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"Space invaders" revisited: counter-narratives of two (b)older south Asian female academics

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we revisit Puwar's concept of "space invader" as two (b)older South Asian female academics at a later stage in their professional lives. Drawing on Critical Race Theory and a counter-storytelling approach, we reflexively narrate our analysis of a series of research conversations through the catalyst of "space invader", and how this led us to explore stages of voice across space and time. Including conversational metaphors in places, we proudly centre our mother tongue languages (Hindi and Panjabi) as we reflect through the scents of our storied memories. We discuss how our professional and community-based equity roles and experiences entwine as an embodiment of driving racial justice. We use metaphoric hooks to chart our herstories of hope as we navigate White fragility and often hostile spaces, seeking refuge in "safe" and supportive spaces as a form of collective healing through speaking, listening and simply being "ourselves". Through our research conversations, we analyse the traumas, isolation and contentment of working at the margins of decision-making spaces, and the challenges of "trespassing" across boundaries towards the centre, where we have never really belonged, yet courageously taken the journey. "Space Invaders" revisited has required us both to analyse the painful racialised memories of our bodies, minds and souls, the visceral violence of racism, the silencing (and confident roars) of our voices, and racial battle fatigue.

Introduction

Aaj assi thwanoo kahaani sunaani heh. Yeh kahaani saadi kahaani heh. Sunno tha sorchor ji (translated from Panjabi: Today, we are sharing a story with you. This story is our story. Please listen and reflect).

This paper has been given birth to following several years of informal research conversations between ourselves, with insights from those across our networks. Through this written space, we situate our thinking around the notion of "space invaders" and invite you to reflect

as a kind of meditation, an open conversation with yourself and others (Brah, 1999), rather than a form of pity that positions us as victims. We unapologetically write through the lens of our lived experiences, which do not operate outside of the personal and community roles that we hold. It is hoped that our (b)older reflections offer some lightness *(dil halka),* possibly points of connection, and importantly hope *(umeed)* for academics of colour who maybe struggling to navigate and vocalise their voices within everyday racisms, whilst managing their mental health and wellbeing. The short stories presented here merely scrape the surface of deeper painful interactions of racism over our careers.

Through a series of five research conversations, we engaged in a cathartic, yet emotionally heavy process of sharing and then analysing our racialised experiences through the academic lens of Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) and counter storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Our conversations flowed organically through an initial prompt question which we both agreed: "What does 'space invaders' mean to you today?" Our shared analyses led to the creation of a conceptual model (see Figure 1) to illustrate how we have used our voices *(awaaz)* over time and space, as a form of protection, survival and resistance. As two older (and now bolder) South Asian female academics in our 50s and 60s, our acts of silence, speaking-up, listening and writing together, have been eased through professional and cultural points of connection, to include: our activist practitioner-academic commitment to equity and racial justice work; our ability to connect and share personal stories through our mother tongue languages, Hindi and Panjabi; a lived appreciation of the rich cultural tapestry of our shared Panjabi heritage; our academic interest in Black Feminism and Critical Race Theory, and also our community-activist work with people of colour, particularly in feminist circles. We have both been teachers, school leaders, Teacher Educators and academics in education, and throughout our research conversations we discussed the importance of our strong teacher-educator identities, and how this linked us through a "thread of hope" (*umeed dha thaga).*
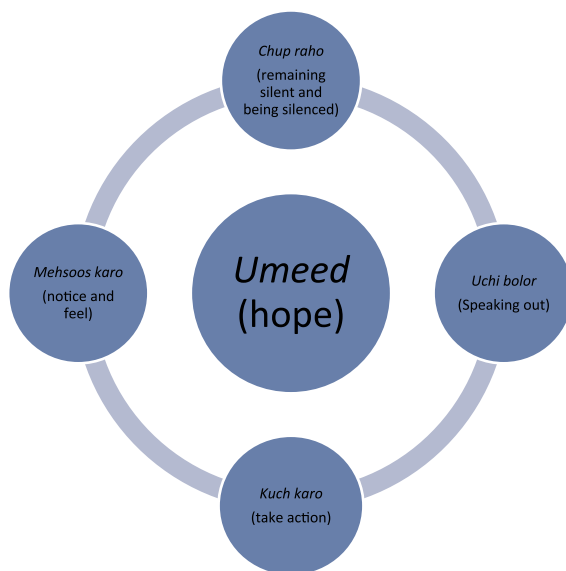

Figure 1. Awaaz aur Umeed (*Voice and Hope*).

The research conversations illuminated the heaviness of our racialised experiences, and the ways in which they have become catalysts for us to take action – be that through creating "safe spaces" and becoming "space holders" for listening circles, (un)learning and speaking "truths" collectively to drive alternative courses of action. Our approaches are very much grounded in a grass-roots activist approach, recognising that racialised voices in academia have historically been silenced and marginalised. We are both at different stages of our academic careers, where Vini is a professor and Geeta a Senior Lecturer (as at the time of writing this paper). Through our research conversations, we discussed power operations within the university, and how these have impacted us in different ways over time. We discussed the degree to which we have felt a sense of agency to influence change from the margins, and later the centre of decision-making spaces through leadership roles. Our research conversations touched on the traumas, isolation and contentment of being at the margins, and also the challenges (and courage) required to "trespass" boundaries towards the centre, where we have never really felt a sense of belonging. Below, we introduce ourselves to make transparent the intersecting identities we bring to this writing and work, acknowledging our ableist and upper-caste privileges as academics of colour, where at the moment, we also see our health and age as a privilege as we near the end of our academic careers during challenging financial times in universities.

Vini is a first-generation South-Asian, Indian immigrant from a Sikh family which migrated to Britain in the 1960s. She was encouraged to speak English at home in the well-intentioned yet mistaken belief, that it would help her to integrate in schools and excel academically. This was at the cost of losing and then having to re-learn her mother tongue, Panjabi. She grew up in an increasingly multicultural town and attended schools which were predominantly white. She qualified as a teacher and taught in predominantly white schools before becoming a teacher educator in Higher Education. Throughout her forty-year career as an educator, Vini's work has unapologetically centred race and racism, where her research has focussed on how ill-prepared new teachers are to teach in a multiracial society. Latterly, she has researched the racialised experiences of teacher educators of colour, and realised the enormous unacknowledged, and unremunerated tasks, they perform whilst enduring daily macro and microaggressions from colleagues, students and the institutions they work in. Throughout her extensive research, she has realised the importance of developing strategies and healing spaces to support Black and Brown bodies, as a "space holder". Over her career, Vini has mentored many academics of colour and holds an online "Sister Circle" space for them to engage in open and bold discussions, "let go" and (un)learn strategies to navigate and exist in the increasingly toxic and harmful academic space of the University, whilst navigating their mental health and wellbeing.

