

# Take a Look Inside: Exploring Closets as Fingerprints of the Queer Community

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The concept of ‘coming out’ of a ‘closet’ is an idea that has taken precedence in queer public life, personal narratives, and fictive stories as opposed to stories about queer life, joy and ‘normalcy’. This chapter follows the inception and growth of Almaarii, a digital graphic storytelling project I began to explore my own queerness, or the lack of it within popular culture of ‘acceptable queerness’. In this essay, I explore the existence of Almaarii as a space that offers comfort, as a space that reveals and conceals, a site of interior exclusion (Urbach, 1996) that shapes the way we experience the digital world as marginalised trans and queer people- and perhaps moves towards the resnatching of our spaces for ourselves, away from the celebrations of pride months and rainbow capitalism (Roque & Horacio, 2011).

Media organizations and safe spaces built for the queer community online and offline have sections of ‘coming out stories’ to talk about the experience of revealing one’s non-normative identity to a society that has learnt to be violent towards any form of ‘deviance’. Closets were built and used as a metaphor to speak about what is considered to be a (often dirty) secret; a queer crack in the wall of a heterosexual/normative society (A Room of One’s Own, 2018). These are stories I have known as an editor, contributor, and consumer of such spaces; they are some of the most popular (or maybe just necessary) stories when it comes to audience reach and readability- human stories that prove to us that we are not the only queer person in the world, that validate our struggle for acceptance. But what happens when the whole experience of coming out of a closet is based on and comes from a culture that has had the privilege of language to back the experience with words? A cultural hegemony (Gramsci et al., 2007) which has boated these words to other cultures and people who have, on their own, tried to grapple with their identity without words to explain what they feel in every fiber of their being?

These were just some of the questions I had one afternoon at home, swiveling in my office chair thinking about my own experience as a queer person in India. I was trying to make sense of my own coming out story and understand when, how, and why I came out. I was brought up outside India, in a conservative setting where I had had no chance to explore any part of my dormant queerness. At my all-girls school, we learnt about the word ‘lesbian’- mostly used as a slur; teachers told us it was okay to hug boys but not girls, we had no sex education (not that sex education includes gender and sexually non-conforming people) and no mention of the queer community in anything we learnt. This created a frankly homophobic, rebellious, and confused young person who had built their entire identity based on feelings they did not know the name of. Eventually, all these bricks that built walls around me that I had to painstakingly break down post the start of my college education in India made me question whether my own closet existed minus the defining moment most people seemed to have. I did not have an answer. I did not know if I ever did come out.

## ***'Invisible Membrane': Closets as Unifying, Intersectional, None and Both***

While my reflections began with my own story, there were already conversations about queerness and language and how coming out in the South Asian scenario is not the same as coming out in the 'western world' or how it is shown on TV. My coming out process, incidentally, was always based on me just not *denying* my queerness to those I needed to 'come out' to. The prescriptive nature of wanting to *belong* in a world I previously thought I was alone in extended even more when I read about other peoples' coming out processes, and when I started noticing whether they mentioned the closet or not. My journey to validate myself and have a similar story culminated in me sending in my own 'coming out story' to a popular online magazine in hopes of putting my secret out there, just 'for the record' in an article titled '*11 LGBTQ Indians Sharing Their Coming Out Stories*'. Once published, I remember feeling an intense wave of emotion. My long-hidden feelings were directly attached to my name, my persona across intersections. It was real, and it was out there for 'anyone' to read- my friends, family, anyone. There are five similar lists on the website, and many more singular coming out stories and open letters to parents populating the brand new and upcoming 'LGBTQ+' sections of lifestyle magazines online and offline but I did not see a lot of critique of the closet beyond it being called *passé*.

Coming back to the chair- I thought about how we describe closets as metaphors, and my thoughts eventually led to the word 'closet' itself. Why were we calling them closets if the wooden boxes holding my clothes in my house are referred to as wardrobes, and my grandparents always called their iron and aluminum cloth-boxes *alamari* in Malayalam. If we did not even have the same name for the thing we were supposedly 'trapped' in, what would we call all of us coming out of that 'trap'? I am not sure. Most of my straight cisgender friends who also did not know of the word 'closet' just called it "So... your parents know?". And so, I tried to find out. I called up a few friends and asked them to describe what their closets *looked* like in as much detail as possible. The keyword here is *look*. Because we all knew what a closet *felt* like, and knew we needed to come out of it, as prescribed by the movement soaring ahead of us outside India. I asked them to write, however short or long, in whatever language, about their spaces- whether that meant an actual cupboard, a room or a small bubble of water threatening to pop. The first comment I always got was- "wow, I never thought about how it would *look*". And that is exactly what I wanted to explore.

