

Nilofur Farrukh

ENTERING THE



Musarrat Mirza, *Hain Muntazir*, oil on canvas, 61 x 76.2 cm, 2011

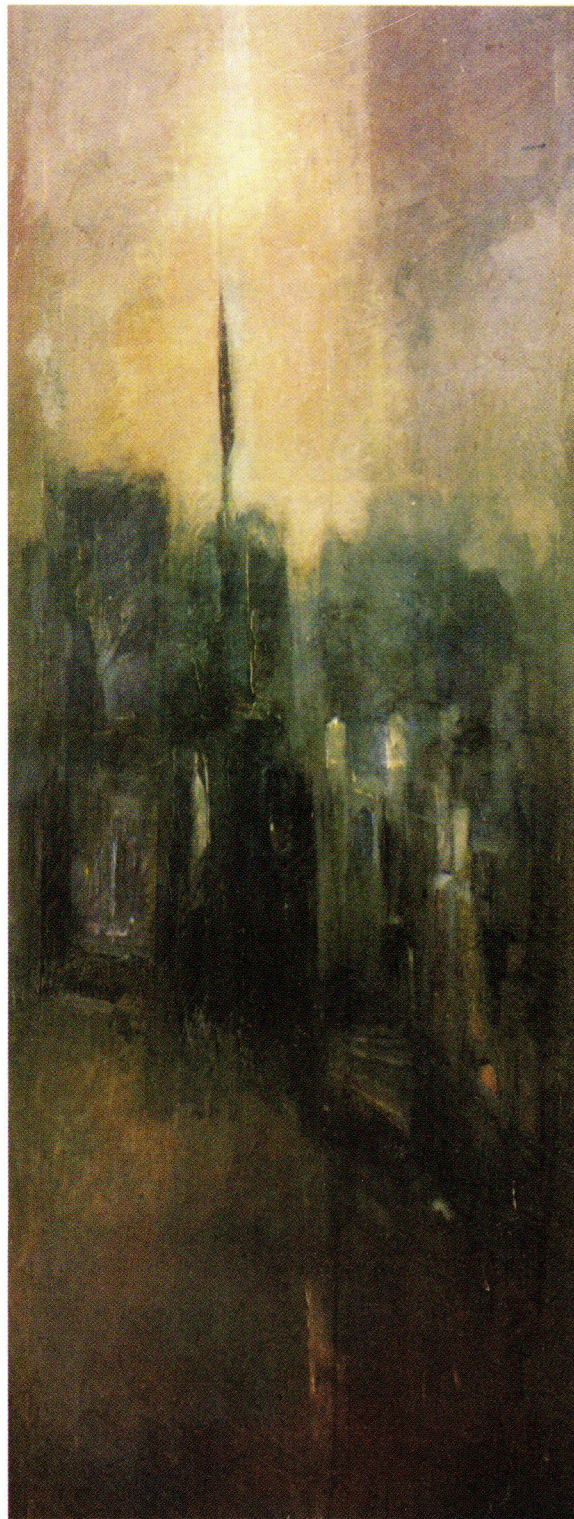
MUQAAAM / location:

The Narrative of Belonging in the Art of Mussarat Mirza

In the Western dialectic of art, dislocation denotes alienation and disjuncture as discussed in the context of a lost sense of belonging due to physical and intellectual rupture. These anxieties gained currency once they were articulated in Diasporic texts and began to be addressed in debates on Multiculturalism in the last century.

The official policies of pluralism that grew out of these new priorities, particularly in the UK, became instrumental in creating a more even playing field for ethnic minorities and institutional space was created for art previously excluded from the national narrative. To get a sense of how much the environment has changed one need not look further than the Third Text that was established as a voice of the racial minority and has diligently chronicled and debated the global politics of exclusion.