Geeta is a second-generation British-born South Asian woman, born into a Hindu faith family. She was raised bilingual, where English was centred as the higher status language of academic "success", in a working-class family. She is the daughter of parents who migrated from Panjab, India to the UK in the early 1960s, working in labouring factory jobs. She grew up in a predominantly white working-class area and completed her post A-level university studies as a mature student, when married with two young children, living in her husband's extended family home. Alongside her part-time academic role today, Geeta plays an active role as grandmother and works as a community practitioner-academic (a pracademic). Her community work engages her with racialised

groups through nature-based educational activities, where she sees her walking as a form of activism. She leads a South Asian women's creative writing space called "educating geeta", and also works with leading nature organisations and rural museums on equity related work to develop more inclusive community-led approaches (see Holliman, Ludhra et al., 2024). Geeta's pracademic approach works to centre the lived experiences of people of colour, attempting to create "safe" and bolder spaces for "being ourselves", without fear of judgement.

The notion of "space invader" then was the entry point for our research conversations, and we were keen for our stories to breathe and evolve organically, rather than following a rigid interview script. Having both re-read Puwar's original work, we wanted to revisit what "space invaders" meant for us today at a different stage in our lives, recognising also that we are much more than our racialised identities, as women who have taken courageous steps to drive change across their careers, home lives and community spaces. We are deeply committed to our education, and (un)learning as part of that, and have taken risks as we have aged into more confident "truth speakers", drawing on our faith and spirituality.

This paper is written jointly where the author order is presented alphabetically, rather than hierarchically. The order respects our sisterly trust and mutual respect built over time. We have shared the emotional labour of this paper over several years of critical reflection, where the writing process has required deep care and empathy towards each other to notice those heavier moments where one of us has needed to pause and step back during challenging personal and political times (for example, we wrote some of this paper during the violent racist riots of summer 2024, and both felt very triggered during this time). During our research process, we have tried to hold a "safe space" for each other to "lighten each other's loads" *(dil halka)* – in Panjabi, we reverted to the phrase like our mothers and grandmothers: "*Chal Pehneh, dil halka karyeh*" (Come on sister, let's lighten our loads and hearts), when opening a conversation. Using Hindi and Panjabi through our conversations allowed us to feel the emotions of our storied experiences differently, where emotions were situated with greater authenticity and rawness.

Our citations have intentionally referenced critical scholars of colour, and white allies in cases, as a political act and form of respect to those who have paved the way before us, offering us hope (*umeed*), a sense of belonging in historically white academic literature (Ahmed, 2017). By giving ourselves creative permission to use our mother tongue, we honour our cultural heritage and voices with greater authenticity. Acknowledging our respected sisters Avtar Brah ji[1], Amrit Wilson ji, Heidi Mirza ji, Sara Ahmed ji and Nirmal Puwar ji, we share the scents of our memories as (b)older South Asian academics who have felt the weight of everything, and the numbness of nothingness.

Setting the scene

The professional lives of women of colour in academia has always been precarious, working out how to negotiate and navigate their survival in the predominantly White space of the academy. They are racialised and feminised bodies considered as "The stranger [who] is not any-body that we have failed to recognise, but some-body that we have already recognised as a stranger, as 'a body out of place'" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 55) or "space invader" (Puwar, 2004).

The female bodies of colour are marked early on as they transform through girlhood to womanhood, always observing, analysing, navigating an inner self-debate as they attempt to find a place where they fit in and belong. Theirs is a constant struggle to belong which becomes suffused with tension and self-doubt, always alert, as they scan and map the whiteness of their environment to find places and people where they can seek comfort and safety to flourish. But sadly, for most, such places are rare within academe, a space "oriented towards and inhabited by whiteness" (Barthwl-Datta, 2023, p. 2). Whiteness comprises a space in which unmarked bodies are considered the "universal somatic norm" (Puwar, 2004, p. 8), it is understood to be the unspoken, invisible normative position from which the marked "other" is assessed and judged. Puwar (2004) contends "there is a connection between bodies and space, which is built, repeated and contested over time … it is certain types of bodies that are tacitly designated as being the 'natural' occupants of specific positions" (p. 8) which she argues extends to white women who are part of the somatic norm "on the grounds of whiteness" (p. 10). Ahmed (2012, p. 33) adeptly argues that current trends to diversify the academic workforce in universities, as part of well-intentioned tokenistic recruitment strategies to gain charter marks merely serve to "expose the whiteness of those who are already in place" and we would contend to assert the centrality of whiteness in contradiction to the EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion) merit badges emblazoned on institutional websites (*ibid*). Ahmed (2012, p. 11) notes "I's as if having a policy becomes a substitute for action". Therefore, institutions expend energy on writing EDI policies as forms of corporate protection, but their enactment proceeds at a glacial pace. As a "marked body" (Puwar, 2004, p. 138) a woman of colour is "out of place", not the somatic norm, and thus a "space invader" (Puwar, 2004, p. 8) whose "arrival brings into clear relief what has been able to pass as the invisible, unmarked and undeclared somatic norm" (*ibid*). Hendrix (2021, p. 250) states: "I always thought of myself as an outsider within", indicating that women academics of colour are located as insiders as academics, but outsiders as women and people of colour (Barthwal-Datta, 2023).

The insider/outsider position is a tenuous and vulnerable one in which female academics of colour, particularly older women, are simultaneously (hyper)visible and invisible (Puwar, 2004). Puwar (2004, p. 11) notes, "Not being the ideal occupants of privileged positions, 'space invaders' endure the burden of doubt, a burden of representation, infantilisation and super-surveillance". As hypervisible marked bodies, they are subject to the racial microaggressions which they endure in their daily lives. These are "brief and commonplace verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of colour. Perpetrators of microaggressions are often unaware that they engage in such communications" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271). Racial microaggressions can include the look, or the double-take when we enter white spaces, and our presence is [still] capable of inducing a state of ontological anxiety. It disturbs the "look" (Puwar, 2004, p. 39). Such white anxiety gives rise to visibility and invisibility for racialised, older and feminised bodies who are "conspicuous because they don't fit the norm of the universal human, yet they are invisible because they are not the somatic norm" (Barthwal-Datta, 2023, p. 5). Thus, age forms an important component of the intersectional analysis of our career experiences in higher education.

