

No Man's Land -Tale of a fractured identity

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

“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 when I came to the UK. At the time I did not know where this unsettling sentiment came from, but it was the only way I knew how to articulate the disorientation and alienation that I experienced. 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 country. Your behaviour is now suddenly seen as being reflective of more than just your personality; it is burdened with the responsibility of representing “your” people. (141)

In my case this was a responsibility I was not ready to take on - one because it is a highly burdening task but also because I had never much reflected upon myself and my essential “Pakistani- ness”. How was I to then appropriately represent something I didn't know much about? (52)

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. The act of contemplation regarding the many conflicting aspects of my personality, which previously felt like an indulgent and unnecessary exercise, became inevitable when I became the “other” or the “South Asian”, or what Lorde ingeniously terms, something other than the “mythical norm” in a society. (Lorde.A,2017, 96) (1) (74)

Coming to London was an epiphany- it was the first time I truly became conscious of the dichotomy present within my own person. I started questioning everything about myself, specifically the qualities that inherently made me “Pakistani” or like a “Firangi” a word disdainfully directed at me by my grandparents when I spoke too much English in their presence.(2) However, I am not alone to receive such admonishment. In the book the Good immigrant, Vera Chok 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 myself, who are considered “despicable racist imposition(s)” in our community by our Anti- Anglophile counterparts but are too “brown” for foreign countries; one of a group of people that don't call any place home - misfits in every crowd. (Mitra. A,2017)(4) (165)

Having had the opportunity to live within both an eastern and western landscape I realized that I tend to stand out like a sore thumb in both. Thus, trying to understand the feeling of being alien in both settings became somewhat of a necessity. (44)

Therefore, through my work I hope to explore the fractured identity of Pakistanis, a product of our tumultuous history, while navigating the many stereotypical images constructed around them, in the contemporary social political climate. I hope to take on what I believe is a 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) (98)

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. I will be drawing on historical references to better understand and decipher my life today as Salman Rushdie suggests “most of what matters in our life happens in our absence”(Rushdie, 2012)(8). Indeed, I have come to believe that is entirely true. (90)

Qurat Ul Ain, an Urdu writer once wrote “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, and some of it is excellence but too much excellence in one country, one period over so many centuries creates problem, it’s not a simple story, it becomes a very complicated story”. (Rumi. R ,2018, 85)(9) 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) (10) 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)”. (Tayebaly.S, 2013) (11) (Balaram.P, 2001) (12) (150)

Of most cultures in the subcontinent somehow the British Raj seems to have had the most lasting impact, a nation that 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” or to bring “civilization to savages”. (Hall.C, 2009)(13) (Mehta.D,2012)(14). According to Macaulay, it was their duty to “enlighten” the natives in a language they thought belonged to the “wisest nations of the world” and was “axiomatically superior to oriental knowledge” (Mitra. A, 2017)(15) (Tharoor.S,2016, 228)(16). Shashi Tharoor, in his book “An Era of darkness” claims that the English felt “the only way to educate anyone is to turn them into a plaster Englishman.”(Tharoor.S, 2016, 223)(17) 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. We became “Westernized enough to be alienated from (our) cultural roots”. (Tharoor. S, 2016, 223)(18) It means I can quote Shakespeare at the drop of a hat but could not tell you the title of a single Urdu poem. (195)

Why does acquiring western education not hold the same allure for me, after years of chasing opportunities to acquire one? It’s definitely something that every middle-class Pakistani aspires for, in order to be as “internationally sophisticated” and recognized. According to a lot of people I am living the dream of moving to a foreign land, acquiring a western education that is far superior to any degree or intellectual exercise back home and will inevitably come out of this experience a better, more competent individual. If you sense a hint of derision, it is there, even though I have time and again been guilty of being of the same opinion- I’ve been an “Anglophile” or more casually referred to as a “Britophile”. (19) (121)

I saw my thoughts reflected in Homi Bhabha’s words “to study English and Oxford was, in many ways, the culmination of an Indian middle-class trajectory where formal education and ‘high’ culture concluded in emulating the canons of elite ‘English’ taste (or what we knew of it) and conforming to its customs and comforts. Why (then)was I intellectually fascinated but unmoved, when I found myself at the academic acme of the literacy culture that I had chosen to follow?” (Bhabha.H ,2004 ,10-11) (20) He also goes on to saying that “the summation of the great tradition, a touchstone of Taste- may only be the dream of the deprived, or the illusion of the powerless”. (Bhabha.H, 2004,11)(21) (108)

Thus, 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. (58)

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) (22). "It (is) as if the Victorians succeeded in colonising (the land) but also, more permanently, our imaginations." (Dalrymple. W, 2002, 42) (23) Thus "The British Raj is scarcely ancient history. It is part of the memories of people still alive" (Tharoor. S, 2016, 23) (24) A Banyan tree chained to the ground in northern province of the country is reflective of that. In 1898 an inebriated British Army Officer, James Squid, shackled a tree to the ground as he thought it was being insubordinate by moving when he told it not to. Till today it stays in the same state with a board on it that reads "I am under arrest". (Tharoor.I, 2016)(25) (167)

