

Taking Humor Seriously: Phone-Snatching, Comedy and Vulnerability on the Streets of Karachi

For Karachiites, phone-snatching is an expected part of urban life¹. “So I’ve lost two phones to muggers,” writes one local blogger. “By the 2nd attempt I had decided that my phone is not my own property, it’s something that Allah has trusted me with which will in time return to its rightful owner, who will be holding a gun to my ribs.”² While Laurent Gayer writes about how ethnic, sectarian, and political violences in Karachi produce “fear as a way of life,”³ I seek to understand how citizens respond to phone-snatching as an everyday form of violence that is not collective but individual, interpersonal, and almost impossible to predict. From snarky blogs to Reddit threads to comedic videos,⁴ young Karachiites navigate the everyday violence of phone-snatching through laughter, humor, and jokes, expressing their shared vulnerability to and expectations of violent crime on the streets of Pakistan’s most populous city. Giving special focus to a growing genre of viral comedic videos from young entertainers like Danish Ali and Shehzad Ghias Shaikh, my essay will examine what Goldstein calls “laughter out of place,” or unexpected, irreverent humor in response to chaos and injustice. What do these videos tell us about how young people understand these violent encounters? How do these videos conceptualize the elusive *mobile ka chor* (phone thief)? How is comedy “wielded to recode and deflect, to make sense of the apparently irrational violence”⁵ of phone-snatching? How do Karachiites use humor to acknowledge and embrace their own vulnerability, which Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay have considered as “one of the conditions of the very possibility of resistance?”⁶

¹ “Over 34,000 Mobile Phones Snatched in Karachi This Year so Far: Report,” accessed November 15, 2019, <https://arynews.tv/en/over-34000-mobile-phones-snatched-in-karachi/>.

² essarind, “My Phone Got Snatched,” *Thoughts by Essa* (blog), March 12, 2018, <https://thoughtsbyessa.wordpress.com/2018/03/12/my-phone-got-snatched/>.

³ Laurent Gayer, *Karachi: Ordered Disorder and the Struggle for the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). 248.

⁴ “Cellphone Snatcher Snatched” -By Danish Ali, accessed November 15, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tE43IWbIVJ0&t=160s>.

“Funny Phone Snatching Stories : Pakistan,” accessed November 15, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/pakistan/comments/9agakd/funny_phone_snatching_stories/.

“How Not To Get Mugged In Pakistan” -By Danish Ali, accessed November 15, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-oq69VZEb0o>.

Mobile Snatching In Karachi | The Idiotz, accessed November 15, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YyuCkmBQNNM>.

“The Right Way To Attract A Cellphone Thief” -By Danish Ali, accessed November 15, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wvh4seDav0U>.

“A Smelly Mugging” -By Danish Ali, accessed November 15, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CV-EPJ0S0s&t=14s>.

⁵ Diane M. Nelson, *A Finger in the Wound: Body Politics in Quincentennial Guatemala* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). 173.

⁶ Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, eds., *Vulnerability in Resistance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). 1.