of intellectuals around the world.

This dissenting undertone serves a more explicit function outside the text and shapes a different context. Bhutto published her memoir in 2010 in which she puts the responsibility for her father’s murder on the then ruling party, Benazir Bhutto and her husband, Asif Ali Zardari. On 27 December 2007 Benazir Bhutto, who came back to Pakistan after a long exile and had much popularity, was killed in a bomb blast. After this, in the general election of 2008, Zardari became the president of Pakistan (2008–13). It is no coincidence that Bhutto chooses to publish this memoir when the same people are in power. However, if the reason for publication lay in some personal vengeance, it might appear a case of settling an old score by damaging his repute as a president. However, her dissent is informed by her identity as a young Pakistani intellectual, because she highlights the greater and more painful irony of so-called democracy in Pakistan. Zardari’s presidency, in spite of his bad reputation in the past, did bring a new hope for the people. Since Parvez Musharaf’s long stay as a military dictator (2001–08) Zardari was the first democratically elected president. Soon after taking charge, his projects and vision took the country into further difficulties. His decision to tie closer with the United States in fighting the War on Terror resulted in the greatest number of drone attacks on Pakistani soil. According to an estimate, since 2004, of all the 406 drone attacks, almost 356 were conducted during his rule. According to one article published after the completion of his mandate, many impartial analysts regarded ‘his five years’ stint as a period of rampant corruption, bad governance, economic meltdown, nepotism, tall claims but little work, lies and disconnect from ground realities’ (Mumtaz 2013). Within this context, Bhutto’s memoir not only
places the injustices done to her father within a long forgotten historical context, but more importantly, as a young Pakistani she presents the present-day corruption and violence in more comprehensible form.

**Context and text: the question of form**

What role does context play in shaping up the form of the text? How can we appropriate the question of aesthetics, mimetic representation, style and artistic craft in a form of writing which claims a certain form of urgency? Indeed, the question of linguistic representation is inevitably tied to the contextual frameworks of a literary text. The factual and the literary aspect of any testimony pose greater challenges to the author, who has to mediate between the two, and the critic who has to negotiate between the unique and individual position of the author and the collective and objective historical rendition of the same experience outside the text. The apparent conundrum of the mutual exclusivity of the factual and the literary within the genre of literary testimony actually serves to free the context from the spatio-temporal bounds. Various scholars find a basic conundrum in the ‘compossibility’, to use Derrida’s term, of literature and testimony. Delaperrière sums up this puzzle as follows: ‘the notion of testimony already assumes accuracy of rendering someone’s experiences by him/herself, whereas literariness (traditionally understood as a group of stylistic and fictionalizing values) seems to disqualify the truthfulness of such message in advance’ (Delaperrière 2014, 42). As Derrida asserts, every act of testimony already entails the possibility of lie, of perjury:

And yet, if the testimonial is by law irreducible to the fictional, there is no testimony that does not structurally imply in itself the possibility of fiction, simulacra, dissimulation, lie and perjury – that is to say, the possibility of literature, of the innocent or perverse literature that innocently plays at perverting all of these distinctions. [...] In order to remain testimony, it must therefore allow itself to be haunted. It must allow itself to be parasitized by precisely what it excludes from its inner depths [intérieur], the *possibility*, at least, of literature [original emphasis] (Blanchot and Derrida 2000, 30).

