

Conversations

Nisha Kaushal

Conversations in questions and answers, and conversations without questions and answers...

When you talk through questions & answers, you define a boundary within which the conversation will flow; you choose a target through which you figure out what you want to say. In conversations without questions & answers, the conversation proceeds through suggestions upon suggestions, where the Self has to open out to the Other.

Relationships

[Neelofar's text]

We have a different relationship with everyone. We can say, "I really love my family". This is just a line. If there are ten people in a family, we have a different relationship with each of them. Maybe some are similar, and some are dissimilar. When we give names to relationships, things become simpler. For instance, living together, letting each other's memories go, claiming rights over one another. But does a relationship hold in it all that the name it is given claims for it?

We are straddled with names of relationships even before we are born. But spoiling them, tussling with and understanding them, or understanding yet disregarding them, all these we search for in our relationships ourselves. Sometimes things flow in relationships, and some-

times they become still. Many relationships don't even have a name. Sometimes one doesn't even realise that relationships have been formed.

Let me tell you about one such relationship we have with a girl. Her height is three and a half feet, she is light skinned, has straight hair that she oils and tightly ties in a doubled-up plait with a red ribbon. For the last eight to ten days, she has been coming to our house in the evening, when we switch the TV on. Actually, our TV is on during the daytime as well. In the morning, at eight, my brother Rehan watches Cartoon Network for an hour. No one is allowed to change channels; he ensures this by crying if someone does. In any case, my sister Shaziya, elder brother Rizwan and I are usually asleep at this hour. Only Rehan and my parents are awake – Rehan gets up specially to watch TV. We wake up with the sounds of cartoons, they're almost like our alarm clock. Then, at 9:15, Rizwan switches the TV off and plays the music system. He listens to loud, rhythmic music. Then he leaves for work by about ten am.

Then it's my turn. For around half an hour, I watch film trailers and songs on TV. Then the TV is switched on in the afternoon. My mother likes to watch soaps like *Kumkum*, *Bhabhi* etc. Rehan again watches cartoons from two to three. Once again, no one has the option to change channels. When I go back home in the evening, sometimes the TV is switched on. That is if Shaziya is watching some film. Then it is switched on at seven. Everyone watches *Kumkum* at seven. By this time, Papa also returns from work. He likes to watch *Alif Laila*, and watches news on Aaj Tak, and on Star News channel. No one can change channels when Papa is watching TV. But these days Papa likes to listen to the song *Kaanta Laga*. But everyone likes *Shaka Laka Boom Boom*. At eight, it's time for *Son Pari*, *Khichri*, *Krishna Arjun*. These are serials that Shaziya likes. But at 8:30, no one budes while watching the soap *Kasauti*, which everyone likes.

(The girl comes around this time and stands at our door. Watching the

programmes, she sometimes smiles to herself, and at other times, looks very serious.) Star Plus is on till around ten thirty. Then Rizwan comes and switches to Sony TV to watch the horror show *Aahat*. This makes me really angry because I like to watch *Saas bhi kabhi bahu thi*.

For the last few days, the girl comes to our house promptly at seven in the evening. She stays till eleven, sometimes half past eleven. If we switch the TV off, or if there is a power cut, she leaves.

Initially we didn't say anything to her. Then, after three to four days, my mother said, "Now just think of what kind of a mother she must have, letting her roam around till so late at night. We bring even our boys back by ten at night. How careless can she be?" Then *Ammi* asked her where she lived. She said she lived in Dulah's lane.

When I would ask her to come inside, she would shake her head, as if saying, "Thank you, but I am alright here". Then, *Ammi* would ask her, and she would come in, but she would look really nervous. It seemed as if she was not sitting on solid ground, but on fluffy cotton. She would fix her clothes constantly, though her eyes would remain fixed on the TV. During advertisements between the serials, we would change channels, but it seemed to make no difference to her. She was only concerned with watching TV, whatever was showing on it.