As two (b)older women of South Asian heritage, we have encountered many microaggressions over the years, which have served to spotlight us as "space invaders" to our colleagues, students and those in community spaces where we also work. At times, during our early career days, we have swallowed micro-aggressions with a smile, absorbing them to help us survive, as we did not have the tools or confidence to speak up. We have been subject to the double-take look as we have stood and spoken at the front of lecture theatre audiences and keynote addresses of predominantly white student teachers and audiences, hypervisible, judged as bodies out of place, and by implication perhaps, unqualified and unworthy to take up such central spaces. Lander and Santoro (2017, p. 1008) indicate how Black and Minority Ethnic academics "felt marginalised, and encountered subtle everyday racism manifested as microaggressions that contributed to their simultaneous construction as hypervisible and invisible as outsiders to the academy". They carry the burden of doubt and must repeatedly prove that they can do the job, better, being placed under greater scrutiny to question their capability (Belkin et al., 2024).

As "space invaders", female academics of colour are under super-surveillance (Puwar, 2004), as they have to work harder to prove that they are capable and have to be "almost crystal-clear perfect in their job performances, as imperfections are easily picked-up and amplified" (Puwar, 2004, p. 61). Yet even if they work harder, write more papers, sit on more committees, provide extra support to students of colour beyond allocated workloads, and undertake more tasks as academic handmaids, their invisibility (and progression) is evident in the lack of recognition for the contributions they make to the academy. They remain on lower academic grades and pay; are often overlooked in promotions, or omitted from research teams where they have expertise, and often given a higher teaching load than their peers (Belkin et al., 2024; Lander & Santoro, 2017). The on-going racialisation of women on lower pay grades, particularly those at the end of their careers are judged by managers and white peers to be insufficiently competent, not high performers, or "not up to the job" to have merited career progression, and the subsequent rise in renumeration and the attendant pension at the end of their careers.

In this paper, we argue that the daily strength (*thakat*) and resilience *(honsla)* taken to persist and survive such career-wide racial microaggressions, are insulting and injurious to the wellbeing and mental health of women academics of colour. We draw here on Kuma's poignant paper, "*Weaving academic home*", and how "academe is squeezing me out" (Kumsa, 2022, p. 5) through embodied colonial violence which inflicts deep gut and soul wounds (we translate gut and soul wounds as "*dukh" and "gammi"* in Panjabi), which shake and injure her very sense of self and wellbeing, arguing academe is not a safe space for an indigenous woman of colour. Racial microaggressions, first identified by the Black psychiatrist Chester Pierce in 1970, are defined by Sue et al. (2007) as real not imagined, visceral not academic constructs, harmful and injurious, not innocent comments or actions. Bonilla-Silva (2006, p. 29) comments, racial microaggressions are subtle put downs and "may be a prototypical example of the way the new racism operates, as microaggressions can be crimes of omission … or commission … , allowing the perpetrator to maintain that they are neutral", arguing such microaggressions have serious effects on the lives and souls of people of colour, where these hostile acts can lead to health damaging conditions.

Kohli (2021, p. 62) discusses how such damaging manifestations of individual and insti-tutional racism present an additional stress, which she terms "racial stress" – academics of colour must contend with this alongside the broader stresses associated with academic teaching, research, student supervision and administration. Smith et al. (2006) argue that racial encounters in the form of microaggressions, particularly in predominantly white spaces, result in people of colour feeling emotionally, mentally and physically drained. Racial stress can lead to "physiological symptoms of racial battle fatigue" (Smith et al., 2011, p. 64). Racial battle fatigue is a term first coined by Black psychologist William A. Smith in 2003. Smith (2004) indicates racial battle fatigue as a condition which manifests due to the psychosocial stressors resulting from racism in all its forms. These stressors in turn induce psychological, physiological and behavioural responses such as frustration, shock, anger, resentment, hopelessness, headaches, high blood pressure, teeth-griding, insomnia, social withdrawal, self-doubt and exhaustion (Smith, 2004; Sue et al., 2007). Menakem (2021) describes how advances in psychobiology have revealed links between our emotions and our body, particularly the link between the role of the vagus nerve in connecting the brain stem to the heart, lungs, gut and spine. He asserts this nerve could be referred to as the "soul nerve" since it "helps mediate between our bodies activating energy and resting energy" (p. 5). It is involved in our rest, fight, flee or freeze reaction to stress. Invoking military metaphors, Hendrix (2021, p. 255) notes: "We do not simply go about our business enveloped in the constant work, we do so while simultaneously surveying the land for trip wires and landmines" and later we are "on constant look out for sniper fire" (Hendrix, 2021, p. 256). If Black bodies are in constant flight, fight, freeze state through racial microaggressions in academe, these stressful situ-ations engender the deep soul wounds (*dukh and gammi),* leading to psychological and physiological trauma and harm.

Corbin et al. (2018) describe how Black female academics suffer from enhanced racial battle fatigue as they are always on the defensive when they encounter racial microaggressions, particularly those that draw on the angry or strong Black woman tropes which serve to dehumanise and control Black women, denying them the chance of self-definition (p. 630). They note how the "the dearth of Black women on campuses exacerbates feelings of entrapment and silencing" (p. 629). Silence and being silent, or staying silent, is used by women of colour as a "source of comfort and reassurance, as well as a site for strategizing and resistance" (Parpart & Parashar, 2019, p. 44). Silence is (or can be) a place for reflection, a means of survival and coping, an active choice, a place for healing and re-evaluating that which is important to us (Barthwal-Datta, 2023). Silence may be used by women of colour academics as a means of staying under the radar, whilst simultaneously evaluating and appraising their position in academia. Silence is (or can be) a means of survival and is not a sign of passivity or compliance; it is an active phase. We as women of colour are not yet ready to be vociferous, and our silence should not be mistaken for being voiceless (Pandey, 2023). The voices of women of colour, particularly those of South Asian women who are often construed as quiet, timid, compliant and voiceless, are expressed via their agency as to how they choose to survive and thrive in academe (*ibid*). However, this does not imply in any way that they will all choose to be silent – many will speak out even when there is fear of falling into the stereotypic traps laid by whiteness. Lorde (2007, p. 42) asserts:

> You're never really a whole person if you remain silent. Because there is always that one little piece inside you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder and hotter and hotter, and if you don't speak it out one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth from inside.