Another cultural rupture that's yet to be fully understood and



Mussarat Mirza, *Hain Muntazir*, oil on canvas, 66 x 182.9 cm, 2011

debated is the combined impact of what Spivak has called 'epistemic violence' of the colonial period and globalization. Within half a century of the end of colonization, globalization, an economic/ trade hegemony began to colonize knowledge production and culture with its seemingly benign homogeneity. Economic interests fabricated a culture industry based on a corporate structure that simultaneously controlled the art canon and the art market. With over simplification as its mantra, a low tolerance for distinct and dissident voices, unmediated by Western frameworks has become prevalent. With a generation interpreting progress and opportunities through the validating lens of globalized culture (read West) has created an unquestioning acceptability of strategies of asymmetrical cosmopolitanism, over simplification and standardization. In previous colonies where globalization of art followed close on the heels of Modernism, a

The act of existing within the location can be an immersive experience as expressed by the Urdu word *Muqaam*, for location. Its multiplicity of meanings conveys the time/space dimension, for it can be read both as a site/physical space or a stage in a journey. The word is also used to indicate position/status. In the Sufic discourse *Maqamat* (the plural of *Muqaam*) identifies the various levels of closeness to the supreme power who is perceived as the beloved.



Musarrat Mirza, *Hain Muntazir*, oil on canvas, 100.3 x 64.8 cm, 2011

cultural attitude that finds traditional ways of thinking, seeing and imagining moribund, is created. Without the assimilation of local philosophies in the twenty first century identity, it becomes easier to acquire an 'outsider gaze' that makes artists into cultural expatriates in their own land, with a process called the 'double othering' by Homi Bhaba.

The 'true' distance between the local and global increased, yet cleverly concealed in the mythology of globalized culture, it has pushed aside the debate between 'location' and 'dis-location' even though it remains a central concern in issues of authorship and authenticity.

If location is read as a binary of dis-location, then the art produced at the place of origin should be free of alienation and linked to the cultural continuum. Built on the belief that rootedness in ones 'location' opens the artist up to a profound engagement with philosophical and cultural dimensions can put external influences in perspective instead of marginalizing local frames of reference. A process that can provide intellectual resources to counter the postcolonial mindset that allows the external discourse to become the dominant framework.

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Among the few artists whose work penetrates the physical and discursive plane of *Muqaam* is Sukkur-based painter Musarrat Mirza. Judging from her oeuvre, her years in Lahore, while she studied for her MFA at the University of Punjab and a stint as a lecturer at the Fine Arts Department at Jamshoro, a few hours away from her hometown, were an interlude in her journey back to this ancient town.

Anthropologically layered, Musarrat's Sukkur has a complexity which demands all the senses to engage with its historical, religious and cultural traces. Pre-Indus excavations can be found along the route taken by the marching armies of Alexander. In the city center, the *minar* of Masum Shah, of brick and blue tiles commemorates Emperor Akbar's visit. The Talpur fort still holds bullet marks of the colonial armies. It was at this point that the colonizers later built the Sukkur Barrage. The Sadhu Bela island temple in the river has attracted Hindu pilgrims for centuries in much the same way as the revered shrines of Muslim saints on the bank.

The artist has assimilated the tangible and the intangible in her oeuvre in which the landscape acts as a metaphor. The unchanged

course of *Sindhu Darya* (Indus River) that has flowed under her window since childhood and the sand storms that roll over date plantations, captured through the aperture of familiarity, become internalized references in a narrative of belonging.

It is not as if Mussarat is not mindful of the bustle of modern Sukkur - the province's third largest city - or that she is a recluse; the artist travels for her shows all over Pakistan and abroad, but she prefers to live away from the art centers where art consumption has become the dominant instinct. Painting to her is like composing a piece of *sama* (devotional) music, which taps into the transcendental vibrations. Fragments of architecture, dark corners with awkward angles, walls that screen off, and hallways and windows that beckon the light into haunting interiors map the rhythms of a long hot season when the cooling comfort of the thick walls and the respite of the night breeze are imprinted on

the skin of memory. Observing, living and experiencing them on an inward expedition, Mussarat arrives at the spiritual *maqam*, a sanctum within the man-made city. Sometimes the narrow lane, through which she approaches her home, becomes the canyon/ the cliff and the crevice through which she explores the urban terrain. The deep fields of rooftops sprouting with vertical wind-catchers, a familiar nocturnal sight from rooftop where summer nights are spent under the stars, become visualizations of an autobiography written without words.