Two to three days ago, Papa brought gooseberries. It was 8:30 or 8:45 pm. Shaziya, *Ammi*, *Abbu* and I were watching *Kasauti*, eating the berries. My brothers were not at home. *Ammi* offered her the berries. When she refused, *Ammi* insisted, and so she took some. Now *Ammi* talks to her sometimes. What did your mother cook today? Who is your mother? Which class are you in...

A relationship has developed between the girl and us through the TV. Soaps and serials flow through this relationship, and in them are mixed feelings. We don't talk much with one another. Only *Ammi* and I ask her to come in and then speak a little with her.

If the TV is switched off, she comes and looks at it, then casts a glance at us. There are questions in those eyes that she leaves us with.

[What everyone said]

[Suraj Rai]

I liked some things that Neelofar talked about. For instance, “we are saddled with relationships even before we are born, but it is up to us to work on those relationships”. Also, “something flows through all relationships”. Something hidden in this line reveals a lot. The question of legitimacy or illegitimacy does not arise in relationships that we make, or desire. Life is about relationships, and these don’t have a boundary. They produce feelings in us, which create distances, or which draw us close to someone. In between all this, sometimes we stop, become still.

[Nasreen]

We bought a colour television a few days ago. That was because our B&W TV stopped catching Star Plus. And *Ammi* is a fan of serials on that channel. So she went one day and bought a new set. We were really happy because it was the first colour TV in the house. There is a woman in the neighbourhood who has a close relationship with us. Her name is Sarfaraz. Sarfaraz *Baji* used to spend a lot of time in our house. With the colour TV, she is at our house more often than before.

My mother used to tell her everything about our house, and she would tell my mother all about hers. She considered *Ammi* to be her sister.

When she would come to our house, she would ask for any channel of her choice to be put on. One day, when my younger sister (who we call *Nannee*) was watching a serial on TV, Sarfaraz *Baji* came home and started asking *Nannee* to change the channel to a film. When *Nannee* refused because she was watching a serial she liked, *Baji* said rude things to her, and when *Ammi* came back home, she complained to *Ammi*. When *Nannee* said, “She is the one who said all kinds of things to me”, she herself got scolded by *Ammi*.

Before leaving, *Baji* said to my mother, "Your daughter has become very impertinent. Such daughters should be poisoned and put to death". Hearing this, my elder sister said, "Why don't you poison your own daughter?" When it came to her own daughter, Sarfaraz *Baji* started fighting with her. My mother made my sister stop, but Sarfaraz *Baji* left and didn't come for a few days.

After some days, *Ammi* sent for her, and she came. They talked for long and then she resumed frequenting our house. Now she comes to watch TV when her TV set is not working.

[Naseem Bano]

The house looks nice with a TV. Because even when the TV is switched off, the house looks filled up. I used to go to Munni *Baji's* house, just to watch serials. I never liked any of the soaps on Star Plus, but when I would hear the story from my sisters and other girls, I would feel like watching the serials as well. So I used to go to Munni *Baji's* house at seven in the evening everyday.

Initially I would stand and watch TV. They would ask me to sit, but I would refuse because I felt weird watching TV in other peoples' houses. But they were really nice to me, and were never irritated by my presence because I was the only one who used to go to their house.

The episode would always end at a note of suspense and leave a desire to know what would happen next. My visits to their house increased a lot, and sometimes I would stay there till ten or ten thirty because I would watch one serial after the next. Now my hesitation had ended, and I would go and sit on their *takht* on my own. I didn't hang around to chat after the serials, but would go home straight.

Ammi would really scold me for coming home so late. I would stop for a day or two, and then resume going. Now I haven't gone to their house for around a month and a half. That's because now there is a TV set on the roof of one of our neighbours. I don't know those people.

My elder sister used to go to our *Khala's* house to watch TV. Now she also doesn't go.

We can see their TV set and hear it clearly because their roof is high. Now why should I watch a B&W TV when I can be watching serials in colour?

[Shahana Qureshi]

Our TV set had stopped working a few months back. Shabana *Baji* said she would not get the TV fixed this time. She said we would get a new TV. A month passed. Then another, and another. The reason was – money.

Meanwhile, Osama, my nephew, went with his mother, my sister, to her friend's house. He watched TV there and said to his mother's friend, "You get *Son Pari* and *Shaka Laka Boom* on TV!" His mother was surprised that he knew the names of TV serials. He is three and a half years old.

