

---

## Cross-Community Counter-Memorialisation and Resistance in the Contemporary Kashmiri Art of Veer Munshi and Ehtisham Azhar

<sup>1</sup>Saqib Mohammad, <sup>2</sup>Waseem Mushtaq

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of Fine Arts, Aligarh Muslim University.

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Fine Arts, Aligarh Muslim University. Aligarh, UP

### Abstract

This paper examines how artistic practices in Kashmir function as acts of commemoration and resistance, focusing on the works of two artists, Veer Munshi and Ehtisham Azhar, from two different generations. In a region marked by violence and systemic repression, traditional forms of memorialization are often censored or erased. In response, these artists use visual narratives to preserve memory and challenge dominant narratives of power and conflict. Through their paintings, installations, and performances, these artists engage with themes of loss, displacement, and resilience, transforming art into a space for collective remembrance. Their work resists the sanitization of historical atrocities, fostering public engagement with contested histories and offering alternative archives of memory. This study critically analyzes how their practices navigate political constraints to assert identity, reclaim cultural heritage, and challenge erasure in a tightly controlled environment. By situating their work within the broader discourse of memorialization and resistance aesthetics, this paper underscores the role of artistic expression in shaping collective memory and countering mediatized narratives in Kashmir.

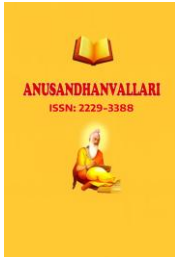
**Keywords:** commemoration, resistance, collective memory, art, Kashmir

---

### An Introduction to Counter-Memorialisation Across Communities in Kashmir

The politics of memory and memorialisation have long been contested in conflict-ridden societies. In regions where state narratives dominate historical discourse, artistic practices often emerge as counter-hegemonic tools of remembrance, defiance, and resistance. Kashmir, presents a unique case where artists have employed visual and performative expressions to challenge erasure and state-sanctioned silences. This paper critically examines the aesthetics of commemoration and resistance in Kashmir by exploring how art functions as a medium for commemorating loss, preserving memory, and resisting the structures of occupation.

The absence of conventional memorials in Kashmir reflects a larger struggle over historical truth. Unlike in other post-conflict societies where museums, plaques, and official commemorations exist, Kashmir's violent history remains largely unacknowledged by the state. This erasure forces artists to reimagine commemoration through visual and performative means, creating alternative spaces of remembrance that resist state narratives. These practices not only offer an emotional and symbolic form of catharsis for the people but also serve as political statements that challenge the hegemony of power. The concept of artistic resistance is deeply embedded in global struggles against oppression and erasure. As highlighted by Huyssen (2003), the role of artistic intervention in contested spaces serves as an essential counter-memory that prevents historical amnesia (p. 49). In many regions, the absence of official memorials signifies not forgetting, but rather an active battle over memory, where artistic expressions become crucial in preserving collective narratives. Similarly, Young (1993) argues that counter-memorials, as opposed to traditional monuments, allow societies to engage with history in more dynamic and interactive ways (p. 27). In Kashmir, the absence of state-sanctioned remembrance compels artists to use their creative expressions as an alternative form of resistance and documentation.



---

### A Visual Dialogue on Kashmir's Conflict and Displacement: The Art of Veer Munshi

Veer Munshi, born in Srinagar, Kashmir, and educated in fine arts at M.S. University Baroda, has been living in Delhi/Gurgaon since 1990. Throughout his three-decade-long artistic career, Munshi has explored a diverse array of subjects, but the theme of exile remains his most profound condition and focus. His art, deeply personal yet universally resonant, reflects the pain and struggle he feels as a result of the ongoing conflict in his homeland. Rather than making overt political statements, Munshi's work serves as a potent human rights declaration, emphasizing the turmoil that accompanies his separation from his heritage and the diminishing space for culture and art in Kashmir. Munshi firmly believes that art, with its universal language, can play a significant role in resolving the Kashmir situation.

Munshi's artistic achievements are marked by 17 solo exhibitions across major cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Perth, and Edinburgh, and even at the United Nations in Geneva. His works, spanning various mediums, including installations, videos, paintings, and photographs, have been showcased in prestigious events such as the Kochi-Muziris Biennale (2018), the Dhaka Art Summit (2018), and the Serendipity Arts Festival (2017). Among the many honors he has received are the National Award and a senior fellowship from the Ministry of Culture, Government of India. His art is part of several significant collections, both in India and abroad, including the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi, the Smart Museum of Art in Chicago, and the Indo-Australian Institute Museum in Melbourne.