Today, as two (b)older women of South Asian descent, we have developed courage and confidence to speak our "truths" and could no longer stay *chup-chaap* (quiet and silent). We had to realise our wholeness and assert our humanity through the act of collectively writing this paper, and other forms of activism, in order to leave a legacy of hope (*umeed)* for the Black and Brown sisters and daughters who follow in the future. We have sojourned on the margins of academia for so long that our age, lived experiences and liminality, provide the courage and confidence *(honsla)* through which to *bhol* (speak of) our pain (*dukh*), and how we have managed to turn *dukh* into *sukh* (pain into peace), with the love and support of our *bhenjia* (respected Panjabi word for sisters). We humbly stand on the shoulders of our scholarly sisters of colour, since our paths to healing, speaking out and engendering hope, are paved by the seminal works of bell hooks, Avtar Brah ji, Amrit Wilson ji, Heidi Mirza ji, Patricia Hill-Collins, Anne Phoenix, and Angela Davis, to name a few.

Williams (1988, p. 17) explains the *dukh* (pain) and erasure of the self, as one of the attendant harms associated with constant exposure to racism:

> There are moments in my life I feel as though a part of me is missing.
> There are days when I feel so invisible that I can't remember
> what day of the week it is, when I feel so manipulated that I can't remember
> my own name, when I feel so lost and angry that I can't speak a civil word to
> the people who love me best. These are the times when I catch sight of my reflection in store
> windows and I am surprised to see a whole person looking
> back … ..I have to close my eyes at such times and remember myself, draw an
> internal pattern that is smooth and whole.

Dukh (pain) argues Bonilla-Silva (2019, p. 4) is a racialised emotion (RE) which arises from the construction (and destruction) of racial subjects who "interpret racialized relationships not just practically but emotionally". In a complex dialectic, racialised emotions sustain the racial order, since white women's tears (Accapadi, 2007) are more legitimate and an effective tool to maintain white innocence and reinscribe the position of the deviant and defective "Other". Racialised emotions are experienced by white and people of colour and not all are negative since both domination and resistance to it can evoke emotional well-being. Hence our pain or *dukh* is partially assuaged by our acts of boldness in speaking out (*uchi bholna*) and in so doing we break our silence, no longer content to be *chup-chapp* we voice our anger and discontentment cognisant of "anger as an indispensable emotion for cognitive liberation of the racial subaltern" (Bonilla-Silva, 2019, p. 15) and no longer complicit in maintaining white comfort.

The internal pattern that is smooth and whole can only be drawn if we act in hope and with hope. Hope is one of the tools of recovery that enables freedom dreaming (Kelley, 2022) for "there is no dream without hope" (Freire, 1994, p. 91). Jacobs argues, hope is social, possible as "we" not "I". In having responsibility for ourselves and for others, hope-filled utopian goals act "as spurs to concrete action" (Jacobs, 2005, p. 785)

thereby rekindling our depleted agency. Freire (1994) explains how hope exists within the triad of love and communion which engenders courage. Courage to take action, or courage to recover and become whole.

Theoretical and methodological frameworks

This research is underpinned by Critical Race Theory (CRT). We use CRT as a liberatory and critical framework to locate and theorise how institutional, individual and structural racism have shaped our professional academic narratives, but more importantly, how racism in the form of micro and macroaggressions has inflicted soul wounds (Kumsa, 2022), *dil de zakham* (heart wounds), which injure the inner core and soul of our very being – our health and wellbeing. It is well documented in research that these injurious acts can lead to emotional, psychological and physiological racial trauma (Keval, 2025), resulting in periods of illness which require time away from work to heal, not just physically, but emotionally (Hendrix, 2021). CRT provides us with a nuanced theoretical framework through which to name and analyse the lived experiences of academics of colour within the toxic environment of academe (Keval, 2021). The tenets of CRT are clear and unequivocal, and recognise race as a social construct which structures society, and that racism is endemic in society. It is not an aberrant, it is persistent, permanent and normalised (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Smith et al., 2011, p. 67). Racism is the organising tool which maintains the racial, economic and power hierarchies in British society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Warmington, 2024).

CRT is not a one issue framework. The founder of intersectionality, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), was also the founding member of CRT. Delgado and Stefancic (2017, p. 58) indicate: "Intersectionality means the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, sexual orientation and how their combinations play out in various settings". Critical Race Feminism (CRF) derives from Critical Legal Studies (the origin of CRT), CRT and feminism. It "highlights the situation of women of colour whose lives may not conform to an essentialist norm" (Wing, 2003, p. 7). CRF then builds on CRT and complements it in terms of analysing the role women of colour play in the academy, and how their experiences, narratives and survival operate (Childers-McKee & Hytten, 2015). CRT centres the voices, lived experiences and stories of people of colour, recounting personal, family and community (migration) herstories, as well as voicing the *dukh* (pain) associated with racism, thereby naming the modes of racist oppression and the related injuries it inflicts on bodies of colour (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

CRT challenges notions of meritocracy, liberalism, objectivity, colour blindness, race neutrality and equal opportunities which pervade our educational institutions (Keval, 2021). It provides a theoretical framework which identifies operations of whiteness and white supremacy, to highlight how racial inequalities are sustained and protected, despite the existence of race equality legislation, strategies and policies (Ahmed, 2009). Critical Race Methodology (CRM) derived from CRT maintains the focus on race and racism within research design and methods, whilst recognising that race intersects with gender, class and religion. CRM, like CRT, is liberatory and transformative since it: "focuses on the racialised, gendered and classed experiences of [people] of color" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 24). CRM rejects research concepts of neutrality and objectivity, it exposes research that compounds deficit notions

attached to people of colour – research that has facilitated the continued mainten-ance of white supremacy, whilst silencing and "distorting the epistemologies of people of color" (*ibid*). CRM enables a social justice research agenda which can support the elimination of discrimination and disadvantage based on race, gender, class and religion. Just like CRT, CRM seeks to empower those at the intersections of these delineations (DeCuir-Gunby, Chapman and Schutz, 2019, Delgado & Ste-fancic, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

The master narrative sustained by racism and expounded via research, centres hege-monic perspectives of whiteness and white supremacy (Ahmed, 2012). The majoritarian stories built on advantage and privilege appear as normal and natural thus centring nor-mative whiteness (Arday, 2018) and "fail to speak to the lived experiences of people of color" (Berry & Cook, 2019, p. 91). Counter storytelling which honours the voices and legit-imates the lived experiences of people of colour, serves to debunk normative white research narratives and challenge stereotypical myths and misconceptions which they disseminate. Berry and Cook (2019) reflect Du Bois' (1995) notion of "double conscious-ness" whereby a person of colour is bound to experience and engage with the master nar-rative, whilst simultaneously engaging in the counterstory of their lived experience, noting that women of colour "possess a double-bind narrative" (p. 91). As women of colour, we were compelled by our liminal existence on the margins, to no longer tolerat-ing being silent or silenced. Our minds and bodies compelled us to tell our counterstories and throw previously held cautions to the wind – our truths mattered, and we needed to be our whole selves in the twilight years of our careers (Wing, 1990).