We got a TV a month ago. It's not new, the old TV was fixed. Osama spends his day watching it. He keeps the remote in his hands all day. When any serial finished, he takes the name of the serial and asks, "When will it come now?" We keep wondering how he will ever manage school. He is old enough to start attending one. And we think that perhaps we should get the cable connection removed. Maybe it was better without the TV!

[Bobby Khan]

When Neelofar read her text, I could visualise the girl. Hair tied with a red ribbon, using her eyes to refuse coming into the house, and reaching Neelofar's house to watch TV everyday. I felt as if I knew her to some extent.

That's because I do know a girl like that. She comes from the side where Zebun *Khala* lives. She carries a three to four month old child

with her. Often, she sits opposite our house, with her back resting against the wall where the *takht* is kept. Seeing her, my sister says, “*O ri O!* Don’t bring your sister with you. She is so thin and frail. And she keeps crying”.

This girl also makes two plaits. She is thin and covers her head with a *dupatta*. When I was listening to Neelofar’s story, two images came into my mind. One was of the girl who comes to her house everyday to watch TV, and the other was of this girl, who I kind of know.

[Masooma Ansari]

Neelofar said she doesn’t get angry on seeing the girl. But she gets so angry with kids otherwise! She can hit them and make them leave! But she asks this girl to come inside and sit. Why? What is in this relationship? Love? Sympathy? Or something else? Well...

I also have one such strange relationship. It formed a few months back, though not with a child but an old fakir. He comes sometimes, and that too when I am making *roti* in the morning. But this doesn’t anger me. Though I don’t get angry with any fakir, there is something special about him.

When he comes, I ask him if he wants tea. Sometimes I also give him some snacks. He has not been coming for a few days now. I feel a strange emptiness; every other fakir’s voice sounds like his.

[Rabiya]

I saw myself in the girl Neelofar described. When I was ten years old, we had a TV at home, specially because Babu didn’t want us to go to anyone else’s house to watch TV. That’s because a lot of people chase children away. And in any case, there weren’t too many TV sets on the side where I lived. If the TV would get spoilt, or if its tube would burst, Babu would get it fixed immediately. So we never had to go anywhere else to watch TV.

But that day, I went to my friend Shahista's house to watch TV, that too at 10:30 at night. My mother also didn't say anything. *Ammi* and *Babu* used to stay up all night to work, that is preparing for the *biryani* cooking in the morning. The reason I had gone to my friend's house was that those were the days of Ramzaan and we didn't switch the TV on.

Shahista's mother used to chase all the children away and bolt the door. Many people used to come to her house to watch TV, but these were all older people, not kids. They all watched *Alif Laila*, because at that time there was no other magical show like it on TV. It's also my favourite serial.

Shahista used to let me in and I would hide under the bed. When her mother used to get to know, she would yell at me, but it had no effect on me. I used to watch the TV even when she would be saying things to me. Her father would ask me to sit, "Watch the serial and then leave".

Hearing Neelofar's story, I have developed a relationship with the girl she has written about, through the television. I never wondered why Shahista's mother would chase me away. Maybe a relationship through the television didn't develop between us, and so she would get irritated by me and scream at me. But I did develop one with Shahista's father, because of which he would ask me to stay and watch TV. Maybe this relationship was just like the one between Neelofar and that girl, because of which Neelofar started liking the girl.

[Sultana]

When I was listening to Neelofar's text, I thought maybe the girl doesn't have a TV set at home. Or she probably liked watching TV in other peoples' houses. Earlier, when we didn't have a TV at home, I used to go watch it at my neighbour Naseema *Chachi's* house. But I didn't stay there as long as that girl stays at Neelofar's house. I used to get sleepy by eight or eight thirty. If there was a new film playing, and I would

stay till nine, *Ammi* would come and call me.

I would also go there after we got a TV set. That's because their whole family used to sit and watch TV, and I liked that. If there would be some comedy scene in the film, it was fun to laugh with everyone. Never mind if the joke was not too funny. When everyone laughed, it was reason enough to laugh as well.