The literariness of a testimony is not a hindrance to the proper function of testimony. Indeed, rather than considering it parasitic, like Derrida,
I consider the relation between testimony and literature as one of mutual ‘symbiosis’ where each party benefits from its dependence on the other (Delaperrière 2014, 48). In a court of law, a witness is called in the absence of evidence. The ‘telling’ of the witness formulates the only proof to a happening. Thus justice is the immediate function of the testimony in court, whereas the immediate function of the literary testimony is empathy wherein the reader judges a situation and makes a decision to empathise with the writer. As Richardson explains, ‘the ethical practice of literary testimony, then, might be said to reside in its affect rather than any right per se. The writer takes on the task of translation, shifting history, politics, and violence into the literary imaginary’ (Richardson 2016, 105). The literariness, the craft and the artistic skills act as the means to achieve this empathy and make this ‘literary imaginary’ possible. In this way, testimonial literature using the literariness of storytelling becomes ‘less definitive, more loaded with potential meanings. Not immediate, but eventual. Not concrete, but gestural’ (Richardson 2016, 2). As a result of this mutual symbiosis, a testimony is freed from the spatio-temporal boundaries of its contextual embeddedness and reaches a wider audience in the form of a story. This is most vivid in how quite often testimonial literature shows highly complex formal aspects, as it moves away from textual autonomy to heteronomy, from linear to non-linear narrative modes, from monophonic to polyphonic narration, from a singular to a communal consciousness. Therefore, far from being at odds with the testimonial pact between a witness and an addressee, literariness and storytelling add newer contexts of shaping literature into a political as well as aesthetic tool.

Just as the content of her memoir is guided by different contexts, a similar interdependence is vivid in the form. Bhutto begins by connecting the specificity of her father’s murder to the anonymity of many who are killed in constant political violence in Karachi: “Man found on a highway, cause of death body riddled with bullets, killer unknown – the victim had been shot to death. End of story”. There is nothing new about this’ (Bhutto 2010, 7). She attacks here both the violence endemic to the city and the lack of storytelling about these deaths. Songs defies this silencing as it narrates the story of her father’s life and death. Although the official version holds that her father was killed in an exchange of fire between his personal guards and the police, Bhutto presents a different version of the events. She claims that the personal guards did not open the fire. Rather the police surrounded his car and started to fire with a deliberate plan. She also asserts that her father survived this first round
of fire. She reports how Asif Jatoi, one of the survivors of the attack, describes the experience:

“Mir baba [Murtaza Bhutto] was fine at that point,” Asif Jatoi tells me later. “He didn’t even need to lean on anyone. The police” – Asif remembers the group including Rai Tahir, Shakaib Qureshi and Shahid Hayat – “told Mir baba that they were going to take him to hospital and he walked over to the police car. He got into the open back section, where the policemen sit, and the APC drove off. As it neared Do Talwa, it stopped. We heard a single shot. Then it drove off again.” It was the last shot that killed my father. He had been injured, but he would have survived. He was walking and talking. It would take more than one bullet to kill Papa and the policemen made sure that the last bullet did the job. The last shot, Papa’s autopsy showed, was fired into his jaw at point-blank range. It was fired, forensics confirmed, by a gunman standing over him as he lay down in the police car (401–2).