This qualitative reflexive research, examines our lived and racialised professional experi-ences and approaches, through the decades we have worked in higher education. Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Race Methodology (CRM) have informed the methods we employed to generate rich data through a series of research conversations. CRT provides "an opportunity to challenge, contest and disrupt dominant ideologies" (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019, p. 3), to challenge the absence of the voices of women of colour within dominant dis-courses and worldviews (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In this paper, the racialised and gen-dered voices of two (b)older, South Asian women academics are privileged as legitimate. Position and privilege are two words not usually associated with this racialised and gen-dered group, whose voices are too often muted. Over time, we feel as if our voices have become stronger with age, rather than being muted. As we have aged in academe, we found that we cared less about any backlash or opprobrium we would receive, since we were at the end of our careers and had other possibilities and spaces for activism and fulfil-ment. We have also developed confidence and self-respect for our ideas and knowledge, developed across our lived experiences, as bodies in/out of place.

Telling our stories

After gaining ethical approval for this study, we met online for between one to two hours, over the course of three consecutive months. We engaged in a series of in-depth research conversations, applying the methodology used by Ludhra (Ludhra, 2015), about our entry points into higher education, and career trajectory "success" and "failure" stories. During the course of these conversations, we revisited different forms of racism and racial trauma that we had encountered (Keval, 2025), and the *dukh* (pain) of particular interactions. We

discussed ways of coping "professionally" through collective spaces of strength and resilience, and also the role of our faith and strong teacher/educator identities which offered *umeed* (hope). The research conversations were recorded on Microsoft Teams and a transcript produced by the software. We analysed each transcript and video recording after the meetings, paying close attention to areas where we were codeswitching to our mother tongue naturally, and moments of pause, sadness, even tears. Using our mother tongue allowed us to grapple with and discuss emotional topics, where the depth of meaning might have been lost in English translation (Brah, 1999; Kumsa, 2022). We used a thematic coding (Bryman, 2015) approach to analyse the data. The data analysis process felt heavy as we were reflexively re-engaging with the scented memories of our pasts (Brah, 1999). Between each research conversation, we would often text, voice note and email shorter reflections as they arose. Although the process felt cathartic at times, we had to push our words through *dukh* (pain) at times, however emancipatory the sharing of our (b)older truths felt.

Conceptual model: *Awaaz aur Umeed* (voice and hope)

Through our research conversations, we developed a conceptual model to frame the transition phases of our stories and thinking over time, as part of our racialised experiences and traumas. The model below shines a light through the key theme of voice (*awaaz)*, centred around a chorus of hope (*umeed*) that repeatedly lifts us, drives us to keep going. We incorporate Hindi-Panjabi translations within the model, for reasons stated earlier (Figure 1).

Mehsoos Karo: notice and feel

In this phase, our conversations focussed on our growing awareness over time of different forms of macro and microaggressions – the ways in which they land on our skin, tingle then sting, how they are felt within our souls – in visceral and violent ways. As we notice (through our senses and instincts), we may feel an internal response, engage in deep questioning and doubting which can lead to painful emotional stirrings. The act of noticing and feeling a racist interaction can also take our breath away through a state of shock, where post-interaction reflections and realisations can result in physical responses like stress, anxiety and illness. During this phase, we may choose to voice our concerns quietly to a trusted colleague/friend, as a form of sense-checking the "realness" of the interaction. This noticing and feeling stage is far from passive, as processing and reflecting takes up space and requires mental energy.

Chup Raho: remaining silent and being silenced

Although this phase is around remaining "silent", or "being silenced", as with the above phase, it is far from being a passive space. It as an active phase of deep and critical reflection and (un)learning, where we may have been shocked into being silenced, or chosen to remain silent as a form of survival, coping and healing. At times, choosing to remain silent can act as a form of temporal self-protection for re-evaluating, as managing the fear and consequences of speaking out may feel overwhelming and cause anxiety.

Uchi Bolor: speaking out!

In this active phase of "speaking out", our research conversations touched on knowing when to speak out, gently agitate, pose critical questions to open new lines of bold(er) thinking – arriving at a point of "knowing" came through years of experience. As we reflected on episodes of "speaking out", we discussed how our lived experiences had led to a particular confidence as we got older, a speaking toolkit to support how we managed personal risk, whilst pre-empting potential White backlash, racial battle fatigue and trauma. We discussed the strength and courage (*honsla*), energy and strong mental and physical health needed to navigate "speaking out" on race related topics. Lander used the phrase "lah parva" (care-less) in one of our research conversations to frame how she has become less bothered, braver, (b)older (meaning that she is willing to speak her "truth", drop the filters, and fear-less). In Panjabi, as part of her faith, speaking the truth in Gurmukhi is translated as "sach boler". To speak the "truth", we have both had to move through certain rites of passage as mature women, some very painful and traumatic, that at times have almost "broken" us.

Kuch Karo: take action

In this phase, our voices led to driving action for change, where we discussed the different ways in which we have set up spaces for listening, (un)learning, healing, and to support each other through the racialised discrimination that we have faced over time and space. As (b)older South Asian academics, we see taking action as part of our core values to support the next generation to feel hope *(umeed),* and work differently, more comfortably to support mental health and wellbeing. When discussing this phase, we drew on the Panjabi saying amongst women: "Pehne, chal dukh-sukh vandiye" (Sister, let's share our pain and joys). This phase is very much about remaining hopeful through our (collective) action and compassion. We discussed the practitioner-academics of colour community spaces that we had created, by "putting ourselves out there" as "safe space" holders. This included for example, holding listening circles, reading groups, and informal mentoring for younger colleagues who trusted us for advice. We both applied for new academic and community-based practitioner roles that felt outside of our comfort zones at times, but took action in hope to influence change from a more centralised position. Being at the centre, we discussed how we often felt a sense of (un)belonging and "trespassing", invading White spaces where we had never felt a sense of "belonging". Through taking bold action, we both discussed feelings of "burn-out", racial battle fatigue, and the importance of setting personal boundaries for self-care and healing. In one research conversation, we both cited the Panjabi phrase: "Meri hun bass horgai" (I feel burnt out now!). We both recognise that taking action can lead to "burn-out", and racial battle fatigue.