Even now, I sometimes go to their house to watch TV. I like watching TV at someone else's house because an unspoken relationship forms between people like this, a relationship one may not even be conscious of. At home if someone says something to me that I don't like, I get angry. But that's not how it is when I am with others. Maybe like me, that girl also formed a relationship with Neelofar's family.

I am also wondering about what Neelofar's mother said about the girl's mother not caring about her daughter. I tend to agree with her somewhere. When people see others together, they wonder what the relationship between them is. Sometimes when they ask about it, we take some time to answer the question. We also form relationships with people, which can't be named.

[Neelofar]

When I read out the text, everyone was quiet and listening. The only sounds in the room were my voice and the sound of the fan. When the text finished, everyone was quiet, so I asked, "What do you think?" After some time, everyone started telling their experiences with television. They also asked me many questions. Then anecdotes around TV started to be told. All my strong feelings, about how people think of TV, also started to flow.

After talking for a long time, everyone has started to write something or the other. Some are writing furiously, while others are thinking. The sound of the fan is quite loud in the room. Bobby is writing so much, she looks unstoppable. Manoj and Suraj are talking about a notebook.

An Unfinished Thought

Yashoda

It was that time of the day when the evening turns golden. Clouds had taken over the sky. The red sun peeping through the clouds was advancing towards old age. I was walking on, looking at the myriad coloured kites in the sky. The road was empty and quiet. Suddenly the sound of many moving feet began knocking at my ears. I lifted my eyes and saw a band of soldiers march by.

Quiet and alone, kicking stones lying on the road, I made my way to my house. The evening was slipping out of my hands. The thick shadows of trees were deepening. The heavy downpour had left the road behind me filled with water. In it, frogs played their notes, *trrr trrr*.

It wasn't as if I was the only man walking on the road. But I was not in the mood to look at other people, or know about them. I reached the door to my house, turned the key in the iron door, and pushed the door open with my shoulder. It left a rust stain on my white *kurta*. Dusting the *kurta* with my left hand, I stepped inside. Then I pushed the door with a quick force to close it, and bolted it.

[What everyone said]

[Azra Tabassum]

I got up at the usual hour today. Asking my mother for tea, I went to the toilet. I was sitting on the toilet seat, planning out my whole day. What do I have to do today? What all lessons need to be covered in school, where I teach. I reach school by 8 am everyday. Should I go to give tuitions in the afternoon? It's Saturday. Why don't I go and watch the film *Darna Mana Hai* with Shama? I've heard it's a nice film.

Getting out of the toilet, I pulled up the ends of my waistcloth and tied them tightly around my waist. I started brushing my teeth with Colgate. My mother's voice came from behind me, "Son, what will you eat today?"

"Whatever you like, Ma. An omelette will do". Immediately after brushing my teeth, I took out my shaving kit. After taking a sip of tea, I started shaving. While I was shaving, I arranged to take a bath. Then I bathed, had breakfast and stepped out, checking my bag.

It was a lazy day at school. After school I went to Manoj's house. He is 14 years old, and studies in the eighth standard. Manoj had gone to the market to buy some books. I said to his mother, "He could have gone in the evening as well". She said, "But it's a new course, and the books could be out of stock soon. He was worried, so he had to go to Nai Sarak as soon as possible. He'll be back in half an hour". He is a good boy, and he's also good at studies. But sometimes, when he doesn't get what he wants, he gets really angry. I thought I wouldn't wait for more than half an hour. I also had to go to watch a film from six to nine. I had reached at 2:15. It was 3:00 now. I was sitting there reading backdated issues of magazines. After some time, I decided not to wait any longer. I got up, said I would come on Monday, and left.

[Bobby Khan]

I was walking on the same road as him. The difference between us was that he was not paying attention to anyone. But I was. I was looking at him. You must be wondering who I am. So let me introduce myself. I am the owner of a common looking face. I'm neither too tall nor short, neither fat nor thin. I am wearing a black checked shirt and white pants. My eyes are blue. I am wearing a brass bracelet on my wrist. My hair is parted on the side, and is gold at the front because I have coloured it.

