My mother runs a beauty saloon in Zakir Nagar. This is where I lived and grew up. It was inevitable, then, that one was unable to stay away from the vocabulary of the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ for long. “You live in the Old City”, someone on the ‘outside’ would say and move on to the next bit of conversation, and I would want to say that the ‘inside’ was not ‘the Old City’. That there was more to a ‘middle-class Muslim ghetto’ than just the generic ways of looking at places like Zakir Nagar, Batla House, Abul Fazal Enclave, Jamia Nagar, Nizamuddin Basti, Chandni Chowk, would be an idea difficult to articulate (the more when stretched as far as, say, Anarkali Bazaar in Lahore). The language in which one could do so would read ‘currently unavailable’.

The person who would want to say this would find herself becoming as much an element of exotica as the biryani and kebabs that people from the outside would know these places for, sold, as they are, cheaply on the sidewalk. They would drive in, park their glitzy cars in the middle of the road, eat and go. And so it would always be fixed as Old – pointing towards a way of life replete with food and kitsch.
I imagine the flickering, guilty moment that eating would create. One in which otherness would be embraced, made one's own, the guilt wiped off with a tissue.

But only so long as that plate of chicken tikka lasts.

Soon enough, there would be a transformation. It would ‘become’ a place where the gangster, the crook, the pimp, the jobless and problem-creating Hyder would be just round the corner, ready to attack. The topography would turn disorienting. GPS systems would go awry and villains from the nooks and crannies of *A Wednesday*¹ and *Aamir*² would cloud the screen. A feeling that it would take forever to get out of here, a moment in which all maps and markers collapse, will in any case remind you of the labyrinthesque adventure of K. to get cured in *No Smoking*.³

The question has bothered me for far too long now. Where did the ‘I am Here’ kind of map go missing? It was never there when I grew up, it is not here now. Jamia Nagar is a cluster of colonies. There is one main road and Zakir Nagar, Batla House, Ghaffar Manzil, Abul Fazal Enclave, fall either on this side of the road or that.

I talk to Nilofeur about this one afternoon at the saloon. Like me, she too is an inhabitant of the Old City. She lives in Chandni Chowk and every day takes the Phatphat Sewa (Quick Service)⁴ to work. She works at the saloon. This she does every day, except Tuesdays. The same morning, I look up Batla House on Google Maps. It does not help much because it is the ruins, the dilapidated, algae-eaten, broken walls that are the markers through which the place can now be recalled. I don’t deny the red, brightly-painted houses and the manicured little green gardens. They are there too. But there is that one image that flickers long after time has passed. The old man looking out of his balcony somewhere on the fifth floor as the khaki men conduct their operation and name it “the L-18 Terror Encounter at Batla House”.⁵ The place is marked once again as it was some years back. At Muradi Road, when the police had come, toting guns, firing and saying a terrorist was “holed up”. A Kashmiri militant. He was killed, and the scene outside the building in which the operation happened was similar to the one outside L-18 a year back. Countless heads chanting *Naare-Takbeer, Allah-hu-Akbar*, people crowding the street, people in homes not wanting to go out for fear of being suspected. The police guards gun-toting, macho-posturing, sipping *chai*, looking you directly in the eye and muttering under their breath. Swanky media vans and chic journalists descending for that byte worth millions.

And because the place is marked, the language persists. A language that constantly throws up the Old against the New. The New has the promise of apartments, education, malls, show windows, ATMs, car loans, cake deliveries. The policeman with the boots, badges and paunch who guards its gates doesn’t just break inside. Even if he needs to, he does so mindful of those things called ‘legality’ and ‘locality’.

In the meanwhile, the Old City sees terrorist encounters, countless raids and arrests, innumerable people losing their jobs or never getting any because they live in places that hole terrorists. Rahim, the madman, who for the longest while suffered from a fear of stepping outside home, a fear of places he could never describe fully, becomes a man of the streets. He was seen last at Lovely Cloth House, Batla House Chowk. Two women were shouting
at him because he had hit them on their heads for being uncovered. My father, like many others, constantly talks about policemen dressed as civilians combing the area, a thought he can’t help thinking.

Nilofeur feels this fear can be dealt with. She looks out of the saloon window at the warm, incandescent glow of light bulbs lining the almost similar-looking kebab kiosks and little eating-places. I know she is waiting for the jobless Hyder. It is evening now.

The Old City is her familiar world. There is the comfort of slipping into something known, she says.

Of not being watched as an oddity.
Of being and moving about easily.

For whatever reason, Nilofeur insists on travelling by the Phatphat Sewa. A rickety tempo with six to eight people sticking together, the one on which she travels regularly between Jama Masjid and Batla House Chowk. In the aftermath of the encounter, questions of evidence dominate the conversation inside. For days, she meets the same people carrying newspaper clips, showing each other photographs of the bullet-riddled bodies of those killed, building their versions of what could have happened.

She is still trying to make sense of it all. But this she says with confidence now:

“My fear begins where your fear ends. It is a question of where those boundaries lie.”

This she narrates as a thought that comes to her in the Chandni Chowk Metro a day after the 19 September 2008 Batla House encounter. She usually wears versions of the hijab. Often wears none, when she and jobless Hyder go for ice cream to the India Gate lawns. But that day she did cover herself – out of whim, maybe.

The woman she was sharing her seat with didn’t stop looking at her from the corner of her eye.

Notes
1. A Wednesday (2008), dir. Neeraj Pandey, Indian thriller drama. A police officer narrates a series of events that lead up to a terror strike being planned by ‘extremist elements’ in Mumbai. The event unfolds as one that has no record beyond his memory.
2. Aamir (2008), dir. Rajkumar Gupta, Indian, thriller. A young Muslim doctor returns to Mumbai from the UK and finds himself in a plan to bomb the city.
3. No Smoking (2007), dir. Anurag Kashyap, Indian, thriller. K. is a compulsive smoker and needs to be cured of his addiction.
4. Phatphat Sewa: A minibus shuttle service, usually packed to capacity.
5. L-18 Terror Encounter, Batla House: On 19 September 2008, the Delhi Police Special Cell raided flat number 108 in building L-18 of the Batla House locality in South Delhi’s Jamia Nagar, and shot dead two alleged terrorists, Atif Amin and Sajid. Another casualty was Special Cell inspector Mohan Chand Sharma, who was wounded and later succumbed to his injuries. A flat mate of the two alleged terrorists, Mohammed Saif, was arrested from the site; the Delhi Police claimed two others escaped during the operation. The Delhi Police also claimed that the occupants of L-18, all students and all hailing from Azamgarh in Uttar Pradesh, were part of the Indian Mujahideen, supposedly an Islamic terrorist group. Further, the Delhi Police alleged that the deceased and the arrested were the main conspirators and executors of the bomb blasts in Delhi on 13 September 2008. The National Human Rights Commission later conducted an enquiry into the encounter and gave the police a clean chit, saying that on the basis of the evidence it was presented, “it cannot be said that there has been any violation of human rights by the actions of [the] police”.