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Representational Subversions and the Limits of Postcoloniality: Shahzia Sikander's Strategic Contemporaneity

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Representational Subversions and the Limits of Postcoloniality:

Shahzia Sikander’s Strategic Contemporaneity

A Dissertation

Presented to the

Faculty of the University of Denver and the Iliff School of Theology Joint Ph.D. Program

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Linda Eilene Sanchez

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Abstract

Transnational artist Shahzia Sikander challenges the limitations of Edward Said’s postcolonial emphasis on secular humanism by deploying the heterogeneous traditions of South Asian miniature painting while strategically drawing on tradition to critique contemporaneity. Through a palimpsest process of composition, Sikander reincorporates the unknown and silenced histories implicit in the tradition of miniature painting to create social imaginaries with motifs that draw on the diverse traditions of South Asian religions and aesthetics to create a subversive politics of remembering wherein alternative images of cosmopolitanism emerge. Through a sustained analysis, this dissertation demonstrates how these alternative traditions interrogate and critique the limitations of postcolonial theory. Particularly important to this critique are some recent approaches of Third World feminists that highlight the limitations of secular humanism implicit in much of postcolonial critique. Sikander’s compositions mirror these approaches as her motifs of the feminine become an intervention into the spiritual emptiness and ethical confusions of contemporaneity. In effect, Sikander’s work is an intervention, a warning, and a plea for the re-invention of positive alternatives as her images embody and facilitate a critical and daring consciousness that is necessary to both our social and spiritual well-being.
Acknowledgements

This dissertation is dedicated to Dr. Daisaku Ikeda who has taught me that the pursuit of knowledge is for the service of others.

Shahzia Sikander is a revolutionary artist whose artwork is stronger than this dissertation. My wish is that in some way, these chapters assist in translating the power of her work to a wider general public.

I was fortunate to have had a wonderful interdisciplinary dissertation committee. My very deepest appreciation goes to Dr. Jere Surber who was determined to see me through the entire dissertation process. His support, encouragement, and, above all, his breadth of mind and character, have been invaluable. I would also like to extend my appreciation for his encouragement to chant whenever I had a deadlock. I think he must be the only advisor in the United States who understands that chanting Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo was exactly what I needed to do to breakthrough my dilemmas.

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Chapter One: Beyond Postcolonial Time

Within the field of cultural critique, postcolonial theory emerged in the 1980’s as a critical attempt to address the material, political, and psychological inequities created by the history and legacy of European colonialism. In the wake of Edward Said’s seminal critique of European domination of knowledge in *Orientalism*, postcolonial theory has taken its place as a major critical discourse engaging with the particular historical condition of European colonialism and its aftermath in forcing a radical rethinking and reformation of forms of knowledge and social identities.¹ However, postcolonial theory has, for the most part, only managed to reproduce the very colonial positioning it set out to address.

This dissertation goes beyond the theoretical and textual mode of postcolonial critical theory focusing instead on the aesthetic imagery of transnational contemporary visual artist Shahzia Sikander as an important test case and a site for critical inquiry. By examining her work in light of South Asian cultural and aesthetic theories and third world feminisms, I will demonstrate that Sikander deploys the heterogeneous tradition of South Asian miniature (manuscript) painting to create proactive ways of envisioning the world.

beyond orientalist stereotypes. ² By examining the formal qualities as well as the historical complexities and contexts of Sikander’s work, it becomes evident that a shift out of the purely theoretical and textual mode is necessary to avoid a re-colonizing form of critique. In her art, we are participants within a realm of tropes that employ both historical and contemporary meanings. By redeploying these tropes, Sikander creates a visual language that challenges the historicity of postcolonial nationalist categories. Through this visual language, she creates the possibilities for a metaphysical dissolution that offers ways of remembering, reframing, and ultimately a redefining other histories, and other religio-aesthetic categories that both precede and exceed postcolonial histories. Sikander’s newly created visual language simultaneously defies categories as it also illuminates and goes beyond textual discourse to suggest that secular postcolonial histories are not sufficiently responsive to representations of the “other.”

Background on Said and Origination of Postcolonial Studies

Writing theory in ‘postcolonial time’ is an activity fraught with multiple complexities, creating, as it does, an ontological situation of postcoloniality while simultaneously seeking to deconstruct it. This is because postcolonialism, used as a form of resistance to a universalizing perspective, is a position at once critical of colonial histories, and yet predicated on those very histories. This makes postcolonial studies an uncomfortable interstice from which to work out the paradoxes and challenges of our contemporaneity.

² Although I realize the economic and materialist connotation of the term “Third World,” I am using it here for expediency.
It is generally agreed that postcolonial discourse emerged from Edward Said’s seminal work *Orientalism* published in 1978, and there is no question that Edward Said has contributed, more than any other intellectual of the 20th century, to a whole style and method of thought that takes seriously the idea that the construction of knowledge is crucially linked to both structures of oppression and processes of emancipation. With Said, orientalism transformed in meaning from a way of describing the study of ‘the orient’ to a new conceptual paradigm that explained how the project and practice of colonial modernity was a self-constituting, historical discourse of knowledge articulated through economic and political power. In describing how colonialism operated as a form of political rule and as a discourse of domination, *Orientalism* positioned the epistemic aftereffects of this discourse in terms of physical, cultural and psychological violence.

In formulating his critique, Said relied primarily on representative European texts, the discourse of the colonizers. His critique did not take into account the power of the many indigenous and alternative precolonial discourses that were implicitly and deeply in place. In other words, the viewpoint of his critique is sustained only in the discourse of the European colonizers who are actually its target. In an effort to counteract this oversight, Said introduced the notion of contrapuntal reading. He defines this approach as a way of reading with an "awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts.”3 However, in Said’s view, there is no opportunity to question or transcend the historicity of colonization and its aftermath. Therefore, his idea of

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contrapuntality still marginalizes alternative precolonial and alternative colonial discourses. On a theoretical level, Said draws on two diametrically opposed threads within poststructuralist theory. He employs Michel Foucault’s mutual determinations of knowledge and power to explore orientalist representations, together with Antonio Gramsci’s Marxist oriented notion of hegemony, which defines the subaltern classes as those subordinated and excluded from any meaningful role in regimes of power. Thus, Said’s critique focuses on discursive regimes of knowledge, but without any account of counter-hegemonic resistance. These trajectories essentialize orientalism into a system of representation motivated by otherwise unexplained hegemonic forces that collapse the ‘orient’ into a relatively unified Western discourse. It is this problematic essentialist nature of representation, whether historical, textual, or cultural, that has primarily dogged Said’s critique. How is it possible to determine truth in representation, or how is anyone to know if anything has been misrepresented? If Orientalism has been an analysis of colonial discourse based on a series of misrepresentations then, as Said asks at the end of the book, “how does one represent other cultures?”4 By his own admission, he was never able to get beyond this problem.

At the heart of this dilemma was Said’s position on the intertwined notions of religion and nationalism. Largely based on his own exilic perspective as a Palestinian living within the United States, his views on religion are linked to his rejection of any form of ethnocentrism which he links to national identities. Most importantly for this discussion is that Said’s references to religion are usually linked to religious nationalism.

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4 Said, Orientalism, 325.
Thus, as a form of critical engagement to this danger, Said adhered to the idea of a secular humanism that he later termed critical secularism. Yet, in adopting this approach, Said failed to realize that the same historical realities do not apply equally in other areas of the world. Said’s notion of critical secularism is inadequate because of its exclusion of categories of thinking found in indigenous cosmologies which are linked also to aesthetics. Such cosmologies are grounded in religious worldviews that precede, and at times, exceed the colonial experience. The result is that Said, relying and adhering to the idea of critical secularism, ends up reproducing the orientalist distinction of Western secularism and the Eastern mysticism. To put it more clearly, Said orientalizes religion at the very point that he rescues Islam from orientalism. This results in an unmediated secularism which demeans and excludes religion as the powerful tool it was within many anti-colonial movements. This dissertation argues that it is primarily Said’s adherence to critical secularism that prevents postcolonial discourse from articulating contemporary cultural transformations on the transnational stage.

**Postcolonialism**

Said’s exilic perspective and his postcolonial theoretical approach are challenged by Sikander’s intervention into the politics of transcultural knowledge systems using contemporary visual rhetoric and its interplay with geopolitical realities. Such visual rhetoric has a complex methodological and theoretical foundation. Visual culture cannot be marginalized in favor of textual discourse in South Asian traditions of either religion.

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or aesthetics. Just as much, if not more so, visual culture has a long history in South Asia as a powerful way of introducing multiple viewpoints while simultaneously blurring the boundaries of religious specificities. Generally speaking, it is safe to say that visual culture, whether in the form of sculpture, manuscript pages or theatrical performances are viewed similar to texts. In other words, they are the discourse of culture. They introduce conceptual and thus perceptual views of the world. Generally speaking, in this visual culture, there is a predilection for the universal rather than temporal visual symbols, and this allows for the interrelationship of the various religions that populate South Asia. In part, it is this heterogeneity that provides the conceptual methodology for Sikander’s rich visual vocabulary.

That the complex creation of miniature painting that Sikander has taken up is ideally situated to take on critical ways to go beyond postcolonialism, is demonstrated by a brief overview of the relevance of the manuscript tradition within postcolonial Pakistan and why Sikander chose to take it on. After 1947, in the newly formed state of Pakistan, miniature painting had become an art form that was perceived not only as a form of craft rather than art, but as an anachronistic craft having no currency and no relevance to the so-called evolution of art as it was perceived within its avant-garde, modernist, and largely Eurocentric, persona which was then being emphasized at the National College of Art (NCA) in Lahore, Pakistan. It might be productive to note that NCA was originally established as an Arts and Crafts inspired school by the British in 1878. Like other art schools set up in this era, colonial administrators saw their role as paternalistic. The purpose of art schools in South Asia during the colonial period was to foster and guide
the ‘indigenous craftsman’ toward a more Europeanized idea of artmaking. Simultaneously, there was an effort to further the idea that fine art was European, and craft was South Asian, thus instantiating a hierarchic division between colonialist fine art and indigenous craft. This stratification was used as a device for maintaining the hierarchy of colonial rule. Miniature painting, along with other indigenous crafts, has consequently been the subject of continual taxonomic shifts since the colonial period, at times bearing the status of artifacts, and at other times seen as fine art, and in the aftermath of the colonial period, viewed as purely tourist art that idealized a long lost past.\(^6\) Alongside other forms of art being taught at NCA, up until the 1970s, miniature painting was practiced as a form of reproduction of Mughal and Kangra era styles under the ustads or master craftsmen, where it was largely perceived as a decorative and romantic re-idealization of a utopian tradition.

Ironically, it was the dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Huq in the 80’s that was responsible for changing the status of miniature painting. His oppressive policies to Islamize Pakistan were responsible for bringing about a paradigm shift for the status of miniature painting at NCA. Under Zia, “the orthodox style of miniature painting figured high on the list of officially sanctioned state art, alongside calligraphy and, paradoxically, Westernized landscape painting.”\(^7\) Despite this official sanction, Zahoor Akhlaq, who was the head of NCA at the time, perceived the anarchic possibilities inherent in the

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manuscript tradition. It became evident to Akhlaq, that even as this tradition beame officially sanctioned, the subversive capabilities that were part and parcel of the little known history of this tradition, also became evident. Akhlaq’s insights into the ability of manuscript painting to be subversive resonated to the next generation of miniature artists, foremost among them, Shahzia Sikander. It was in a similar spirit that Sikander as “an act of defiance” took on the moribund craft at NCA in response to the dictatorial regime of Zia-ul-Haq. Against Zia’s oppressive Islamist policies, Sikander perceived that miniature painting could be a way to represent another layer of social narrative where the personal was the political, and often transcended the political. As one scholar notes:

One reason for the development of this benign vision could be the replacement of the ‘documentary’ for the ‘decorative’ as a strategy that has suited dictatorships by its denial of content. It is precisely for this reason that the work of experimental artists [such as Shahzia Sikander] is so powerful. They have retrieved the essentially content-based nature of the medium rather than approaching it as purely an aesthetic exercise. These artists have questioned the ambivalence of a postcolonial art education. They ask why it should encourage pride in a cultural tradition while mystifying the past through a nationalist propaganda that lacks critical history. They see the reinvention of the miniature that began with Akhlaq as an example of a more positively critical art-form – one that offers a critique through its content as well as its form. [Emphasis added.]

As she experimented with this medium, Sikander began to see that within the contexts of newly emerging and continually changing political realities, previous and current constructions of these traditional images have divergent religious, aesthetic, and social significations. Her hybrid appropriations intentionally convolute any linear colonial or postcolonial narrative, and through an intricate layering process, they become

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9 Whiles, Kharkhana, 29.
extraordinary in their complexity, allowing genealogical interrogations of how and for whom histories are constructed and legitimated to emerge. Her visual rhetoric addresses orientalist stereotypes of identity and its construction, yet transcends the nationalisms, exoticism, and othering implicit in such constructions. At times there are explicit ironical references to such exoticism. In contrast to Said, Sikander interrogates his monolithic concept of postcolonial identities and instead introduces us to multiple conceptions of how identities are changed and defined through time. These illusions to history critique a linear approach, instead calling up other allusions to making meaning. The result is that Sikander’s compositions often use traditional elements to critique present day realities. Additionally, her visual rhetoric opens us to the quagmire of contemporary politics and religion often grounded in misunderstandings, and introduces us to other realities by drawing on the very religious references that have been previously marginalized or exoticised. The shifting semiotic nature of images is central to this quagmire of re-interpretation as that has been and still is fashioned to serve nation-state claims. This shift in semiotic meaning of various tropes that transform to stereotypes is especially obvious with longstanding neo-orientalist clichés regarding the Islamic world. Particularly, images of women, especially of veiled or burqa-clad women, have become global icons signifying women’s oppression. By extension, these stereotypes have the effect of simplistically implicating Islam as the root cause of such oppression. In contrast, Sikander’s deployment of these tropes overturns their stereotypical power. Instead, she uses them to illuminate the complex negotiation of feminine self, religion, media, and nation, thereby problematizing the distortions from becoming too readily
absorbed. Her contemporary reconstruction of miniature painting speaks to both the challenges and possibilities of interpreting visual ideas across cultural and religious divides. Her compositions address the dangers of the absence, despite postcolonial theory, of contextual knowledge. More importantly, given the categories of the two contrived camps of “with us” or “against us” in the wake of September 11, 2001, Sikander refuses to be pigeon-holed into such a meaningless dichotomy.

![Image of Sikander's artwork](image)


All of the above assertions can be made clearer by examining one of Sikander’s installations entitled *Chaman* (Fig. 1), and comparing it to several related works created around the same time. In contrast to a manuscript page format, these installations are temporary, and partly painted on the wall with additional large pieces of transparent paper. Scale is interesting in Sikander’s work because the process of miniature painting
is extraordinarily time consuming, as layer upon layer is added, reworked and burnished with a very fine brush. In contrast to this intensive labor, the scale of these works is quite small. In the late 1990’s, Sikander began doing much larger installations. In contrast to the process of creating miniatures, installations were done in just a few days, and the process and decisions of creation that were required were much faster which was in direct contrast to the process of the miniatures. For my purposes, beginning with an installation enables the uninformed viewer of Sikander’s work to gain some idea of the layered process involved in manuscript painting which is often not immediately apparent.

The title of this installation is an ironic choice on Sikander’s part, as Chaman is both an Urdu and Hindi word which means garden. As in both visual and textual discourse in South Asia, the title has multiple meanings. It alludes to the name of a town situated on the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan which is home to a significant population of refugees who originally fled the civil war and the Soviet Union's invasion in 1979. Also, in titling this work Chaman or garden, Sikander draws on the little known importance of the garden in precolonial manuscript paintings. The historical context of the garden then becomes a critique of the tragic results of the aftermath of colonial politics, as well as the contemporary tragedy of the wartorn town of Chaman situated on the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The process of the installation is itself replete with critical messages on the nature of the politics of knowledge. In this larger performance presentation, the importance of the layered images on large transparent paper which hang one over the other becomes a way of critical engagement to demonstrate how some forms of knowledge are hidden at
times, yet come to the fore in other historical settings. How some realities receive attention and other are ignored is a complex negotiation of agendas involving various ideas and forms of identity. Sikander’s choice of transparent paper is also a metaphor for how certain knowledges come to be. These large transparent images are never meant to veil the images beneath. Instead, they visually read as transparent layers, one over the other, metaphorically calling to mind the many layers that make up the past. There is no effort to hide anything, and perception constantly changes as each layer is added. In effect, what she is doing is taking the same ideas of manuscript painting from a small format to a larger format, as manuscript painting also involves many layers that are not so easily apparent to the eye as they exist on a flat surface. These transparent, overlapping images in these performance installations are a witty allusion to the ephemeral nature of how history is perceived. It is a comment on what gets recorded and elaborated and what gets omitted according to various perceptual realities. Thus, the process of these performance installations draws on the indisputable concept of plural identity amid shifting geographical boundaries through time. As Chaman references a garden landscape, it attaches another meaning to the land beyond national identities, which, in any case, are always changing through history. In other words, the land exists despite the imposed and ever-changing imposition of boundaries. The particular location of Chaman as a place on the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan is an allusion to the many ancient villages and towns that exist in Central Asia in the very region that recalls the ancient trade routes of the Silk Road. The cowboy boots on the left reflect Sikander’s brief residence in Texas in the early 1990s, as they also bring to mind the issues of
borderlands, and the changing boundaries over the past two hundred years between Mexico and the United States. Thus, this installation moves us from one part of the world to another, both areas reflecting the commonality of the experience of changing boundaries, borderlands and the historical experiences of people living in these regions.

To demonstrate how Sikander moves from manuscript paintings to installation, the installation detail below (Fig. 2) appropriates and reinterprets a motif from a *Safavid* manuscript drawing of a polo player in a mountain landscape (Fig. 3).

![Fig. 2. Untitled, 1998, detail. Acrylic, gouache, ink and tissue paper on wall. 12 x 45’ overall. *On the Wall*, Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis, 1998.](image-url)
In the detail of the installation, the rider of the horse in the original manuscript drawing has disappeared and we see only the faceless horse as it runs across seemingly invisible, boundless, formless territories. Sikander previously appropriated this drawing in a witty manuscript painting from 1994-98 entitled “Who’s Veiled Anyway?” (Fig. 4).
In this image, the male polo player is now a woman rider wearing a shredded *burqa*, and riding a horse in a 16\textsuperscript{th} century Persian style landscape. This stylized landscape, as Sikander is well aware, itself reflects both Central Asian and Chinese stylistic re-adaptations. Another figure of a woman behind the rider seems to hang off the horse as the triumphal booty of conquest, while simultaneously Sikander’s signature...
figure of a self-rooted veiled woman, reminding us of a Hindu goddess and a veiled woman, make up the tail of the horse. From this manuscript drawing with its many layers, she simply unpacks the smaller format of this labor intensive process into the larger installation, where these same images have been painted on larger transparent paper, and layered one on top of the other. Additionally, the title of this image is worded so as to reverse the notion of veiling to imply the unwillingness to perceive not only alternative forms of aesthetics, but the cognitive categories of perception that accompany them. By extension, these alternative forms of aesthetics are also linked to blindnesses regarding alternative contemporary realities.
In some of her recent work, Sikander questions the purely textual emphasis of much contemporary discourse as she adds what is a semblance of purely imaginative written calligraphy, but is not calligraphy at all. In *Pathology of Suspension, Transcending the Text* (Fig. 5) the text is purely imaginary; yet obviously referencing the Arabic written word. There are always simultaneous and competing messages and references in all of her work. Here, the Arabic calligraphy of the Koran is actually meant to transport the reader to a higher awareness, while at the same time the unreadable text alludes to the increasing limitations and inapplicability of the written word as reliable representation. The written word has always occupied a privileged place both in Islam and in Western discourse, including Said’s *Orientalism*. As Faisal Devji tells us, in Islam, the written word, “signifies the conceptual authority of religion and the state.”

Said similarly allows the supremacy of discourse as central to his project, but he simultaneously questions its representative power. In both East and West, writing and not image was the bearer of both legal and liturgical concepts. Image and imagination were subordinate as were women. In many ways, Sikander reasserts the power of images to question such representations, as the figures of Sikander’s disparate women remind us that the stories they might tell us of a different history are left unwritten, and therefore, unrepresented. In other words, these histories and representations remain veiled, or are sometimes characterized as the victims stories. This characterization leaves out the veiled stories which transcend the temporary nature of nation and state boundaries.

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Sikander’s message in the title of the manuscript painting, “Who’s Veiled Anyway?” ironically references these untold stories as it also references the slipperiness of a transcultural politics of representation. This title also alludes to a kind of hypocrisy where the accuser attempts to construct a certain perception of reality which perhaps masks a certain self-loathing. This is what Ashis Nandy would term a form of ‘the intimate enemy,’ where one finds that, and this happens in the cases of both nation-states and individuals, one has disowned a part of one’s self in order to construct their alternative vision of reality. ¹¹

In this brief discussion, my point has been to introduce viewers to both the process and the heterogeneous historical contexts of Sikander’s work. By explaining these examples, I want to begin to bring to awareness the idea that Sikander’s images have the ability to suggest a multiplicity of perspectives, as they simultaneously avoid a monolithic or specific narrative. Instead, they allude to the possibility of many narratives, as she interrogates monolithic theoretical ideas. Her images question the status of theory itself, allowing an interrogation regarding the nature of representation and perception. Sikander’s images continuously interpose alternative understandings, and lead us to question just how certain discourses have structured the nature of representation and its attendant histories, and of our understanding of these histories. Her juxtaposition of images does not allow us to construct meaning in the usual way and certainly not in the instrumental way of nation-state narrative, or in terms of only a

historicity based after colonialism as Said does. The disparate figures of women, first as colonial booty, second as the polo player in shredded burqa, and third, the veiled Hindu Goddess, all constitute a cultural critique as they provide motifs that rely on the power of transformation and metamorphosis, enabling the creation of new metaphors that form the genesis of a reinterpretation of myth and religion into contemporary terms. That this is a reality that transcends the East/West dichotomy, is what Faisal Devji in his essay on Sikander in 1998 trenchantly observes:

Obviously the Taliban’s efforts to write off or on, as the case may be, women’s bodies ends up dispersing and miniaturizing them, a gesture whose corollary would be the use of the female form on billboards in the West. Both instances represent an exoticism come fetishism, a point which is never written into public meaning in Sikander’s work. But again, that would require an act of translation which is not forthcoming. Sikander is in fact stating the opposite: that the failure of translation, the failure to find a universal language, fuels desire and along with it the need to make yet another exquisite work.  

I would add to assert that we must go beyond Devji’s point. What is now required is an act of translation that brings us to a broader awareness that results in an awakening of new cognitive categories. This broader awareness comes from understanding the multidimensional aesthetic traditions of South Asia which are deeply rooted in the multiple religions of the subcontinent. To understand the aesthetic traditions is to understand how Sikander uses tradition to critique the present. This is what this dissertation will attempt to undertake throughout the following chapters.