I am walking along the road that is filled with water. My feet are moving towards their destination, but my gaze is fixed on the kite that is flying, but looks caught in a whirlwind. It looks unmoving, just as I look frozen on one thought even when in a whirlwind of thoughts.

Oh! I have hit something and tripped. And my thought has fallen and

scattered in the wet soil. I looked ahead. Some people were walking. I liked the footsteps they left behind on the wet soil. I turned and stood there, looking at my footsteps.

[Babli Rai]

Lost and swinging in his thoughts, Sameer didn't notice he had reached home. In great style, he pushed open the door with his shoulder. The door opened, but it left a rust stain on his shirt. The stain shone on his sky blue shirt like the moon. But along with the shine, the moon also has dark spots. Disregarding these, Sameer entered the house. Seeing the house in darkness, he forgot everything else and started looking for his mother. But he couldn't find her. He wanted to go back outside, but he hit against a table and his watch broke. Hearing the sound, his ten-year-old sister ran into the room. She said, "*Bhai jaan* you broke the watch! I'll go get *Ammi*". Without waiting for a response, she went in. Sameer walked out of the room and stood near the door. He remembered the stain on his shirt, and thought, "I ruined *Abbuji's* shirt because of that useless style of mine. And now I broke the watch. Looks like *mangal* (planet of Tuesday) is unhappy with me today. May Allah save me from *Abbuji's* spanking and *Ammi's* wrath..."

[Masooma Ansari]

I didn't listen to Yashoda's text just now. But I read it when she was still tussling with her thoughts while writing it. She had written a line about a band of soldiers marching. I had a flash recollection while reading that line. I started remembering a scene from the serial *Kashmir*, where the character Amir looks longingly at a band of soldiers passing by.

I found the character in Yashoda's story very serious and grief-stricken. I could sense his loneliness and wondered if his family members had been killed by militants, and if he was thinking of avenging their death. I thought this because the story triggered off images of the beautiful, but sad and serious valleys of Kashmir.

[Nasreen]

These days when I climb on to the roof, I see many other people on their roofs. That's because they fly kites from their roofs. When I see those children flying kites, I remember Ujar a lot. He had started enjoying kites a great deal; it had become like his hobby. Because of this hobby, he had not been going to the *madrasa*. He had gained admission just a month ago. When his mother would ask him to go to the *madrasa*, he would cry a lot and put forth the excuse that he was feeling unwell. His mother would let him stay home. Then he would become all right by noon and he would take two rupees from his father and buy four kites. He would go to our roof and fly them, unmindful of the hot sun. If someone would cut and take his kite, he would say all kinds of things to him and start fighting with him. Ujar is three to three and a half years old, but he is number one at fighting!

[Naseem Bano]

When I opened the door and went inside the house, I saw my mother- who is very old, and wears glasses- walking with the help of a wooden stick, looking at me. She said, "*Beta*, since when have you started having *paan*?" Her eyesight is very weak, so she mistook the rust mark on my shirt to be a *paan* stain. Saying, "No mother", I walked towards my room. Opening the door to my room, I went to my bed and lay down on it. For a moment, I shut my eyes and started scanning through the blackness. This relaxed me. I turned on my side. Suddenly I heard a loud, "It's cut! It's cut!" I opened my eyes to find the window in front of me. This window is a friend of mine. Looking through it makes my tiredness go away. I moved towards the window and stood there, with one hand on one of its door-slats, and the other on my waist. I put out my head and ran my eyes over the sky. Many, different, coloured kites were visible. It looked like the sky had invited them on a feast, and all the kites were dancing. And the kite which would get tired, would swirl and fall to the ground, admitting defeat. Seeing this, I remembered my friend Vineet who had died when a bus rammed into him.

[Shahana Qureshi]

Sometimes it happens that we are walking on a road, looking at the surroundings, but are unable to listen to the sounds. We just keep walking.