In that chair and through frantic phone calls to friends, *Almaarii* was born. It wasn't called *Almaarii* at first, it was 'Our Closet Project', an exploratory space talking about the non/existence of our closets. I first plotted the project with my partner, we chose to create a site on WordPress and also started social media versions on Instagram and Facebook. The first stories were in English, but their lengths varied; one exceeded two pages while another stopped at three lines. But everything was welcome; Our Closet Project was, after all, an exploration of what this space was/could be/is for all of us. The stories kept coming in as the project became popular within the communities, I was a part of. However, I realized that the discomfort I felt about what was known about the closet was not nearly over. Coming out, *baahar aana* (hindi),

*purathhu varaan (malayalam)*- coming out, when described in languages other than English sounds almost incomplete. *Baahar aake?* (after coming out?). I imagine it sounds like a balcony to stand on and look at the outside world and see if it is a place of acceptance. Which means, the balcony also connects back into this space in case conditions are not favorable to the person daring to look outside. At this moment I started questioning the name of the project as well- why call it and describe it as a 'closet' if that is not what language we experienced it in? I asked its followers what they would call their closets if not closets. There were a range of answers; '*Almirah*', '*Kaavu*', '*Almaarii*', '*Gufa*', 'cupboard', 'wardrobe'. From these, *Almaarii* was the only one that everyone knew and identified with- and so 'Our Closet Project' became *Almaarii* which aimed at describing the indescribable and redefining what we knew of the 'closet'.



*Untitled, written by Teenasai Balamu and Illustrated by Priya Dali*

*Almaarii* was created as a space where queer people can safely explore their un/safe spaces, hopefully without the pressure of calling it a coming out story. I did not want to create

alternative routes of exploring our queerness; I just wanted to understand why our queerness needed any more exploration than our straightness. As the writers kept writing in, and I kept reaching out to community members to write for *Almaarii*, I was introduced to many queer artists and allies who wanted to illustrate these spaces. The illustration element of *Almaarii* came from two primary, personal motivations. One, that I always found great merit in visually representing feelings and thoughts. Just like some feelings cannot be put into words, only words can often not hold the entirety of the weight these spaces had in our lives. And two, that this was me trying to create a space with queer people at the center, but also one able to show those outside the community what it feels/looks/hurts like to be queer. I constantly wondered, how, even in my case, I would explain to someone who has never experienced a life that is away from the way 'norm'al life proceeds, how *my* normalcy contains the smell of Vicks VapoRub and how it triggers in me memories of my mom. How do I show why it needs to be on my bedside table inside my closet, for the days my mom refuses to see me, or hear me? Will words be enough to say this story? The illustrative aspect of the project became a space for people from every nook in the community to collaboratively explore my original question- What would your *Almaarii* look like? With this need to search deeper, *Almaarii* becomes a means of collectively experiencing someone else's space, reimagining the idea of such a space entirely, comparing it with, or maybe even striving to not compare it at all.