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Chapter Two: Background on Postcolonial Theory, the Aesthetics of Visual Culture, and its Role as Critical Discourse

Postcolonial Theory – a Brief Overview

Within the past several decades, postcolonial theoretical methodologies have increasingly come under scrutiny. In formerly colonized countries, they are viewed with extreme skepticism, while within the academic structures of the United States postcolonialism has at times been thought to replicate what it has attempted to negate, often re-inscribing the very surveillant visions it set out to question. In recent years, postcolonial discourse has evolved into an ambivalent undertaking revolving around the slippery nature of truth and representation. By Said’s own admission, “representation is eo ipso implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the ‘truth,’ which is itself a representation.” In Saidian discourse, there is insufficient methodology to represent what might be the challenges to those representations.

Robert J. C. Young, in his magisterial history of postcolonialism, contends that postcolonial theory has evolved into a set of practices that necessitates a conceptual

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13 An excellent critique of Orientalism from a Marxist perspective is Aijaz Ahmad’s In Theory (London: Verso, 1992). The European empire held sway over more than 85% of the rest of the globe by the time of the First World War, having consolidated its control over several centuries.


reorientation that seeks to make visible the perspectives and knowledges that have
developed outside of Europe. Yet, it remains questionable whether postcolonial
practices have indeed overturned the order of knowledge systems, given that
contemporary events appear to be motivated by newly emerging neocolonial formations.
Critics of *Orientalism* have long pointed out its shortcomings: the homogenization of
European representations and non-European worlds, the overemphasis of colonial power,
and the marginalization of the colonized in the making of colonial projects. Scholars
such as Aijaz Ahmad criticize the Euro-American origin and methodology of
postcolonialism, its privileging of the Western canon, and its lack of any real relevance to
Third-World culture. Benita Parry, who subscribes to the need for colonial discourse
analysis, argues against the excessive emphasis on textuality and its neglect of counter
revolutionary movements. Theoretically, postcolonial discourse, although it claims to
deal with issues of representation, strongly emphasizes the textual representation, as it
simultaneously reinstates the centrality of Eurocentric discourses in their trajectory and
appropriation of non-European cultures as the “other.” Said’s emphasis on the textual
nature of history where the representation of a few literary texts from which larger

historical generalizations are drawn has also come under scrutiny. This textual emphasis
of postcolonialism is continued throughout the discourse.

Among the different geographies of the aftermath of European colonialism, each
with its own perspectives and critiques, by far one of the most influential interventions
outside of academic structures in the United States has been the Subaltern Studies group
in Kolkota, India. Founded in 1982 by Ranajit Guha and others, the Subaltern School
intervened between the histories of the Cambridge School which wrote of the beneficence
of Britain’s colonial rule and the histories of Bipan Chandra and others which eulogized
the regenerative force of Indian nationalism against colonialism. They sought to write a
‘history from below’ by exploring fault lines within dominant discourses in order “to
describe histories revealed in the cracks of the colonial archaeology of knowledge.”

These South Asian scholars expanded Gramsci’s concept of the ‘subaltern’ to signify not
merely class, but also race, nationality, and gender, thereby attempting to give
subjectivity to the multitudes whose voices were buried not only by colonial and imperial
projects, but also by religious and gender structures. A critique of gender structures
emerged with Gayatri Spivak’s important criticisms, which also helped motivate
productive conversations with postcolonial studies as taught in the United States. Within
the past decade, diasporic scholars, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak,
and others have established a presence within the academic structures of the United

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20 Gyan Prakash, “Postcolonial Criticism and Indian Historiography,” in Dangerous Liaisons, ed. Ann
McClintock et al. (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997), 492-3. Dipesh Chakrabarty’s “A Small
History of Subaltern Studies,” in Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies (Chicago: The
University of Chicago Press, 2002), 3-19. For an alternate critical look at the Subaltern School, see Vinay Lal,
“Subalterns in the Academy,” The History of History: Politics and Scholarship in Modern India (New Delhi: Oxford
University Press, 2003), 186-230.
States where the emphasis has shifted from subaltern consciousness to issues of migrancy from which emanate multiple or alternative modernities. Their projects, particularly in the case of Bhabha and Spivak, have intersected with European poststructural discourse, particularly with the critical perspectives of Michel Foucault’s genealogies and Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction of European logocentrism.21

In particular, Spivak’s project applied Derridian deconstruction to postcolonialism, as she asserts that her ideas are continually evolving and resist, in true deconstructive fashion, a straight textual analysis, stressing instead the notion that ideas are continually in motion and development. However, she admits that,

My position is generally a reactive one. I am viewed by Marxists as too codic, by feminists as too male-identified, by indigenous theorists as too committed to Western Theory. I am uneasily pleased about this.22

Spivak’s admission of her reactive position is interesting, and is partially indicative of why postcolonial theory has developed its malaise in recent times. She is obviously aware that the reactionary nature of her critique is dependent on the historicism of postcoloniality and ultimately leads to its polemical register. This reactive position ultimately allows no creative or proactive way out of the conundrums of postcolonial feminism, as Spivak’s famous essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” attests.23 This is partially the reason why many contemporary feminist scholars view her work as inordinately pessimistic.


Within the work of both Homi Bhabha and Dipesh Chakrabarty, what seems to emerge most strongly is ambivalence to the epistemological inadequacies of European theory and philosophy. Against Said, Bhabha argues that colonial power and its perceived authority is not straightforwardly possessed by the colonizer. Relying on the North African psychologist Franz Fanon and employing Lacanian theory, Bhabha argues for the ambivalence of colonial discourse and emergence of hybridization, a concept that addresses the reality that both colonizer and colonized were transformed within the processes of the colonization. Bhabha also draws on Derridean poststructuralist notions about language and meaning when he evokes the idea of the “Third Space”, a concept he uses to refer to the problems of interpretation brought about by the semiotic disjunctures within multi-dimensional cultural spaces. As he says:

The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People.

Bhabha helps us to understand the problematic nature of the translation and the representation of cultural differences, and the difficulties of articulating this situation often demonstrated best by the complexities of his own tortuous vocabulary. Nevertheless, despite the difficulties in understanding just what Bhabha is trying to tell us, he has introduced us to the perils of representation at a time when the global


25 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 37.
circulation of cultural stereotypes is becoming a major industry and when the relation of art to the state, to possible publics, to the market, and to political or ethical positioning seems more volatile and unpredictable than ever before.  

In recent years, Bhabha has gone beyond the textual, and put the emphasis on speaking to and questioning the processes of the unfolding of contemporary culture. He has conducted several dialogues with Shahzia Sikander, and it is interesting to speculate if it is the visual rhetoric of Sikander’s art that has helped influence his recent turn in putting the emphasis on the questions rather than in promulgation of theories. Bhabha is one of the few recent theorists who allow theory to collaborate with visual art. The following quote in his 1997 dialogue with Sikander makes clear that he feels the language of visual representation is far more capable of representing and transcending ‘non-modern’ complexities brought about by the limitations of language and text:

Somehow, it strikes me that modernity for us in the Third World is largely a colonial intervention. It did not grow organically out of historical circumstances and therefore had to coexist with a number of non-modern traditions. The field of visual representation was much more heterogeneous, contradictory, open, and juxtapositional. I am very carefully not saying ‘pre-modern’ because I believe that it was the function of colonialist modernity to introduce the modern/pre-modern distinctions into countries that had their own modes of transformation that were simply different from what was recognized as Western modernity.

While Bhabha’s attention to the power of the visual is important, nevertheless, in drawing heavily from Fanon and poststructuralism, and in his seemingly unquestioned adherence to critical secularism, he is not able to explicitly articulate the power of indigenous

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26 W.J.T. Mitchell, “Translator/Translated: Interview with Cultural Theorist Homi Bhabha,” in *Artforum* 33, no. 7 (March, 1995): 80-84.

religio-aesthetic epistemologies which emerge within these artistic representations. In Chapter 3, I will demonstrate that although he does not say so, Bhabha’s many references to the production of meaning as performative are indebted to South Asian aesthetics of rasa, which originated in performance theory. In recent years, Bhabha has deepened his collaboration with contemporary visual artists in the diaspora, not only Shahzia Sikander, but also, among others, South Asian artist Anish Kapoor now working in the U.K.²⁸ I speculate that it is such artists who are helping cultural theorists like Bhabha perceive and eventually articulate the complexities of contemporary global realities.

In partial alignment with Bhabha’s work, the work of the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, one of the founding members of Subaltern Studies, now teaching at the University of Chicago, still sees Europe as a silent referent dominating the discourse of history. Yet, regarding the history of colonialism and its ambivalent relationship to those colonized countries, he posits that one cannot just avoid the hegemony of European perspectives, but the question remains how to introduce those alternative epistemologies and resistances originating in South Asia which are largely invisible within Western academic structures. As he succinctly states in Provincializing Europe:

European thought has a contradictory relationship to such an instance of political modernity. It is both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the various life practices that constitute the political and historical in India.²⁹

Chakrabarty argues that postcolonial theory and its history cannot contain the paradoxes of modern India where far more often than one is aware, the modern cannot be separated

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from the traditional, the public from the private, or the secular from the religious.

Whereas Spivak and Bhabha have nowhere written of the role of religion in the culture of politics and its relationship to either violence or non-violence, Chakrabarty, citing Ranajit Guha, acknowledges the influence of religion in the nationalist movement. He has written that such a modern nationalism:

Did not follow the logic of secular-rational calculations inherent in the modern concept of the political. This peasant but modern political sphere was not bereft of the agency of gods, spirits, and other supernatural beings. Social scientists may classify such agencies under the rubric of “peasant beliefs,” but the peasant-as-citizen did not partake of the ontological assumptions that the social sciences take for granted. Guha’s statement recognized this subject as modern, however, and hence refused to call the peasants’ political behavior or consciousness “pre-political.” He insisted that instead of being an anachronism in a modernizing colonial world, the peasant was a real contemporary of colonialism, a foundational part of the modernity that colonialism brought to India. . . .

Peasants’ readings of the relations of power that they confronted in the world, Guha argued, were by no means unrealistic or backward looking.30

In this attention to other subjectively different constructions of modernity, Chakrabarty has thus sought to point out the limitations of conceptualizing postcolonial discourse within European so called secular constructs. In fact, he explicitly states that it is impossible to think of the phenomenon of ‘political modernity’ without invoking “the genealogies of which go deep into the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe.”31 Chakrabarty represents the postcolonial historian’s sense of the insurmountable task that faces her/him when he writes that historians wanting to provincialize Europe must realize that:


31 Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, 4.
‘Europe’ cannot after all be provincialized within the institutional site of the university whose knowledge protocols will always take us back to the terrain where all contours follow that of my hyperreal Europe – the project of provincializing Europe must realize within itself its own impossibility. It therefore looks to a history that embodies this politics of despair. . . . I ask for a history that deliberately makes visible, within the very structure of its narrative forms, its own repressive strategies and practices, the part it plays in collusion with the narratives of citizenships in assimilating to the projects of the modern state all other possibilities of human solidarity. The politics of despair will require of such history that it lays bare to its readers the reasons why such a predicament is necessarily inescapable.32

Chakrabarty’s plea for a history that makes visible its own repressive strategies and collusion with ‘the narrative of citizenships in assimilating to the projects of the modern state’ is a description that might well be applied to describe Sikander’s The Many Faces of Islam discussed below. But Sikander also provides visual rhetoric that challenges Chakrabarty’s ‘politics of despair.’ In other words, it is the artists like Sikander who are better able to lay bare the predicaments of modernity while simultaneously creating a visual language that renegotiates the iconography of the future. Essentially, she is able to revisualize elements of the past that have remained outside of discourse. Traditions that have remained little known emerge in subtle ways to renegotiate and interrogate modernity.

While Spivak has relied on Derridean deconstruction and Bhabha is indebted to the North African critique of Frantz Fanon and other European poststructural theoretical models, the South Asian cultural theorist, Ashis Nandy is not a well known cultural theorist in the United States. It is perhaps only in the writing of Dipesh Chakrabarty that one can discern an ambivalent homage to Nandy’s work.33 Yet, out of all of these South

32 Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, 45.
Asian born theorists, only Nandy has seen fit to readapt the human rights activist, Mahatma Gandhi into a neo-Gandhian cultural and spiritual critique against colonialism. Gandhi, of course, successfully combined activism during the Indian Independence movement against the British with the theoretical construct of *Satyagriha*. Drawing on Gandhi’s ideas in his own idiosyncratic way has thus enabled Nandy to powerfully address the role of religion and its relation to politics from the viewpoint of a colonized country. He has also redeployed Rabindranath Tagore in his critique on the illegitimacy of nationalism, and more recently, has written about the linkages of violence and creativity in the 20th century, wherein he redefines the role of creativity for future change. This approach challenges Chakrabarty’s ‘politics of despair.’

Nandy, who has been described as the father of South Asian cultural studies, is a cultural critic whose unique insights originate from his dual backgrounds in psychology and sociology. He proposes, “that colonialism is first of all a matter of consciousness and needs to be defined ultimately in the minds of men.” In his groundbreaking work, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*, he not only addresses specifically the collaborations of Indian politics with the British colonial project, but he also speaks to the ways in which Indians responded to colonial knowledge by creating an

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36 Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy*, 63.
alternative discourse. Along with the Subaltern school, Nandy also takes seriously the power of indigenous cultural movements in overturning colonialism. However, he differs from the Subalterns in his emphasis on psychological structures by asserting that his analysis is, “primarily an enquiry into the psychological structures and cultural forces which supported or resisted the culture of colonialism in British India.” At one time or another, Nandy has critically deconstructed some of the most cherished products of modernity, the totalist political organizations of the nation-states, the knowledge systems of techno-science, the ideal form of social life of Westernized secularism, and the utopia of linear progress and development. All of these narratives were born in the civilizational projects of colonialism and have been sustained in post-Independence India, and his critique reveals the breaches, silences and gaps in these narratives. As D.R. Nagaraj perfectly describes it:

Nandy’s heart and mind go to those passive, weak and silent historical moments, which are placed in an adversarial relation with the articulate, powerful, arrogant forces, and the modes in which the former slowly regain their energies and self. Kipling is created by both the victorious West and the defeated India. There is little scope for such mutual transformative processes in the Saidian mode; it has difficulty in accepting and privileging forms of self-escape and transcendence that a culture develops. Said and Fanon are historians who capture moments of clarity, conscious action and explosion, open articulation and direct conflict. Nandy is the artist who captures the speech hidden in enigmatic silence, who sees spurts of activism that take cover under passivity. To put it differently, in the Fanonian and the Saidian modes, there lurk dangers of absolutizing their own methods. Nandy escapes from such dangers because of the emphasis in his method on states of intimate enmity and mutually transformative powers.

37 Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy*, xvi.

A powerful example of how Nandy deploys the mutually transformative powers of intimate enmity is his analysis of the ambiguity and androgyny of Gandhi’s own selfconstruction. Such a move enables Nandy to explain how Gandhi constructed himself androgynously in order to resist Europe’s masculinist version of modernity, thereby overturning concepts drawn from the very culture that was being resisted, and demonstrating the relationship of gendering and ideology during the colonial period. This insight is then linked to Gandhi’s emphasis on spiritual force which Nandy ingenuously redeployes in psychological terms, using a strategy that with heavy irony (referencing the colonial mindset towards indigenous people in India during the colonial period), he terms ‘the savage Freud.’ This redeployment of gender as it is linked to the complexities of religion in the service of political freedom problematizes and exposes the European celebration of the secular.

Robert J.R. Young is one of the few scholars to include Nandy within the discourse of postcolonial history; and he describes the importance of Nandy’s use of Gandhi’s legacy which is so unusual in postcolonial theories:

Such counter knowledge was developed through a reinterpretation of Gandhi’s thought that introduced many of the elements that have become particularly associated with postcolonial theory. Though far less acknowledged than Said’s Orientalism, Intimate Enemy contributed most to setting up the basic framework of the theorectico-political environment of postcolonial studies in India, among diasporic Indian intellectuals, and through them across the whole field.39

Young omits the fact that neither Spivak nor Bhabha have acknowledged Nandy’s influence, although Bhabha does recognize his profound debt to the Sartrean inspired

39 Young, Postcolonialism, 339-40.
anti-colonialism of Franz Fanon. Nandy, however, has had this to say about the legacy of
Fanon:

Let us not forget that the most violent of denunciation of the West produced by Frantz Fanon is written in the elegant style of a Jean Paul Sartre. The West has not merely produced modern colonialism, it informs most interpretations of colonialism.\textsuperscript{40}

Nandy differs from the Subaltern scholars, Chakrabarty and Guha, and those associated with the Subaltern school, Spivak and Bhabha, by problematizing the notion of what he terms a museumized approach to history, opting for an open-endedness that does not define history or indeed for that matter, the self, in linear terms. He states that:

The past is not only the objective history of a person or a group but a record of marks left in the form of memories, experiences, scars and adaptive resources within personalities… reconfigured memories are the stuff of contemporary subjectivity, and a theory of the past is actually a prognosis of the future.\textsuperscript{41}

Nandy leads us away from a false notion of objectivity by evoking the somewhat nebulous idea of memories, that when reconfigured, develop into powerful contemporary subjectivities. It is Nandy’s emphasis on the importance of the creative power of these subjectivities that has often been maligned by scholars within the United States. This emphasis is changing somewhat in recent scholarship and is acknowledged by Chakrabarty.

In previous writings, Chakrabarty faults Nandy for being decisionist in his approach to history, by which he means that Nandy’s position, “allows the critic to talk about the future and the past as though there were concrete, value-laden choices or

\textsuperscript{40} Nandy, \textit{The Intimate Enemy}, viii.

\textsuperscript{41} Nandy, \textit{Time Wars: Silent and Evasive Pasts in Indian Politics and Religion}, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 1.
decisions to be made with regard to both.”42 Recently, Chakrabarty has acknowledged that Nandy’s approach actually allows for subjective creativity as Nandy’s theoretical approach does not admit either the objectivity of history, nor its division from the self. Instead, Nandy asserts the power of reconfigured memories in that one has the freedom to reconfigure the past in order to develop the ability to open the future. To paraphrase Nandy, the self is permeable, not fixed, not defined too tightly, nor separated from the not-self, enabling one to adapt to cultural ambiguities and to use them to build psychological and even metaphysical defenses.43 It is this insight that Chakrabarty has recently acknowledged.

Female theorists and activists are among the most powerful proponents to alternative theoretical approaches beyond colonial paradigms. Especially important work on the dangers of European cultural essentialism has been done by scholars such as Uma Narayan, who argue that a postcolonial feminist perspective needs to acknowledge the degree to which the colonial encounter and its writing in favor of liberty and equality masked the:

Profound similarities between Western culture and many of its Others, such as hierarchical social systems, huge economic disparities between members, and the mistreatment and inequality of women, [who] were systematically ignored in this construction of ‘Western culture.44

Other scholars including Chandra Mohanty and Leila Ahmed have put forth consistent arguments that a feminist critique challenges postcolonial discourses that mask the

43 Nandy, Time Warps, 1.
inequalities of gender relations in all geographical locations and in time periods after and preceding the experience of European domination.\textsuperscript{45} For example, writing from her position as an Egyptian-born scholar now teaching at the Harvard Divinity School as the Women’s Studies in Religion Professor, Ahmed, while admitting that Said’s \textit{Orientalism} provides a language with which to speak of what it was to be Arab in the West, at the same time she is ambivalent and suggests that, “it seemed simultaneously to flatten and erase other aspects of being Arab.” Coming, as it did, from Said’s place of embattled exile, Ahmed writes that Said did not address, “how to think about, speak about, or make my way through the broader, more complicated territory of what it was to be Arab.”\textsuperscript{46} Ahmed is deeply critical of Said’s rhetoric in \textit{Orientalism} because of the way it resonates with the rhetoric of Arab nationalism. Both are responsible for binaristic viewpoints, albeit from opposite sides. Ahmed emphasizes that Said’s “theoretical analysis of imperialism…did not seem to allow for the complexities that had been part of my own experience.”\textsuperscript{47} This point is made clearer when Ahmed outlines that her own dissertation on Edward Lane differs considerably from Said’s conclusion of this scholar’s work. Ahmed’s different reading of Lane is more nuanced and forgiving, and she regards him as a scholar, “working within the Western tradition both reproduced and affirmed the


\textsuperscript{47} Ahmed, \textit{A Border Passage}, 240.
views and assumptions of their times and also, sometimes, endeavored to work against them.\textsuperscript{48} In pointing this out, Ahmed illustrates one of Nandy’s notions in \textit{Intimate Enemy}. That is, one must acknowledge the humanity of one’s enemies before one can begin to overcome the inhumanity of one’s oppressors.

At the same time, even as feminist scholars negotiate recent feminist theories, they are ambivalent in their incorporation of Western feminism, as they are of Saidian postcolonialism’s silence on gender issues. Madhu Kishwar, one of the most active advocates for women’s rights in India, has gone so far as to completely reject the ideological biases inherent in Western feminism.\textsuperscript{49} Activist scholar Nawal El Saadawi, whose image and quotations are prominently featured in Sikander’s \textit{Many Faces of Islam}, weaves her lived experience as a medical doctor in Egypt into evolving and creative approaches that increasingly highlight grassroots proactive strategies.\textsuperscript{50} Recent critical interpretations of the problems of the Western reception of activist scholars such as Nawal El Saadawi by feminist scholars in the United States point out that these scholars seriously misconstrue many of El Saadawi’s most powerful points because of their own political and ideological preconceptions.\textsuperscript{51}

One of the most trenchant criticisms of a postcolonial paradigm is Anne McClintock’s critique of postcolonial time as “prematurely celebratory and obfuscatory.” Her critique highlights that postcolonial time creates its own ontological situation of

\textsuperscript{48} Ahmed, \textit{A Border Passage}, 241.


postcoloniality while simultaneously seeking to deconstruct it. Scholars such as Nicholas Dirks acknowledge this problem without going beyond its possible use to:

   Signify those places and histories, rather than either specific identities or theories, that resist the universalization of position and perspective, even as they underscore the power of the forces of universalization.  

In contrast, McClintock questions the very nature of postcolonial time as a lens through which we perceive reality, and seeks to reconstruct it by highlighting how gender and class, together with race, were responsible for constructing both subjective and collective categories of identity. While this deconstruction of postcolonial time is extremely useful, it does not alone lead to a genuine re-emergence of lost subjectivities of the ‘other.’

The dual ambivalence toward Western feminism and postcolonial discourse has much in common with South Asian art histories and aesthetic theories. For example, the art historian Vidya Dehejia has made the case that in the South Asian context, as far back as the pre-Christian era, the image of woman as auspicious and creative was common and that postmodern and postcolonial criticism of the orientalist and male gaze and the passive female figure do not translate well within both traditional and contemporary South Asian visual cultures.