### The Poetics of Displacement

In Kashmir's politically charged atmosphere, where censorship and surveillance often restrict open dialogue, the arts have emerged as a powerful medium for reflection and expression. Artists like Veer Munshi use their work to convey the unspoken experiences and emotions of the people, presenting a deeply personal yet collective vision for peace. Over the years, Munshi's art has moved beyond sensationalized portrayals of the valley's conflict to explore more profound, nuanced truths. One of Munshi's most poignant pieces is his depiction of Zuljinah<sup>1</sup>, the horse that holds immense significance in Shia Islam. Zuljinah was the horse of Imam Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who was martyred at the Battle of Karbala. According to tradition, after Imam Hussain's death, Zuljinah carried his body and those of his companions back to their camp. Munshi's artwork draws on this powerful imagery, presenting Zuljinah with skeletons on its back, a haunting reflection of the ongoing suffering and loss in Kashmir. This piece exemplifies Munshi's ability to blend religious symbolism with contemporary themes, using the figure of Zuljinah to comment on the cycles of violence and martyrdom that continue to plague the region. By integrating the traditional papier-mâché technique with modern visual storytelling, Munshi creates a dialogue between the past and the present, offering a poignant commentary on the enduring impact of conflict on Kashmiri society. Through works like Zuljinah, Munshi not only pays homage to the rich cultural and religious heritage of Kashmir but also uses art as a medium to engage with the broader issues of displacement, identity, and memory. His art becomes a space where the personal and the political intersect, challenging viewers to reflect on the deeper meanings behind the symbols and stories that shape their understanding of the world.

---

<sup>1</sup> Plenary talk on "Visual dialogue on Conflict and Displacement". Veer Munshi. (n.d.). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OMM3wih6XQk>

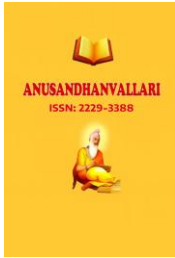


*ZULJINHA- Resin hand painted in Kalamkari Kari technique 72/60/36 inches -2016*

One of Munshi's most compelling series, *Abandoned Houses* (2008-present), began during a visit to Kashmir after fifteen years of exile. The series documents the abandoned homes of Kashmiri Pandits, including Munshi's own ancestral home. These houses, left in states of decay and abandonment, serve as powerful symbols of the devastation wrought by the exodus of the 1990s. Photography, as the chosen medium, allows Munshi to present these houses as they are, unaltered, capturing their stark reality. This series marks a significant shift in Munshi's practice, where he moves beyond traditional painting to engage in a form of archiving and historicity. The distinction between figurative and abstract art-making is dissolved in the photographic representation, where the background becomes a mere aesthetic of natural beauty against which these houses stand, representing their lost residents and the erstwhile charm of Kashmir's architecture.



*The series 'Pandit Houses' photographed by Veer Munshi. Image courtesy: Sakshi Gallery*



*Homegrown. (n.d.). Veer Munshi's photographs of Kashmiri Pandits' abandoned homes tell a truly disquieting story [Images]. Homegrown. Retrieved from <https://homegrown.co.in/homegrown-voices/veer-munshis-photographs-of-kashmiri-pandits-abandoned-homes-tell-a-truly-disquieting-story>*

In 2014, Kashmir was hit by a devastating flood, cutting off all channels of communication. In response, Munshi began drawing portraits of the people he remembered from his visits to Kashmir—the barber, the butcher, the neighbor. This act of drawing became a form of memory preservation, an attempt to safeguard the presence of those who remained resilient in the face of chaos and violence. These portraits were later placed inside a wooden installation titled *The Fallen House* at the India Art Fair in 2015. The installation featured lattice designs on the windows, which remained shut, and a video showing the floodwaters carrying away life and property. The installation bridged the gap between media and the event, creating a space where art could build a special bond between the two.