These interviews by the eyewitnesses are not without a complex legal and political context. The Murtaza murder case was dragged in the court for years. In 2009, however, the court acquitted of murder all the policemen involved and also pardoned the six workers of People’s Party. However, in 2011 advocate Omar Siyal, appearing for Appellant Noor Muhammad, requested to reinvestigate the court trial. This appeal pointed to many flaws and gaps in the previous court trial: the report of the initial inquiry tribunal has not been brought on record, the police officers have not admitted to shooting Murtaza and his guards in self-defence in their records and finally, that the trial court, in spite of lacking any substantial evidence ‘disbelieved’ all seven eyewitness accounts for the reason that they were ‘not of good character’ (Mujahid 2018). By conducting interviews with the survivors who according to the court were unreliable witnesses, Bhutto formulates an alternative testimony, a testimony made inaccessible through court procedure is given its due space in the literary realm. However, the credibility of the memoir relies not just on these witnesses. Rather, a sum total of all the resources (personal, political, historical) allows the readers to decide for themselves whether they would want to trust or believe the testimony of these witnesses. In this way, the legal and political context of Murtaza Bhutto’s murder case provides strong justification for making the memoir a complex collage of different sources.
The use of different intertextual sources makes Songs polyphonic and dialogic in nature. One example of this is her inclusion of dissenting voices – voices that dissented even from her own stance regarding her grandfather and father. For this purpose, she incorporates interviews from many journalists, party workers, friends and foes of her grandfather or father and her aunt. She goes to people who revered her grandfather as the saviour of Pakistan and believed in his vision, and also to people who were his opponents. She goes to people who condemned her father’s political activism and resistance movement and the ones who considered him a national hero. For example, her grandfather’s permission for a military operation in Balochistan (a province in Pakistan where many people have been involved in a separation movement) engendered hatred from the Balochi leaders and political opponents. Out of many interviews conducted for this memoir, one is with Sardar Marri, one of the strong opponents of Bhutto’s strategies in Balochistan, she records, “Bhutto was no different from Hitler,” Sardar Marri revealed, “Before the operation he initiated, death only touched certain areas of the province. Then it affected all of Balochistan. The violence was expanded. Before, our resistance had been traditional, tribal. Then it became more nationalistic” (Bhutto 2010, 118). This form of narrative challenges the dominating and simplistic metanarratives of history. The polyphony of perspectives, the non-linearity of narrative, the inclusion of dissenting voices and the ambivalence offered by a witness, who is a daughter, an educated upper-class citizen and a woman writer of contemporary society, certainly position Songs as a significant contribution to the contemporary testimonial literature in particular and the existing canon of Pakistani literature in English in general.

To conclude, it can be asserted that Bhutto’s Songs is undoubtedly a complex form of transgenerational testimony wherein the main protagonist relies not only on her own memories, but also on tremendous amounts of resources: personal documents, letters, interviews, family photos, official reports. Bhutto mediates between her own experience as a daughter and an heir to the political and personal legacy of the Bhutto family and the experiences of other people. Her identity as an upper-class, educated woman certainly shapes and adds nuances to the way she remembers the past. It offers the perspective of a daughter and upper-class writer on particular moments in Pakistani history. In linking these moments to a larger cycle of violence, Songs transcends its time and place and speaks for the victims of violence to an international community. Songs, therefore, presents an elaborate example of how literary testimony problematises a grand narrative, how it defies the
traditional, linear narrative structures and how the author-witness uses different formalistic structures to not only convey the truth of his or her testimony, but also the difficulty of writing through that testimony. Bhutto’s memoir reiterates the need to understand historical, political and cultural tensions through individual, subjective, and quite often fractal forms of experiences. The multiple contexts shape the form and the content of the text and also give rise to newer contexts in the present-day Pakistan. The somewhat controversial reception of the text within Pakistan and immediate critical acclaim in the international community provide yet another clue to how the contexts of a text keep reinventing and remodulating newer more nuanced contexts of reception and ‘acceptance’.

Notes

1 I use the words 'literary testimony', 'testimonial literature' and 'literature of testimony' interchangeably in this article.

2 Many journalists and close relatives, including Sanam Bhutto, reacted very strongly to this allegation after the publication of the memoir. (For more details see Walsh (2010).

3 A very recent example of such a killing is Naqeebullah Masud, a 27-year-old from South Waziristan, who was allegedly among four suspects killed in an ‘encounter’ with a police team headed by Senior Superintendent of Police Rao Anwar in the outskirts of the metropolis on 13 January 2018. (For more details see ‘Imtiaz Ali’s Anger on Social Media after Waziristan Man Killed in Karachi “Encounter”’, Dawn. 18 January 2018. https://www.dawn.com/news/1383540.) Another incident of extrajudicial killing occurred just after a month when according to Jalal Khan, 34-year-old Moosa Khan was tortured to death by the police on 15 February 2018. (For more details see: ‘Protest over Another “Extrajudicial” Killing’, Dawn. 17 February 2018. https://www.dawn.com/news/1389836.)

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