Umeed: hope

Across our research conversations, the repeating chorus of *umeed* (hope) lightened the load of sharing and revisiting painful racialised experiences. When we analysed the source of our *umeed*, we touched on themes of faith and spirituality, the scented hope-filled migration stories of our parents, our roots as teachers and teacher educators,

who see possibilities in every child/student that we teach. We discussed the power and strength of collective voices (and spaces) to develop *umeed,* an essential ingredient that allows us to carry on with our equity work. In relation to our chorus of umeed, an important Gurmukhi phrase that we both heard growing up from our fathers and elders in the Gurdwara, is "Chardi Kala", to stay in a state of eternal optimism. We recognise that this principle is very difficult to embody in racial justice equity work, but in our mother tongue, it somehow felt more possible and "real".

The counter story examples that follow, illustrate three of the five themes in our conceptual model: *chup raho, uchi bolor and umeed*. We emphasise that this model (see Figure 1) is by no means linear, and depending on one's particular experiences and approach, phases will intersect and overlap differently.

Our stories

Chup Raho – *remaining silent and being silenced*

Lander had always been acutely aware of the damaging effects of racism ever since she was a child – through her parents' migration stories, schooling experiences, social spaces, and sense of social justice when growing up without the academic metalanguage of race before entering academia. Her childhood journey led her to centre her undergraduate degree, Masters dissertation and doctorate, on research focussed around race and racism. As a teacher, Lander led the school multicultural working group, and later worked with the Local Education Advisory (LEA) as a Race Equality Advisor. She always thought that racial justice was written through her body and soul, like letters running through a stick of rock. When she first started in higher education, it was no surprise when she was asked to deliver a lecture on race and English as a Second Language (ESL), as it was mistakenly called, framed as it was and still is, within a dominant deficit framework. In her newness and naivety, she assumed the all-white student body and staff were kind allies – after all they were going to be, or had been, teachers – so surely they would "get it".

She started the lecture by speaking in Panjabi (delivering a read around story). The aim was for student teachers to experience what it felt like for a new learner of English to be immersed and develop academic skills in that language. A nervous titter rippled through the lecture hall, hands started shooting up and one male student shouted: "We don't understand what you're saying!" But, Lander valiantly carried on. She reverted to English and explained her positionality as a Black woman, using the term within its broader political and theoretical context. Before she had the chance to further explain the term, the same impolite young man shouted, "But you're not Black!" laughing as he finished the end of his sentence, as the chorus of others followed. However she felt at that time, Lander carried on and explained key terms, completed the lecture, courageously and professionally. Crest-fallen and upset, she returned to her office feeling deeply upset about what had just happened, yet knowing what she had been subjected to felt like and was a form of racism. Back then, Lander did not have the tools, courage and confidence to tackle such arrogant and rude assertions of whiteness and white supremacy – terms she discovered as she developed her academic research. At the time, none of her colleagues showed a flicker of concern or understanding for what she had just passed through in the lecture, alone. Lander did nothing and remained silent, carried on. Just like when a student teacher in

another university where Lander had gained promotion to a senior post, said, "Thanks for the lecture. It was really helpful. You do speak good English". Lander felt put in her place, as the other, the insider/outsider, by a first-year undergraduate student who had just attended the Welcome Lecture at the start of her course. Yet again, she knew what had just been said was a slight, she wanted to remain "professional" and name it as racism, but at the time, felt it was best not to rock the boat.

Geeta related to Lander's story in a visceral way – goosebumps, shivers, through re-visualising the lecture centre which she had framed as the "Gladiator's Ring" for a particular incident where she once experienced a similar racist student interaction during her first academic year. Having worked on National Strategy documents, English as an Additional Language curriculum materials as a school leader, and having worked across super-diverse London schools, Geeta was well-positioned and experienced to deliver linguistic and cultural diversity lectures. She recalls the excitement of being a new lecturer, the joy of learning language acquisition theories and the history of race education. As she created interactive lecture activities to help students engage and discuss concepts around linguistic and cultural diversity, policy changes in the curriculum (to include a bilingual storytelling activity like Lander), it was that moment of crash that broke her confidence and courage early on in her career, when a young white male student shouted: "EAL is just a hot potato for you – it holds the other kids back!" This student went on to agree with school segregation approaches for early English learners, reflecting historical moments of exclusion. Geeta did not have an issue with the disagreement, but felt triggered (and "unsafe") at the angry, condescending tone. She paused and went silent in that full lecture centre. Her paused silence was broken when a young female South Asian student stood up in support of her to praise what Geeta was sharing, stating how she found the diverse experiences brought to the lecture very relevant and how they connected with her own family migration stories. Geeta reflected on how she was polite and professional, silenced, but almost made to feel ashamed of herself and the knowledge she brought to the lecture, by someone who had never taught before.

Like Lander, she valiantly carried on, standing tall, performing confidence. Geeta discussed being well-prepared, almost over-prepared – something that she'd learned to do even more when teaching topics relating to equity, decolonisation and racial justice, for fear of White backlash. As Geeta's lecture drew to an end, she quietly gathered her belongings and some students slowly walked past her lecture desk, pausing to ask if she was okay. However confident she acted, inside she felt shaken, angry with herself for not planning enough, not responding fully enough, and questioned her academic knowledge. She immediately problematised herself and sat with self-disappointment for some time.

One male Indian student stood outside the lecture centre and said he'd love to walk back with her and speak/learn more as he enjoyed the lecture (very aware of what had happened) and was teaching in Southall. That evening, Geeta received several emails of support and positive feedback from students, which filled her with hope (umeed) that she must not let this one early-career incident weigh her down or push her out. That one early act of silencing by a young white man drove Geeta to learn more, and also change the power dynamics of how such lectures are delivered "safely" by academics of colour, to include white "allies" where they were willing to support. Geeta felt very alone after that interaction for some time, and processed the emotional stirrings in isolation as there were no support systems back then. That one act of silencing did not sit in isolation and mirrored a previous racist

interaction in school when Geeta was a newly qualified teacher, working in a predominantly white, working-class setting. A parent questioned Geeta's academic credentials as the Head of English. There are many more examples of silences and being silenced that Geeta carries, and has processed in pain – from staff meetings to lectures, meetings in Board rooms as a trustee, and conference microaggressions. Through every act of silencing, dismissal of experience, Geeta talks through hope about building a stronger toolkit of resources from which to respond and speak out about racial justice with greater boldness, less guilt and shame, but as a "killjoy" who is driving change (Ahmed, 2024).