A few days ago, I had gone to meet a teacher. I had not met him for the last two months. I had time that day. So I took a bus from near Zakir Hussain College. The fare from Zakir Hussain College to Darya Ganj is two rupees. I took the money out of my black bag and bought the ticket. Because the bus was crowded, I remained standing on the front door of the bus. It was six in the evening, and so the temperature had fallen a little. And rain had fallen in all its glory in the morning. But the sun shone its face in the sky again and reminded us, "People of Delhi, don't forget – its still summer!"

I would sometimes look at the crowd in the bus, and sometimes look outside. After a ten-minute ride, I got off the bus. Walking through a lane, I reached sir's Centre. There were eight to fifteen year old children there. I wished sir, "*Salaam*". He returned my greeting and asked me to sit. I sat down. We talked generally, and in this time sir checked a child's work. Then he said to me, "Yesterday I saw you at Sui Walan. I even called out to you two or three times, but you didn't hear". I tried to recollect, then said to him, "I must have been on my way to the tailor. But I didn't hear you call, neither did I see you".

Perhaps when we are on our way for some work, we only think about the place we have to reach quickly. We walk on the road, see it, but don't feel the need to know or look out for people on the way. Our eyes are fixed on our destination, like the man in Yashoda's lines. Maybe someone close to him is ill and he got to know at office, and he wanted to rush home to finish some tasks and then go and visit this person with enough time to spare.

[Suraj Rai]

A kite that wants to fly in the sky. It needs a long string, and hands

that will make it fly. Similarly, we need concentration and the right companions. The kite flies in the direction of the wind. Wind flows in different directions in our life as well. The difference is that in this wind there is no coolness, only dust.

[Sultana]

I can't make out whom the text is written about. But what I like in it is that the man was looking at the different, coloured kites flying in the sky, and at the setting sun. What was he thinking when rust stained his *kurta*? He must have muttered something. When he saw the band of soldiers passing, what did he think? I felt from the text that when we are lost in our thoughts, we ignore the sounds round us and so we can't understand our surroundings. Once this happened with me as well. I was returning home from school...

I was sitting in line during the assembly. A girl was sitting in front of me. Those days, they were very strict at school. My friend Fouzia would wear a colourful rubber band from home and switch to a black one on reaching school. She had worn a white dress that day. Girls dressed in white were being taken away by the school prefects to be punished. Fouzia gave me her rubber band before going. The girl sitting in front of me said, "Oh. I'll tell *Baji*". I said, "Go ahead, tell her. *Baji* won't say any thing to me because my hair is tied". Each time *Baji* would look at me, I would hide the rubber band, which I was holding in my hand. The girl was threatening me again and again. So I angrily said, "Go tell *Baji!*" *Baji* saw and called me out and scolded me. I went to my class.

This girl's name was Nishat. When she saw me, she started laughing at me. I got angry and said, "Don't talk to me unnecessarily. Don't walk home with me from now on". She said, "I don't go to your house, but to my own. You're always bossing around about walking together".

School ended. While walking home I was thinking about what she said. Someone was calling out to me but I didn't pay attention.

[Yashoda]

Inside, the slippery mud in the raw courtyard had become wet and was flowing. I took off my 'number eight' leather slippers, put them in a corner, and walked slowly and carefully across the courtyard. A broom was kept on one side. I rolled up the sleeves of my *kurta*, picked up the broom and started sweeping the leaves to one side. My feet had got covered with the wet mud. I collected the leaves and put them in a dustbin. Tying a rope to the bucket, I climbed the steps to the well and slowly lowered the bucket in it. The sound of the bucket hitting the water, *chhapaak*, resounded in the air. I pulled the bucket out and started washing my hands and face. When my hard hands touched my face, the mole on my face screamed out, "Aye stupid! You are so filled with pride about this mole, no wonder your long poking fingers are forever desirous of stroking it". I quickly removed my fingers from the mole.

Tears flowed from my eyes and mixed with the water on my face. The well had changed form and a woman's face had emerged. I screamed out, "I want to forget you. Please stop coming back in my memories". The bucket had slipped out of my hands. I quickly climbed down the steps. The bucket had fallen with a loud splash, because of which the birds, with their cries of *chi-chi*, had flown out from the trees. I picked up the towel that was hanging on the rope and went inside the room...