

## **No Man's Land -Tale of a fractured identity**

### **“ If only I knew “me”, all riddles would be solved!” - Lalon Shah**

To say this year has been a very different experience for me would be an understatement. If you bear with me I will try and rehash some of the events that have happened and the thoughts that have been running around in my head. It starts something like this:

“She stood in No Man's Land, waiting for the wind to sway in her in one direction or the other” (69)

These are the first words I scribbled into my journal upon arrival in the UK. At the time I did not really know where this ambiguous statement came from but it was the only way I knew how to articulate the feelings of disorientation and alienation that I experienced here. Being frazzled by a new place is considered as normal due to changes in environment and its respective inherent lifestyle, the rules to the society, etiquettes, how you are perceived as an individual and most of all how you view yourself. You perpetually become an ambassador for your native country. Your behaviour is now reflective of more than just your personality; it is burdened with the responsibility of representing “your” people. (121)

Moving away from a place I called home made me think a lot about my behaviour, responses, social interactions and that which I had accepted as intrinsic qualities. Contemplating upon the many conflicting aspects of my person which initially felt vain and unnecessary became inevitable when I became the “other” or “South Asian”, or what Lorde calls, something other than the “mythical norm” in a society. (Lorde.A,2017, 96) (1) (66)

Somehow, I had started questioning everything about myself, specifically the qualities that inherently made me “Pakistani” or like a “Firangi” (2) a word disdainfully directed at me by my grandparents when I spoke too much English. However, I am not alone to receive such admonishment. Vera Chok in the book *The Good Immigrant* talks about how being a British born Chinese she feared going to China because she would be “shamed because of (her) obvious foreignness.” China to her was like any other country “but one where (she) happens to look like the locals” (Shukla. N, 2016, 551) (3). This statement sums up the plight of many Pakistani's, like me, who are considered “despicable racist imposition(s)” in their own community but are too “brown” for foreign countries. (Mitra. A,2017) (4)

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Thus, I hope to explore the fractured identity of Pakistanis, a product of our tumultuous history while navigating the many stereotypical images constructed in the social political climate today. I hope to take on what I believe is one monster of a task which will perhaps give me a reasonable answer to “that puzzling question (that) haunts (our) country: what exactly does it mean to be a Pakistani?” (Pasha.N, 2018, 28) (5). Subjecting myself to the “intimacy of scrutiny” I plan on learning more about cultural hybridity and discover how “multiplicity (serves) as a kind of identity”. (Lorde. A, 2017, 6) (6) (Landy. J, 2018) (7) I aim to understand the confused sense of self and the convoluted ideas of ownership and belonging due to a culture that is always in flux - from the Indus Civilization, to Alexander the Great, to the Mughal dynasty, to formally being part of the Indian subcontinent to British Colonialism. (143)

As Qurut Ul Ain, an Urdu writer suggests “What is (this place) all about, what is the problem, why are we so full of problems, why are we like no other country? it's because there's too much history, we have too much of everything...it's not a simple story, it becomes a very complicated story”. (Rumi. R ,2018, 85)(8) This explains why the inability to fit oneself within a specific social construct or “straddling two homes, whilst knowing you don't really belong to either” (Shukla. N, 2016) (9) is

quite a common sentiment. Thus, I will try and illustrate my ongoing enquiry about this metaphorical sense of displacement. Through my artwork, I hope to show how I being the new Pakistani generation am a concoction of the east and the west - a generation of “Macaulay’s child(ren)”. (Masani. Z, 2012)(10)(Tayebaly.S, 2013) (11) (Balaram.P, 2001) (12) (128)

Of most cultures in the subcontinent somehow the British Raj seems to have had the most lasting impact, a nation who learnt to govern the rich, proud and independent minds of the subcontinent by disconnecting them from their strong cultural heritage in a claim to bring sophistication into a “benighted and backward society”. (Hall.C, 2009) (13) According to Macaulay, it was their duty to “enlighten” the natives in a language they thought belonged to the “wisest nations of the world” (Mitra. A, 2017) (14). However, honourable or dishonourable the intention, the fact is it has severed our ties to local Art, Literature or any sources of knowledge endemic of our homeland where we use our western education as badge of our civility and sophistication. It means I can quote Shakespeare at the drop of a hat but could not tell you the title of a single Urdu poem. (141)

The implementation of English as the official language and the introduction of a western education system became a major reason for the natives’ losing touch with the intrinsic cultural landscape. Therefore, the importance of language and complex role in the history of the subcontinent is shown through the recurring role of the written script in my work. (57)

Dr. Atteqa Ali, in her dissertation, focused on Pakistani Art mentions how Art education in the region followed the European academic style for the longest time with little consideration for the social climate or culture context, until 1991. They “implement(ed) western ideals to an Asian world, requiring them to lose some of their vitality and cultural richness to make them a part of the global world.” (Ali.A, 2008, 15-16) (15) “It as if the Victorians succeeded in colonising (the land) but also, more permanently, our imaginations.” (Dalrymple. W, 2002, 42) (16) (82)

