

# A FELLOWSHIP IN SOLITUDE

BY  
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I spent the last nine months on a writing fellowship at Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart, Germany. It was a welcome break away from teaching—my first non-academic semester since I was 3 years old—to give vent to many pent-up creative energies, but also to find spiritual succour, new inspiration, and synergies. Schloss means castle in German. The fellowship was situated in an erstwhile pleasure (literally ‘lust’) palace cum hunting lodge commissioned by Charles Eugene, Duke of Württemberg in the 18th century. It is located on a hill overlooking the city. The grounds have fruit trees and pastures for horses. Behind the schloss lie acres of forestland filled with red deer, wild boar, sometimes their human hunters, squirrels, and birds of many different species, a couple of man-made lakes that the duke used to ply gondolas upon, and streams and rivulets, and of course lots and lots of redwood, birch, pine and other trees. Ample space for meandering long walks, getting lost in nature.

The Akademie Schloss Solitude is probably unlike any other fellowship on earth, and I do not say this lightly. Many fellowships give you a place to stay and work individually and there really is no one else around as part of the programme except for a few contact persons and organizers. I spent three months on one such Charles Wallace Trust fellowship in Wales in 2018–19. What one experiences on such fellowships is, yes, solitude, but also loneliness. The fellowship could be in a city or an isolated property, but there is no guarantee that such fellowships ensure constructive discoveries of the self. It is challenging and hard on most people, who, however desirous of solitude, are habituated to have some human connections around, to be part of a workspace, if not family or a social group. Insecure selfhood is not easy to handle.

There are other creative fellowships that put you together with fellows from your area of work, or mix up a few, say artists (of various kinds) and writers (of different types). Such fellowships could be constructive, even collaborative, but may also be competitive, and are often limited in their scope. Akademie Schloss Solitude is perhaps unique in providing cohabited space, two low-rise apartment buildings where visual, performance, and digital artists, live with curators, musicians, architects, writers, and academic researchers. There is of course your private studio and the forest in your backyard for your solitude. But when you require com-

-pany, you don't need to go out looking for random strangers in a pub (or biergarten, I should say), but you have some of the most creative peers possible in your own castle. [And, yes, strangers used to seem amazed when we would get off the bus late in the evening at the castle, sometimes getting into conversation and telling them that yes, indeed, we did live at the castle.]

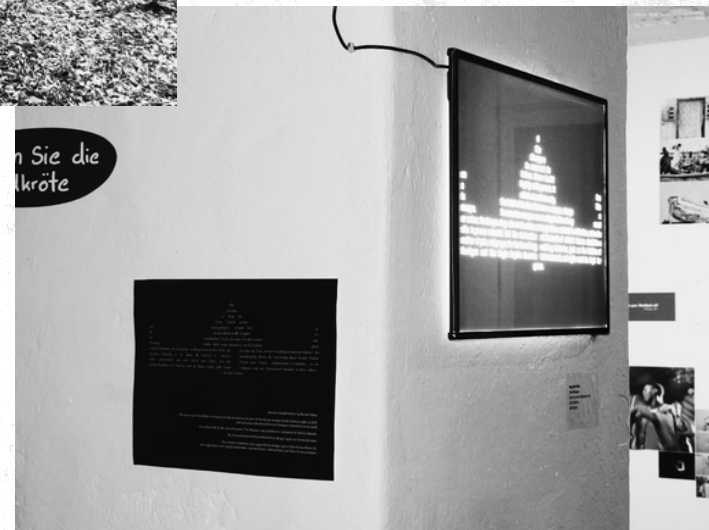
Together these incredible peers and the solitude of the forest, the quiet of a society free of auto-horns, an isolated ex-royal neighbourhood free of industry, and traffic sounds, led to experiences and wide-ranging yet focussed thoughts in a manner I had not hitherto experienced. The first impulse was to rest, and I slept my deepest sleep in years, especially in my first month. The fellowship director had generously indicated in our first meeting that they do not expect a product. There are few places one encounters in life that facilitate and fund your work and life without expecting something concrete in return. I was told I was at liberty to treat this fellowship as I may—to rest if I so desire, to travel if I so choose, to work if I want, or to network if I like. I ended up doing all of this in phases, and there were enough creative products at the end, and the seeds sown for many more to come. I am sure when the director said that they do not expect a product, they also said it with the quiet confidence that the creative/intellectual cohort selected from a pool of talented people from across the world from a 1:100 selection ratio wouldn't not produce work on an extended fellowship. Yet the kindness to say that no work output is necessarily expected freed me and all of us fellows in real terms, leaving us without the pressure and disgust of compulsory publishing or production.