What feminist scholars emerging from South Asian and Islamic countries and scholars of visual culture such as Dehejia and cultural theorists such as Nandy have in common is an awareness of alternative frames of histories and ways that give rise to alternative cognitive constructions that precede the critique of postcolonialism. There is


a commonality between these postcolonial scholars of the diaspora and third world feminist scholars of the dissonances between reality and theory and the acknowledgement of theory on shifting ground. Even Chakrabarty and Bhabha are now also realizing that theory cannot ‘see’ beyond a certain point. These silences open the door for a more embodied approach to future theoretical perspectives.

Said’s Exilic Perspective and its Influence on Postcolonial Theory

Said’s theoretical perspectives emerged at a time when many colonial states were attaining their freedom and as he himself was being schooled within elite academic U.S. institutions. Originally from Palestine, Said considered himself in exile. It was from within this embattled position of exile that Said’s theoretical perspectives were formed, and which gave rise to his seminal work, Orientalism. The autobiographical aspect in the formation of Orientalism was a critical component in the entire work, as the introductory chapter illustrates. In a subsection titled “The personal dimension,” Said refers to the “uniquely punishing destiny” of being a Palestinian in the West, held hostage by dehumanizing ideologies.54

By his own admission, Said never meant Orientalism as a cross-cultural examination. As pointed out by many commentators, Said makes it appear as if colonialism is the primary experiences of those countries that were colonized, thus foreclosing the multifaceted experiences, cultures and histories of formerly colonized countries that surely exceed the experience of colonialism. This critique replicates the simplistic binarism implicit also in the Arab nationalist movements that arose both before

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and during Said’s lifetime. These movements replicated Said’s thesis from the opposite viewpoint, in representing European colonialism as uniformly and comprehensively negative. Yet, the legacies of imperialism, although extremely destructive in many aspects, cannot be generalized in these simple binary terms. This theoretical analysis of colonialism did not allow for the complexities of experience, nor does it speak to these complexities. The problem of representation and its contingency upon power relations was one that dogged Said until the end of his life. His perception of representation was in terms of a relationship of victor/victim. This is demonstrated by his statement in *Culture and Imperialism*: “. . . representation itself has been characterised as keeping the subordinate subordinate, the inferior inferior.”\(^{55}\) It is a Manichean theoretical approach that still privileges the legacies of Western scientific objectivity.

It is important to realize that Said’s ideas about representation were formed from his own experiences, originating from his position as a Palestinian exile and schooled predominantly within American academic structures. As he says himself:

For the first time since I had left to come to the United States, I was emotionally reclaimed by the Arab world generally and by Palestine in particular. This was a direct result of the war – which I experienced in New York – and of the severely damaged political, cultural, and, of course, military and geographical situation that it created…. Starting that summer, I began to feel that what happened in the Arab world concerned me personally and could no longer be accepted with a passive political disengagement, not least because at the same moment that pan-Arabism lay in ruins, the Palestinian national movement emerged in Jordan, then in Lebanon, then, more or less, wherever – including North America – Palestinians lived.\(^ {56}\)

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As an intellectual exile during the mid-20th century when the colonial powers were finally forced to withdraw from many areas of the world, and when in counter-reaction to colonization, many of these colonized areas adopted a hyper-nationalism, Said adopted a cosmopolitanism which was still one of an outsider – an ‘other’. As an outsider, he believed that the role of an intellectual was to speak truth to power, and in this regard, he deployed a vast range of theoretical perspectives. In the end, however, the Manichean nature of orientalism still retains the legacy of Said’s own personal experiences. His intellectual position was a reaction against the legacies of the colonial experience which was part of his own experience. Ultimately, his position reinstates a colonializing and hegemonic dichotomy as it puts textual theory on one side and the object of theory on the other. That is, Said’s position is centered on textuality and still retains the illusionary objective viewpoint where the theorizer is the knower. The static nature of textuality and Said’s objective viewpoint do not allow us to co-participate in constructing multiple meanings or even alternative meanings.

While it is important to appreciate the insights that Saïd has given us, it will not do to remain in such a reactive position. If we have a heightened awareness of the dangers, it behooves us to proactively and articulately theorize alternative perspectives. These alternative representations go to the heart of how we envision other humanities, those lost subjectivities, and how we then envision and move beyond a postcolonial paradigm.

The re-emergence of those lost subjectivities with their reconfigured memories is becoming more important than ever before. Although the nationalisms of colonial
entities have receded from the mid 20th century onward in many parts of the world, their imaginary traces are still so readily visible. It is increasingly evident that new forms of orientalist images and representations are alive and well in our contemporary media and newspapers. It is impossible to refute these neo-orientalist representations through postcolonial discourse if the emphasis continues to remain on the textual and omits the increasingly proliferating visual representations. Ultimately, it is in alternative approaches to visual culture that will allow us to co-participate in constructing alternative meanings amid the plethora of representations that now bombard us.

**Theoretically Situating Visual Culture as Critique**

As mentioned previously, if Said was integral in linking the problem of representation and how it acquires meaning within imperial political contexts, he and others have addressed the problem primarily from the conceptual and the textual literary sphere. However, it may be argued that the contemporary political use of popular imagery in its creation of stereotypical images of other cultures, particularly within the media, constitutes the very site where power is being controlled and contested. What is our responsibility as viewers in a world increasingly constructed by visual images? While much of contemporary visual rhetoric seems intent on envisioning cultural divides, artists like Sikander are engaged in problematizing these east/west, modern/traditional divides, by reinventing visual imagery that interrogates the roles of power, and the ends for which images are appropriated, altered or commodified in the course of global exchange and across nation-state boundaries, both historically and in contemporary contexts. More specifically, from which historical viewpoint are we viewing these
images? By introducing this turn to visual culture, together with alternative South Asian aesthetics, I hope to clarify the multiple ways Sikander’s interventions help introduce alternatives about how we think of contemporary global realities. In this regard, it is important to establish not only the groundwork for a polysemic aesthetics, but also the methodology that will elucidate how and why visual culture should more firmly be instituted as cultural critique.

One of the most important issues cultural studies has addressed the turn to the field of visual culture, and in theorizing the importance of this field, it is possible to gain entirely new insights into how one delinks representation from imperial political contexts. Within contemporary culture, we must ask ourselves: what is the nature of diverse aesthetic systems which now operate in a diversity of cultural modalities? How can we wrest representation away from patriarchal, Eurocentric dominance? More importantly, if visual culture provides immense opportunities for rewriting culture, then how are we to understand these new modalities? This involves redeploying these visual modalities from the realm of pure aesthetics and seeing them from their broader implications, as the contemporary visual theorist Irit Rogoff asserts:

    The emergence of visual culture as a transdisciplinary and cross-methodological field of inquiry means nothing less and nothing more than an opportunity to reconsider some of the present culture’s thorniest problems from yet another angle.\(^\text{57}\)

In contemporary global culture, images do not stay within discrete disciplinary boundaries of art history or documentary film, or any other contemporary medium. In today’s world, meanings circulate visually in addition to textually. Images convey

information and mediate power relations. Further, it is imperative to realize that images circulate and signify according to the viewer. In our culture, the signification of images as they circulate transculturally may be deeply connected to ideological agendas, but may also function well beyond them. Rogoff theorizes that images provide the opportunity for a mode of new cultural writing. This new mode takes the role of the viewer seriously, thus enabling us to theorize about how and in what ways we can understand that looking and returning the gaze is an act of political resistance. Furthermore, we can then understand the manner in which all of us actively interact with images from all arenas to remake the world in the shape of our desires or fantasies or to narrate the stories which we carry within us. In defining this field Rogoff catalogues how visual culture differs from traditional art history:

Visual culture…does not function as a form of art history or film studies or mass media culture but is informed by all of them and intersects with all of them. It does not historicize the art object or any other visual image and provide for it either a narrow history within art or a broader genealogy within the world of social and cultural developments…. Nor does this field function as a form of criticism – of art or of any other visual artifact. It does not serve the purpose of evaluating a project, of complementing or condemning it, of assuming some notion of universal quality that can be applied to everything. Furthermore it does not aim at cataloguing the offenses and redressing the balances, of enumerating who is in and who is out, of what was chosen and what was discarded. These were an important part of an earlier project in which the glaring exclusions, erasures and distortions of every form of otherness – women, homosexuals and non-European peoples – had to be located and named and a judgment had to be passed. All of this, however, would constitute a ‘speaking about,’ an objectification of, a moment in culture such as an exhibition or a film or a literary text, into a solid and immutable entity which does not afford us (the viewing audience) the possibilities of play…

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Rather than ‘speaking about,’ Rogoff advocates a ‘speaking to’. What she means by this is that in ‘speaking to’ the representation, we alter the very structures by which we organize and inhabit culture, stating that, “It is this questioning of the ways in which we inhabit and thereby constantly make and remake our own culture that informs the arena of visual culture.” 59 To give this freedom to visual culture, it needs to be rethought outside of its Eurocentric origins and beyond the limited realm of art history as it has been constructed in Europe according to its linear progression and privileging of mimetic realism. The advantage of the emerging field of visual culture is that it presents a way to interrogate the narrative of this art history as it ‘progresses’ from realism, modernism and postmodernisms, all of which are thought to supersede one another. Such a narrative collapses when confronted with the multi-dimensional, religio-aesthetics of South Asian cultures.

The contemporary methodology of visual culture, and the need for a polycentric aesthetics as theorized by Rogoff and others, has much in common with South Asian visual culture, which, with its corresponding religio-aesthetic categories, has been particularly adept at exhibiting visual and philosophical multiple-perspectival realities that speak to the simultaneity of multiple cultural situations. These multiple perspectives refute the nature of objectification. Instead, they exist in participatory collaboration with the societies in which they live. South Asian visual culture has not been about mimetic realism based on objective reality, but about active participation in heterogeneous dialogue amidst the changing structures of society. This power of South Asian visual culture to speak to a diversity of cultural situations and to alter the very structures of how

59 Rogoff, Terra Infirma, 32.
we inhabit culture becomes clearer by explaining the interrelated aesthetic conceptual categories of *darshan* and *rasa*. While *darshan* addresses seeing and *rasa* addresses performance, these two categories are deeply related conceptually, so that in understanding them, one understands why religion and aesthetics are deeply intertwined to the point that the aesthetic categories are religious and the religious necessitates the aesthetic. Both *darshan* and *rasa* employ embodied participation and both rely on an idea of the relation and interdependence of all phenomena. Both assert the importance of the viewer, of the participant. In other words, truth or truths are not transcendent, but are inherent. For instance, *Darshan* suggests that through viewing the deity, one is directly affected by the exchange of glances. *Rasa* draws on the same framework situating the embodied participation of the viewer with performance. In other words, the dominant theme in a work of art evokes a deep feeling within the viewer – there is an interdependence of viewer and viewed. Participants do not see themselves outside of these realities in some objective way. These South Asian embodied approaches to aesthetics exceed traditionally Western secular categories of understanding. In fact, both rely on the idea that the arts enlarge our awareness. This awareness is, of course connected to the very cognitive categories through which we understand our worlds.

To enlarge on the concept of *darshan*, we must consider what is meant by seeing and perceiving the sacred. Seeing involves participation with the object of sight that, in effect, touches the object and thereby acquires its form. It may be unusual to consider that seeing includes touching, but this idea is what is involved with perceiving the deity, or with perception of any object or person which or who has qualities that are respect-
worthy and that the viewer wishes to take in or to embody within him or herself. The eye 
touches the object and the vitality or energy of the object pulsates within the viewer. 
This type of seeing centers on the power of perception and on the participation of the 
viewer. But it does more than this. It enlarges or deepens the perceptual awareness of 
the viewer. There is a deepened cognitive understanding. To see is to understand more 
deeply, to perceive more clearly.

Additionally, the concept of darshan exceeds its association with Hinduism. As 
Diana Eck explains, darshan is often thought to be a strictly Hindu concept, but this is 
not so as darshan has a kind of currency in South Asia that is difficult to understand 
unless one considers that the very term Hinduism, “refers only to the ‘ism’ of the land 
which early Muslims called ‘Hind,’ literally, the land beyond the Indus. Hinduism is no 
more, and no less than the ‘ism’ of India.” Thus, the multi-dimensional qualities of 
Hinduism embrace diverse religious perspectives and divergent civilizational boundaries. 
Such a conception is incompatible with the unified understanding that the word religion 
brings to mind in a European Christian context. Darshan helps in understanding not only 
India’s genius for polycentrism and pluralism on both visual and philosophical planes, 
but also in understanding that seeing is an epistemological exercise. As Eck explains:

The concept of darshan then, describes what has enabled India’s cultural genius 
for embracing diversity, so that diversity unites, rather than divides. Darshan not 
only applies to the seeing of the sacred, but is a word used to refer to the six 
philosophical traditions or systems known as darshana. Here the term means not 
the ‘seeing’ of the deity, but the ‘seeing of truth.’ There are many such
darshanas, 
many ‘points of view’ or ‘perspectives’ on the truth. And although each has its 
own starting point, its own theory of causation, its own accepted enumeration of the 
means by which one can arrive at valid knowledge, these ‘ways of seeing’ share a 
common goal – liberation – and they share the understanding that all their rivals are

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60 Eck, Darshan, 24.
also ‘orthodox.’ Philosophical discourse, therefore, takes the form of an ongoing dialogue, in which the views of others are explained so that one can counter them with one’s own view. Any ‘point of view’ implicitly assumes that another point of view is possible.61

This also helps us to understand why secularism has been differently construed and understood in South Asia as interreligious understanding, whereas European Enlightenment secularism implies that religion has an unequal place in society negating any influential power. It is interesting that Spivak, in her *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, refers to the philosophical meaning of *darshan* in the following way:

> Much can be made of the fact that *darshana* – vision – is usually translated as ‘philosophy, […] the alternative usage, the felicity of constituting the transcendental object as object of the gaze, at once points to the difficulty of violating a cultural text by translation.62

Since Spivak remains firmly grounded in Western ontology, she reads *darshana* as the transcendental “object of the gaze.” By “object of the gaze”, Spivak misses the embodiment of what is meant by *darshan*. Spivak, whose theoretical perspective is grounded in Derridean deconstruction, is a good example of how theorists remain epistemologically and ontologically well within European poststructural categories. One recent commentator makes an excellent point when he says that:

> Spivak, Bhabha and Young continue to inhabit these forms of Western knowledge and in doing so ratify Western ontology. Why is there a continued unwillingness to reassess the different ontological knowledge available in Western traditions? If the first assessment of the non-West was made through the imperialist gaze of condescension (Macaulay’s Minute, of course, epitomizes this gesture), the re-assessment that has taken place in the latter half of the twentieth century continues to employ a prejudice that normalizes non-West difference into the horizon of Western expectation. Postcolonialism needs to disrupt the economy of

61 Eck, *Darshan*, 24-5.

Western discourse by taking up the option to discovery the alternative ethical formations of non-Western ontologies.63

Bhabha also seems indebted to a similar objective ontology. In a commentary after his dialogue with Sikander, amidst his pleas to move beyond exoticism, he still posits his orientation in the objectivist outsider position, a position indicative of European-centered thought:

What are the various threads of experience that inform Sikander’s practice? She speaks of the problems that arise when Western audiences have specific expectations of the work, because they see it as being ‘from India,’ thereby immediately exoticizing it. As she has stated, she finds it problematic to be a cultural spokesperson or an informant. For me, this raises an interesting question. Supposing we don’t want an exoticism, we don’t want an orientalism…. If we don’t want that, what kind of intercultural knowledge is necessary? Where must I stand to be able to actually pick up the great predicated subtleties of the work that are manifest? What must I know? Must I be a cosmopolitan? Must I be a nationalist? What must I be as a citizen spectator?”64

This quotation is indicative of Bhabha’s recent turn in asking questions instead of promulgating theories. However, reading this quote carefully, Bhabha still positions himself as an outside objective spectator. It is only Chakrabarty who seems to understand the underlying implications of darshan in Provincializing Europe. In his critical analysis of how Benedict Anderson and Rabindranath Tagore position the idea of the nation-state, Chakrabarty employs the interrelationship of darshan as a kind of performative divine sight that problematizes the imagined nation-state of Anderson. Chakrabarty asserts that darshan goes beyond historicism:


My point is that the moment of vision that effected a ‘cessation of the historical world’ included plural and heterogeneous ways of seeing that raise some questions about the analytical reach of the European category ‘imagination’.  

It seems that aside from the exception of Chakrabarty, South Asian scholars living in the United States seem to be so steeped in applying poststructuralism to Said’s postcolonial ideas, they have overlooked the serious challenge that such concepts as *darshan* pose in moving beyond historicist objectivism and its deeply intertwined secular legacies.

While *darshan* explains the concept of seeing the sacred, *rasa* is a similarly related concept that explains the embodied aesthetics of performance of music and dance. As Susan Schwartz describes it:

[*Rasa*] is used to describe the primary goals of performing arts in India in all the major literary, philosophical, and aesthetic texts, and provides the cornerstone of the oral traditions of transmission. It is also essential to the study and production of sculpture, architecture and painting.  

Literally, *rasa* means taste. The reference here of cuisine or food is apt, as *rasa* is literally something one digests and internalizes, at the same time one is nourished by it. These metaphors are all-powerful correlates for the power of art, the belief that art, whether performed or visual, is capable of being digested and therefore capable of nourishing the viewer. Dating back several thousand years to classical Sanskrit drama, the myths of Hindu, and even earlier Buddhist, cultures are told within stories based less on linear plot lines than on the subtle modulations of mood and feeling, and the ability of the dramas, and their related visual modes, to elicit a change in the audience. *Rasa* is a

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complex subject, and admittedly, application of aesthetic theory related to performance is problematic. However, there seems to be an ironical awareness in Sikander’s work that the interrelatedness of the aesthetic idea of rasa, with the related artforms of music, poetry, theater and manuscript pages is conceptually difficult in our present day culture. However, her images, in their multiple ironical references, reintroduce us to these possibilities – possibilities that reference the embodied and interrelatedness of ourselves with art and of art itself.

Of note here is that because of the cognitive categories introduced by the related concepts of both darshan and rasa, art and artistic phenomena are not about disconnected objective reality, but are embodied concepts. By extension then, art in all its manifestations is participatory and embodied activity. These ideas challenge purely objective thinking, and thus by extension, a postcolonial perspective that remains largely blind to indigenous challenges in its perceptions. In South Asia, material culture has been and continues to be, a force that transforms a complex society in which secularism is not understood to be religious so much as interreligious. In some senses, this is demonstrated by the phenomenon of the contemporary film industry in India which is largely centered in Mumbai, now inappropriately termed Bollywood. If Hollywood represents the homogenizing effect of American capitalism in global cultures, Bollywood allows a unique opportunity to study the contrasting map of globalization in popular culture. Although a study of Bollywood is outside the scope of this dissertation, nevertheless, a similar comparison may aptly be applied to this project in its contrast of the secularist, mono-focused orientation of postcolonial studies with the notion of the
world in flux where *darshan* and *rasa* still remain as living categories. The reality that these concepts still transcend religious and cultural divides is also illustrated by the example of the contemporary music of the Sufi *Qawali* singer, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, whose image appears in Sikander’s *Many Faces of Islam* (Fig. 7).

The above discussion elides the serious complications of politics, nationalism, religion, and Hindu and Islamic fundamentalisms in post-independence and contemporary South Asia because these realities have been taken up and are being debated extensively by other scholars. My purpose has been simply to demonstrate that aesthetic visual, performance and heterogeneous approaches to the sacred have been deeply intertwined in South Asia and continue to be deeply intertwined, thus giving rise to alternative conceptual and cognitive categories that differ significantly from Saidian secularism. I would also assert that it is not my project to argue that these categories explicitly undergird the art of Sikander, but instead to point out that art and religion are differently understood, and that this understanding is reflected within the significations of certain features and modalities of the images Sikander uses.

Turning now to a more formal approach to visual culture, as it is related to the above aesthetic categories, I would like to discuss the issue of South Asian multi-dimensional perspectives as they have been used in visual representation since pre-colonial times versus European artistic modernism. Artistic modernism, as it has been defined in its European context, increasingly deviates from realism as the dominant historical norm in representation. Outside of this European history, however, realism was
rarely the dominant mode of representation. Thus, modernist reactions against realism did not hold the same power of provocation as they did in Europe. As Shohat tells us:

[European] Modernism, in this sense, can be seen as in some ways a rather provincial, local rebellion. Vast regions of the world, and long periods of artistic history, have shown little allegiance to or even interest in realism.\(^{67}\)

South Asian contemporary artists continue to draw on the most traditional elements of their cultures, elements that are not so much pre-modern as para-modern, where the distinction of archaic/modernist or primitive/modernist are not pertinent in the sense that both share a refusal of the conventions of mimetic realism. The archaic is employed, paradoxically, to modernize a dissonant temporality beyond colonial histories. This deployment is being theorized by the artists themselves. One such example is the contemporary artist and theorist, Ghulam Mohammed Sheikh, who lives in Baroda, India.

In an interesting essay, Sheikh talks about the ability to represent artistically this reality of a world in both historical and material change:

The imperatives of the mobility of vision spring from the view of the world in flux rather than in a momentary stasis, in multiple rather than a singular focus. It embraces reality from all possible life perspectives in time rather than printing an optical moment upon a laterally constructed scene. Perception of such art involves greater mobility, hence the process of viewing necessitates an active participation rather than a cool contemplation.\(^{68}\)

Sheikh enlarges our ideas in visualizing the world in flux. There are in his ‘mobility of vision’, many possible viewpoints of our realities. Such a perception is multiple-perspectival and finds its correlate in the ability to perceive and adapt to multiple perspectives.\(^{68}\)

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conceptual reorientations. This type of multi-dimensionality encompasses the traditional as it does the contemporary. Visual synoptic or multi-dimensional storytelling are represented in both ancient Buddhist and Hindu visual images, which were in turn revised and adapted to the richly heterogeneous manuscript traditions under the patronage of both Mughal and Rajput rulers in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. It is this heterogeneous tradition that Sikander incorporates in all of her work.

What is important to point out for purposes of this discussion is that multi-dimensional perspective involves the individual viewer as located not as an objective receptor of a single perspective, but as a viewer whose location and process of viewing necessitates active participation and invokes again the ideas discussed above with regard to the aesthetic concepts of darshan and rasa. Such compositional multi dimensionality necessitates multiple cognitive possibilities, as Sheikh explains that the consequences of such multiple perspectives indicate that art has the capability to represent, and simultaneously transcend, “the barriers of its time.” Such a perspective allows us to live both in the past and the present, and interpret these times subjectively, thus not only avoiding the false illusion of objectivity, but bringing about the ability to reimagine and reconfigure the past towards the future.

It is within the trajectories of contemporary visual culture and indigenous cultural aesthetics, which have never delinked the cognitive categories associated with their

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70 G. M. Sheikh, “Mobility of Vision,” 52.
religious structures from their relation to the visual, that it is possible to situate visual culture as a new strategy of critical intervention. Explanation of these alternative aesthetic categories and formal elements serves to interrogate the sequencing of colonial/postcolonial time while juxtaposing it against the art historical linear sequencing, thus demonstrating the inadequacy of a purely linear historicity.