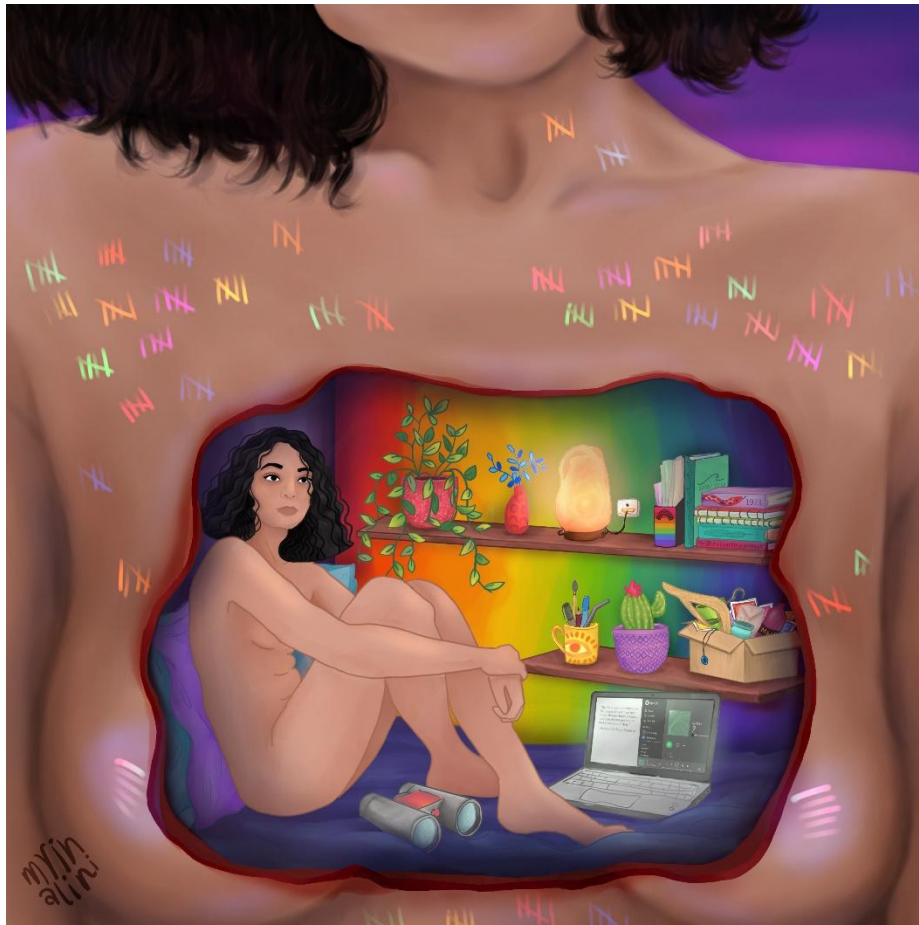
Some of the first conversations I had with friends and colleagues who were part of the community said my need to explore the closet was 'overdone'. I understand this, because closets, coming out, and queer journeys are *popular* both within the community and outside of it- but what is not popular is unpacking these words, and really thinking about why we took a language, a word and all the meanings attached to it and did not bother to question it. Three years on, one would think that reading other peoples' *Almaariis* would tell me where I could start with mine. 100 stories later, I still don't know what my *Almaarii* looks like, or whether it exists. In some ways, I knew what pain it would hold, but I don't know how I could construct or reconstruct it for someone else to see. There is a certain bravery in describing a place that might have caused so much pain. So much like the slurs the community has reclaimed for itself. Very few of us get to talk about the pain in reclaiming, post the power we feel once we have reclaimed a word. A lot of us do not even know what we left behind; We do not know what or *where* we were coming out from. We just knew we did not want to stay in this pit of ambiguity, and in pain about our identities. Through this, I also understand *Almaariis* as a coping mechanism, possibly a place we would rather stay in than toe the borders of, only to be shoved back inside.

### ***'Freedom of Restriction': The (Changing) Nature of Almaariis***

The whole idea behind calling this project an 'exploration' was because it was. I did not know how many stories would be out there, whether there would be stories at all, who this would interest (or even, offend). I did not know if *Almaariis* existed in the same way for us in South Asia (or even wider Asia and Africa) and its diaspora as it did for other people in the Global North/West (our first point of reference). I was comfortable with the possibility of people



telling me they did not have a closet, what I wanted was a space to explore these stories, regardless of their possible (non)existence.



*Skin Deep, Written and Illustrated by Mrinalini Godara*

These differences in the Almaariis are accentuated by who draws what, why and how- because we know that we all come with our own experiences that translate into the way we create. And Almaarii as a creative project will function in the way its creators' function, together and apart. For example, Almaariis written and illustrated by queer people themselves have been beautiful journeys of self-discovery. Queer written and illustrated Almaariis have little room for error because the person writing and drawing it bring to the front their entire experience as a queer creator. This is different from a writer having to explain why they wrote something so the illustrator can decipher it for themselves and figure out the best way to draw it, the best colors to use, and how it can capture both the story and the style of the artist themselves. If all my writers were comfortable drawing for themselves, I would have had them draw their own Almaariis.



1: *My Mountain*, written by Maisha and illustrated by Mia Jose

2: *Two Halves of a Whole*, written by Shruti and illustrated by Veer Misra

These nuances in difference and sameness can also be seen in who occupies the *Almaarii*. A closet is often thought of as a prison in which a queer person is confined (Urbach, 1996). That may be true but isn't always. In some *Almaariis*, there are friends, and in some, there is nothing, but the owner and their space furnished only with the thoughts others have weighed on their being. Some *Almaariis* have nobody in the house- not even the usual occupier of the house. The person has left, to never come back, or they have gone out onto that balcony to test the waters.