Tharoor in his book "An era of darkness" also discusses how the Empire is gone but the affects continue unabated in the form of "the imitative elites it left behind in the developing world, the mimic men". We still have book clubs that only allow western literature and we snort in derision when someone mispronounces something in their very "desi" accent. I myself have turned up my nose in disgust every time I see a misspelled banner sprawled over the walls of a city with a majority non-English-speaking population. (90)

The imitation does not stop there. It is not just a "whitening" of our person that is something South Asians aspire to, but the literal whitening of the skin is also preferred. Men and women both seem to endlessly slather their faces with whitening creams while playing hide and seek with the sun because being fairer is considered more desirable. I remember having seen several many locally produced ads promoting the same mindset, where the product is described as a ticket to the good life. So damaged is our psyche that I've been told numerous times by relatives and friends about how lucky I am when it comes to skin colour as I can easily be mistaken for a foreigner. According to them I should be grateful that I wasn't similarly afflicted with the curse of dark skin. (138)

The "east to west cross fertilization of cultures" (Dalrymple. W, 2002, 43) (26) 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"(27) 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) (28). In Pakistan, drinking coffee is derisively described as a part of a Western fetish where as drinking tea immediately makes one part of the family. (179)

Paracha in his book "Points of Entry" tries to solve another such misconception about the consumption of alcohol in Pakistan. 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) (29) (120)

Despite these multiple levels of 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)(30) In the words of Frantz Fanon a community that does not completely destroy old government models and rebuilt from scratch would still bear “marks (of) a colonized society”. This is exactly what happened with Pakistan. So much importance was given to Urdu that Quaid-I-Azam, also known as the father of the nation went on to declare it as the national language and declared any who suggested otherwise “the enemy of Pakistan”. (Rajani.S, 2018)(31) (137)

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) (32). 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) (33) 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)(34) 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. Thus, I like many others have been cut off from her words as we all know a lot gets lost in translation. 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) (35) 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)(36)

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) (37).This made me realize that I am only the latest in line to delve into a similar enquiry. Dr. Mubarak Ali, like most historians, agrees Pakistan since its inception has been so continually riddled with an existential crisis. “Seldom can one find a country in the comity of nations whose intelligentsia and often the common people be seen speculating about the basis and rationale of their country.” (Ali.M, 2011,7)(38) Thus, 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. (170)

Another thing that jumped out at me was how Bulleh Shah is considered as emblem of the Pakistani spirit, yet it stands in complete contrast to the orthodox Ulema or the principles of organized religion upon which the state was built. “a single immovable idea of nationhood” that was then “imposed upon a diverse population”. (Parachi.N, 2016,50) (39) A great effort was made to suppress the heterogeneity of the community as “highlighting Pakistan’s ethnic, religious and sectarian diversity would somehow negate the theory that had rationalized the emergence of a separate Muslim- majority country that broke away from the rest of India” (Parachi.N,2016,49) (40)

(100)



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

Several artists today have embraced this 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)(41). 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.

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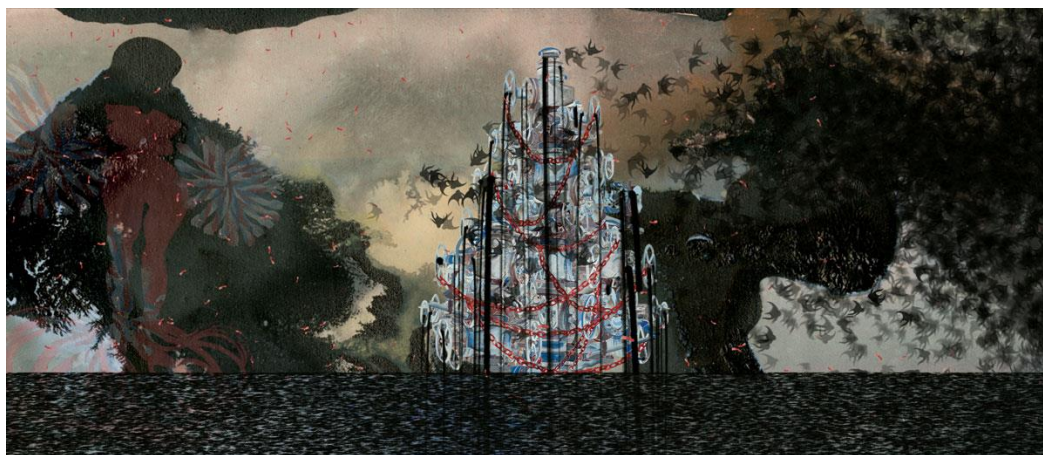


Figure 2, Shahzia Sikander, Parallax, Sharjah Biennale, 2013



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 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. 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)(42) (107)