The “east to west cross fertilization of cultures” (Dalrymple. W, 2002, 43) (17) has made it difficult to decipher what was part of the native lifestyle and that which was later introduced by our colonial masters. I remember the day when walking through the tea fields in Srilanka I found out that Lipton, a brand of tea that we advertise as so authentically “desi”(18) was named after a Britisher who started the company. It is a well-known fact that the ritual of tea drinking became pervasive during the English Raj, however it has become so ubiquitous in Asian homes that we misguidedly took ownership of it. This piece of information led to more than just my momentary disappointment, it revealed how the emulation of Western practices is a norm in our society where an everyday innocent tea drinking ritual that is classified as a “integral part of the South Asian culture” is just a hangover of our colonial past. (Paracha.N, 2018, 107) (19) (153)

Paracha in his book “Points of Entry” tries to solve another such misconceptions such as the consumption of Alcohol in the country. He says, “The truth is that drinking alcoholic beverages is not a ‘colonial legacy’. The people of South Asia have been drinking alcohol for over 5000 years.” Somehow a country that was created in the name of religion negated certain aspects of society as they thought it threatened the basis of its inception. Thus “They have often sought refuge in the explanation that intoxicants were thrust upon them by foreigners”. Interestingly, it is lighter stimulants such as coffee, cigarettes/tobacco and tea which were first introduced in India by the colonialists and all of them are legal in Pakistan.” (Paracha. N, 2018,107) (20) (120)

Whatever the confusion one thing that we are utterly sure of is our national language – Urdu. It became the language of the Muslims in the subcontinent and the tool upon which we built a separate identity from Indians. However, we are ignorant of the fact that it was first introduced in schools by the British to “suppress” the “language of dissidence” - Persian. (Rahman.T,2002,85) (21)

To further understand cultural hybridity in today's world, I picked up the book "The Good Immigrant" edited by Nitesh Shukla, a piece of writing that "paints a picture of what it means to be 'other' in a country" (Shukla. N, 2016) (22). The book consists of 21 narratives by mixed race individuals in Britain, talking about navigating different life situations constantly conscious of where they come from and how they are viewed by others. One of the author's, Riz Ahmed, who identifies as a British-Pakistani talks about "The fluidity of our personal identity being further compounded by the changing labels assigned to Asians in general." (Shukla.N,2016) (23) This idea is very much descriptive of the subject of my current practice. (116)

Continuing to be frazzled by the complexity of my own existence I picked up Raza Rumi's book "Being Pakistani". The writer has touched upon several topics; myths, geology, art and literature endemic of my native homeland. Through his book I was acquainted with the words of Qurratulain, whose work is centred around existentialist crisis in the subcontinent. She is described as a writer that "in a contested terrain...took no sides...when examining the concurrent eras of Indo-Pak history... and from the point of view of the common people rather than rulers, nobles and court historians." (Rumi. R, 2018, 85 )(24) Her writing presented personal narratives that are indicative of history rather than the alleged facts. Her work so far seems to be the closest to what I've been looking for but my inability to read the Urdu text keeps me from discovering her deeply informed perspective and therefore resort to translations. To best describe this Javed Akhtar states "The kind of work she has done...it's only because she was born in a third-world country and wrote in a language that is not of the imperialistic powers, her novels have not reached anywhere." (Rumi.R, 2018, 82) (25) Akhtar's statement does not only reflect upon our incapacity to familiarize ourselves with local literature but also refers to Macaulay's belief of eastern knowledge being inferior to that in the west. It is also reasonable explanation as to why I have questioned the credibility of facts drawn from Eastern Literature more than their western counterparts. (241)

Also mentioned in the book is Bulleh Shah's poetry more specifically:

"Bullah ki jaana mein kaun?" (who am I really?) (Rumi.R,2018,13-14)(26)