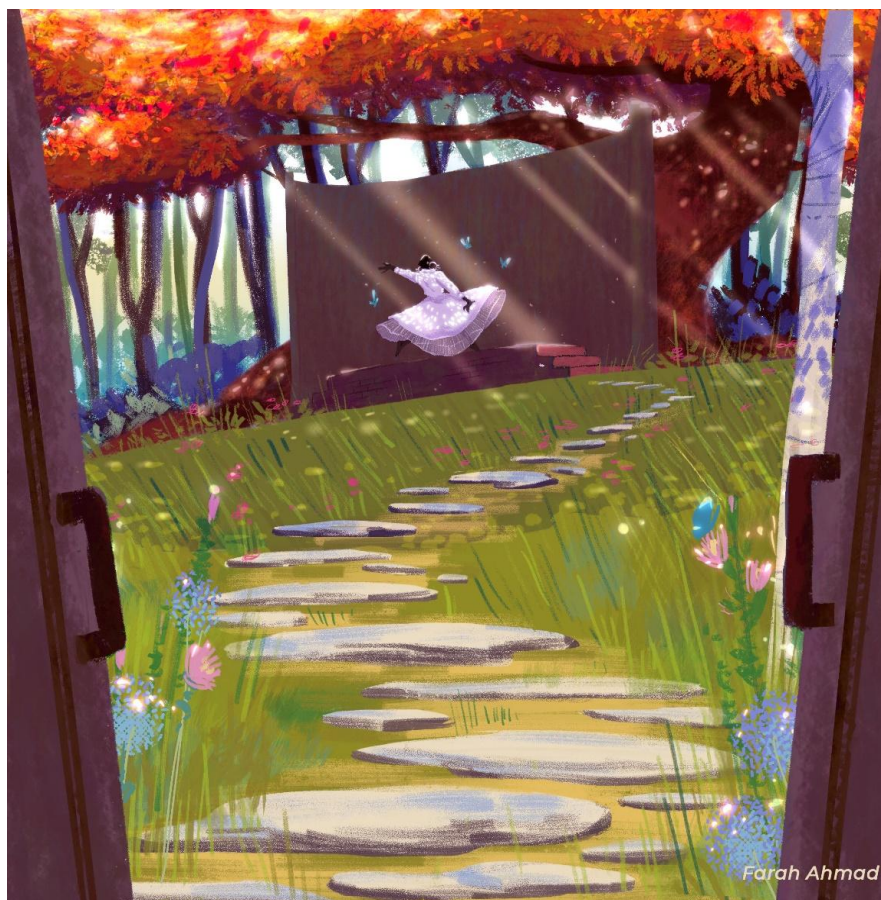
### ***'The Entertainer, The Entertained': Dismantling the Closet and the Experience of having an Almaarii***

The closet has often only remained a metaphor by which queer people can be spoken *about*, in the way that queer people and their lives can be sympathized for, experienced, and fed to media narratives to create traumatic stories to 'shake someone up' with (Turner, 2018). Our stories are often viewed through a lens of orientalism, appropriation, and an overall lack of self within the expected 'familial structure' of South Asians. Our experiences with oppression- by both being the oppressed as well as oppressors across the lines of our lives are seldom covered by the single tone paint of coming out. I did not create *Almaarii* as a space where mainstream narratives on trans and queer lives can be unpacked and understood. It is and was meant only for *us*. The current reality (and might I add, trend) is still trans women dying violent deaths, and cis men playing trans women for brownie points in Indian media (Sugavanam, 2021; Tripathi, 2021). I do not know if *Almaarii* evades the trauma porn constantly fed to cis



populations and shoved down the throats of trans people. We do not want it. And we are tired of saying that we do not want it.