Toor’s work goes beyond national identity it talks about “Intersectionality” - a term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw to define multiple forms of social inequality and disadvantage that compound together.(Crenshaw.K, 2018)(43) Toor that paints his reality on canvas, in a rather fantastical way, reveals the different elements that intersect to create an individual and how to fit in the society one characteristic or trait is given dominance over another, reinforcing the idea of a fluid being. The nature of the painting in several ways reveals what I like to call “a split between worlds”; the juxtaposition of western and eastern visual cultures, the artist’s sexual orientation contrasted with the forced display of heterosexuality in society and the imaginary characters doused in everyday scenes to ground them to reality. (125)



Figure 4, Salman Toor, Empty Plot, 2017



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

Farazeh Syed is another artist that describes her work as autobiographical with fantastical elements. According to the artist any form of creativity involves introspection. One has to “(dig) up the many layers that constitute the self, revisiting the past and relocating in the present”. “In the process, one comes across many demons, many ghosts, many lies and many truths. It is a veritable Pandora’s Box, the Self.”(Syed.F,2019)(44) (67)

She talks about her narrative and execution being spontaneous in order to bring onto canvas a more authentic and honest depiction of the self. Her process involves the selection of random images from different sources, which when put together, eventually makes an unorthodox yet, cohesive narrative. Her latest work in the exhibition “There is no them” at The Sanat Initiative, Karachi, seems to be carrying out parallel narratives within each painting. Primarily the focus seems to be on gender politics, however in the background one can witness perhaps the amalgamation or clash of cultures that serve as a backstory or explanation for the protagonist’s disposition. Thus, this fusion seems eminent in depicting what lies within the “latent recesses of (her) brain”. (Syed. F, 2019)(45) (121)



Figure 6, Farazeh Syed, *Refuse to be the muse*, 2019



Figure 7, Farazeh Syed, *The Tiger Under My Feet*, 2019



Figure 8, Farazeh Syed, *The porcelain dog*, 2019

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) (46) 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. (86)



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) (47). 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”.(Roberts. C, 2019) (48) (140)

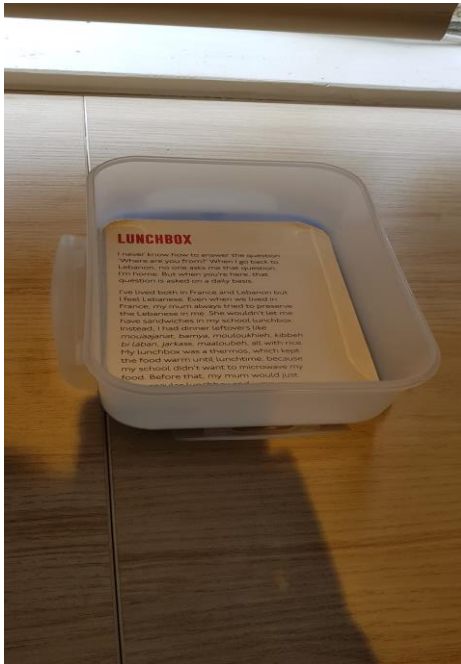


Figure 7, Raqs Media Collective, 'Lalu & rsquo's Dream, 2018



Figure 8, Raqs Media Collective, Chandelier, 2018

I also had the opportunity to go to the Museum of Migration. Tucked away in the top floor of what seemed like a warehouse is the museum where I witnessed the exhibit “ Room to breathe”. In response to Refugee Week the organization had set up a show by artists that had relocated to Britain sometime back; those that identified as “immigrants” or “away from home”. There was a sense of universality to the show. Artists from all over the world working on the feeling of exclusion or vulnerability that made the word “immigrant” more than reflective of just physical displacement. The exhibit was built up of immersive installations in the form of different domestic, work or academic spaces that speak volumes about the people that reside in the spaces despite their absence. The objects in each room, presented a different facet of he/ she who resides within it and calls it home, making the spaces living and breathing entities. It also gives a tangibility to the displaced identity that lives beyond the realm of normal labels. (177)



Though my experiences do not come close to their life narratives there was still a strange familiarity or sense of kinship. Homi Bhabha talks about a similar affinity when he comments on how he was not influenced by English Literature or even Indian writers, but it was the words from V.S.Naipaul's Indo-Caribbean world that resonated with him.(Bhabha. H, 2004, 37)(49) It did not matter that they were from different generations as well as different socio-political settings. He related to Naipaul's people; "vernacular cosmopolitans of a kind, moving-in cultural traditions and revealing hybrid forms of life and art that do not have a prior existence within the discrete world of any single culture or language".

(111)

I similarly thing of myself as "a complex , on- going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation." (Bhabha. H, 2004,3)(50) 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. I feel that this is only the beginning of an ongoing search for clarity about the fluidity of identity. It is like Martin Heidegger suggests " A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing," (Bhabha.H,2004,1)(51)

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(3981 words)

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