Despite the attempts to silence them and the *dukh* (pain) that followed these interactions, Ludhra and Lander demonstrated resilience and deep commitment knowing that there was work to be done in the "teaching to transgress" and developing critical thinking skills areas of teacher education spaces (hooks, 1994; hooks, 2010). If not for themselves, then for the student teachers of colour and the junior academics who would follow them. Clearly, they were always going to be bodies out-of-place (Puwar, 2004), hypervisible at the front of the lecture space with their positions questioned. They were tested by gatekeeping white students asserting their white lenses of scrutiny to examine their legitimacy, and to ensure that they were worthy of teaching white students in higher education, unaware of how they exposed their own racism through the harmful microaggressions inflicted. In analysing our respective experiences, not only did we feel under constant surveillance and silenced, our credentials and knowledge were being questioned. This scrutiny invoked feelings of unworthiness, fear, shame and unbelonging, the need to work hard and harder, without realising the *dukh* and *gammi* (pain and soul wounds) this led to over time. We chose to stay silent in an invisible place from which to reflect, survive, heal and repair (Barthwal-Datta, 2023). Through our analyses of these acts of resistance, we surmised that we were not accepting our silencing as a yoke of racial oppression, but as a reflective space to strengthen our resolve to rise and return, rise and take action through our equity and social justice work. We discussed how this constant rising came at a deep personal cost, and also required us to appreciate the importance of "radical rest", something that did not come naturally to either of us in our younger years (Muir, 2024).

Uchi Bholo (speaking up, speaking out)

You live and learn they say thought Lander as she walked away from what she classified an interesting race encounter with Jacob, a secondary teacher educator colleague. "I don't know why you do all that race stuff. When I see you, I don't see your colour."

Lander retorted, "Oh right! What is it I become which suits you? I didn't know you had Harry Potter's cloak of invisibility!" Lander was proud of her response. She felt proud and bold that she'd spoken out, rather than absorbed, remained silent and been silenced as in previous racial interactions. This colleague had often undervalued her work on race at the university, and she was fed-up with his constant snipes delivered with a wry smile, as if this was some kind of jolly jape!

Ludhra's story of International Women's Day left her questioning the solidarity, creative possibilities, performativity and toxic harm through such celebratory feminist events for racialised women of colour, when speaking in predominantly White spaces which failed to recognise the risks and backlash (see Hamad, 2021). Over recent years, Ludhra had been

invited to deliver keynotes/presentations on themes which required a more inclusive presence/panel of women in leadership. This particular year, she had been invited to present her community-practitioner work as a female leader who is amplifying new nature stories and knowledge. The title of her presentation was: "Women of Colour in the Countryside: 'Space Invaders' vs 'Safe Space Creators'". The conference was a residential which Geeta was excited about, but that evening, she sat alone and pencilled through her dukh (pain), journaling reflections after an uncomfortable dinner:

> My slide images were very different,
> I'm a brown body in a white feminist space,
> My messages were very different, possibly too different for this audience –
> I was a "space invader" in this rural space celebrating International Women's Day –
> Yet it didn't feel international, inclusive or intersectional.
> Why did I agree? – all that prep and reassurance from the organisers –
> I should have followed my gut instinct.
> I'm so glad that I brought my friend, otherwise I would've left before dinner.
> I was not silenced today, but chose to remain silent on my terms,
> to protect my energy
> and re-evaluate where and when I speak and respond.
> I chose not to invest in the emotional labour of educating on rural racism,
> and what it means to be a brown body out-of-place, in a green space.

Ludhra agreed to speak because she knew that change needed to happen, raise awareness and knowledge of how some communities may feel invisible – the land and air needed to feel the energy of new stories, new footsteps, new memories, and she also belonged here (Sethi, 2021; Pace-Humphreys, 2022). When Ludhra first started her nature community work, she knew that the journey would require speaking out through more interactions of dukh (pain). She took a close friend to this conference for company, yet over dinner, she also faced microaggressions by a white man who assumed that she was a "secretary" in the university. When presenting, Geeta was not apologetic in tone, but bold and spoke her truths through the knowledge of her community work. She spoke up about the historic and systemic inequalities that worked against racialised communities in accessing and enjoying rural nature spaces. In her presentation, she referenced an upcoming University seminar series on "Decolonising Green Spaces" (Fowler, 2020; 2024) and this slide led to puzzled looks and uncomfortable mutterings in the audience.

In her (b)older phase of academia, Ludhra felt more confident to speak up through her grassroots community activist work and felt less afraid of backlash. She was now better-equipped and prepared, had learned through painful lessons. Reflecting back, she discussed how she felt proud of speaking what had never been said before in that rural space – she disrupted the Whiteness of that "feminist" space with stories from people of colour that were what Avtar Brah ji calls the "pariah". The coffee break discussions revealed further episodes of discomfort, silent gazes and microaggressions, alongside a woman of colour sharing saying how refreshing it was to hear her speak in a space like this. Ludhra journalled that evening, to help her reflect on the discomfort felt, by herself, and the audience, through memories of what was said:

- Do you think your community just aren't interested in getting out as much? They need to put their boots on and just get out there!

- *We are friendly people in the countryside and colonialism is a thing of the past – I don't get why you want to run an event called decolonise the countryside? Sniggering between two people who exchanged glances and made me feel like my seminar was irrelevant and a silly idea.*
- *They could join the Ramblers to motivate them? (I reflected on stories that some of my walking group had shared with me about trying to join, and feeling excluded).*

The list went on. Ludhra's keynote is where she chose to speak up, share the community stories and lessons of racialised people creating "safe" spaces and experiences in ways that they felt a sense of belonging and enjoyment, and were able to explore meaningful connections creatively. She opened-up for questions and comments and chose to retire at the microaggressions over coffee, before the evening meal – racial battle fatigue kicked in and she felt like going home.

Through this event and several others, Ludhra reflected deeply and re-evaluated her approach constantly.