*Almaarii* here, became a space where we wrote our own reflections for none other than us, not for news outlets during pride month, not as token representation on a panel on ‘the bathroom debate’ and not as research subjects in papers cisgender-heterosexual people wrote, pathologizing and ‘studying us’. But this experience too exists in duality- all closets are essentially private spaces being performed by queer folx for the public in an attempt unpack our own confusions and ambiguities while also asking for some kindness in the way our stories are treated. In the case of an *Almaarii*, a private space, we intentionally make it one that is consumable because we want this experience to be consumed. The existence of a queer person on the front stage (Goffman, 1959) (the stage that is shown to the entire world) is more of a maze. There is a constant and difficult negotiation taking place on how visible to be, where to be in the spotlight, how to hide in the shadows and when to jump off the stage. The backstage, ideally one that is supposed to be ‘safe’ and free from performance, is performative as well. The performance extends to the (wet) dreams that also seem learnt, in the internalized sense of fashion, in the constant brain chatter that tells you that being anything less or more than straight is wrong.



*A Silent Opera, written by Haisum and Illustrated by Farah Ahmad*

## ***‘A Totally Second Hand Closet’: Accessing the Almaarii Through Language, Inclusion and Censorship***

The stories we get to hear in the languages we get to hear begs an important question; people in rural India aren't 'coming out' in the same language as those of us in urban India are. Those without the same language as those of us in urban India may not be experiencing their queerness in the same way as we are. Are they even afforded the luxury to come out, or are we even afforded the luxury to stay 'in'? Do I get to be a part of this community without engaging in activism? A conundrum all (in)visible people need to live with- if one has to make a change, they need to be visible and ready for assault- both physically and virtually.

One of the first stories I received was from rural Karnataka. I still don't know how Sunita heard of Almaarii or why they wanted to write to *Almaarii*. Sunita's involvement made me work towards building a base of inclusion for Almaarii, perhaps way more than I would have in any other case.



*Paradise, written by Sunita and Illustrated by Harshit Manocha*



Over the years, I have fought with myself, understood, and reflected on the need to practice radical *exclusion* in my work to make spaces radically *inclusive*. There needs to be space for marginalized groups to explore their own identities, histories and collective memory that is away from normative identities. Radical inclusion for me has meant to constantly learn ways in which every single person around me can access something that I have access to. The best part of being radically inclusive is that as we all learn it, there is no end to how inclusive you can be.

One of the primary reasons making *Almaarii* illustrative was to decode metaphorical knowledge and unpack what something that has been a topic of conversation through shared knowledge and collective acceptance might represent and ‘look like’ for those sharing this knowledge. In the future, *Almaarii* might even become a series of collected voice notes on space, letting go of its illustrative aspect. Speaking of using visuals to ‘include’, I soon realized that these *Almaariis* should be made accessible to those who are visually impaired as well. We are now in the process of writing alt-text to describe the visuals of all *Almaariis* as accurately as possible in hopes that more people are able to understand and reach out to the project, afterall, there is no end to how inclusive something can be.

At the core of *Almaarii*’s creation, is the language we use to talk about our experiences. It was only fitting for me then, to think about translating the *Almaariis*. I had to see how accessible these stories that were usually written in English could be to those of us not using the language. I come from a South Indian household but being brought up in Mumbai and other metropolitan cities meant that I knew and could converse in Hindi. Having said that, Hindi has had a very hegemonic presence (Jawahar, 2019) in many of our lives, especially in the lives of those who were from the non-Hindi speaking states in India. This weighed heavily in my choices when it came to translation efforts. Instead of Hindi, we chose to first start translating to languages like Tamizh, Malayalam, and Marathi. We started doing Hindi translations later on because it is still widely understood and used. This double hegemony of the English language first, and then Hindi is an interesting, double-glazed closet door that is difficult to break open and speak about if the occupier neither spoke nor thought in these two languages. The same thought was applied when I first asked the community what they would like to name the project when we wanted to change it from ‘Our Closet Project’.

Radical inclusion is a choice, but it is also something that can be pushed back on and curtailed based on the structures it is trying to function in. We chose Instagram when we first began because Instagram was a lot more loved as a photo sharing app three years ago. Moreover, it also has the space for individuals to create multiple profiles to keep their queer identities secret, like/join groups of queer folx without risking their ‘real’ identities and helping them remain in closets while also being a part of the larger community and accessing support systems. Instagram today has restricted a lot of what *Almaarii* could have become and done because of its algorithm; what content is ‘allowed’ and what is shown to the ‘audience’, pushing queer people back again, to the margins of social media based on ‘morality’ and ‘respectability’. It is still the best space to reach out to storytellers and artists, but there is a growing discomfort with

Instagram's acquisitions and policy changes (Joseph, 2019; Lovine, 2020) that seems to push people outside Instagram to search for greener (and less policed) pastures.