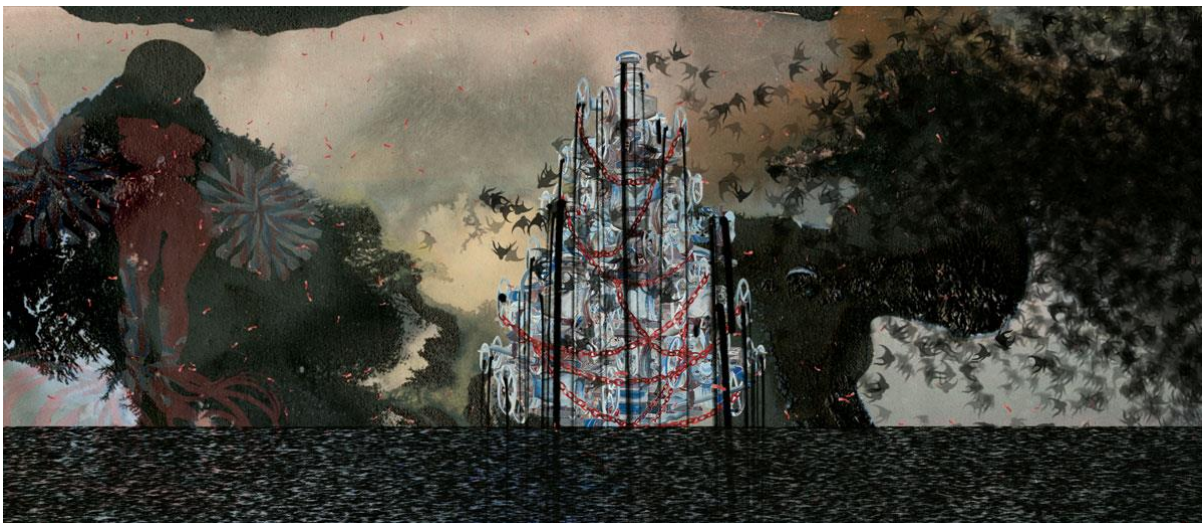
Bulleh Shah that is referenced to in both Raza Rumi and Naeem Paracha's book, is referred to as capturing the soul of Pakistani culture. The poem talks about how "He realizes that by rejecting existing theological, political and social labels, all he is left with is (this) question"(Paracha.N, 2016) (27).This made me realize that I am only the latest in line to delve into a similar enquiry. The search for identity is very much a recurring theme in south Asian literature; whether it took up a more socio-political take like Qurratulain's work or reference to a more spiritual journey in Bulleh Shah's poetry.

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*Figure 1, Shahzia Sikander, The last post, 2010.*

Several artists today explore cultural hybridity in their practice. One such example is of Shahzia Sikander, a Pakistani artist based in New York. The artist's practice focuses on exploring social and political boundaries. She draws on her own personal experience to raise questions upon the "limitations and possibilities" within the eastern culture (Desai. V, 2013)(28). Sikander considered as the pioneer of contemporary Miniature painting turns to the traditional historic practice and reconstructs it using modern technology or software. The artist's animations are constructed out of hundreds of drawings made by her, that reveal a layered narrative of the complex South Asian identity. Her images are made of several small ones, a rather relevant way of delineating a distinctive rich disposition made up of an eclectic array of cultures. Furthermore, to negate stereotypes attached to visuals, i.e. the "veil", the artist uses the tool of repetition. By repeating the same visual in separate paintings, she recontextualizes the imagery so as to not let the viewer settle on one single interpretation of it. (168)



*Figure 2, Shahzia Sikander, Parallax, Sharjah Biennale, 2013*



*Figure 3, Salman Toor, Roof top party with ghosts, 2015*

Salman Toor claims that he narrates stories of “brown” people caught between two cultures. This is evident in his adoption of the 16<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century European style of painting to illustrate characters that look Pakistani. As a queer artist, living between two cities Lahore and New York, the artist himself has to adopt two different personalities, to be acceptable in his hometown. This duality is also visible in the artist’s vacillating description of his artworks, in interviews for Pakistani and American publications. The artist claims he “ attempt(s) to explore selves and perceptions that oscillate between ‘Potentially Dangerous Muslim Man’ to ‘Queer and Harmless Cultural Ambassador’.” (Tata.H,2018) (29)

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*Figure 4, Salman Toor, Empty Plot, 2017*



*Figure 5, Salman Toor, Eleventh Street, 2018*

Artist, Amir H. Fallah also grapples with being in a perpetual state of “limbo” where “is not completely Iranian” and doesn’t look like an American either. (Fallah.A, 2018) (30) Therefore, he gives shape to his hybrid world, by creating portraits that have nothing to do with one’s physicality but instead delineates characters through the use of items and objects loaded with memory and history. By cloaking the figures he directs the viewer’s attention to objects that surround him rather than allowing them to make superficial judgements based on their physical features.

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*Figure 6, Amir H. Fallah, Life's Epic Poem, 2017*

Self-reflection made me realize that in our case talking about race is never off the table as “our very existence (is) a form of political labour” (Lorde.A, 2017, 6) (31). Thus, south Asian artworks based on personal accounts, quite often contain historical references and study of the socio-political climate of the past. I came across one such display recently by Raqs Media Collective at the Frith Street Gallery that talked about the lingering trauma in the subcontinent due to participation in the first world war. The exhibit draws on old transcripts, letters, diary entries, medical records, film and sound recordings to comment on how the war has ended but it reverberates with individuals to date and how the psychological implications have not yet ceased to exist. It demonstrated how the emotional upheaval experienced by individuals in history “never really ends”. (32)

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My project though originating from a very personal space, portrays the contradictory or evolving national identity of many Pakistanis today. Using my experience of being physically relocated I aim to give tangibility to my enduring mental or ideological displacement upon canvas in hopes of giving the displaced a new identity.

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(Total: 2288 words)

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