In 2016, Munshi curated a show titled *Concourse* in an old, abandoned industrial building in Srinagar. The event brought together sixty artists, many of whom were meeting for the first time since their departure from Kashmir. The show featured a wooden installation in the shape of a maze, symbolizing the daily struggles faced by those living in conflict zones. Despite the challenges posed by a heavy downpour the night before, the event went on as planned, demonstrating the strength of belonging and collective memory among the artists. The show highlighted the unresolved nature of the exodus and the Partition, making it clear that these issues continue to shape the present.



*Fallen House, Veer Munshi, Wood, 12x20x9(ft), 2023, Art Alive Gallery*

Munshi's exploration of Kashmir's history, inspired by ancient texts like Kalhana's Rajatarangini and the cultural influences of Buddhism and Islam, led him to create a shrine out of wood. The coffins inside the shrine, made from colorful papier-mâché skeletons, draw on the architectural influences of Buddhist pagodas and Islamic latticework. This installation, showcased at the Kochi Muziris Biennale in 2018, served as a powerful commentary on the cultural pride of Kashmir and the ongoing political vigilance associated with the region.

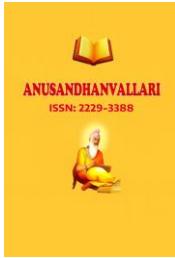


*Relics from Lost Paradise, Veer Munshi exhibited at Kochi Muziris Biennale 2018*

Munshi's work often documents the practice of violence, as seen in his Shrapnel series. The shrapnel, found heaped on roadsides, became a source of inspiration for Munshi, who sought to create an aesthetic language of violence to expose its deepest impacts. His sculptures of Hanguls, staged with cityscapes or in isolation, serve as allegories of forced migration and the conflict in Kashmir.



*SHRAPNEL -acrylic on handmade paper - 60/120 inches-2010*



Munshi's interest in the Arts and Crafts communities of India led him to engage with the kar-e-kalamkari tradition, weaving it into his visualizations. His art became a tool to raise awareness about the plight of artisans and craftsmen who were struggling to earn a living<sup>2</sup>. Through his work, Munshi sought to create a platform for these traditional practices, helping to preserve and promote the cultural heritage of Kashmir.

Gathering his lifelong work, Munshi has created a message of health and healing through his art. His works feature images of caste karigars (craftsmen) and intellectuals, representing the events and circumstances that have shaped their lives. Munshi's art is a powerful testament to the resilience of the people of Kashmir and a call for peace and understanding in a region marked by conflict and displacement.

### Art, Silence, and the Concept of Paper Planes in Ehtisham Azhar's Practice

Ehtisham Azhar's academic background in visual arts from Pakistan's Beaconhouse National University, Lahore, has significantly shaped his artistic practice. His time in Pakistan, which he describes as transformative, provided him with a strong foundation in performing arts. Upon returning to Kashmir in June 2014, Azhar began mentoring undergraduate students at Kashmir University's (KU) Department of Music and Fine Arts, collaborating with reputed art practitioners, Showkat Kathjoo and Mubashir Niyaz. At KU, he was immensely impressed with Kathjoo's critical understanding of art which subsequently set and influenced his focus on thematic areas. After his time at the KU, Azhar's artistic interests slowly started to be dominated by ideas of identity, freedom, and incarceration within the context of geo-politics, power dynamics, and the notion of the panopticon.



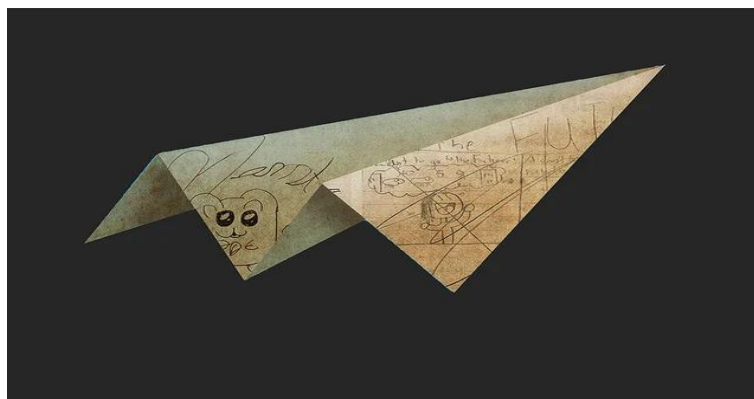
*"Untitled-II" 2014 Performance; 24 hours, Image Courtesy : Artist*