That Sikander sees herself as charting a new discourse, while simultaneously positioned within the heterogeneous aesthetic traditions of the subcontinent as discussed above, is demonstrated by an article she wrote for an art magazine in Mumbai, India, in 2000. Lengthy quotations from her essay demonstrate her allegiance to the multiple aesthetic traditions of the subcontinent, the position of the miniature tradition within the tradition/modernity debate, the re-appropriation of this tradition to address contemporary events:

Often, I am asked what tradition means to me as juxtaposed with the avant-garde in my work, whether there is a reinvention or a conscious need to blur boundaries. While I didn’t set out with the aim to subvert, let alone reinvent a tradition, those boundaries became blurred simply through my engagement with miniature painting, through the act of making them. I was aware from the start that I was indulging in anachronistic practice, labour intensive and limited in the scope of its impact. But I was interested in an art form whose present was of the past.71

Here is a reflection on both process and adaptation of tradition to the present. The two are linked. Just as in rasa it is the experience that is more important than the end product. The process of making these miniatures contemporary is also linked to the idea of experience which process makes visible and present. With the idea of process, there is also the connection of reality as ever-changing -- as in flux.

Initially, miniature painting seemed restrictive, yet I discovered it was not so. There is something in our part of the world, the subcontinent, which allows multiple aesthetics to coexist – a parallel could be drawn with New York City which operates on a postmodern platform though different from the pre-modern plurality of the subcontinent.72

Like Sheikh, Sikander also refers to the reality of multiple aesthetics so predominant in the South Asian subcontinent, as there are actually multiple aesthetics in operation everywhere, particularly in a postmodern age.

Sikander is very aware of the intertwining of music and manuscript painting particularly predominant in the *Ragmala*, the musical modes which were adopted by precolonial Pahari painters. During the colonial period, these modes were often seen as anachronistic. However, during the Indian Freedom Movement in the early twentieth century, these aesthetics were referenced particularly by the great Indian painter Abindranath Tagore. The problem for Tagore was that often his references were viewed as nostalgic. Sikander, in her re-appropriation of the manuscript tradition has managed to avoid nostalgia because of the simultaneous and multiple aesthetics which she draws from. Additionally, her re-appropriation of the *Ragmala* or musical modes becomes a comment on contemporary events. How she has transformed manuscript painting into critical discourse is explained best in her own words:

> Conceptually, schools like the Indian *Ragmala*, which gives representation to theories of music, was of great interest… In Kangra, the signature image of a woman in the foreground always awaiting her lover, or in anticipation of an event, was to be reinvented in my painting *Ready to Leave?* which reflected the psychic chaos of the contemporary world.

> The Western discourse of representation versus abstraction, especially in its relation to the miniature genre interested me. I deliberately began contrasting the abstract reserved nature of Muslim art with the expressionistic and sensual elements of Indian painting, destroying all borders between them through this

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intermingling. The paradox of identity, especially that of Pakistan and its complex relationship with India, became crucially important. By combining the Muslim-Hindu vocabulary, I found the intersection of the two provided a new visual language with which to confront problems of identity and who claims what. *I was and am driven to bring the miniature painting into the area of critical inquiry.* [Emphasis added.]

It seems appropriate to conclude this chapter with a quote from Shohat and Stam for a polycentric visual culture – an approach that is not just oriented visually, but one where the other senses participate within the cognitive structuring of multiple realities, problematizing the objective standpoint of the outsider. It is also a plea for a visual culture beyond the parameters of “art history,” capable of speaking to contemporary events in an active and critical way:

> The visual is also an integral part of a culture and of history, not in the scene of a static backdrop… but rather as a complexly activating principle. The visual is simply one point of entry, and a very strategic one at this historical moment, into a multidimensional world of intertextual dialogism.

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73 Sikander, “Charting a New Discourse,” 25.

Chapter Three: Media Politics, Patronage and Agency: Multi-faceted Incongruities of *The Many Faces of Islam*\(^7\)


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\(^7\) *The New York Times* has labeled this image *The Many Faces of Islam*. This image has also been labeled *The Resurgence of Islam* in *International Gallerie*, and also in the exhibition catalogue, David O’Brien and David Prochaska, *Beyond East and West: Seven Transnational Artists* (Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), 2004, 66-7.
2007, in Boulder, Colorado, where she was invited by the University of Colorado as a visiting artist, she revealed to me how she had been instructed by the editors of The New York Times to limit her illustration to figures from the Western Asian geographical region in the latter half of the twentieth century. Sikander, with collaborator Sameer Butt, following these dictates, included a disparate group of post World War II political leaders, the majority of them male, interspersed by a few little known cultural figures and women activists. Whether the irony of the myth of orientalist despots and Sikander’s inclusion of contemporary male political figures was evident to the editors of The New York Times is open to speculation. The inclusion of these figures as symbols for national identities, and also as collaborators in various ways with emergent forms of Islamist politics, draws our attention to the doubling of neo-orientalist discourse within the nation-state after colonialism, while also reminding us that national struggles for sovereignty are now increasingly framed in religious terms that predate these nation-states.

Sikander both alludes to and challenges stereotypes. One example of this is in the title itself which can be read ironically as both a caricature of the orientalist attitude as well as the failure of postcolonial theory to challenge such an attitude.\textsuperscript{76} Sikander challenges the postcolonial paradigm in many other ways. One of the most important is her contemporary manipulation of the ancient manuscript techniques of West and South Asia. One of the more obvious points about TMFI is that it goes beyond the nostalgic

\textsuperscript{76} Samuel Huntington, \textit{Clash of Civilizations} (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996). One of the more recent formulations of this fiction, and one of the most controversial in recent times, is Samuel Huntington’s \textit{Clash of Civilizations}, wherein he asserts that the conflict lines of the contemporary world run along the ancient borders separating hostile civilizations and their religions. The myth is, in actuality, a very old story, and art is routinely pulled into it. While one might laud the effort of The New York Times to confront the revival of such ideologies of cultural alterity, it will become evident that TMFI as an image is much more successful than the accompanying editorial text at undertaking this task of illumination.
and retroactive tone of colonial wrongdoings by using a pre-colonial Mughal-Persian artistic tradition as the background for contemporary political and cultural leaders. Sikander’s conflation of the traditional and contemporary is deeply ironic as tradition is used to question contemporary geopolitical realities. *TMFI* simultaneously references political frictions produced by transnational oil corporations, hints at the duplicitous collaborations of the United States within international politics, and points to the myth-making capabilities of twentieth century national leaders in their diverse uses of religion to buttress nationalist identities. Such witty dissonances as the faces of Zia al-Haq and Benazir Bhutto both wrapped in an American flag complicate the stereotypes associated with easy preconceptions of an Islamic “other.” Zia al-Haq was a well-known dictator who was responsible for hanging Benazir Bhutto’s father; Bhutto herself was adamantly opposed to the politics of Zia al-Haq, yet both rulers enjoyed the support of the United States. Indeed, the support of the United States was in part responsible for Benazir Bhutto’s recent return to Pakistan to challenge Musharraf.

The image reminds us also of the importance of a critique in the precise area where stereotypes are being propagated through representations, and there is no better platform upon which to stage a critique than visual images which are concerned with these very problems. The public is often led to accept that seeing is believing. However, the composition of *TMFI* refuses such a complacent transparency. The dissonances and contradictions within the image require us to ‘see’ multiple viewpoints. By understanding these multiple viewpoints, we are led to realize the ironies and contradictions of the contemporary myths associated with Islam and the West. The
image does not allow us to collapse Islam into fundamentalist myth, nor does it refuse an internal critique. Allowing internal critique, it points to multiple collusions with the United States, revealing hypocrisy on both sides, therefore challenging us, the viewer, to change our vision around the very terms of discussion of just what constitutes postcolonial identities. Sikander creates a visual rhetoric that makes it impossible to address any of these individuals through a politics of fixed national or religious identities. Rather, the centrality of the U.S. currency as the icon around which all the images revolve is a reminder of the motivating power of the structures of capitalism, and brings to mind Arif Dirlik’s indictment of postcolonialism:

Rather than a critique of earlier radicalisms from the inside as initially intended, postcolonialism in its unfolding has turned into a repudiation of the possibility of radical challenges to the existing system of social and political relations. Its preoccupation with local encounters and the politics of identity rules out a thoroughgoing critique of the structures of capitalism, or of other structurally shaped modes of exploitation and oppression, while also legitimizing arguments against collective identities that are necessary to struggle against domination and hegemony.  

The New York Times text which accompanies Sikander’s image admits the paradoxes of Islam, but does not reveal whether the many complicities of U.S. political maneuvering, and the other ironical references throughout the image, were understood by the editors of one of the most prestigious newspapers in the United States. The text reads as follows:

Based on the form of a Persian miniature, this work by Sikander, a Pakistani artist who now lives in the United States, shows some of the paradoxes that attend Islam today. As Sikander and her collaborator, Sameer Butt, observe, despite political and cultural differences, Islam is one faith the world over. Islam, the law that the prophet Mohammed revealed in the seventh century, governs all aspects of

life and, unlike Christianity, does not admit any dichotomy between church and state, between sacred and secular. Islam overrides nationality; Western notions of political left and right do not apply. Difficulties, of course, arise from interpretations and behavior. The Judeo-Christian world today has only a partial and deeply distorted view of Islam. For one thing, we tend to forget the vast contributions made by Islam in the Middle Ages—the philosophical writings of Averroes and Avicenna, advances in astronomy and mathematics, the preservation of ancient Greek manuscripts. For another, we overlook the religion’s contemporary strains of thought and practice, a point Sikander makes by constructing a galaxy of Islamic leaders. Packed into her picture are mystics like the Pakistani qawwali singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, politicians like Henan Ashrawi, the Christian Palestinian activist, and religious leaders like Ayatollah Khomeini. The artist included Menachem Begin to signify what she regards as Israel’s role in uniting Muslims against a common foe. Non-Muslims often think that a jihad is meant to be carried out by force of arms, but many of the faithful believe, rather, that it consists of following the path of righteousness and setting a good example. Indeed, it is this side of Islam, not the extremism so prominent in recent years, that Sikander’s visualization suggests will prevail.  

From the viewpoint of its patron, the image is meant merely as an illustration that is intended to deflect cultural misunderstandings with the ultimate message that despite cultural differences, Islam will prevail as one faith the world over. Contrary to its title, however, this image is a far cry from the easy portrayal of Islam’s unity, as it conjures up the multiple complexities and complicities of both East and West under the rubric of nation-state status, and their deployment and manipulation of Islam amidst U.S./Middle Eastern politics. Although The New York Times references some of the disparate figures throughout the image, the text leaves out the implicit ironical references to complicity and collaboration between the U.S. and Middle Eastern nation-states. And it may be an understatement to say that this explanation appears naïve in its assertions of a utopian vision of a unified Islam as the title of the image, The Many Faces of Islam, asserts.

78 The New York Times, 19 September 1999, Sunday Magazine, 126-9. Sikander’s collaborator, Sameer Butt is a film maker whose credits include the film “Becoming Muslim: Submitting to Allah in America.” He has also been a commentator and collaborator on Comedy Central’s “The Daily Show.”
Indeed, part of the irony of this image is an explicit awareness and critique of what Edward Said has termed the resilience of Islam as ‘other’ in the Western imagination, “Islam, the very epitome of an outsider against which the whole of European civilization from the Middle Ages on was founded.”

Confronting such an image can be a disorienting experience to those who are not well aware of the multiplicity of histories, politics, and aesthetic systems that make up such an image. For most people living in the United States, knowledge of and attitudes toward Islam and the Muslim world have been and still are shaped by political policies that are imaged by contemporary stereotypes, particularly within the global media -- stereotypes which are just as relevant today as when Said wrote *Orientalism* in 1978 and *Covering Islam* in 1981. In the latter book, Said observes:

> For the general public in America and Europe today, Islam is ‘news’ of a particularly unpleasant sort. The media, the government, geopolitical strategists, and – although they are marginal to the culture at large – the academic experts on Islam are all in concert: Islam is a threat to western civilization. Now this is by no means the same as saying that only derogatory or racist caricatures of Islam are to be found in the West… What I am saying is that negative images of Islam are very much more prevalent than any others, and that such images correspond not with what Islam ‘is’… but to what prominent sectors of a particular society take it to be: Islam and the West: A Clash of Civilizations? Those sectors have the power and the will to propagate that particular image of Islam, and this image therefore becomes more prevalent, more present than all others.

One is struck by the continued truth of this quotation from almost thirty years ago. Yet, we live in a time of increasing realization of the bankruptcy of the triumphalism of the Western project, and a growing awareness of the need to address shared problems and predicaments in global contexts. Whereas it is irrefutable that Said convincingly

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establishes that Islam has been constructed as an object of Orientalist discourse, what is problematic is his religious-secularist distinction. There is an implicit understanding throughout *Orientalism*, and also throughout his later works, that religion is East and secularism is West. Said deploys this distinction to buttress his idea that Eastern religious consciousness is inferior, while Western secularism is enlightened and superior. Never does Said seriously address this problematic dichotomy of religion and secularism, continually arguing that only a critical secularism will be able to get us beyond both national and religious constructions to counteract what has now turned into a global war on terrorism. Said’s secular position only exacerbates the role of religion and the possibilities of their erupting into violence.

To demonstrate the multi-layered complexity of Sikander’s images as well as their ability to address issues beyond a secular/religious dichotomy, this chapter will provide contextual information, not only in the form of brief biographical background of the figures from *TMFI*, but much needed aesthetic, stylistic, and art historical background regarding the manuscript painting tradition. Vital biographical information on Sikander will also be woven into the complex story of the fraught nature of the patronage of this image amidst contemporary global politics. All in all, this chapter is an effort to provide multi-faceted contextual layers, and in this way is perhaps analogous to the method Sikander employs in creating a contemporary dialogue within the layers of her use of the ancient manuscript tradition.
The Figures in The Many Faces of Islam

All of the figures in *TMFI*, in a variety of ways, illustrate the multiple conundrums and tensions that result when contemporary politics and representative political leaders are conflated with religious identity. Some of these tensions originate, in part, from the processes of nation-building and its close association with the idea of secularism that has had the effect of politicizing religion. Thus, though marginalized, religion has become the focus for resisting authoritarian forms of secularism (although this form of resistance has been addressed very little). There are, however, many instances where the more secularism became tied to notions of colonial ideology, the more it was rejected in favor of indigenous worldviews that were, for the most part, tied to Islam. The decline of secularism in these states that have a colonial history can be directly tied to the decline of colonialism. Therefore, Islam can be tied to newly emerging forms of cultural resistance that Said’s critical secularism is not equipped to address.

The type of cultural resistance I am talking about is typified by the centrality of the legendary Pakistani *qawwali* singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan who presides over and unites the entire image of *TMFI*. *Qawwali* is an ancient musical form that can be traced to eighth century Persia where it was linked with the Sufi tradition of Islam. It is a type of devotional music wherein one reaches a mystical state of union with Allah, or the divine, from listening to or singing. It was made famous within the Indian subcontinent by another legendary figure, Amir Khusrau, who in the late thirteenth century used this form of music to create an approach to synthesis and pluralism in the Hindu-Muslim culture of the subcontinent. Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan has been perceived as a modern-day
Khusrau, as he has brought this ancient Sufi form of music to international recognition. Although Khan died in 1997 the internationalism of his music is still legendary.\textsuperscript{81}

In *TMFI*, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan’s adaptation of the music of *qawwali* is a direct allusion of the power to Islamic Sufi cultural movements to create unity both in the past and the present. Historically, it is through music that dialogue between Hindus and Muslims has been possible. In the forms of dance and music, Sufi ideas found common ground with Hindu worshippers in the Mughal period. This is demonstrated by this quote from Susan Schwartz’s recent monograph:

Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam, was able to bridge some of the gap between the two religions by emphasizing ecstatic experience, and the role of dance and music in this aspect of religion is well documented. Together with bhakti forms of devotionalism that developed in India, the mystical strains of Islam and those of Hinduism found common ground. The result of this synthesis was a flowering of graphic, poetic, and performing arts characteristic of the Moghul period, particularly during the reign of Akbar in the sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{82}

The prominent positioning of this legendary singer at the top and center of the double manuscript page is meant to represent the power of Sufism to unite disparate elements. This positioning is also a direct challenge to the violence that has been perpetrated by the national leaders who flank him on the right and left. A message overlaps with his figure that bears the inscription “Unity Faith Discipline.” The placement of the message is ambiguous, perhaps purposefully, in that it also seems to issue from the figure of Ali Jinnah pictured in the upper right, whose appearance recalls

\textsuperscript{81} Dimitri Ehrlich, *Inside the Music: Conversations with Contemporary Musicians About Spirituality, Creativity, and Consciousness* (Boston: Shambala, 1997).

the painful realities of the partition of India and Pakistan, one of the after-effects of the British colonial regime on the Indian subcontinent.\textsuperscript{83}

As the first Governor-General of Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, a British trained barrister, left Mahatma Gandhi’s Indian National Congress partially because he believed that Gandhi’s use of Hindu symbolism would encourage religious zealotry in politics. Paradoxically, it was Jinnah’s approach to a secular Islam that encouraged the religious zealotry in Pakistan.\textsuperscript{84} Jinnah remained a firm believer in secularism, considering Islam to be not a religious identity, but a national, cultural identity. Prior to independence in 1947, he rose to prominence as a strong advocate for Hindu-Muslim unity, yet remained a proponent of a separate Muslim state. One recent historian, Ayesha Jalal, describes the evolution of Ali Jinnah’s thought process in this way:

More cosmopolitan than communitarian in outlook, Jinnah’s career exemplifies the constant reconfiguring of the balance between the individual and the community in Islam. Starting off on the outer margins of the Muslim community, Jinnah negotiated his space in all-India politics by becoming the ‘ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity’ and then reconstituting himself as the foremost individual protagonist of the Muslim League’s ‘two-nation’ theory.\textsuperscript{85}

It is well known that the subsequent partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan resulted in the largest and most violent mass migration and relocation of peoples in history as both states set about renegotiating their identity according to the dominant

\textsuperscript{83} For a recent history and critical analysis of Partition politics, see Gyanendra Pandey, \textit{Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India} (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

\textsuperscript{84} Ira M. Lapidus, \textit{A History of Islamic Societies}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 645.

idioms of separate nation-states. The primary victims of violence were women, whether Sikh, Hindu or Muslim. As Jalal further states:

The individual, far less woman as individual, formed no part of a nationalist political agenda, whether of the League, Alkalis or the Congress. Gender eroded the barriers that religion had been forced to create. Whatever women may have achieved by aligning their interests with nationalist organizations of their communities, it was more as abstractions appended to the religious community seeking sovereign statehood than as substantive subjects constituting the nation.  

Perhaps this is the reason one of the weapons held by the many-armed, and veiled Goddess, part Hindu, part Muslim, is aimed directly at Jinnah’s mouth. The icon seems to mirror Jalal’s comment, “The scars of partition have proven to be deeper than the healing touch of independence from colonial rule.” While speaking to the tragedies of partition, which primarily affected women, Sikander’s veiled Hindu goddess, reminiscent of a powerful Durga image, is emblematic of the ability women possess to overcome these tragedies. The icon of the veiled Goddess works on three levels that may be categorized as geopolitical, cultural/religious, and biological: (1) the figure draws on traditions that collapse the space and time of postcolonial geo-political boundaries; (2) on a cultural and religious level, it is an intervention into the politics of the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, as it merges Hindu and Muslim; (3) biologically, the icon collapses both religious and geopolitical boundaries within her own body as she carries her roots within herself. It is a motif that reflects the artist’s profound desire to erase boundaries, link differences, and merge adversaries.

86 Ayesha Jalal, Self and Sovereignty, 566.

Historically, the female figure in art has a much different understanding in South Asia than in Europe. Art historian Vidya Dehejia has made the case that in the South Asian context, as far back as the pre-Christian era and through the medieval era, the image of woman was auspicious and creative, and that postmodern and postcolonial criticism of the orientalist and male gaze and the passive female figure do not translate well within both traditional and contemporary South Asian visual cultures.  

Scholars of visual culture such as Vidya Dehejia bring to our awareness alternative histories that exceed postcolonial and Western feminist theoretical understandings.

In the upper-right-hand corner, the image -- a one-hundred dollar bill in U.S. currency -- is positioned as one of the key players. The paradoxical position of women as metaphors of liberation movements is evident in the juxtaposition and centrality of the two female figures holding the currency positioned as the center of each facing page. The reverse imaged side of U.S. currency, constructed to resemble a wet textile, is held by two women. Lady Liberty, dressed in red, simultaneously takes on Muslim and Hindu attributes, and the motto “In God We Trust” is juxtaposed with the Koranic refrain, “Then which of your Lord’s blessings will you deny?” in the original Arabic. On the right, a woman wearing a traditional burqa holds a sign reading “Who’s veiled anyway?” which, in conjunction with other imagery in the painting, suggests that concealed motives lie behind the United States cosmopolitanism. In our contemporary world, images of women are part of an ideological terrain where broader notions of cultural authenticity and integrity are debated, and where women’s appropriate place and conduct may be

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made to serve as boundary markers. In the majority of nation-state ideologies, both progressives and traditionalists invoke “Islam” as the sole paradigm within which issues pertaining to the position of women may be debated through the filters that are simultaneously iconographic, religious, and aesthetic. In contrast to this instrumental usage, the female body is a motif that Sikander uses to critique the politics of power of nation-states in order to confront and disrupt the nationalist and religious uses of the female body.

On a diagonal to the dollar bill in the upper right hand corner is a Pegasus – a hybrid animal in the form of a flying horse, and also the logo for the Exxon Mobile Oil Company. This diagonal composition implies a connection between money, U.S. interests and oil, and the collaboration of Saudi Arabia. It is no accident that King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, who ruled from 1964 to 1975, is pictured in a direct diagonal to the dollar bill and nearly directly below the Exxon Mobile Oil logo, as he represents a long line of Saudi rulers and their collaboration with United States interests.