### ***'Take a Look Inside': 'Archiving' and 'Editing' the Almaarii***

I am an artist, but above and beyond that, with Almaarii, I started viewing myself as a collector and explorer. I have found discomfort in calling it an archive for archives, and museums in extension are not neutral spaces (Finigan, 2020). I started questioning my positionality as a person who is maintaining an archive I did not want to call 'maintained' in the first place.

This discomfort in using synonymous words for gatekeeping a community like mine stems from the accidental hierarchies that are created from ionizing people from marginalized communities for our 'bravery' and 'courage'; eventually taking away from the complicity the rest of the society has in benefiting from and upholding oppressive power structures and a culture of tokenism. One of these reflections is that being a 'curator'/'collector' of a space like Almaarii means I have a certain sense of 'style' I would impose upon the space- both intentionally and unintentionally. One way in which Almaarii could be lacking is that it is a creative project of writing and illustrating- both of which are taken away from those who are marginalized on the basis of the *correct* way to create. Possibly, in the future, Almaariis will have only voice recordings that can be transcribed and posted rather than a strictly written to drawn road that it is currently on. A large part of thinking about and doing the administrative work of running Almaarii has been wondering how it can truly be crowdsourced in ways that I cannot even control.

It is also important to note what other people, 'the audience', thinks of Almaarii, because this directly affects the kind of 'performance' I, and those of us who engage with the space put up (Cooley, 1992). Some folks thought Almaarii was a collective of artists, until I called it a research project, because I was most comfortable with that description. Others might think of it as an archive, an artistic intervention, or an advocacy initiative. However, we view the space, it is still true that I work as a person who 'moderates' voices, and that needs intensive reflection to make sure I don't end up silencing the voices that come to engage with the project and me. The Almaarii exists in two planes- one that can be viewed and one that can be seen. The first, as it is viewed by cis straight allies of the community or those outside of the queer experience, who see the posters and decorations in the space as the physical remnants of the queer experience; as a performance that they are watching. The second, seen from the eyes of queer people who understand the little secrets, objects, and feelings in that space. Muñoz (1996) theorizes the duplicity of 'visibility' when he says that queerness has historically existed in innuendos, gossip, fleeting moments and performances meant to be interacted with only by those in its epistemological sphere; hidden under performance for those outside of it.

The existence of Almaarii on social media pressures it to curate itself as proof of the existence of the pain and joy of queer people. Archives exist to prove the existence of queer lives. Perhaps, but either way, there is an audience. I sometimes wonder how these Almaariis would have looked if they were only being written for ourselves. Having an audience makes you

accountable, but having an audience also risks ingrained performance. Speaking about performance, it was perhaps difficult for my first five friends to think and write about their Almaariis. They had no blueprint to think about how their closets would have looked ‘in real life’. It was these stories that got other people to think and write about their own sacred spaces. Almaarii also does not say no to any closet/story with the single rule that it talks about the manifestation of the space in whatever way- poetry, prose, anything. Whenever there are people who write saying they don't think they have closets, I ask them to write about that. If they have more than one- write about that. I think the beauty of the project lies in its exploratory capacity that fearlessly says it can end, bend, and shape-shift the moment a bunch of us think we want to rid ourselves of these words that capture us more than any experience ever has. Vintage Desi's story came at a time when all the stories on Almaarii were about happiness, safety, and closets that people were ‘okay’ with. They describe their closet, ‘The closet is a heterosexual script. Interludes of loneliness. Intermissions in missionary. Re-reading my part as I wait at the bus stop.... Who built this for me? Who lays the foundation? Of this waiting room. Of this chamber inside a chamber. Of walls smeared with the abandon of love songs’.



*Deep end of the Waiting Room, written by Vintage Desi and illustrated by Hana Ghosh*

I mentioned earlier that the first 5 Almaariis were possibly the most original ones because there were no references to write from. This is in no way saying that the rest of the 195 are not original, but more that there is always space for ‘I want it to sound like x’s Almaarii’, or ‘I want it to be different from all 100 I have seen till now’. There is an inherent feature of relatability attached to stories of a community. In the case of the first 5 Almaariis, I was there to tell the creators how to look at it, how to think about it- so is there an original work or an original Almaarii at all? Perhaps not. But that also just points to the fact that there are no original bodies or fingers on those bodies. So maybe there is no original closet, and there are no original people, but there are unique combinations of experiences that make us whole people, and from which we have whole closets.