Although the microaggressions didn't stop, she developed "thicker skin" and stopped accepting with the compliant smile. She didn't feel the need to sense-check every racialised interaction as she had passed through that rite of passage several times before. Some White allies came along as part of this community work and were open to addressing some of the unspoken discomforts, and (un)learning without expecting her to be the educator (see Holliman, Ludhra, Warren et al., 2024).

After years of receiving and surviving racist microaggressions in the form of microinvalidations (Sue et al., 2007), being silenced and staying silent as a form of resistance and protection, Ludhra and Lander have learned to choose their moments to speak up (*uchi bholo*), to have their voices heard, and to assert their agency in an act of usurping the quiet South Asian woman trope (Corbin et al., 2018). In our analysis, we considered this colonial stereotype a dehumanising assertion of white masculinity, which we believe is equally invested in by white women (Ahmed, 2012; Mirza, 2009). But asserting our agency requires strategic planning and strength, confidence and supportive networks to vocalise how we can learn through our collective experiences. The act of *uchi bholo (speaking up, out)* is one which could focus the ire of whiteness on our bodies, and the displeasure of senior managers to detrimentally affect our career trajectories and our livelihoods (Corbin et al., 2018).

Umeed (hope)

Well, who would have believed it? Me, a professor, a professor of race and education thought Lander as she was putting her papers together at the end of a successful CPD session with teachers. "Excuse me. Can I just ask you something?" asked a Black woman who'd been in the audience. She continued, "I'm a deputy headteacher in a school nearby and I have been doing work on race for a while, but not as long as you. Can I just ask, how have you kept going for so long?" Lander wasn't surprised by the question. She'd asked herself that same question on so many occasions. She sat down and invited her Black colleague to join her. "It's a matter of hope. We need to give hope to those that follow us to appreciate that change is possible – hope so that they can envision a different future. We have to keep going because we owe it those who came before us, who engaged in the struggle, and died as a result of racism or fought racism" replied Lander.

After several years in academia, Ludhra built up the courage and confidence to apply for promotion as Associate Dean of Equity, and was successful. Although b(older), she felt imposter syndrome, but she had a deeper inner confidence to drive change from a more centralised position, and get her voice heard to drive collective change. Within this new role, her thinking and activism felt valued, differently – seeing small changes happen filled her with hope. Within the joys of this new role, which she enjoyed, she also embodied new dukh (pain) yet continued to embrace every challenge through the lens of hope. She met new people, and a small group aligned with her thinking around social justice for the first time in her career. In this more central space, Ludhra experienced how her ideas and words were viewed differently – one person called her " … refreshingly bold – I can see that you're passionate about this work". Filling yourself with constant hope is exhausting though, particularly during the current political and economic university context of "crises". Being at the margins felt isolating for many years, particularly when Ludhra had a strong voice and ideas, but they often felt muted. "Trespassing" towards the centre across boundaries was not designed for women like her, yet she did, and felt inspired by women of colour who were there to support, encourage her with hope. As a "space invader" in a new University role and space, Ludhra was under no illusion of the reality of university cuts. She continued to remain hopeful through the few people who worked through the genuine sisterhood of the collective "we", rather than the competitive, neoliberal "I" of academe.

Final reflections and conclusions

For us as two (b)older South Asian women entering the later/final phases of our academic careers, we have survived the challenges to our identities, valiantly forged our place within academe whilst being questioned for speaking our "truths", realising that we have always lived with and through these challenges, learning to accept the harsh reality of being discriminated bodies of colour. We have developed the courage *(honsla)* to speak out boldly, and fear-less of the consequences of White backlash through growing self-respect, belief and confidence – this in no way means that we are immune to *dukh* (pain) and falling at times. But, unlike Hendrix (2021), we have not become "unsure of ourselves" – we have been fortified by our racialised challenges – becoming not just older, but openly bolder, unwilling to accept what we historically always have. Today, we recognise the importance of our diverse and creative forms of knowledge and lived experiences, the rich tapestry of cultural herstories that we embody, and our ability to drive cultural change and moral courage through the chorus of hope *(umeed)*. We have learned to put on our armour and survive, and find/ create "safe spaces" to survive and thrive. We have learned the hard way – that our tears "do not carry the power of white women's tears … . there is power in her tears", as Hendrix (2021, p. 258) states. We have learned to dry our tears, hold them back, rise from institutional onslaughts and carry on courageously – in Panjabi: *Sach borl, honsla rakh, umeed rakh* (speak the truth, stay strong, keep faith). We are strong warrior women, and as in the Sikh faith, we live to fight if not for ourselves, but for those women of colour for whom we prepare the way to work with a lighter load, and fewer distractions through racism. The artistic representation of Durga below, provided a hook for our final research conversation where the power of our Sikh and Hindu faith offered us *umeed* (hope) as (b)older South Asian women. During our final research

conversation, we spoke at length about how we saw parts of our intersectional identities through dimensions of strength represented in the Hindu Goddess, Durga, and the legacies of *umeed* that we would one day share with our granddaughters (Figure 2).

The cycle of awaaz (voice), through the stages of chup raho, mehsoos karo, uchi bolor, kuch karo, are spokes emanating from the fulcrum of umeed. *Umeed* (hope), which has served and driven us from our early career days as teachers working in challenging schools. Even when our *dil de zakham* (heart and soul wounds) were deep and raw, we remained resolute, unbroken by the oppressive whiteness in our universities. *Umeed*

Figure 2. Image: Durga (2023). Artist: Jatinder Singh Durhailay. Natural stone pigment heightened with gold and silver on handmade wasli paper.

has sustained us, fuelled by the love we have for teaching and educating, a belief in the transformative power of critical education to change lives. Marked, but unbroken (yet!), we have marched on through umeed, knowing that we are worthy of taking up space, are knowledgeable and highly competent practitioner academics who have done the work, the deep work, the labouring work that has not always been recognised. We invite you as readers, to engage with our conceptual model of awaaz and umeed (voice and hope), and to reflect on developing it further through your own stories, lived experiences and identities. But for now, we end in Panjabi: *Sadi dhona dhi baas hor gayee* (We are both worn out!) and pass the torch of *umeed* onto our younger female academic colleagues of colour.

Umeed rakho, pyari Pehnjiya aur Betiya, honsla rakho (Keep hope, respected sisters and daughters, remain courageous).

Note

1. We use the honorific Hindi-Panjabi term 'Ji' at the end of names to indicate deeper respect.

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Image: Durga. (2023). Artist: Jatinder Singh Durhailay. Natural stone pigment heightened with gold and silver on handmade wasli paper.

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