The wonderful cohort made me feel at times that I was in some magical place, a Hogwarts, a Xavier Institute, or some such. In some ways it was magical as you'd serendipitously encounter a permanent art installation in the castle or something more ephemeral that a fellow had just created. I was part of a dramatized reading of fellow American playwright Peter Gray's play of a camp Harry Potter. The British musician Neil Luck invited other musicians to the Schloss (including the music director from Mumbai, Benedict Taylor) and led a night-time walk through the forest in peak winter, introducing novel sensory experiences, walking in the pitch dark where, with our eyes shut, the blind led the blind, making weird music from leaves in the quiet of the forest, hearing the silences and sounds of the forest.



Aderemi Adegbite from Nigeria combined the madrassa tablet with motherboards in his art. Monika Czyżyk, Polish artist based in Finland, created an immersive VR of the Schloss and the forest that I didn't feel like leaving. And this is but to name four of over 60 fellows I met during my nine-month stay.

Every week we would have an internal presentation from a fellow exposing us to a new form and discipline of work. We went to openings, readings, and performances every few days. I travelled away from Stuttgart to different countries and cities in Europe, visited some of the world's best art and literature museums and galleries.



To mention but two of the lesser-known but most impactful ones: Sammlung Prinzhorn in Heidelberg displayed a collection of art made by mental health patients in the 1920s, housed at the Heidelberg University Hospital. Works of exquisite quality, deeply exploratory of the subconscious, made me question notions of sanity yet again. ZKM, Karlsruhe, is the largest gallery space I have personally visited, and it focuses on digital art and media. An erstwhile ammunition factory, it had on display robotic arms making precision sketches of the moon landing, archives of the passage of audio and film recording technologies that we managed to get privileged access through our Akademie, bioart made with bacteria that was eating away sculpture, and room-sized spider web that the viewer could twang and make their own music from, while feeling like a fly caught in the net and so on. Previously it has housed a cloud as an exhibit, in one of its cavernous spaces.

In this rich environment I read privately with the luxury of time I hadn't known awhile. I continued with my ongoing translation projects, but also wrote English ghazals after a gap of many years, and more ghazals than I had written ever before, even revising all the ones I had written in the past. I wrote some short fiction which is not my regular writing genre. I embarked on a longer work of fiction too.

I created word-art installations and exhibited them. The first, a mixed-media installation "Mosque" exhibited at the "Currently Available" exhibition co-organised by the State Art Academy of Stuttgart was something that had been on my mind for years, and I was able to finally realise due to the conducive conditions and support of the curatorial fellows. It was based on my concrete poem written in response to mosque demolitions by mobs and states and was a plea for the continuation of multiculturalism.

The second "Birds" was based on a poem I wrote at the schloss and was made in collaboration with the London-based Towards Species Citizenship Collective, Samuel Collins and Mo Langmuir. I gave them this poem with its line "Attār wrote of the Parliament of Birds" as it felt most appropriate to their work, and they riffed on the line "would you paint my world in chalk with birds" to produce the poem in chalk on a tree of the Stuttgart Forest as a land art installation.

I read some of my poems to a packed house at Haus für Poesie in Berlin on UNESCO World Poetry Day with the German poet and translator Katharina Schultens reading their German translations. I gave a talk for the South-Asian Institute at University of Heidelberg based on my work on translating Ghalib and another at the EASAS Conference in Turin on the Ghalib's Banaras and his religious-urbanity. I wrote academic essays and contemplated upon longer research projects as well. I am still collaborating with a Zimbabwean digital artist Kombo Chapfika with my poetry to be part of his VR installation. Some of my writing work from the fellowship will also result in books in the coming years.

All of this was possible in the splendid solitude provided by the fellowship, tempered as it was by the friendship of brilliant peers from across the world. Retreating from the busy monotony of everyday life to an inward gaze combined with the exposure to new media, modes, and techniques has emerged in newness for me.

I'd recommend solitude wholeheartedly to all who are on such a path, but also to mix it with a fellowship of kindred creative and intellectual souls. Food played a great bond in this and perhaps deserves a separate essay. During my fellowship I saw seasons change up close in nature, arriving at the Schloss with the yellowed tree leaves of early autumn and seeing the remarkable fall in a huge forest laid barren, then covered with snow to eventually give way to cherry blossoms, and finally a glorious summer. One experienced a plethora of emotions and thoughts over this time. I left Akademie Schloss Solitude content and brimming with further plans. I leave you with a ghazal that perhaps focuses on the lonelier aspects of solitude, but that is also an emotion I examined in this time as I was reading the collection *The Poetry of Solitude: A Tribute to Edward Hopper*.

Everyone's birthed in solitude  
But I ended in solitude

The sun shines equally on all  
Yet light bended in solitude

Loneliness—the mark of the West  
Apprehended in solitude

The winter forest lies barren  
Leaves descended in solitude

I call as I drown, but who hears?  
My cry blended in solitude

I am social in virtual life  
My truth trended in solitude

Birdsong to keep me going now  
Cries appended in solitude

And lines to remember Maaz by  
Words befriended in solitude