Below the dollar bill on the upper right appears Muhammad Zia ul-Haq, who usurped power from democratically elected Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and was the strongman president of Pakistan from 1977 until 1988 when he was mysteriously killed in a plane crash. Over half of his face is covered with the United States flag symbolizing the Reagan administration’s significant financial support of Zia ul-Haq’s policy for the “Islamization” of Pakistan. According to the Canadian feminist scholar Shahnaz Khan:

Zia attributed many of Pakistan’s social and political problems to an “un-Islamic way of life,” identifying a lack of individual and societal morals as responsible for
social woes. The solution to these ills, Zia believed, was a program of Islamization, the Nizam-e-Mustapha (governance inspired by the Prophet). Zia’s Islamization, Aijaz Ahmad notes, included a form of collective purification through the removal of impure and undesirable elements from society, either by death or imprisonment. Beginning in 1979, the brutal fist of the Pakistan army enforced a series of laws and ordinances to ensure this purification.89

Under Zia ul-Haq, the role of women became a significant issue as the Zina ordinance was reinstated. Citing Shahnaz Khan, “Zina means illicit sex, adultery and fornication. The Zina Ordinance comes out of a social, historical, and political process that connects religion to nation building.”90

What is not well known is that women activists and women’s movements in both Pakistan and Afghanistan have been active for decades and have long been speaking out against the effects of patriarchal religious attitudes and their complicated connections to nation-building and global forms of imperialism. However, these movements have received little attention in the American media. One example is the Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan, or RAWA, a political and social organization of Afghan women active since 1977. On September 14, 2001, they circulated a statement that pointed out the problematic policies of the United States government. This excerpt of an analysis issued by RAWA states this clearly:

In this context the international community must note the resentment generated by the insensitive and unjust policies of the United States, particularly in their unconditional support to the aggressive policies of Israel towards the people of

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Palestine and in their sustained campaign against the people of Iraq. It should be remembered that much of the terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan stems from international interventions in the region including by the United States for its own political ends in which Osama bin Laden himself was originally an ally of the U.S.  

This quote demonstrates a sophisticated awareness on the part of these Afghan women from of the global games of collaboration and politics enacted by political rulers both in Pakistan and the United States. From their perspective, a postcolonial perception, while valuable for historically situating some of these global political games, is theoretically inadequate to address the fact that “oppressions operate globally.”

The other issue at stake here, and one that Shahnaz Khan has written about extensively, is how women’s oppression in the Third World is typified by the example of the Zina ordinances. Stories of the ‘oppressed Muslim woman’ have been used to sensationalize perceptions about the Third World woman. Khan explains this double bind further in connection with her positionality as a scholar working in Canada:

I have found that speaking about the injustices women suffer is a fairly straightforward matter in Pakistan, because many of the activists and jurists I have met are openly against the laws. However, my criticism of the zina laws places me in a theoretical and political quandary in Canada. My work risks not only reproducing the Third World woman as a spectacle but also has the potential to reinforce the Islam-bashing so popular after September 11. Pakistani women, controlled by poverty and their families, may be controlled again by the orientalist gaze and co-opted into mystifying the oppression women in the West face. Set against the backdrop of the woman jailed for fornication, the Western woman may appear free and liberated. Such dichotomous views of East and West, however, shake feminist solidarity.

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92 Shahnaz Khan, “Reconfiguring the Native Informant: Positionality in the Global Age,” 2033.

There is a direct relationship here with the image of Zia ul-Haq’s face half-covered with an American flag, and the politics of representation as they apply to women. The oppressive rule of Zia ul-Haq has a direct connection with Sikander’s adaptation and interrogation of miniature painting in the late 1980s in Pakistan at the National College of Art in Lahore. In an interview with Ian Berry she describes her reasons for taking up miniature painting:

I elected to work in the miniature format in 1988 during my second semester of foundation year at school. The choice itself was an act of defiance. At that time, there was no interest in the miniature painting department – in fact it was viewed with suspicion. I was attracted to the inherent challenges of miniature painting. My interest was and still is to create a dialogue with a traditional form – how to use tradition while engaging in a transformative task. Over the years I have continued to try to understand miniature painting’s historical significance and its contemporary relevance. I remain curious about its varied stylizations, and how illustrative it can be. Miniature even in its most traditional aspect is extremely multi-dimensional.  

Throughout her work in the 1990s, she experimented with the “semiotic nature of various symbols that could question stereotypes of certain feminine representations.” In her work in the nineties, women appear simultaneously as agents of change and hybrid representations that convolute an understanding of traditional stereotypes, motifs which collaborate well with the work Shahnaz Khan and her attention to the differing modes of transnational reception and interpretation.

Directly below the image of Zia is Benazir Bhutto, the daughter of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto who was deposed by Zia Ul-Haq in 1977 and later hanged. She was twice-elected

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95 Ian Berry, “Nemesis,” 8.
Prime Minister of Pakistan, from 1988-1990, and again from 1993-1996. She has the
distinction of being the first female Prime Minister in the post-colonial Muslim World.
To begin to appreciate why she appears above a banner inscribed with “Daughter of the
East?” and wears a *dupatta* formed from the American flag, it helps to know that she
penned an autobiography entitled *Daughter of the East* (also known as *Daughter of
Destiny* in the American edition) despite her education in elite, English-speaking schools
including Harvard and Oxford.96

Notwithstanding promises to improve social conditions for women and to repeal
the *Zina* ordinances, during her terms of power, conditions did not improve substantially.
Esposito points out that Benazir Bhutto did not hesitate to use both regional and global
fundamentalist threats “to appeal for greater understanding and aid from the West,” while
simultaneously justifying internal and “indiscriminate repression of Islamists,” when it
threatened her claims to power.97 In this, she was not alone, as Sadat in Egypt, Begin in
Israel, and Saddam Hussein in Iraq employed similar double-edged strategies. The
religious tensions brought about by the Rushdie affair in the late 1980s provided an
excuse and outlet for religious outrage against the policies of Benazir Bhutto. News of
her recent return to Pakistan as well as of her tragic assassination is a continuation of
these double-edged strategies. Nevertheless, her assassination is tragic and has again
given rise to violent tensions.

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96 Benazir Bhutto, *Daughter of Destiny* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989). In the Pakistani and
British editions, the title is *Daughter of the East*.

223.
Pictured in the bottom right, demonstrating that Islamic fundamentalism is not confined to Middle Eastern and South Asian countries, is the image of Malcolm X with the message which reads:

So that in Islam…We believe that there is one God, we believe that all of the prophets who came on this earth taught the same religion…I am a Muslim. …and it does say in the Holy Koran that this religion will overcome all religions. Malcolm X.

While it is true that the use that religion plays has been underestimated in its role as a vehicle and impetus for social reform, the quote of Malcolm X, who is a complicated figure within the history of the Civil Rights Movement, demonstrates that the dangers of fundamentalist thinking exist within the borders of the United States. Although it is primarily Islam that is accused of fundamentalism, the United States is as religiously fundamentalist as any country in the world.

The politics and histories of the national leaders represented on the upper-left-hand of the image are extremely complex and contentious in light of contemporary politics. The purpose of the discussion below will be to point to the contradictions, ambiguities and paradoxes in order to bring to light that, in reality, the image acts as a mirror to point out mutual reciprocities of culpability. All of the represented figures in the upper-left portion of the image come from the geographical region of West Asia, or, to use the popular and problematic term, ‘the Middle East.’ Sikander’s depiction of these particular figures is highly selective. They are primarily from countries which have majority Islamic populations. All of these figures have used Islam, to various extents, to engender support for their various repressive policies. Although bound by the parameters of patronage, the selection of these figures is ironic in that their legacies involve
collaboration and participation with United States political policies. At the time of the creation of this image, the only living individual of the four that are represented was Saddam Hussein, who was executed by the United States government in December, 2006. Ironically, his ruling policies were arguably the most secular of all the national leaders depicted.

Menachem Begin, who appears at the top of the image and just to the left of center, was the Prime Minister of Israel from 1977 to 1983. Originally from Poland where his parents were victims of the Holocaust, he immigrated to Jerusalem in 1942. His image conjures several competing and ambivalent histories: his participation in the massacre of Palestinian citizens at Deir Yassein in 1948; Israel’s military occupation of Palestine including his own nationalist agenda in enlarging Jewish settlements; his participation in the Camp David Accords and his signing of the Israeli-Egypt Peace Treaty with Anwar Sadat, an event which earned him and Sadat the Nobel Peace Prize in 1978. This Treaty and the subsequent awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize created immense dissonance as it was perceived within the Middle East as collaborating against the Palestinian cause in supporting U.S. support for Israel. It also confirmed Sadat’s support of Western ideas and practices, and probably resulted in his assassination by a member of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad organization in 1981.

The secular, Western policies of Sadat, whose face appears next to Begin’s in the upper left hand corner of the image, were directly responsible for the rise of such militant groups. These secular Westernized policies did not prevent Sadat from cracking down on intellectuals and activists in early 1981. One of them was Dr. Nawal El Saadawi, the
esteemed author whose head appears balanced in a scale with Salman Rushdie in the bottom right of the image.\textsuperscript{98} El Saadawi, through her novels and other writings, helped expose Sadat’s use and abuse of Islam to provoke public support for his repressive policies against intellectuals like herself. Sikander cleverly positions these two important writers on a scale, perhaps to balance the unequal attentions that both have received. Salman Rushdie has been written about extensively, primarily because of the \textit{fatwa} issued against him by the Ayatolleh Khomeini. In contrast, El Saadawi, although well known in Egypt and other parts of West Asia, is not a writer who is familiar within the United States.

The face of Sadam Hussein, appearing just below Anwar Sadat, was President of Iraq from 1979 to 2003. Along with his invasion of Iran in 1980 resulting in the ten-year Iran-Iraq War, Iraq was also invaded by the United States in the Gulf War of 1990. Islamic scholar John Esposito notes that:

If Saddam Hussein had his way, Iraq would have emerged from the Gulf War as the defender of Islam against Western imperialism. However, the war again undermined stereotypical images of monolithic Arab and Muslim worlds gripped by Pan-Arabism or Pan-Islam. The Gulf crisis of 1990-91 divided the Arab and indeed Muslim worlds.\textsuperscript{99}

In the case of all three of these national leaders (Begin, Sadat, and Hussein) the divisions within these countries have been exacerbated by divisive policies of the United States. This is demonstrated by the guns pointing back and forth between Lady Liberty and the Ayatollah Khomeini which are, as one commentator explains, “a sly reminder of


\textsuperscript{99} John Esposito, \textit{The Islamic Threat}, 252.
the Iran-Contra affair, in which the Reagan administration secretly sold arms to Iran and used the proceeds illegally to support right-wing guerillas in Nicaragua.”

Certainly, this is one example of mutual hypocrisy, but this comment also betrays not only a deep Western unawareness of the reality of Middle Eastern political events, but also the complicity of the United States within such politics. As the guns point back and forth, so do political strategies with their mutual hypocrisies, generating internal outrage within Middle Eastern countries at such double-edged policies. Two other figures who have strong ties to the United States are King Faisal of Saudi Arabia from 1964 to 1975 and King Hussein of Jordan who ruled from 1952 until 1999. Faisal of Saudi Arabia was a promoter of a strong Islamist state which the image demonstrates by including the quote: “A constitution? What for? The Koran is the oldest and most efficient constitution in the world.” The other figure is that of King Hussein who advocated an approach that was more Western and ostensibly secular.

In counterpoint to the dominance of male political agendas, yet little known in the Western world, are the images of two women who are important advocates for human rights: Hanan Ashrawi from Palestine and Asma Jahangir from Pakistan. The inscription between them on the image reads: “Women of their time, the human rights activists, Hanan Ashrawi and Asma Jahangir.”

Hanan Ashrawi, whose father was one of the founders of the Palestinian Liberation Army, earned her doctorate in English literature from an American University. While a professor and Dean of the College of Arts at Birzeit University, the oldest university in

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Palestine, she became actively involved in the cause of Palestinian justice. After the Gulf War of 1991, the Americans convinced the Israelis to sit down with the Jordanian-Palestinian delegation, but the Israelis refused the presence of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, known as the PLO. Despite the absence of the PLO at these talks, they managed nevertheless to steal the limelight from their spokesperson, Hanan Ashrawi. As woman and spokesperson, Ashrawi’s intention was to transform the way the Americans perceived the Palestinian people. Her role as spokesperson in this process was waged within the context of the group of intellectual activists known as the ‘people’s delegation,’ of whom Ashrawi was one, and the PLO in Tunis with its spokesman, Yasser Arafat. Their negotiation with Washington, the Oslo Agreement, and the later unsatisfactory peace proposal of 1994 are recounted through Ashrawi’s autobiography *This Side of Peace*. Her rejection by the revolutionary government of the PLO whom she assisted during the peace process as well as subsequent efforts at peaceful dialogue are documented in a video-recording made in 1995, entitled “Hanan Ashrawi: Woman of Her Time.” It is interesting to note that Ashrawi was a close friend of Edward Said during his lifetime. Said himself describes the ‘new language’ of the Palestinians as coming from Ashrawi’s diplomatic efforts. Ashrawi believed strongly in the power of words to humanize and give a voice to those who might be able to speak:

I was spokesperson, and I vowed to speak in my people’s voice, to put on the mantle of their visibility, and to unfurl before the eyes of the world images of both their melancholy and joy. I would capture their spirit in language and set it free before witnesses.  

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Unfortunately, this humanistic voice gradually disappeared as the peace process progressed and was taken over by the more bureaucratically-minded PLO politicians led by Arafat. Regarding Arafat’s speech on the White House lawn on the historic signing of the peace proposal with Rabin in 1994, Ashrawi reflected that:

Rather than touching our hearts and minds as an act of grace and healing, it rebounded like impersonal sound waves etching a vague image of an unidentifiable object. We could not recognize ourselves in it.\(^{102}\)

After this, she turned down the official post offered by Arafat and joined other women in creating an Independent Commission for Human Rights. She remained loyal to, yet critical of, Arafat. Her efforts, according to her autobiography, were for Palestinians to be the master of their own narrative, and she continues to strive to humanize their situation. As is well known, the possibility of Palestine’s sovereignty is still ongoing. In 1998, Ashrawi founded MIFTAH -- the Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy, an initiative which works towards respect for human rights, democracy and peace. MIFTAH reflects Ashrawi’s wish to end the Israeli occupation on humanitarian, rather than historical or ideological, grounds. She remains firmly committed to clearly articulating the Palestinian cause in the face of Israel’s unjust occupation which still receives the full support of the United States, and she holds that a willful ignoring of injustices and the subsequent incorporation of these injustices into peace processes lay the groundwork for future conflict. The representation of her face in the image represents a strong irony as well as an alternative voice to the perceived knowledge of Israeli-Palestinian politics. As a woman, she strove to put a human face on the Palestinian struggle, and still continues to do so, while the Nobel Peace Prize received

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\(^{102}\) Ashrawi, *This Side of Peace*, 273.
in 1979 by Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat more than twenty years previously, resulted in more conflict, the very result that Ashrawi sought so hard to redress.

Similarly, Pakistani lawyer and human rights activist, Asma Jahangir, has a reputation of defending the rights of women, religious minorities, and children in Pakistan. She has carried on these activities despite continuous threats to her personal safety. She has relentlessly defended victims of rape, women seeking divorce from abusive husbands, and people accused of blasphemy. Her continuous criticism of Pakistani politics has made her one of the country’s more controversial figures. She has served as the chairperson of the Pakistan Human Rights Commission, and in 1998, was appointed Special Rapporteur of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. Along with her criticism of Pakistani politics, she is also critical of the foreign policies of the United States and the disconnect in its deployment of ‘human rights’ that is clearly at odds with its declarations of war in the Persian Gulf and its support of Israel. She discusses how in Pakistan, the perception on the part of both liberals and those who espouse an Islamist viewpoint, is that the United States selectively uses human rights (or their violations) as a mere cover for its prejudice against predominantly Muslim countries:

‘Human rights’ is said to be a Western concept that the West is using in a calculated manner to erode indigenous values. As a result of these views, liberal movements in the developing world, particularly in Muslim countries, have become isolated. They support the West in its promotion of the universality of human rights but cannot justify many of the West’s actions taken under the banner of human rights. … both secular and Islamist groups cannot help but share suspicion of deep-seated Western prejudices against Islam. Thus, even while opposing rigid
Islamists, the liberals cannot approve of the often-violent methods the West is using to quell them.\textsuperscript{103}

That it is the United States’ government policies which have helped foster the fundamentalist policies of Islamist groups, simultaneously marginalizing those voices and entities, not only in Pakistan, but everywhere, that challenge the repressive use of Islam in the service of nationalism is a well known reality for those living outside of the United States. This critical perspective is reiterated by the women activists, Hanan Ashrawi and Asma Jahangir. They are not postcolonial theorists but engaged activists who are both involved in institution-building within their respective nation-states. Both have grappled with negotiating the difficulties of what one does when the states are locked in hostility but yet it is evident that the people are willing to engage in dialogue. Both are familiar with what happens when government support emboldens and empowers certain ideologically and religiously motivated movements. Jahangir has stated that public opinion is very important, that the question is not one that is between India’s secularism and Pakistan’s theocracy. These dichotomies cannot be allowed to co-opt public opinion, for the “direction has to be in the practice, rather than the oratory of it.”\textsuperscript{104} Jahangir further notes the silence on the part of political leaders such as Sonia Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto on these important issues. Thus, just because political leaders are women does not guarantee alternative directions. Hanan Ashrawi and Asma Jahangir demonstrate what happens when women cease being the objects of political discourse and become

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political actors. It is important to point out that there may be no better example of the problems of mistranslation grounded in misunderstandings within the quagmire of contemporary politics than these two women. The representation of these two women also goes right to the problematic nature of images, as they are fashioned in state-sponsored propaganda and the mass media, the public has often been lead to accept that ‘seeing is believing.’ Simultaneously, this is often why images of women are used to re-inscribe the revolutionary zeal of nationalist movements. Images such as Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People* or even the Statue of Liberty feature women carrying a flag or other iconographical devices. The bodies of women then become allegories for national unity. Sikander has used images of women not to act as metaphorical devices for the idea of nation, but to bring attention to its fissures. She also addresses the particular facets within her motifs of women that allow distortions to be so readily absorbed, resisting the tyranny of binary categories. The phenomenon of Sikander’s various motifs of women, and their ambivalence to postcolonial categories which have now become religious, and their simultaneous resistance of those categories through other signs they carry, is one of the more powerful tools that Sikander has evolved as she has transformed the discipline of miniature painting.

The juxtapositioning of the heads of Nawal El Saadawi and Salman Rushdie, each of whose heads is balanced in this scale, is nothing short of inspired genius. The scale, associated with justice is positioned in a diagonal to another allegorical figure of a woman who appears in the central position on the left side of the page, and bears some resemblance to the Statue of Liberty as one arm lifts a lighted torch. The other two arms
of the figure evoke the image of a Hindu goddess, and the face is half-veiled, simultaneously evoking a Muslim identity, and the idea of liberty linked with the United States.

Nawal El Saadawi and Salman Rushdie are writers from Egypt and India respectively, who have each experienced severe recrimination from the heads of nation-states. Rushdie was issued a fatwa on February 14, 1989, by the Ayatollah Khomeini, and El Saadawi was imprisoned by Anwar Sadat. In their novels, both writers have challenged authoritarian powers, whether political or religious, and both have reversed the hierarchical differences between the oppressor and the oppressed. Where Rushdie’s novels can be read and are actually illuminated through the lens of postcolonial theory, El Saadawi’s novels question the viability and efficacy of much postcolonial discourse through the lens of complex third-world feminism that is targeted simultaneously at the dangers of nationalism and religious fundamentalism.

Both writers, however, have wildly contesting receptions in the global marketplace. While Salman Rushdie is notoriously well-known within Western and global metropolitan centers, El Saadawi is no less notorious, but less well-known, throughout the Western world. She is, however, extremely popular throughout countries in West and Central Asia. The politics of reception within the global marketplace of both of these writers demonstrates the slippery nature of the politics of representation and its collaboration with certain politics of knowledge. The varieties of ways these authors have been interpreted within various contexts is neither neutral nor arbitrary, but predicated on a politics of representation within conflicted and contested transnational
terrains. The way they signify is dependent on location, as well as ideological agendas, and has to do with signifying possibilities of signs in circulating transnational contexts. All of this echoes the Saidian perspective, and as Aamir Mufti points out, the politics of these circulating signs forces a reexamination of current critical theory in terms of the confusions of representation and the social and cultural goals for which it was originally mobilized. Both of these writers question institutional religious and state authority. However, El Saadawi has advocated a proactive stance of creative dissonance, while Rushdie’s writings adhere to the more reactive postcolonial exilic perspective.

No better example of the relevance of political context to the reading of cultural texts exists than the well known, and well publicized case of Salman Rushdie, who with his novel, *Satanic Verses*, earned the *fatwa* pronounced and issued by the Ayatollah Khomeini on February 14, 1989. No other cultural artifact in the late twentieth century has been the subject of so much controversy as the misunderstandings provoked by this novel. It is impossible to read *The Satanic Verses*, or any of Rushdie’s novels, as if the 1989 *fatwa* and the political debates surrounding it had not happened. It is also important to realize that the artistic elements of the novel cannot be separated from its politics. Given the context of the Iranian Revolution and the challenge this posed to global power relations, the Rushdie affair was the site through which an illustration of Islam’s incompatibility with Western liberalism could be read, again demonstrating that

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Rushdie’s novels are incapable of illuminating realities beyond a dichotomous postcolonial perspective.\textsuperscript{106}

This discussion is not meant to analyze Rushdie’s novels; that has been done elsewhere and extensively by experts of comparative literature. Rather, I would like to briefly address how Rushdie’s novels, including \textit{The Satanic Verses}, are representative of the reactive nature of a postcolonialism. As anyone who has read Rushdie’s fiction knows, his novels are deeply indicative of the postcolonial migrant in exile. In might be safe to say that one can understand Rushdie’s novels only through the lens of Saidian postcolonial theory that sees the secular as the appropriate dominant discourse of cosmopolitan identities. I would argue that Rushdie’s novels represent a quintessential postcolonial secularism.

The relationship and interconnection of Rushdie’s novels and the establishment of Iran’s theocratic republic in 1979 by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in which he exported a revolutionary Islam is an obvious and ironical allusion in this image. The Ayatollah Khomeini’s ideological worldview, an interpretation of Islam which combined a religiously-rooted brand of Iranian nationalism with a belief in the transnational character and global mission of Muslims to spread Islam through preaching and example, as well as armed revolution, resulted in the Iranian revolution of 1979. It was the first instance of a fundamentalist movement replacing a secular state. The Iranian Revolution evoked shock in the Western world, which was never able to come to terms with the true motivation of this movement. Instead, the common understanding portrayed in the media saw the politics of the Iranian government through the lens of Islamic extremism. In

\textsuperscript{106} John Esposito, \textit{The Islamic Threat}, 250.
TMFI, the message of the Ayatollah Khomeini, just below the faces of Begin and Sadat, is chosen to demonstrate the complicity of the United States government, and to complicate an understanding of the culpability of Islamic fundamentalism:

In short, at a time when the Muslims stand in greater need than ever of unity, Sadat, the traitor, and servant of America, the friend and brother of Begin and the dead, deposed Shah, and Saddam, another humble servant of America, are trying to sow dissension among the Muslims. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, 1980.

The Ayatollah Khomeini’s call for the execution of Salman Rushdie, author of the *Satanic Verses* in February of 1989, in part, mobilized a defense of Islam by Muslims in many parts of the world causing the furor over the book to become an international event. In issuing Rushdie’s death sentence, the Ayatollah Khomeini drew worldwide attention to a novel that otherwise might have gone largely unnoticed by many people. It was the *fatwa* issued by Ayatollah Khomeini that helped make the novel a best seller.