There is a constant pull and push between the foreboding dark concrete and the shadows it creates, and light. The light is a living thing for the artist, sinuous and sharp like lightening, glowing in soft haloes, or blinding white that can destabilize the picture plane with its starkness. Sometimes, light appears to fight its way through dense particles of suspended desert sand and at



Musarrat Mirza, *Hain Muntazir*, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 76.2 cm, 2011

other times is muted into tones of gray of a misty morning. Pigeons, in dazzling white spread out like sparks in the near monochrome trance that can take over Mussarat's canvas.

Inspired by sufic interpretations of poets like Sachal and Bhitai, the nuanced light in Mussarat's works calls for different readings, as the *noor* or heavenly light of serenity and enlightenment and *rosbni*, the more generic term used for absence of darkness vie for primacy. Her work in gold invokes the door of a holy shrine; the metallic tincture in loaded brush strokes 'alchemizes' the surface so *rosbni* and *noor* can meet between the layers.

Mussarat, whose art can stir the deep recesses of the imagination creates an art that needs no categorization; she is not a modernist, although she started her journey as one with her mentor Anna Molka Ahmed, nor is she a post-modern artist, landscapist nor expressionist but a painter/ thinker whose independent trajectory defies popular labels. For researchers who find it difficult to work without labels, maverick artists that explore 'what happens at the borderline where reason find its limits' have been grouped under 'Contemporary Sublime'.

The Western Civilization based on rational thought when confronted with what Kant calls the awareness of lack, where reason is challenged and presents no answers is the place where the limits of logic exist. Artist Marina Abramovic explains "Our rational way of thinking demands proof, evidence, but this is only one element in our perceptive capabilities. Things which we cannot explain rationally are eliminated from our lives, as if they were non-existent". Elaborating on her art she adds "Breaks with conventional understanding are important for me; I want to lead people to a point where rational thinking fails, where the brain has to give up. The confusion which then rises in the brain is also an interval. Another world can open up."¹

There is a seamless flow from the rational to the subliminal in cultures of South Asia where the expanded consciousness accepts both as lived reality. In this region of Sindh where Muslim saints are revered by Hindus and Muslims alike and the ancient practices of Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim civilization converge, and music, dance, art and verse have long been the instruments of transcendence. This pluralized metaphysical space in the twentieth century was contested by the linearity of the Modernist dogma, even postmodern multiculturalism seen through the lens of the



Musarrat Mirza, *Hain Muntazir*, oil on canvas, 30.5 x 35.6 cm, 2011

rational, has not been able to fully recognize this unconditional embrace of the 'other'.

Negotiating time and timelessness in recent works titled *Muntazir* (2011) the view from the rooftop, a reoccurring visual, transforming the banal architecture into a void, as it gives up the privilege of concrete existence to the unknown. In returning to the emptiness, Mussarat's imagination activates the *Muqaam*.

These works may be quiet and meditative, yet they are not passive. Painting them is Mussarat's act of subversion as she is walking in the footsteps of the people's mystics to reclaim and foreground all that has been lost and pushed to the fringe by privileged discourses. The art then becomes her '*tarikah*', the path to the divine as well as an instrument of resistance echoing the dissident verse of Bulleh Shah and Bhitai, which continue to flow from the *Muqaam*.

The creativity that presents the 'unpresentable' has the transformative power to destabilize the illusion of rational order which Ziauddin Sardar terms as the post-normal time, characterized by confusion, chaos and contradiction in the age of Globalization.

According to Ziauddin "The most important ingredients for coping with postnormal times, as Cilliers suggests and I would argue, are imagination and creativity. Why? Because we have no other way of dealing with complexity, contradictions and chaos. Imagination is the main tool, indeed I would suggest the only tool, which takes us from simple reasoned analysis to higher synthesis. While imagination is intangible, it creates and shapes our reality; while a mental tool, it affects our behavior and expectations. We will have to imagine our way out of the postnormal times."²

Mussarat who locates herself in the consciousness of all that Sukkur is, and symbolizes as the metaphysical landscape of the void, creates a transformative narrative that offers a new way of seeing and imagining, and belonging to the *Muqaam*.

References

1 The Sublime, Documents of Contemporary Art, Edited by Simon Morley, Whitechapel Gallery, London, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass, USA

2 'Welcome to postnormal times' by Ziauddin Sardar <www.ziauddinsardar.com> Essay originally printed in *Futures*, 42, 5, June 2010

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