Azhar chose to explore these through the concept of the body performing in space, reflecting a schizophrenic tendency towards multiple identities, including political and psychological dimensions. His performances, though visually simple, engage multiple layers of understanding conflict, demonstrating a nuanced approach to representing geo-political issues. He views his work as a failure if it is only perceived through a singular lens or

<sup>2</sup> Plenary talk on "Visual dialogue on Conflict and Displacement". Veer Munshi. (n.d.). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OMM3wih6XQk>

linked to a specific geo-political scenario. His understanding of conflict extends from observations of geo-politics to personal experiences within households and historical contexts. This reflects in his work where he seeks to revert history to its constituent elements and celebrates it as a form of fiction or fictional memory. His commitment to expanding the reach of unconventional art forms is evident in his efforts to popularize these practices among the masses. His involvement in mentoring young artists and participating in various art residencies, including those offered by the Foundation of Indian Contemporary Art and Nikhil Chopra, reflects his dedication to strengthening a broader appreciation for contemporary performance art. Ehtisham Azhar's artistic approach engages deeply with the themes of silence, displacement, and the quest for connection. His conceptualization of silence is crucial to understanding his work. He likens silence to missing pieces in a jigsaw puzzle, suggesting that it completes the context of his artistic expression by uncovering the unspoken horrors embedded within societal, cultural, and political frameworks. Silence, in this metaphor, functions like the subconscious mind—holding and reflecting truths that are often overlooked or suppressed. This understanding has profoundly shaped Azhar's approach to positioning silence as a vital component that enhances the depth and impact of his narrative.

Azhar's project "Paper Planes," which began in 2019, serves as a powerful illustration of his engagement with the theme of silence. The project was catalyzed by Azhar's personal experience of isolation during communication blackouts in Kashmir<sup>3</sup> as part of months of military curfew immediately after the Indian Government revoked Article 370 and Article 35A arbitrarily in Kashmir that gave the indigenous population a special status. . While he was in Australia, curfews and communication cuts in Kashmir prevented him from contacting his family for five months which deepened his sense of helplessness, frustration and anxiety. This situation underscored the severe impact of such restrictions on personal connections and prompted Azhar to explore the metaphor of paper planes as a symbolic representation of his experience.



*Paper Plane 2023 (Artwork by Ehtisham Azhar), Image Courtesy : Artist*

The concept of paper planes became a focal point for Azhar's artistic exploration. Paper planes, with their simple yet profound symbolism, represent unattainable freedom and the silent nature of childhood dreams. Azhar's choice of this motif reflects his desire to convey the fragility and ephemeral nature of communication in times of crisis.

<sup>3</sup> *Guardian News and Media.* (2019, August 8). Kashmir: India's "draconian" blackout sets worrying precedent, warns Un. *The Guardian.* <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/08/kashmir-communications-blackout-is-draconian-says-un-envoy>

The project evolved through various formats, including physical paper planes displayed in museum vitrines, digital representations, and correspondences, demonstrating Azhar's intent to dissect and investigate the concept of silence and its role in storytelling<sup>4</sup>. Azhar's work, such as this project, is characterized by an innovative approach that transcends traditional boundaries within the art world. For him, art is an expression that needs no fixed disciplines. His performances and installations are informed by a deep engagement with contemporary art practices and an exploration of new forms of expression. Azhar's work often involves the use of his body as a site to interpret historical complexities and personal experiences, merging body, space, and text into a cohesive artistic act. One notable instance of Azhar's performance art occurred during the International Day of the Disappeared, organized by the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP)<sup>5</sup>. Alongside fellow artist Hilal Ahmad Khan, Azhar utilized his white-painted body wrapped in a white sheet as a metaphor for the presence and absence of the disappeared body<sup>6</sup>. This performance, along with another during the Haqeeqat-e-Kashmir<sup>7</sup> event—a counter-protest against Zubin Mehta's controversial concert in Srinagar<sup>8</sup>—demonstrates Azhar's engagement with socio-political issues through a performative lens.