This is not true for the novels of El Saadawi. Yet her idea of creative dissonance, together with her novels, and her activist activities, represent a proactive third-world feminist challenge to postcolonial theory. It is important to note that TMFI contains more quotes by Nawal El Saadawi than any other figures. Between the figures of Asma Jahangir and Hanan Ashrawi, who are discussed above, appears this message: “There is nothing in Islam that prevents women from participating fully in all political or religious activities.” Just below her own image balanced on the scale with Salman Rushdie appear two more quotations: “Now we are faced by a resurgence of religious so-called fundamentalism. Some people think it is only Islamic. That is not true.” And beneath her own image appears the message, “Christian Fundamentalism was encouraged in the
U.S.A. by Reagan and Bush. They also used, and often encouraged, Islamic Fundamentalism…in order to fight against the Soviet Union and Communism.”

These quotes demonstrate the eloquence of a writer who has done more than any other to shed light on the plight of women’s issues in the Arab world and to challenge the misogynist and androcentric practices of both nationalist and religious structures. In reward for this, El Saadawi was imprisoned under the regime of Anwar Sadat, an event that she recorded in the novel Memoirs from a Women’s Prison. She was later condemned to death for two of her novels, both of which attacked the dangers of male authority whether in nationalist or religious guise. Of particular interest to this discussion is the subject matter of The Fall of the Imam, which recounts the assassination of the highest authority in the land, a transparent reference to Sadat’s assassination. The novel is an open attack on the hypocrisy and emptiness of religion when diverted to promoting nationalist interests.

El Saadawi’s reputation and visibility in the West is contingent on her identity as an Egyptian feminist activist. Amal Amireh notes that this visibility has been, “over-determined by the political-economic circumstances of First World versus Third World relations of production and consumption.” How the first world ‘reads’ the novels of El Saadawi is still dependent on a context “saturated by stereotypes of Arab culture.”

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This context rewrites El Saadawi through a lens of reductionist ideas of Third World women’s oppression. Chandra Mohanty argues that a feminist critique challenges postcolonialism and the degree to which the colonial encounter and its writing are in favor of liberty and equality masking the similarities between Western culture and many of its Others and the mistreatment and inequality of women, [who] were systematically ignored in this construction of “Western culture.” A further paradox is evident by the insertion of Nawal El Saadawi’s image just below the image of the woman wearing the burqa. The same discourse of revolutionary nationalisms that valorized the revolutionary female figure has also condemned third world feminists as traitors to the nation. No better example of this reality exists than that alluded to in this image. El Saadawi was imprisoned by Anwar Sadat, a revolutionary leader who espoused “Western” ideals of democracy and who was the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize together with Menachem Begin in 1978. If these two figures speak to the lost hopes of nationalisms, then El Saadawi represents the demonization of critical voices to this nationalism, and to the exclusions of those underrepresented voices within. The fact that the critical voices of feminists within the so-called Third World have still found no easy home in the communities of First World white feminism speak to the power of a paradigm of the national positioning of sovereign nation states within the global community. Also important here in the message of veiling is its metaphorical implication of the hidden violence that is the other reality of patriarchal nation-state building. The strength of El

Saadawi’s critique is in its criticism of these national, racial, and ethnic identities, a critique that made visible the interior exclusions veiled by national identities, which for Saadawi is deeply informed by a universally prescribed patriarchal system.

In the case of both Rushdie and El Saadawi, the heads of nation-states ranged around the periphery of TMFI who represent those great movements of national liberation – those struggles for nationhood and self-determination in the wake of colonial domination – that began in the years following World War II, are the targets of their writing. These represented figures in this image remind us of the unresolved contradictions and dilemmas of the nation-state. The promises of nationalisms, which held such enormous possibilities for liberation, are now empty. The novels of both writers belie what Franz Fanon termed “the truths of a nation are in the first place its realities.”  Each writer has successfully unmasked the promises of nationalism and its dreams of liberty for all. That is why the appearance of their balanced heads in the scale of justice is a poetically visual reminder that their cultural creations have done more to illuminate issues of justice than all of the national leaders who surround them.

To summarize then, if such a thing is possible given the extraordinary multiple understandings embedded in this image, all of these imaged figures represent the diversity of political Islam and how it is used by various nation-state ideologies to manipulate perceptions that play into ancient stereotypes from the past. All of these figures see or have seen themselves and their policies as being historically important, and many of them operated from the awareness that politics has as much to do with perception, as with the reception of the how and what of representation.

In effect, what *TMFI* does in bringing all of these figures together is to highlight a different and complex awareness regarding contemporary realities. Through this strategy, there is an assertion of a multiple consciousness through which one must understand contemporary politics. As demonstrated above, Sikander’s image points to the increasing exhaustion of postcolonialism in terms of its limited ability to envision such a multiplicity of contesting voices as this image so eloquently demonstrates.

Sikander’s Biographical Background, the Patronage of *The New York Times*, and the History, Aesthetics and Politics of Manuscript Painting

As Said’s autobiographical connection was vital to the invention of postcolonial theory, so too is Sikander’s biographical connection to the events signified in this image. It is vital, as well, to understand the position and the relationship of the patron to the artist and how divergent understandings are demonstrated within Sikander’s employment of diverse notions of a politics of style associated with the tradition of manuscript painting. It is also important to point out that this image is rather exceptional in Sikander’s *oeuvre*, not only because of its patronage, but because it is the most ideologically emphatic of all her work. This ideological emphasis must be attributed to the dictates of the patron. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, according to Sikander, the image was commissioned in 1999, and was specifically meant to deflect the many stereotypes associated with Islam. The image has now taken on a more problematic presence retrospective of September 11, 2001. It is easy to map the world from the perspective of
certain defining moments. Not only did this date change the course of history, it reoriented perceptions of global geographies. As it has changed our spatial realities, it has also changed the nature and definition of time since it has now become the defining date that quintessentially links how we perceive events before and after. These changing perceptions of time and geographies are integrally linked to issues of representation and identity. Like Salman Rushdie’s novels which can only be read retrospective of the Iranian Revolution and the Ayatollah Khomeini’s fatwa, Sikander’s image is forced to negotiate a similar terrain. What is ironic is that the disjunctions and incongruencies of the image were implicit and visually apparent well before the seminal September 11, 2001 event.

Because of this, the artist is extremely ambivalent about TMFI and its place in defining her work, and was emphatic in stressing that she does not perceive it to be indicative of her artistic output both because of the dictates of its patronage, and because of its retrospectively close association to the events of September 11, 2001. Having created this work two years previous to this event, Sikander’s extreme ambivalence regarding the patronage and interpretation of this image is understandable, while also reflective of the slippery signifying nature of circulating images as they make their way through history, and the mistrust of interpretive strategies amidst global realities.

Despite her ambivalence, TMFI exceeds Saidian postcolonialism. The image is more definitive than the accompanying text of The New York Times in its ironical references to the effects of contemporary U.S. political culpability, as well as in counteracting the text’s idealization of Islam. Sikander and her collaborator, Sameer
Butt, have managed to complicate a U.S. centric viewpoint while also managing a gentle and humorous interrogation of the simplistic agenda of The New York Times. TMFI manages the seemingly impossible task of simultaneously illuminating contemporary political complicities while adhering to the patron’s wishes. To understand how Sikander manages this feat, some necessary background is in order.

While Sikander is subject to an art world that remains largely Eurocentric in its conceptions, she has yet managed to transcend these limitations, largely through her chosen media. Since she studied manuscript painting in Pakistan, and received her Master of Fine Arts from the Rhode Island School of Design, she possesses the ability to considerably enlarge the theoretical debates that have previously limited an art world centered on a Euro-American paradigm. Born in Pakistan, Sikander is a product of a heritage that is both post-colonial and post-partition. The partition is one of the tragic ironies of Indian and Pakistani Independence. The 1947 border, known as the partition, is as much a result of ideologically imposed religious categories as it is a national border. As these religious and national categories have also been imposed or otherwise recently created, Sikander also understands that the debate about what is ‘western’ and what is ‘indigenous’ is deeply related not only to a mythic politics of postcolonial identities, but also to an ideologically motivated idea of religious categories. What artists like Sikander do is to blur these boundaries and these categories from her awareness of multiple worlds.

When she took up the tradition of manuscript painting at the University of Lahore, the art department there was firmly oriented toward a European modernist trajectory.
Manuscript painting was seen as moribund craft associated with the inferior past and with tourist art, a craft associated with nostalgic sentiment and idealization, and a pre-colonial past that was impossible to recapture. Sikander intentionally chose this medium, and its pre-colonial legacy, to critique the legacies of colonialism and to go beyond them. At the time, her decision to take up the craft was viewed as one that would place her outside of the *avant-garde*. Sikander’s bold reinvention of manuscript painting with its implicit critique of the contemporary social and political realities, is now the chosen media of many young artists at the College of Art in Lahore, and a large part of the credit for this reinvention goes to Sikander.\footnote{Virginia Whiles, “*Karkhana: Revival or Re-Invention,*” in *Karkhana: A Contemporary Collaboration* (London: Green Cardamom, 2005), 30.} It has already been noted how she took up this ‘craft’ as an act of rebellion against the policies of Zia al Haq, who was the notorious Pakistani dictator of the 1980s, and who ruled with the collaboration of the United States government.

**Background on Persian/Mughal/Pahari and Basoholi styles of Manuscript Painting**

Integral to understanding the implicit ironies of Sikander is the understanding of the historically heterogeneous Mughal style of manuscript painting and how it evolved from the Persian school of miniature painting in the sixteenth century, specifically when Babar, the founder of the Mughal Empire, promoted such painting as part of his ancestral and cultural identity. His son, Humayun, continued this tradition, importing miniature painters from the Persian Safavid Court to the royal Mughal ateliers. The interface...
between Persian and indigenous Indian art took place when local artists, many of whom were Hindu, brought their own sensibility and technique to the new artistic enterprise. Later, in Akbar’s reign, diverse religions were avidly examined and discussed, and manuscript painting became critically important in disseminating this knowledge. Akbar’s heterogeneous approach to governing in South Asia employed the power of the arts in his state policies, and his patronage employed manuscript painting in the furtherance of religious tolerance. Not only Hindu and Muslim, but also the influences of Europe were felt as he invited Jesuit priests to his court where South Asian manuscript artists were exposed to European religious art, leading to interesting experiments in fixed perspective and chiaroscuro. While incorporating these European techniques, Akbar’s court artists never perceived European style as superior, but employed the techniques along with other heterogeneous influences in their artistic arsenals.

Akbar and his successors established their courts not only in Delhi and Agra, but as far as Lahore, now in the nation-state of Pakistan. Successive rulers in the Mughal court were personally involved with the art emerging from these ateliers, so it is no accident that each successive ruler was influential and left their stamp on successive images. However, the patronage of each ruler and the artist’s artistic negotiations are complex, and this subject will be taken up further below. Allegorical painting and halos around the head of the emperors and holy men during the time of Jahangir and Shah Jahan were perhaps concrete manifestations of the miniaturists’ study of European religious paintings. The architectural grandeur of the Mughal court, especially from the time of Shah Jahan, is evoked in many of Sikander’s images. For example, references
that she makes to the Hindu cowherd girls who accompany and worship Krishna, known as the *gopis*, are a nod to the influence of both Pahari and Rajasthani styles of court painting in Northern India.

For example, in *SpiNN*, (Fig. 8), Sikander appropriates the figural portrayal of the *gopis* from a Basohli manuscript painting (Fig. 9) an illustration from the *Bhagavata Purana* entitled "Krishna Steals the Clothes of the Maidens of Vraja", done in the early 18th century in the Punjab Hills. This geographical region was formerly part of the Mughal empire. It is now partially located in both India and Pakistan.

At one level this points to the heterogeneous nature of the art produced at the Mughal court, but at another level, Sikander is making a humorous allusion to the turmoil of the *gopis* who seem to be without their Krishna. The proliferation of *gopis* without Krishna points to the absence of women in the Mughal style of manuscript painting. This absence belies the often unseen influences of women behind the scenes of the Mughal court, typified by such women as Nur Jahan, the wife of Jahangir.\(^{114}\) At a religious level, there is an ironic reference to the fact that women have often managed their own spirituality without the reference to male gods.

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\(^{114}\) There are many interpretive biographies that are being published on this remarkable woman recently. See for example, Jyoti Jafa, *Nur Jahan* (New Delhi: Roli Books Pvt. Ltd., 1994).
In the Pahari style of manuscript painting, even though women were an important subject, their appearance was always idealized. In contrast to this idealization, in SpiNN (Fig. 8), the images of gopis constantly multiply and transform, at times leaving only the genderless blueprint of hair.

The way Sikander has begun to employ multi-media animation films which run continuously changing from one scene to another for several minutes enables a layer by layer deconstruction of the manuscript painting process itself. At another level, as the animations unfold, and the scenes change, perception also changes, and Sikander plays on this. As the animation unfurls, the gopis disperse and give way to a composite horse in a continuously evolving metamorphosis. These stills evoke multiple layers, turning history into fantasy, as the scene simultaneously recalls the cosmopolitan nature of Akbar’s court, against the backdrop of the ever-present gopis awaiting their non-existent Krishna, who eventually does later appear on a composite horse.
The title SpiNN is a play on CNN and evokes the way media spins reality, and is capable of representing events in order to support certain political platforms. Similarly, Sikander also prevents an objective and progressive historicism from emerging. Instead, there is a multi-conceptualization of the past which creates a possible means of altering the present. The past is not an authority, but, as Ashis Nandy tells us, “the nature of the authority is seen as shifting, amorphous and amenable to intervention.” \(^{115}\)

The concept of metamorphosis is a constant theme in Sikander’s work. For example, the veiled form of a hybrid animal with the legs of a horse or lion and the wings and head of a bird, is a figural form that appears in many of her pieces from the late 90s and into the early years of the current century. The form is actually taken from a sculpture that can be found in certain art history survey textbooks of a bronze griffin dating from the 11\(^{th}\) century from the Islamic Mediterranean, probably Fatimid Egypt. Now in Pisa, Italy, it may have arrived as booty from Pisan victories over the Egyptian fleet in 1087, and the Pisans displayed it atop their cathedral from 1100 to 1828. \(^{116}\)


\(^{116}\) Marilyn Stokstad, *Art History Survey One*, rev. 2\(^{nd}\) ed., (New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2008), 301. The sculpture made of cast bronze is about 42 inches high and decorated with incised feathers, scales and silk trappings. The decoration on the thighs of the creature includes animals in medallions; the bands across the chest and back are embellished with *kufic* lettering and scale and circle patterns.
Fig. 10. *Griffin*. Fatimid, Egypt, 11th century, bronze, height 42-1/2”.
Museo dell’ Opera del Duomo, Pisa.

According to a dialogue with Homi Bhabha in 1998, Sikander recounts how she appreciates the opportunity to appropriate languages, experiences or figures from various mythologies. She tells Bhabha that the griffin:

Is a figure from classical Greek mythology. Under Alexander the Great, the Hellenic world extended to the Punjab, making the griffin a remnant from an earlier period of colonization. But it has become a standard figure in Punjabi. It is called the *Chillava*. It is somebody who is coming and going so fast you can’t pin down who they are. I tried to pin it down with a headdress, a veil. The *Chillava* has multiple identities, and it reflects the sort of rhetoric or categories that I am confronted with. Are you Muslim, Pakistani, artist, painter, Asian, Asian-American, or what? But it is not my agenda to say that I belong to any of these categories. To borrow one of your key words, I am interested in hybridity. This is all new to me, particularly being labeled a minority, even though my experience is obviously substantially different from that of my African-American
friends. But the search for affinities has been great since I am still developing as an artist.\textsuperscript{117}

In the manuscript painting entitled \textit{Ready to Leave} (Fig. 6) Sikander has incorporated the griffin like image of the \textit{Chillava}, which is surrounded by circular forms and placed below the figure of a woman reminiscent of those in both the North Indian and Mughal traditions. She has then defaced part of the surface of the painting, bringing us to the contemporary artistic figurative/abstraction debate.

In the same interview, Sikander further explains how the \textit{Chillava} form emerged from a heightened sensitivity as she wore a \textit{burqa} at different locations in the United States to get an insight into how the veil can change the dynamics of visibility and interaction between people. By feminizing the \textit{Chillava}, which in Urdu has no specific gender, Sikander makes it an extension of her own identity shaped by a diasporic experience.

Resistance to categorization is part and parcel of what makes Sikander’s work fascinating. As she tells Bhabha:

\begin{quote}
I think my work is about observation. More about raising questions than providing answers. I remember coming upon your book \textit{Location of Culture}. It was something of a revelation. In grad school, the fact that I had read it became a dilemma. It exposed what I had feared all along. Without a context, many people thought the work was simply about technique and that ‘postcolonial discourse’ would serve as a conceptual crutch. A flattering crutch, but no thank you. I was shocked to learn of people’s inability to see ‘the conceptual’ in other forms, ones outside the rather recent, narrow parameters established by practices of the 1960s. I find miniature painting a very conceptual activity.\textsuperscript{118}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{117} Homi Bhabha, “\textit{Chillava Klatch: Sikander Interviewed by Homi Bhabha},” \textit{Sikander} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 19.
\textsuperscript{118} Homi Bhabha, “\textit{Chillava Klatch: Sikander},” 20-21.
\end{footnotesize}
This quote demonstrates how Sikander resists fitting into categories or theoretical constructs, especially the theoretical construct that postcolonial discourse has become. The reality is that she has conceptually expanded multiple stylistic influences that allow the fluid nature of language and thought to evolve into new realities. The themes that run through her work begin with an awareness of and engagement with multiple cultures. The lived experiences of her cultural encounters are interpreted through new symbols and established symbols invested with new meaning. She employs these themes to challenge the dualistic thinking created by categories such as ‘East’ and ‘West.’ To build a new discourse from the miniature aesthetics, she deconstructs the tradition by delinking symbolic forms and spatial interpretations from their original relationships with ever-changing configurations. Fully cognizant of the power of their cultural and religious expression, she expands their conceptual limits to encompass the contemporary. The spatial construction and use of the heterogeneity of the Persian-Mughal-Hindu manuscript traditions do not allow for the primacy of a Eurocentric artistic heritage. There is as well a biting humor in the use of this background setting that adapts the style of a Persian miniature that was originally used to commemorate the supremacy of Safavid rulers, which was then adapted and in use during Akbar’s reign which saw a time of religious tolerance in India, and is now again re-adapted to form the background for the complexity of the problematic nature of contemporary global politics.

Pakistani artist, writer, and curator, Salima Hashmi, has described the visual vocabulary of the adaptation of contemporary miniature painting as a coded language,
one that requires its viewers to read paintings carefully as if they were texts.\textsuperscript{119} The appropriation of the precolonial manuscript tradition is a way of undermining contemporary culture and its political representations through parody, satire, and irony. The flattened spatial perspective incorporates layers that act as a palimpsest, re-inscribing contemporary and hybrid figures with decorative border imagery that traditionally appeared in 16\textsuperscript{th} century Mughal manuscripts. These manuscripts had been, in part, adapted from the earlier Persian style manuscript pages that, not coincidentally, were traditionally constructed at the very crossroads linking the ancient caravan routes of the Silk Road through Central Asia. When these complex manuscript painting traditions began to influence the subcontinent, primarily during the Mughal rule, they in turn were influenced by South Asian pre-Mughal visual traditions, leading G. M. Sheikh, a noted artist and theorist from Baroda, to conclude:

\begin{quote}
In fact this process of interaction cut across the peripheries of visual, literary and performing practices. Text accompanied visual image, which in turn took cues from dance and theatre. Such overlaps, even interdependence (a strategy for survival?) left little room for notions of ‘purity’ and necessitated resilience and response to change.\textsuperscript{120}
\end{quote}

While the genealogy of the Persian-Mughal miniature painting is important, no less so are the aesthetics of its visual perspective. To appreciate why the flattened out spatial perspective of the manuscript page becomes so subversive, it is important to understand the privileging of European-style representational painting with its notions of Italian Renaissance perspective and the relationship of this particular scopic regime to the


European colonial episteme. As pointed out by Michel Foucault, such a scopic regime was structured to control and dominate a disembodied, objectively observed subject as the colonial powers dominated the colonies. This insight, now known as Foucault’s “panoptic gaze”, has since been elaborated within the framework of postcolonial critique in what has now come to be known as the scopic regime of colonialism. Meyda Yegenoglu and Homi Bhabha have both noted how artistic representational scopic regimes are linked to ideas implicit in colonial fields of power. The use of the background of the historically complex Persian miniature is representative both of the subversion of European colonial perspective as well as an insertion and allusion to other silenced histories.

In contrast to a European scopic regime of a linear perspective, the synoptic mode, or multi-leveled mono scene has a long historical resonance throughout the Indian subcontinent. Sheikh describes the metamorphic quality of the Mughal style of painting in a paragraph that aptly describes Sikander’s palimpsestic process. In talking about the sophisticated code of communication that permeated and transcended Mughal court life, Sheikh describes how artists created visual imagery that drew on these multiple traditions exhibiting “an elastic propensity for multiple readings [which] could communicate specific meanings to those familiar with its complex manipulative range.”

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describes this practice in some detail, and it is striking how similar this process is to that of Sikander:

For figure-environment-space constructs, the system [of representation] employed a minimization of means, a synoptic mode of rendering ‘props’ and imagery in mutual conjunction. These were brought to life with an improvisatory method of animation in a quick yet measured pace through modulations of movements, calligraphic and otherwise. The space was denoted by the movement, positioning and postures of images rather than by relative scales or ground and horizon lines. The process – both additive and impulsive – expanded the spatial arena from inside outwards in multiple directions, thus extending the grounds of action beyond the borders of a painted folio. The figuration in consonance with the spirit of spontaneous improvisation dealt with sexuality and gender differentiation with cursive aplomb.\textsuperscript{124}

Sheikh develops his thesis further by arguing that many of these manuscript paintings were done in a way that provoked the viewer to be an active participant in the realization of the image. Not only were many manuscript pages constructed to include the viewer as an active participant, but Sheikh argues for the active participation of the artist in constructing these unique visions, and the connection that might have been felt in individually “discovering and shaping the world he lived in anew, hence being an active participant in the making of history.”\textsuperscript{125} Sheikh goes even further to venture the controversial assertion that within the patron-artist framework, the manuscript painting was at times a vehicle for subversion:

Totally dependent upon patronage, whether it came from the individual, the community, or both, the artist served as transmitter of the patron’s visions. Such a visualization by proxy however took into account the magical power of manipulating the visual signals the artist possessed. In other words, the patron knew the painter was capable of inserting into the image dynamics that would emit signals other than the ones prescribed or mutually agreed upon. Those signals,


interfused in the complex chemistry of visual articulation, were conveyed tacitly or clandestinely through the coda system. So, *pressurizing an artist beyond mutually understood limits of power-balance could prise open the possibilities of subtle subversions. Such portents tempered the patron’s power.*"\(^{126}\)

[Emphasis added.]

