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MA Painting

No Man's Land

Transgenerational Identity crisis and the evolving nature of the term "Pakistani"

"She stood in No Man's Land, waiting for the wind to sway in her in one direction or the other"

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. (141)

Somehow I had started questioning everything about myself, specifically the qualities that inherently made me "Pakistani" or like a "Firangi"(1) a word disdainfully directed at me by my grandparents when I spoke too much English. (34)

My work is about 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. Thus, the inability to fit oneself within a specific social construct or "straddling two homes, whilst knowing you don't really belong to either" (2) (Shukla. N, 2016) is nothing new to a Pakistani. My artworks will illustrate an ongoing enquiry about this metaphorical sense of displacement. Through my work, 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)(3) (Tayebaly.S, 2013) (4) (Balaram.P, 2001) (5) (121)

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) (6) (53)

In order to better understand cultural hybridity in today's world, I turned to 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) (7). 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) (8) This idea is very much descriptive of the subject of my current practice. (119)

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, 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) (9) Furthermore, the implementation of English as the official language and the imparting of western education 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. (115)

Dr. Atteqa Ali, in her dissertation, focusing on Pakistani Art talks about 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.” (10) (67)



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

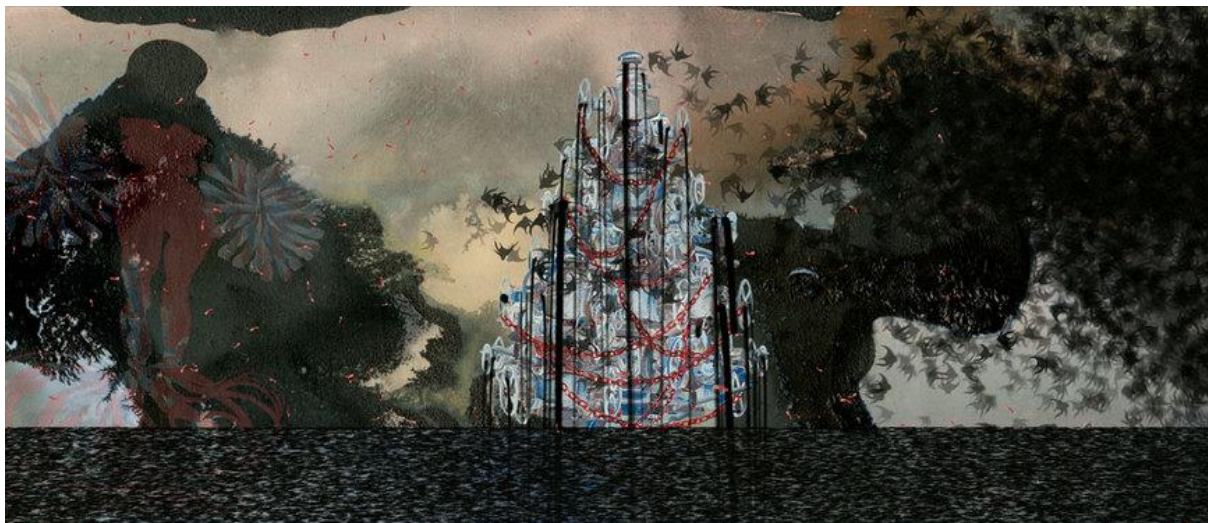


Figure 2, Shahzia Sikander, *Parallax*, Sharjah Biennale, 2013

However, recently several artists have explored this cultural hybridity. 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. 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 out 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. (11)



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



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

Salman Toor, claims that he narrates stories of “brown” (12) people caught between two cultures. This is evident in his adoption of the 16th or 18th 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. The artist claims he “ attempt(s) to explore selves and perceptions that oscillate between ‘Potentially Dangerous Muslim Man’ to ‘Queer And Harmless Cultural Ambassador’.” (13) This duality is also visible in the artist’s vacillating description of his artworks, in interviews for Pakistani and American publications.



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 (14) . 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. (88)



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

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 - I hope to give the displaced a new identity. (51)

(1064 words)

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