*Installation View of Come Butcher Sing Me a Song..... 2013 by Ehtisham Azhar, Image Courtesy : Artist*

<sup>4</sup> *Kashmiri Artist Ehtisham Azhar: Silent Paper Planes. Outlook India. (n.d.).* <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/kashmiri-artist-eh-tisham-azhar-silent-paper-planes>

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>7</sup> *"haqeeqat-e-kashmir is to reclaim public space, narratives." Hindustan Times. (2013, September 4).* <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/haqeeqat-e-kashmir-is-to-reclaim-public-space-narratives/story-oRwAEQxBayK3pYxIPAcapO.html>

<sup>8</sup> *Pandey, G. (2013, September 6). Zubin Mehta in Kashmir: Concert hits controversial note. BBC News.* <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-23987183>

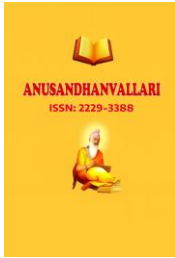
### Navigating Memory, Space, and Trace through Art

Ehtisham Azhar Chesti is deeply immersed in the exploration of visual arts. His academic journey is anchored in his thesis titled, “Forensic Image: (Re) Configuration of Space through Memory and Trace.” His thesis project reflects a profound engagement with the intersections of space, memory, and residual traces. Over the past decade, Ehtisham has cultivated a practice that defies adherence to any singular medium or technique. For him, the themes of spatial studies, particularly in the context of sites of violence, are central to his artistic inquiry. He envisions space as a schizophrenic entity—an existence beyond physical palpability. This conceptualization invites a re-imagination of space as layered with histories and echoes of past events, deeply intertwined with the human experience.



*The testament, artwork by Ehtisham Azhar “The poet wanted to forget.... And his purgation becomes an act of memory, a monument, against forgetfulness and the ravages of history.” (Muhawi, 1995:xix , Darwish, 1995) , Image Courtesy : Artist*

The evolution of Ehtisham’s work accentuates the socio-political and cultural underpinnings inherent in his artistic practice over the years. Whether examining Michelangelo's classical sculptures or contemporary abstract works his art invariably engages with societal narratives and critiques. His practice, however, deliberately distances itself from overt acts of commemoration. A deeper examination into this reveals that commemoration is not a separate artistic act for Ehtisham but rather an acknowledgment of residual traces—both material and immaterial—that persist within spaces and objects. He critically examines the role of commemoration in shaping collective memory and identity while being acutely aware of how the act of commemoration can be co-opted by state mechanisms to reinforce selective historical narratives. To reflect this, we can take the example of him contrasting the state's celebration of Maqbool Sherwani's anniversary with the suppression of Martyrs' Day. This dichotomy raises complex questions about ideological erasure and the manipulation of historical memory. In contested spaces,



Ehtisham suggests that commemoration becomes a tool of ideological warfare, similar to the Lacanian concept of desire and the gaze, where opposing forces strive to assert dominance over collective memory. As a result, Ehtisham's practice inherently involves an investigation of memory, space, and trace. His engagement with landscapes explores to unearth overlapping temporalities, preserving the character of spaces imbued with history and latent narratives. This subtle interplay between memory and space challenges conventional notions of commemoration that favour an immersive exploration over direct representation.

This has led Ehtisham's rejection of narrative-driven art and as a result he has employed materials and symbols to amplify silence rather than convey overt stories. His deliberate selection of materials is informed by their inherent histories, allowing them to resonate with the silent complexities of the spaces they represent. This approach aligns with Deleuzian principles, emphasizing sensation over sensationalism, and strengthening a visceral engagement with the work. It is in this context that Ehtisham recognizes art's vital role in unearthing alternative histories and marginalized narratives. He cites global examples like Doris Salcedo and Lawrence Abu Hamdan, acknowledging their contributions to documenting violence and absence. However, he critiques the aestheticization of such spaces in visual arts and advocates for a more visceral and experiential engagement with sites of trauma such as Martyr's Graveyard in Kashmir. He perceives Kashmir's visual art scene as still nascent in authentically grappling with these themes. It is with this notion that his early work delved into "unversed whispers"—the untold and alternate histories that subtly informed his exploration of spaces marked by violence. Although he has not directly engaged with archival materials in a traditional sense, he considers landscapes and bodily traces as living archives, which is why myths for him serve as an early form of archiving societal beliefs, blending fiction and reality to preserve cultural memory, especially in contexts threatened by historical erasure. The motivation behind engaging in such an artistic pursuit comes from a sense of responsibility and with the belief that art must engage with pressing human experiences rather than exist solely as a commodity. Quoting Anselm Kiefer, Ehtisham focuses on the need for art to balance responsibility with artistic integrity as he rejects compartmentalizing personal and collective memory, viewing memory as a fluid, dynamic force that shapes and is shaped by space. This perception aligns with his conceptualization of space as schizophrenic—where diverse identities and histories coexist, intertwine, and transform. Among his notable works within this framework is the 2017 installation titled "Landswept," an exploration of loss and displacement. Although not intended as a commemorative piece, it encapsulates his engagement with memory and space, embodying the complex layers of absence and trace that define his practice.