To demonstrate this ability for subversion, Sheikh employs the example of a particular portrayal of the Mughal emperor Jahangir, demonstrating how the artist portrayed the emperor in an excessively flattering way as a means of in fact undermining the divine elements of these portrayals (Fig. 11).

This manuscript page, *Jahangir Enthroned on an Hourglass*, is by Bichitr, around 1620. Jahangir is perched precariously on the hourglass throne. Sheikh notes that:

The attribution of the divine in the images of Jahangir and other rulers would invite interpretations. The halos around the head or the placing of a monarch on a throne of time or on a globe may at first appear as unadulterated sycophancy on the part of the artist. I would, however, like to consider the use of excessive flattery as a device to effect subtle subversion. It is not difficult to see that the physical positioning of the emperor on the throne of time is rather precarious. The personality portrayed is accurate enough to reveal the accentuated harshness, along with pride and power, in the face of Jahangir. The exaggerated depiction of power, in the audience, or in the rather pretentious portrayal of a Mulla offering the holy book does more than indicate elements of falsehood and absurdity – despite the allegorical intents of the tableau. A marginal self-portrait of the artist displaying his rewards, a horse and an elephant, also indicates the quality of transactions between the artist and patron for the painted glory.\(^{127}\)

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Sheikh further asserts that other portraits painted by the same artist, Bichitr, reveal far more empathy than the impersonal and cynical adulation of this royal portrait. In this
way, the artist asserts the primacy of his art and his ability to see beyond the surface of representation.

Turning again to *TMFI* in light of Sheikh’s hypothesis, it should be evident that Sikander is also practicing multiple subtle subversions in her portrayal of the various political figures of *TMFI*. Like the Mughal artist, Bichitr, she also draws on the polyvalent traditions of manuscript painting, bringing various visions and ideas into mutual interaction. She, too, makes visible the process of transformation in the final product, and there is an awareness of the fleeting panorama of time where the artist is both participant and witness.

Sikander’s conflation of the traditional with the contemporary flies in the wake of Franz Fanon’s assertion that the artistic use of traditional culture actually results in the reification of the nation state: “The artist who has decided to illustrate the truths of the nation turns paradoxically toward the past and away from actual events.”

Rather, Sikander uses tradition to question the present, and by using contemporary portraiture on the margins of traditional manuscript pages, fuses together traditional political ironies with contemporary political ironies. The result is a stark contrast to Fanon’s assertion that the nation-state turns to its idealized past in order to construct its identity. Like the accomplished Mughal artists before her, Sikander subtly subverts the ruler’s idea of his own identity. This is a continuation of the same sort of sophisticated visual rhetoric used by Bichitr in Sikander’s contemporary imagery.

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128 Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 225.
Chapter Four: The Limitations of Secular Criticism

Background

One of the most salient features of postcolonial theory, and indeed, much of postmodernism, is the consignment of the spiritual to the intellectual borderlands. This is evident in Said’s advocating of the idea of secular criticism as crucial to the role of the politically-engaged contemporary cultural critic. From my reading, implicit in Said’s attitude is a view of religion which is:

An agent of closure, shutting off human investigation, criticism, and effort in deference to the authority of the more-than-human, the supernatural, the other-worldly. Like culture, religion therefore furnishes us with systems of authority and with canons of order whose regular effect is either to compel subservience or to gain adherents. This in turn gives rise to organized collective passions whose social and intellectual results are often disastrous.\textsuperscript{129}

In effect, religion is Said’s ‘other’ in that his rejection of any sort of spiritual or transcendent narrative ultimately reflects a distinction between Western rationalism and Eastern mysticism, which is readmitted under the rubrics of secularism on the one hand and religious/national fundamentalism on the other. The upshot of this continuing dichotomy is that postcolonialism’s retention of secular criticism has contributed to its inability to be effective given recent contemporary developments, particularly the cultural and religious politics that currently surround us.

In contrast, Sikander creates social imaginaries with motifs that draw on traditional South Asian aesthetics now transformed into resources for empowerment and healing. These renegotiated images most often have their roots in cultural ‘traditions’ as well as contemporary religious icons. *Fleshy Weapons* (Fig. 20) exemplifies this in its self-rooted emanation of a veiled Hindu goddess with autonomous creative power which is known as *shakti*. *Fleshy Weapons*’ multiple arms handle multiple weapons, some to overcome evil, some to cut attachments, as is common with the iconography of a Durga image. As a twentieth century icon, *Fleshy Weapons* in essence embodies an empowered and critical self-awareness as it reanimates Hindu icons and Muslim stereotypes. The stereotype of the Muslim veil is powerfully overturned in the body of the Hindu goddess, simultaneously over turning preconceptions into a new cognitive awareness of self-rooted empowerment. As Sikander herself says when describing this image, one must not underestimate what is beneath the veil.\(^\text{130}\) The reference here is extended to a contemporary politics of knowledge and the unveiling and re-emergence of alternative meanings from beneath the illusionary veils of stereotypical representations.

In both her art and the processes of creating it, Sikander transcends the static nature of both stereotypes and textual discourse. In a quote where she explains her processes of layering in the installation, *Chaman* (Fig. 1), she references both the construction as well as the manipulation of perception:

> At some level, the idea of layering here through painting on the wall and covering it up with tissue, with paper, and then putting more drawings in front of it - that kind of space, or that experience of space through those layers, suggests a

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certain sense of meaning being either manipulated or meaning being constructed, or that there is more to understand than a simplistic reading of something. So it does allude to a lot of meaning which becomes significant culturally. And I think experience, or the idea of veiling and revealing here, becomes important because a lot of my work is deeply personal. And it also takes a lot of liberty through personal experiences. It kind of takes a jump-start from there; whether at a humorous level or at a level where one intends to subvert something, it takes on and challenges how people read work, or how people read different cultures, or one's own sort of reaction to those experiences. And since I'm dealing with such an image-oriented genre of work, a lot of the vocabulary in the miniature painting basically deals with mythology and refers to a particular period of painting: the court paintings during Mogul patronage. It refers to a lot of the aspects of that time. And then through Hindu mythology it refers to a lot of the Hindu religion.\textsuperscript{131}

\textsuperscript{131} Sollins, “Shahzia Sikander,” \textit{Art 21}, dvd.
Writing the Written (Fig.12) is an excellent demonstration of transcending textual discourse in its re-imaging of calligraphy referencing the Koran. The decorative border, which resembles (but is not) calligraphy, transforms from a vague unreadable text into horses and is meant to transport the viewer to a broader awareness. The recitation of the Koran was not only about reading, but it was meant to evoke oneness of the spiritual and material. That this was intentional is demonstrated by Sikander’s comment:
If you look at this particular border, it’s called *Writing the Written*, and here the text becomes more like horses or there’s a suggestion of movement. And that aspect is my experience of reading the *Koran*, and I would read it with no particular understanding because I was a child and I could read Arabic but I couldn’t understand it. And the memory of it is this amazing visual memory where the beauty of the written word supersedes everything else. The meaning is there, but it’s not just the meaning, it’s the ability of the written text to take you to that other level.132

I would like to contrast several of Sikander’s work with several recent and influential approaches to postcolonial theory that attempt to reanimate Said’s notion of critical secularism, and further contrasting these approaches with how Sikander draws on the power of the traditional spiritualities. And by further comparing Edward Said and Aamir Mufti’s recent re-animation of this approach to critical secularism with the South Asian cultural theorist Ashis Nandy’s anti-secularist position, these differences in the very cognitive way these categories exist and come into being are highlighted.

As is evident from these few examples of Sikander’s work above, and as will become more evident below, because of the multiplicity of its strategies, and its historical, religious, and political ambiguities Sikander’s art goes beyond a shallow war of symbols with Eurocentric culture and succeeds in creating a genuine decolonizing struggle that overturns the usual postcolonial categories at the epistemological level, where being, existence, meaning, and of course knowledge, are defined.

**Said’s Secular Criticism**

Part of the problem one has when dealing with the term ‘secular’ is that the term has never had a straightforward meaning within the international contemporary politics of

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culture. In the United States, the meaning usually denotes the complete marginalizing of any religious attribution, category or reference. In South Asia, the meaning is more likely to mean the ability to both respect and perceive multiple cultural and religious viewpoints. Therefore, secular is a fraught word, the meaning of which differs according to location.

It is important to clearly delineate what Said meant by secular criticism. Said clarified this approach in the face of the most problematic criticisms of Orientalism, most prominently, the invisibility of a specific methodology within Orientalism that was capable of challenging orientalist representations. In the face of such criticisms, Said clarified the role of the contemporary cultural critic as existing within the secular realm, and therefore capable of not only resisting orientalist representations but enabling the emergence of minority voices.

One can get further in understanding this position when one realizes that Said’s ideas were formed during the struggles of anti-colonialism. They were also formed during a time in the twentieth century when the assumptions of all humanistic knowledges generally were coming to be deeply shaken at their core, and it is not merely coincidence that simultaneously, the fallout from the revolutionary and anti-colonial movements of the early to mid-twentieth centuries were at an apogee. Within this environment, and amid the upsurge of anti-colonial movements, Said became a critic of what he saw as the transcendent claims of nation-states as the new utopias of modernity. These utopian claims, in Said’s view, were formerly the province of religions, and the rise of the nation-state was simply a new form of transcendent utopianism. Said, as
witness to these new forms of nationalist fundamentalism, viewed the dangers of religious fundamentalism and fundamentalist nationalism as two sides of the same coin. In this regard, he sought to posit an idea of the secular that challenged not only religion’s tendency toward fundamentalism, but also the replacement of nationalism as a secular form of transcendent identification. Critical secularism for Said is intertwined with what he calls the “fetishization of the national identity,” as one that he saw increasingly replicating distinctly and genealogically located Christian notions of religious identity. He calls such nationalism a new form of idolatry whose sole purpose is to provide some sense of identity:

The national identity becomes not only a fetish, but is also turned into a kind of idol, in the Baconian sense – an idol of the cave, and of the tribe. That, it seems to me, then produces, pulls along with it, the rise of what I would call a kind of desperate religious sentiment.

Against such new forms of idolatry, the politically engaged modern critic must have a critical consciousness that challenges such false allegiances. In an essay entitled “Secular Criticism”, Said defines the role of a critic in the late twentieth century as one that is necessarily oppositional. I would like to call attention to the fact that the term ‘oppositional’ comes from Said’s own description. It is worth quoting the entire of Said’s lengthy explanation on this position:

Were I to use one word consistently along with criticism … it would be oppositional. If criticism is reducible neither to a doctrine nor to a political position on a particular question, and if it is to be in the world and self-aware simultaneously, then its identity is its difference from other cultural activities and

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134 Viswanathan, Power, Politics, and Culture, 129.
from systems of thought or of method. In its suspicion of totalizing concepts, in its
discontent with reified objects, in its impatience with guilds, special interests,
imperialized fiefdoms, and orthodox habits of mind, criticism is most itself and, if
the paradox can be tolerated, most unlike itself at the moment it starts turning into
organized dogma. ‘Ironic’ is not a bad word to use along with ‘oppositional.’ For
in the main – and here I shall be explicit – criticism must think of itself as life-

e nhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination, and
abuse; its social goals are noncoercive knowledge and produced in the interests of
human freedom.135

What is evident from this quote is that for Said, who was educated in the elite institutions
of the West, the meaning of secular implies a relationship wherein one is still the
objectively positioned critic; only now, the stance is also oppositional. As he says, and it
is very telling, that the role of the critic must be oppositional and skeptical to all forms of
what he terms idolatry. Such an oppositional positionality not only retains a Eurocentric
objective viewpoint; it is also skeptically wary and even hostile to religion. It is perhaps
not necessary to point out that such a hostile and oppositional viewpoint is not immune
from its own violent confrontations. In TMFI (Fig. 7), this idea is already in play on the
left side of the image where two guns, one on top of the other, point in opposing
directions.

Similarly, in Entanglement (Fig. 13), two half-human, half-snake, Mughal
inspired figures face each other, their lower bodies are intertwined, indicating a familial
interdependence. One is faceless indicating perhaps that we cannot see clearly those
closest to us. The guns which are rendered useless as they are tied at the ends are in the
forefront of the composition and are outlined in highly contrasting blue, black, and
brown, against the dreamlike pink blush of the figures. The allusions are layered and
multiple bringing up the idea of not being able to perceive the humanity of the ‘other’

despite the interdependence of the two entwined figures, the illusion of victim and victor mentality, and the false shadows of enmity which originate ultimately, not from the ‘other’, but from ourselves.

Said’s theory lacks the cognitive awareness of interdependence that Sikander’s art takes for granted. This is because his theoretical approach lacks the awareness inherent in many of Sikander’s images including *Entanglement* (Fig. 13). Said’s idea of humanism is based on the autonomy of the individual in a secular world. This idea so obviously follows European Enlightenment philosophies, wherein humanism is defined somewhat narrowly as the individual, and not the divine, as the prime movers of historical events. In contrast, in Sikander’s images, there is an interdependence of self and other. This contrasts with Said’s idea of secular humanism:

Men and women produce their own history, and therefore it must be possible to interpret that history in secular terms, under which religions are seen, you might say as tokens of submerged feelings of identity, of tribal solidarity.\(^{136}\)

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For Said, secular humanism challenges the idea that events are driven by divine intervention. In this worldview, nationalism becomes a re-emergent form of supernaturalism, an illusion that prevents us from seeing that human beings are the prime movers of history. These ideas are dogged by a constant dichotomy between material and spiritual realities. They position spiritual realities outside of the material domain, but what if these influences are actually part of the material domain?
What no one seems to have noticed is that Said’s notions of submerged feelings of tribal solidarity and the idols of culture which he refers to above, originate from the ideas of the European Enlightenment philosopher of science, Francis Bacon, in his work *Novum Organum*, published in 1621. Writing at the threshold of the ‘modern scientific revolution,’ the method Bacon advocated was secular in its anti-Christian viewpoint, and scientifically positivist. Essentially, he advocates a subject/object orientation where reality is the object, and induction the method through which to attain true knowledge, a mechanical method where understanding does not fall prey to ‘idols’.\(^{137}\) In short, such a Baconian view of reality was instrumental and mechanical, viewing nature as a mechanism to be controlled by human beings. Such a vision of the natural world is not only chauvinistic, but instrumental and inhuman as well. It was within this sort of mechanistic knowledge structure that European colonialism could be perpetrated. And this is to say nothing of Bacon’s own personal history of being “a corrupt judge and an unscrupulous politician.”\(^{138}\)

It is a bit odd that Said draws on such a mechanistic subject/object bit of European Enlightenment philosophy to buttress his idea of the role of secular criticism as a methodology capable of self-reflective knowledge construction, and a viable way of questioning the idols of our contemporary age. Just what the basis would be for such self-reflection he does not say, just as Bacon’s method did not provide an adequate way to be free of the very idols he sought to exorcise. Said continues the subject/object,


\(^{138}\) Bajaj, “Francis Bacon, the First Philosopher of Modern Science,” 25.
religious/secular dichotomies inherent in European Enlightenment thinking within his secular enterprise. This sort of uncritical thinking migrated to his idea of the modern secular critic as autonomous and unfettered by the idols of religion and nationalism, as he sought to free the secular critic from the dangers of dogmatism within academic structures which are connected to the modern political world, as the following quote makes clear:

Folding back on itself, criticism has therefore refused to see its affiliations with the political world it serves, perhaps unwillingly, perhaps not. Once an intellectual, the modern critic has become a cleric in the worst sense of the word. How their discourse can once again collectively become a truly secular enterprise is, it seems to me the most serious question critics can be asking one another.  

Said largely marginalizes those twentieth century philosophical movements of psychoanalysis and feminism. He asserts:

The number of prevalent critical ideas whose essence is some version of theory liberated from the human and the circumstantial further attests to this trend. Even the revisionist readings of past critics and critical theories – say the current vogue for Walter Benjamin not as a Marxist but as a crypto-mystic, or those versions of such actively radical positions as Marxism, feminism, or psychoanalysis that stress the private and hermetic over the public and social – must also be viewed as being part of the same curious veering toward the religious.

Said positions ‘the religious’ then as dealing with the mystical and unprovable, whether in theory or otherwise. In doing this, his objectively oriented secularism anathematizes any allusion or viability to the subjective or personal which he terms the personal and hermetic. The subjective and religious are linked, and he makes his antipathy toward the mystical paradoxes of religion very clear:

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139 Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, 292.

What one discerns today as religion is the result of exhaustion, consolation, disappointment; its forms in both the theory and practice of criticism are varieties of unthinkability, undecidability, and paradox together with a remarkable consistency of appeals to magic, divine ordinance, or sacred texts.\(^{141}\)

In his defense, writing in the 1980s during the Reagan years, Said was well aware of the insidious nature of relationships between academic politics and nation-state politics. He saw the role of the critic as one who spoke truth to power. Indeed, for much of his life, this is the role Said took on. But, even given the fact of Said’s belief in this role, one cannot help but reflect that such a stance may emanate more from Said’s personal experiences as a Palestinian exile living in the United States, rather than a true reflection of how deeply ingrained, whether consciously or not, religion entwines with so-called secular political realities.

Sikander, too, is part of the South Asian diaspora living in the United States. Yet, in her images, there is always the awareness that perception and reality are not synonymous, and that this is as true for the media’s spin machine as it is for the ever-changing nature of international politics. In *TMFI, Writing the Written, Fleshy Weapons, Entanglement*, and even *SpiNN*, there is the awareness of the ever-changing and shifting nature of perception and reality, as well as the idea that self and other are not autonomous. Further, the secular and religious are not separate categories for Sikander. It is in fact these icons, connected as they are to Hindu and Islamic ideas that emerge as healing and empowering emblems within and amid these forever changing realities which is in contradistinction to the exilic perspective of Said.

\(^{141}\) Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, 291.
There are at least three obvious paradoxes inherent in such an oppositional viewpoint of Said’s notion of the secular critic. First, Said’s vehement stress on the critic as secular disallows the very cultures and belief systems wherein people structure their identities, thereby reflecting a lack of respect for those cultures and beliefs. By placing the critic in such an oppositional position, the critic’s approach cannot help but become embattled. The paradox in Said’s thinking is that one cannot marginalize the deeply held belief systems of cultures and, at the same time, posit that such an oppositional mode constitutes a non-coercive approach to knowledge and a resistance to tyranny. What I am attempting to point out is that if one is to aim simply toward a critical consciousness that is predicated on the secular, that consciousness (by disallowing the very belief systems wherein people structure their identity) continues to see itself as separated from its ‘other’.

Secondly, Said posits the role of the secular critic as the only viable stance in creating a non-coercive and non-tyrannical approach to diverse knowledges amidst our intercultural world. The secular critic is meant to speak for those marginalized knowledges, but the paradox is that the creators of those marginalized knowledges are better able to speak for themselves. As Said theorizes, they also are inventing their own theories and these theories are usually located in those ‘traditional’ categories of religion which Said castigates. It is difficult to see how Said’s position of secular critic is not one that reflects the sort of autocratic notion of cultural criticism that Said sought to speak against.
Thirdly, I would argue as other scholars have also pointed out, that the religious-secular distinction is fundamental to Said’s *Orientalism*. Religion is, in fact, Said’s ‘other.’ As Said rejects the orientalist distinction between Western rationalism and Eastern mysticism, he readmits this distinction under the rubrics of secularism on the one hand and religious fundamentalism on the other.

Although Said’s position as a secular critic who spoke truth to power was a courageous stance in the late 20th century, in our post 9/11 times, one might well question just what sort of efficacy such an oppositional theoretical position might have within contemporary realities that demand strategies that help assist us to realize an evolution of consciousness capable of better understanding intercultural connections and relationships.

The Many Faces of Islam and the Failure of Critical Secularism

Regarding the viability of visual rhetoric in Mughal, India, I have previously referred to G. M. Sheikh’s assertion that Mughal manuscript painting used diverse and complex cultural codes to quietly satirize the pretentions of certain Mughal emperors, particularly during the time of Emperor Jahangir. Thus, even executing portraits of the emperor under royal patronage, the artist was able to draw on multiple traditions to emit subtle signals into the dynamics of the image that were quietly subversive of the pretensions of Mughal emperors to divine power. Sikander too, in *TMFI*, has also inserted such subversive signals, using the past to critique the present, and like the artists in the Mughal ateliers, she also inserts signals that critique the new divinity of global capitalism and the duplicitous and hypocritical actions of politicians. Like the Mughal artists during the time of Jahangir’s patronage, Sikander draws on both traditional
iconography and contemporary codes and signals to bring subtle ironies and subversions
despite the dictates of the contemporary patronage of *The New York Times*. Like the
artists during the time of Jahangir in the 17th century, Sikander exceeds the dictates of
patronage in the 20th century, and goes beyond the parameters of Said’s secular critic.
She is both critical of the mutual determinations of nationalist claims using religion, but
she also inserts traditional iconographic signals from both Hindu and Muslim traditions,
to assert the viability of a moral critique of contemporary events. She uses tradition to
critique the present in a multitude of ways and therefore, goes further in giving vision to
possibilities of collaboration that are undergirded by the affinities with religious and
cultural forms that challenge the viability of Said’s notion of secular criticism. There are
several specific ways in which both subversions and elements of collaboration founded
on spiritual and cultural forms are evident in *TMFI* (Fig. 7).

First of all, there is an explicit critique of the mutual determination of
nationalism’s use of religion: from Jinnah’s demand for an Islamic Pakistan to Zia-ul
Haq’s invoking of one school of Sunni Islam to justify his right-wing rule, and to
Menachem Begin’s perpetration of the atrocities on the Palestinian peoples in the name
of a Jewish state of Israel to the Islamist-political rule of Iran under the Ayatollah
Khomeini. All of these, in various ways, demonstrate political and national manipulation
of religious ideologies. There is, as well, a critique of the politics of religious
fundamentalism and its uses by the Reagan and Bush regimes, along with a quote from
Nawal El Saadawi, “Now we are faced by a resurgence of religious so-called
fundamentalism. Some people think it is only Islam, but this is not true.” What El
Saadawi refers to are what I would call the ideological and secular uses of religion, whether Christian fundamentalist or Islamic fundamentalist. The message is that duplicitous political collaborations encourage religious fundamentalisms, both Christian and Islamic. Whereas there is an ironic awareness throughout *TMFI* of the various differences for which these so-called fundamentalisms are evoked, there is no such distinction or specific references in Said’s secular criticism. Additionally, these manipulations of religions in terms of the national are really secular uses of religion. The critique that Sikander insinuates in the veiled Hindu goddess is a subjective critique which uses both Hindu and Muslim iconography as female and personal empowerment in the midst of the secular nationalisms and their differing uses of religion as fundamentalism. These are the very symbols which nation-states have used to defame religious belief. Perhaps taking a cue from Nawal El Saadawi’s novels, there is a darkly humorous and ironic awareness throughout the image of what happens to women when politics seeks to control religion. The discourse emanating from such political agendas always uses women as a means of control from dictating what they should wear to how they should act. Sikander reverses such an instrumental usage of these symbols and motifs into a subjective empowerment.