Maybe what I should really be collecting is the initial notes of writing an *Almaarii* that someone would have jotted down- not the edited version that reaches me. The edited version is still a performance for the ‘editor’, Jo, the ‘collector’ of these *Almaariis*. With this in mind, my approach to constantly find people who can add to *Almaarii* has shifted from being a task, to people just sending me their pieces, and me working as a matchmaker for the needs of their piece. I send all the pieces I have to illustrators who have shown interest and they get to pick what stands out most to them. In this way, I have let go of control a little. The only thing I can offer this community is the time and space to explore their *Almaariis* and the making of these *Almaariis*. Putting yourself in this space is intense and serious, while the beauty of its evolution lies in how it can be taken wherever it needs to be. So, while *Almaarii* exists as a performance, it also exists as an ‘act’ for the love of community, for what is community, if not a series of kind acts for each other?

### **‘Everyone’s Invited’: *Almaarii*, The Community**

Queerness is not inherently individualistic, contrary to Eurocentric understandings (Kayvon, 2017; Noman, 2019). We have had queer ancestors, elders and community support for the longest of times. Even though our specific identities are central to us, just like our mind is our mind, these identities and minds do not exist in vacuums and definitely not in isolation. *Almaariis* are little social microcosms of information about a people experiencing a space that closets them, what they break away from and how they choose to come out (or not) from these spheres of safety or violence (this is not a binary). In this way, these *Almaariis* tell us more about the individual and their social sphere than their experience of coming out as a dynamic experience undertaken by an individual who should not have to come out in the first place. Imagine *Almaariis* as moving spaces where we know the entire world of someone before and after they think of leaving this space they have occupied in this particular way. This space, which has been built only for the non-normative parts of their identity, where they can be ‘themselves’. The *Almaarii* cannot always exist and be tangible as a space. That is why it is often the physical bedroom of a person, or someone’s bathroom at 6 AM in the morning as they dress in clothes that are forbidden. The *Almaarii* exists in what is left behind when the person ‘comes out’, set up in case they decide to go back inside for a breather. This movement can possibly be captured because these *Almaariis* are not traditionally, but digitally reimaged. They can be zoomed out of, animated to move, have music in the background, and even a voiceover to take the audience through its nooks and corners. For some of the ‘audience’, the page, *Almaarii* is also a closet- where they can come and comment on other people’s thoughts and *Almaariis*, think about their own, and construct imaginations of how they would tell their story.

Advocacy has been an unintended consequence of *Almaarii*, even though I am an activist and work in other spaces as one. *Almaarii* perhaps becomes the first time allies to the community, are granted access to the innermost workings of a community they have supported, but not seen up close because of the wall of metaphorical knowledge we are surrounded by, that keep our real lives hidden behind new terminologies, acronyms, concepts and trauma fueled representation. Queering the closet that is queer itself takes radical breaking down of what we

thought to be the set rule. Through Almaarii, a lot of these set rules are questioned- the rule of having a closet, of having a 'type' of coming out story, and of being a certain kind of queer. As living people who queer our selves and our lives every single day by resisting, we are creating history which must be available for us to look at, pass on, revel in and rest in when and if we want. It is required to radicalize our thoughts regarding the queer movement owing to the nationalist forces that seek to homogenize our experiences that cannot be more varied from each other. Our strength lies in the diversity of our experiences that we have grown to appreciate and love. The beauty of the collaborative process that Almaarii is, stems from the imaginative power these Almaariis have, and how illustrating them can move them out of the metaphor to see them as real places that can be explored. Experiencing them in this way is an opportunity to separate them from what has been understood as a universal experience to something belonging to only one person- a fingerprint. Digitally, one could zoom into an Almaarii to find posters of movies that took a person through sleepless nights, pieces of a puzzle that was carefully arranged together, glitter from clothes one was beaten up for owning.

Coming back to my original question of what coming out even feels like without these words, I understand a little more, that the only real, and non-performative coming out that is possible, is coming out to yourself. In some of our minds, that could look like a very long 'aaaaaah' of realization, for some others, frantic google searches to find terms and sub terms that match. In my mind, it looked like the jigsaw puzzle fit. I did not have questions anymore about why I felt what I felt. I just felt. And I enjoyed feeling. Feeling, especially pain for those both outside, inside, and without a closet, as well as happiness for those outside, inside and without it.

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