Ehtisham Azhar Cheti's work invites viewers into a contemplative space where memory, trace, and the physical environment converge. His art challenges traditional representations and offers instead an immersive experience that resonates with the unspoken histories and silent traumas embedded within spaces. Through this nuanced exploration, he contributes to a deeper understanding of how art can navigate and reveal the complexities of collective memory and cultural identity.

## Conclusion

The role of artistic resistance in Kashmir's memorialization process underscores the profound connection between memory, identity, and political defiance. By analyzing the work of artists such as Veer Munshi and Ehtisham Azhar, it becomes evident that art in Kashmir is not merely an aesthetic pursuit but a critical means of documentation and resistance. Each of these artists engages with themes of loss, displacement, and erasure, ensuring that the suppressed histories of Kashmir remain in public consciousness. Veer Munshi's work, particularly his installations, critically addresses themes of forced migration and cultural displacement. His *Pandit Houses* serves as a visual representation of exile and memory, reminding audiences of the Kashmiri Pandit exodus.



Ehtisham Azhar's work, on the other hand, employs performance art and installations to create interactive spaces for collective mourning, reinforcing the idea that commemoration must be an active, community-driven process.

Through their diverse artistic expressions, these artists construct counter-memories that refuse to be erased. Their work stands in opposition to the dominant state narratives, offering an alternative archive that future generations can engage with. By examining their contributions within the broader framework of global memory politics, it becomes clear that artistic resistance in Kashmir is part of a larger struggle for truth, recognition, and justice. Memorialization in Kashmir does not rely on official monuments but on creative interventions that transform both personal and collective grief into acts of defiance. Ultimately, the aesthetics of resistance in Kashmir demonstrate the enduring power of art to challenge oppression and shape historical consciousness. By turning absence into presence, these artists ensure that Kashmir's contested histories remain visible, defying efforts to erase them. Their work embodies a powerful form of commemoration, proving that in the face of systemic erasure, memory and resistance remain intertwined in the struggle for justice.

### References

- [1] Connerton, P. (1989). *How societies remember*. Cambridge University Press.
- [2] Edkins, J. (2003). *Trauma and the memory of politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- [3] Gandolfo, L. (2021). *Memory politics and transitional justice: Post-conflict memorialization*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [4] Gibbons, J. (2007). *Contemporary art and memory: Images of recollection and remembrance*. I.B. Tauris.
- [5] Huyssen, A. (2003). *Present pasts: Urban palimpsests and the politics of memory*. Stanford University Press.
- [6] Mannegren Selimovic, J. (2021). *The presence of absence: Memory work in post-war Sarajevo*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [7] Otele, O., Viejo-Rose, D., & Filippucci, P. (2021). *Memorials in the aftermath of armed conflict: From history to heritage*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [8] Homegrown. (n.d.). *Veer Munshi's photographs of Kashmiri Pandits' abandoned homes tell a truly disquieting story* [Images]. Homegrown. Retrieved from <https://homegrown.co.in/homegrown-voices/veer-munshis-photographs-of-kashmiri-pandits-abandoned-homes-tell-a-truly-disquieting-story>
- [9] Sørensen, M. L. S., Viejo-Rose, D., & Filippucci, P. (2021). *Memorials and memorialization: History, forms, and affects*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [10] Young, J. E. (1993). *The texture of memory: Holocaust memorials and meaning*. Yale University Press.
- [11] Azhar, E. (2023, March 10). Personal interview. Conducted by Saqib Mohammad.
- [12] Munshi, V. (2023, January 20). Personal interview. Conducted by Saqib Mohammad