*TMFI* constantly and ironically points to these instrumental uses of both religion and women by the nation state, yet subtly and through a number of visual cues, turns the tables on these attempts at control. In the center of the image are two women each holding a corner of a piece of fabric which is in fact the reverse side of a bill of United States currency. Contrary to being controlled, the two women dominate the image, their
gazes focused downward on the currency and firmly away from the duplicitous political collaborators ranged on either side. Although it may seem that their gazes focus intently on the currency, a monetary symbol that is perhaps a reference to global capitalism as a cultural absolute, un-tempered by ethics or morality, what emerges from this fabric of capitalism are two printed sentences, one in English and one in Arabic. The Arabic phrase is printed as a kind of graffiti meant to deface or as graffiti often does, to write over the dominant culture and to declare a presence out of the invisibility of the dominant culture’s erasure. The English phrase is, of course, part and parcel of the fabric of the currency, ironic in itself, stating, “In God We Trust.” The second is a sly graffiti-like addition, both a statement of presence and visibility couched in morality: “Which of God’s blessing would you deny?” This message of a Koranic ethical reference intrudes into the symbol of global capitalism stating the presence of ‘the other’ within.

Above the burqa-clad woman to the right is the image of a self-rooted, veiled, Hindu goddess who floats just below the figure of Ali Jinnah. In one hand, this veiled Durga-like figure holds a sword that points at the mouth of Jinnah. Her iconic figure is both Muslim and Hindu. The veil on the Hindu goddess and the burqa-clad woman are a reference that the veil is used as a symbol of oppression for women – a clear ideological and instrumental manipulation that the United States government often uses to justify aggression against other nation states. The insertion of this icon discussed below in its independent appearance as Fleshy Weapons (Fig. 20) is yet another reference to how knowledge is manipulated, often using the bodies of women, to both veil and reveal. As this Hindu goddess floats free of any oppression, she is aware of a politics that both veils
and reveals, again referencing both the manipulation of religions and the politics of knowledge. The figure of the woman in the *burqa* does something similar as she holds the inscription, “Who’s veiled anyway?”, again reiterating the veiling and revealing of certain knowledge for political ends. The woman on the left conflates iconographical attributes both of a Hindu goddess and as a symbol of liberty, which is subverted from the nationalistic, to the personal.

As nationalistic and religious ideologies seek to manipulate images of women through potent symbols, Sikander subverts these manipulations. The idea of personal empowerment emerges in multiple references that also draw on multiple spiritualities. In other words, there are metaphysical concerns that draw on South Asian aesthetics, and their usage leads to multiple ironic references throughout the image. Sikander succeeds in all of these subversions despite the dictates of patronage, precisely because these ironical references are undergirded by these alternative aesthetics. This, then is the new visual form of cultural critique, which is actually not a new idea as we saw with G. M. Sheikh’s explanation of the portrait of Jahangir (Fig. 11). What Sikander has done is make this critique contemporary and international, transcending postcolonial categories.

There is another layer to the inclusion of these figures and their use of religious institutions. Whereas Said’s secular criticism is critical only of nationalism and fundamentalism in their negative connotations, in *TMFI* figures as diverse as the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, and Malcolm X in the United States, are reinventing forms of religion not as repudiation, but as a means of laying claim to the modern world. From some perspectives, what is thought of as contemporary religious extremism is, from other
perspectives, a generalized, nebulous consciousness of dissent. Essentially, it is a critique of the political and moral economy of today’s world. This is not to excuse the violence of these movements, but to point out that it is important to carefully distinguish between the instrumental uses of religion from religion used as a form of cultural critique. Even this subtlety of nuanced perspectives is not possible given the dichotomy which Said sets up.

In another example of such a construction within a radically different cognitive register, Ashis Nandy in *The Intimate Enemy*, brilliantly recounts how Gandhi’s self-construction and complex reinterpretation of indigenous ethics and moralities was able to construct a political stance that ultimately embodied a philosophy of non-violence which overturned British colonialism. Such an approach was not based on a subject/object dichotomy, or any other binary, but instead, arose from an ethical awareness that sought to overturn such binaries. In fact, Gandhi constructed himself subjectively as an androgynous, childlike *sadhu*, a self-structuring that resisted the cognitive categories that British colonialism imposed. These categories that saw the Indian as childlike and effeminate were the basis of the very self-construction that Gandhi employed as resistance. Gandhi used this sort of self-structuring as a self-enactment of a morally-based insight that was capable not only of motivating the masses who followed him, but also as a self-constructed testimonial that acted to raise the awareness of the colonizer’s cognition of their own morality. Sikander also does something similar in her self-rooted veiled Hindu goddess who is clothed in the very symbols of oppression with which she empowers herself to oppose such oppression.
These forms of dissent that use such ethical forms of tradition and religion as a form of cultural critique exist in both violent forms as well as non-violent forms. *TMFI* has representations of both. Cultural and religious symbols of non-violent resistance pervade the image, and are typified most prominently by figures such as the *Qawwali* singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, and the lawyer and activist Asma Jahangir. Jahangir, who since 2004, has been the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The activities of these figures privilege human rights using both artistic expression and institutional means, operating from the view of the viability of spiritual categories as constituting human rights. Nawal El Saadawi, in her novels and as an activist, uses artistic expression to illustrate a feminism that retains an independence from the nationalist manipulations of religion, as well as the institutional corruption of Islamist thought.

In another example, visibility is given to contemporary freedom movements that are usually interpreted as terrorist. Above, I recounted how invisible the situation of Palestine and its people have been and still continue to be. This is particularly true in the United States, as the political support for Israel is reflected in one-sided media reports that pretend to explain the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in terms that privilege Israel. Sikander has cleverly given this invisibility a presence in her placement of the figure of Henan Ashrawi. The invisibility of Palestine’s political occupation by Israel, and the attempt to humanize the Palestinian participants of this conflict are the backdrop for Ashrawi’s autobiographical account of her involvement with the peace process and the Oslo accord. In *TMFI*, the guns above Ashrawi’s head, which Sikander points first one
way and then the other, are a sly allusion, not only to the dead-end nature of a politics of blame, but to the mutual hypocrisies, complicity and complexities of Middle Eastern/U.S. politics as well as the U.S. ‘war on terror.’ As is evident in Sikander’s image, and in Ashrawi’s autobiography, what is particularly poignant is the visibility of Ashrawi in this image and the invisibility of such stories in the general media.

In light of the confluence of various forms of religious fundamentalism and the complexities of religious forms of dissent within socio-political realities today, how is the role of a secular critic as defined by Said justified? How is the secular critic even capable of illuminating the truths within such a fraught politics of knowledge? Yet scholars such as Aamir Mufti insist that Said’s critical secularism is an important tool in postcolonial critique. In the past ten years, Aamir Mufti, a student of Said, and now a postcolonial scholar and an Associate Professor at UCLA, holds that the way in which postcolonial theory can retain its critical edge is to relocate Said’s notion of secular criticism as a viable theoretical tool within contemporary events, capable of significantly enlarging our understanding of the world beyond Eurocentric categories. I am focusing on Mufti not only because he carries on Said’s secular legacy, but because he is an example of the tendency within contemporary scholarship that continues to patronize and to marginalize spiritual concerns as incapable of critical dissent relegating these types of critique to the intellectual borderlands. Given that spiritually-based, aesthetic references come up quite often in the work of many contemporary artists, including Sikander, who seek to voice a dissent to Eurocentric, intellectually re-colonizing knowledge, this is puzzling. The
question is how are we to engage with the contemporary realities these artists are seeking to illuminate without understanding these references?

In the essay “Auerbach in Istanbul: Edward Said, Secular Criticism, and the Question of Minority Culture,” Mufti points to the centrality of secular criticism within the thought of Said and how he advocated that it was only from a secular viewpoint that a postcolonial critique could be waged:

Edward Said has never left any doubt as to the significance he attaches to what he calls secular criticism. It is by this term, not postcolonial criticism, that he identified his critical practice as a whole. The meaning of this term is a theme he has returned to repeatedly since first elaborating it at length in the introduction to The World, the Text, and the Critic.¹⁴²

Mufti ignores the idea of interdependence found in many indigenous spiritualities that do not find identity within a nation-state matrix. He justifies Said’s stance in terms that again trot out his antipathy to any form of belonging or community:

Said most often opposes the term secular not to religion per se but to nationalism…. Secular implies for Said a critique of nationalism as an ideology of hearth and home, of collective Gemutlichkeit; a critique of the ‘assurance,’ ‘confidence,’ and ‘majority sense’ that claims on behalf of national cultures always imply; a critique of the entire matrix of meanings we associate with ‘home,’ belonging and community.¹⁴³

Reminding his reader that Said was a critic who wrote from the perspective of exile, Mufti continually marginalizes references of any kind to the importance of “hearth and home, belonging and community” – all categories that speak to interdependence. He asserts that, “The form of cultural ‘literacy’ that Said calls secular criticism makes an


Despite his emphasis on exile, homelessness, and loss, Mufti still contends that secular criticism is capable of reasserting the power of the cultural over the national. Yet, if secular criticism is concerned with the cultural, why marginalize issues of religion and spirituality which are so closely intertwined with culture?

If we contrast Mufti’s justification of Said’s secularism as more critical of national ideologies than religious, and going back to *TMFI*, in contemporary terms, how is one to address one without the other? This viewpoint forecloses multiple perspectives and possibilities. In contrast, the multiple ways in which *TMFI* represents a variety of nationalist, political, and dissenter approaches to the complex ways in which nationalism and religion operates within a global marketplace, Mufti still sees only one viable secular oriented viewpoint, which conflates the national and religious, as demonstrated by this quote,

> Nationalism does not represent a mere transcending of religious difference… but rather its reorientation and reinscription along national lines. Secular criticism is aimed at the mutual determinations of the religious and national, at the unequal division of the field of national experience into domains marked by religious difference.  

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Again, he is peculiarly insistent on the ethical possibilities of such a viewpoint by which he maintains that only through this viewpoint can marginalized voices be heard. Against numerous charges that Said’s critical energies still retain links to European knowledge systems, Mufti is anxious to point out that Said is well aware of the genealogy of

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144 Mufti, “Auerbach in Istanbul,” 105.


secularism within the European Enlightenment. This is why Mufti positions Said’s critical secularism within the exilic perspective of Auerbach, and argues that the place of exile is the result of colonialism. He argues instead as to the impossibility of understanding contemporaneity outside the postcolonial paradigm. Somewhat akin to Dipesh Chakrabarty, in *Provincializing Europe*, Mufti perceives that European knowledge systems continue to hegemonically function as “the sovereign, theoretical subject of all historical knowledge” so that other histories still “tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called ‘the history of Europe’.”

Following Chakrabarty, Mufti takes seriously the idea that:

> Everything in the present makeup of the humanistic disciplines points toward the conclusion…, most implicit but even explicitly made at certain points, that as Chakrabarty puts it, ‘only ‘Europe’…is theoretically (that is, at the level of the fundamental categories that shape historical thinking) knowable; all other histories are matters of empirical research that fleshes out a theoretical skeleton that is substantially ‘Europe’."

But whereas Chakrabarty puts forth complex arguments that problematize postcolonial dichotomies of the religious and the secular, Mufti’s contends that the origins and effects of globalization on the postcolonial world are a result of the postcolonial adherence to a conflict between the West and the exploited margins. Chakrabarty uses the idea of *darshan* as a critical element in subaltern constructions of nationalism. He positions nationalist resistance within the peasants’ use of *Bharat Mata*, wherein:

> ‘India’ or Bharat could indeed be the mother because, long before there were the newspaper and the novel, there was the age-old practice of *darshan* that came to

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constitute a crucial element in the ‘performative’ aspect of peasant’s nationalism. As a practice, it bypassed the question of the experiencing subject.\textsuperscript{149}

Whereas, Chakrabarty explains the various constructions of nationalism based on capitalist print culture, secular claims, and subaltern constructions, Mufti, it seems to me, in marginalizing any religiously based categories, silences the ‘minority’ voices of the subaltern.

To demonstrate how Mufti negates the emergence of ethical possibilities that are couched in religious terms, I will use the same visual example he uses in “Auerbach in Istanbul.” It is a photograph from After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives.\textsuperscript{150} This book is a collaboration between Edward Said and the photographer, Jean Mohr, regarding the everyday aspects of the realities of people living under Israeli occupation. As Said was himself a Palestinian exile, the written texts that accompany Jean Mohr’s photographs are reflective of Said’s personal viewpoint. And it is, as far as I am aware, one of the few examples where Said deals with visual material. The book is a photographic documentary that is meant to reflect on the humanity of the stateless Palestinian peoples, particularly in midst of their constant political misrepresentation within global media culture, as Said says,

\begin{quote}
The whole point of this book is to engage this difficulty, to deny the habitually simple, even harmful representations of Palestinians, and to replace them with something more capable of capturing the complex reality of their experience. Its style and method – the interplay of text and photos, the mixture of genres, modes, styles – do not tell a consecutive story, nor do they constitute a political essay. Since the main features of our present existence are dispossession, dispersion, and yet also a kind of power incommensurate with our stateless exile, I believe that
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{149} Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, 177.

essentially unconventional, hybrid, and fragmentary forms of expression should be used to represent us. What I have quite consciously designed, then, is an alternative mode of expression to the one usually encountered in the media, in works of social science, in popular fiction.

The difficulties in learning the truth of this conflict from media reports is as true now as when this book was published. This is especially evident in Said’s reflection in the form of a postscript regarding the fall of Beirut, Lebanon, in 1982. The context for these comments was the official severing of the Palestinian link with Lebanon when the PLO, led by Yassar Arafat, evacuated the city in which he had been besieged by the Israeli army for three months. Yet, at the time, over 300,000 Palestinian refugees remained behind. One cannot help being reminded yet again of the guns pointing back and forth in *TMFI*, when one reads Said’s comments regarding the media coverage of this event:

A close Palestinian friend of mine who has lived through the entire ordeal told me over the phone from Beirut that quite apart from putting up with the bombing and mayhem, reading the epidemic of local newspapers would certainly drive anyone crazy; no two of them say the same thing, and trying to figure out what is happening or who is fighting whom for what reason is like catching clouds.\(^\text{151}\)

I recount this event with Said’s comments because I want to make it clear that I am a great admirer of Said’s courageous attempts to counteract the inhumanity of the media regarding these human tragedies. At the same time, this quote is also indicative of the perils of ascertaining the truth of events from newspaper and other media accounts.

And yet, while this quote reveals the poignancy of Said’s humanistic involvement, other quotes within the same book reveal the limitations of critical secularism. That Said exhibits extreme suspicion regarding any sort of religious

conviction or the strategies of resistance which are framed within these convictions, is
demonstrated by this quote:

The second thing about Beirut’s unhappy fate is the insidious role played by
religious and sectarian conviction. I’m ashamed to admit that a great many of my
early memories of friends and family expressing religious opinions are harsh and
unpleasant. ‘Moslems,’ I was told in 1954 by a great friend of my father’s, ‘are
dust. They should be blown away.’ Another good Christian, a prominent
philosopher and former Lebanese foreign minister, frequently denounced Islam and
the Prophet Mohammed to me, using such words as ‘lechery,’ ‘hypocrisy,’
‘corruption,’ and degeneration.’ These, I later discovered, were not isolated
opinions. As anyone who has followed the discourse of Christian militancy in
Lebanon and elsewhere in the region will know, they have come to constitute the
core of minority expression.\textsuperscript{152}

As we have seen above, this positioning of religious extremism is only visible in Said’s
writings from this critically negative perspective.

The specific photograph under discussion is pictured below and entitled,

“Jerusalem, 1984, Koranic Studies Within the Walls of the Mosque of Omar.”

\textsuperscript{152} Said, \textit{After the Last Sky}, 173-4.
I quote here Said’s comments accompanying this photograph, pointing out that Mufti also quotes this same paragraph, although the image is not included in his essay:

To look perhaps at the plodding efforts of a group of Islamic school students in Jerusalem is therefore to feel some satisfaction at how their unexceptional attention to the Koran – I speak from an essentially non-religious viewpoint – furnishes a counterweight to all the sophisticated methods employed to wish them away. I do not by any means refer to the so-called Islamic resurgence, which is what every resistance to Israel is converted to these days (as if ‘the Shi’ite fundamentalists’ of South Lebanon, or ‘the Arab terrorists’ on the West Bank, did not have the same anti-occupation drive as any other Maquis in history). What I do mean, however, is that the local attentions of Palestinians – to their work, families, teachers and friends – are in fact so many potential breaks in the seamless text, the unendingly unbroken narrative of U.S./Israeli power.  

Further on, Mufti notes that, “Mohr’s photograph is a rich and complex text – a group of young Palestinian men engaged in the performance of Islamic identity.” Further noting the importance of the location at the Mosque of Omar, located on the Temple Mount, is an example of the complex collaboration of secular politics of nationalism and the state with emerging forms of Islamist politics. Most importantly for this discussion, he states that the intensity of the young men in the photograph intently studying the Koran, draws our attention to the terrifying doubling of neo-Orientalist discourse within the nation-space itself, the national struggle for sovereignty and self determination now increasingly framed in religious terms as a struggle over the fate of places and meanings that predate the nation.  

While Mufti’s point is that our postcolonial space is one where religion rescripts nationalism along sectarian lines, we have already noted the multiple ways that Sikander, in TMFI, subverts the very doubling of neo-Orientalism that Mufti references. There are

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multiple references to how and why religion is re-scripted, and there are explicit references to the dangers of this re-scription along sectarian lines, as well as references to a personal spirituality that act as empowering antidotes to the invention of sectarian lines.

In contrast, in Mufti’s view, neo-orientalism emerges again within a postcolonial paradigm as the dialectic of self and other, of religious identities in conflict, one with another. The rise of religious fundamentalism, whether Islamic or otherwise, emerges within postcolonial space, and the historical rupture of postcolonial time. In other words, Mufti’s ethical position is firmly rooted in postcolonial modernity where the identities we construct for ourselves are constituted within postcolonial histories. This historicist positioning continually gives rise to conflict, where self and other are never in collaboration, continually recreating an oppositional construct of majority and minority. That Said held to this position is demonstrated by this quote:

"The dialectic of self and other in the contemporary 'non-Western world' cannot be understood without reference to the determinations of majority and minority domains, as the postcolonial histories of any number of societies – including Ireland, India-Pakistan-Bangladesh, Egypt, Malaysia-Singapore, Lebanon, and more recently, South Africa – amply demonstrate."156

This is an objectively representational positioning of self and other that mirrors only the way of seeing things through the historical realities and spatial perspective of a postcolonial lens. Such a lens allows Mufti to overlook that it is precisely within religious categories that the majority of contemporary counter cultural movements are being staged. Whether violent or non-violently, there are histories and contexts, and cognitive strategies that are positioned from outside the framework of postcolonial space.

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Postcoloniality positioned in spatial terms is no different than the Enlightenment scopic regime, which Martin Jay has demonstrated is characteristic of modernity. He notes how the dominant visual model of the modern era is characterized by a combination of Renaissance notions of one-point linear perspective and by the Cartesian mind/body split. In such a rationalistic perspective, which he terms Cartesian perspectivalism, the visual gaze of the viewer is not participatory, but only objectively engaged in the epistemological acquisition of knowledge. If I can position postcoloniality visually within spatial terms, such a position implies a way of seeing where the viewer exists within a certain time in postcolonial history which acts as the horizon. The viewer of this linear perspectival arrangement is writing as though he or she were outside of this history, and the within a vanishing point always ending up as neo-orientalism. The subject and the object are never allowed to meet because they are not connected in any way. Further, the viewpoint is only correctly seen within a one-point perspective, through a postcolonial paradigm. If one shifts from this position, the viewpoint is no longer the view that adds up to a one-point perspectival postcolonial reality.

Meyda Yegenoglu in her examination of the chauvinism of the visual, positions the discourse of orientalism within this Cartesian scopic regime of modernity. She explains that the discourses of colonialism are marked by the will to possess and control with the visual correlative privileging a disinterested, invisible, disembodied, objectively observing and recording subject. How does a postcolonial paradigm such as Mufti’s

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reinterpretation of Said propose to challenge this by remaining in the realm of the secular?

It seems to me that Mufti is trying to make things fit, not within an orientalist perspective, but within a postcolonial perspective. The viewer of Mohr’s photograph in Mufti’s term is still the outside observer who sees the attention of the young Palestinian men studying the Koran as just so many breaks in a seamless text. If I am reading Mufti correctly, Mohr’s photographs and Said’s comments, through the ‘local attentions’ of the photo’s participants, displace fundamentalism’s sense as counter-universal. While there is a kind of objective sort of humanism here, what is the means for any alternative agency? Or for other cognitive perspectives to become visible? If as, Mufti argues, Said’s secular criticism makes it possible to see the young men reading the Koran in a way that challenges a re-inscription of religion along nationalist and sectarian lines, how then does one account for the neo-Orientalist turning of resistance into terrorism? Such a question remains outside of Said’s humanism.

This is not a position that I find convincing. It is an assertion that remains obscure, it does not give any grounds, or language, or means within which these participants practice an active agency. They exist, and are forever in media res, in the middle of things. And, if the role of the secular critic is to illuminate the problems of contemporaneity and collaborate with ways to create solutions, does not Mufti’s interpretation of Said’s secular criticism avoid these problems by taking us into the realm of formalism?
This formalism is apparent in Said’s only approach to a methodology that would ground his idea of the postcolonial secular critic. As he was a classically trained musician, Said posited the idea of contrapuntal reading, a method that would lead to not a polarizing of colonized and colonizer, but instead an ability to think through and interpret discrepant experiences. The definition of contrapuntal originated as a musical term used by classical musicians trained in European Renaissance and Baroque styles to denote several notes or voices operating at the same time, independent but in harmony. The term comes from the Latin *contra punctum* ("note against note"). The use of this term, therefore, is indebted to Said’s training as a classical musician, and it is a term that he then applies to the idea of cross-cultural understanding of cultures:

By looking at the different experiences contrapuntally, as making up a set of what I call intertwined and overlapping histories, I shall try to formulate an alternative both to a politics of blame and to the even more destructive politics of confrontation and hostility. A more interesting type of secular interpretation can emerge altogether more rewarding than the denunciations of the past…the hostility between Western and non-Western cultures that leads to crises. (Emphasis added.)

Can contrapuntality go beyond the confrontations that dichotomies create? The intention is great but the method is lacking. It was after all, his theories of orientalism that exacerbated the politics of blame.

The upshot is that Mufti has not rescued Said’s secular critic from being oppositionally critical of religion per se, or of, as he asserts, being not primarily concerned with religion. Said has in fact orientalized religion and Mufti continues the process. One cannot help but agree with William Hart’s harsh judgment:

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If we substitute religion for the Orient, those things to be feared with religious-cultural effects (sacred violence), and those things to be controlled (by quarantine and trivialization), then the irony will be evident. Said Orientalizes religion at the very point that he rescues Islam from Orientalism.159

Citing William Hart, Gil Anidjar has recently pointed out that Said appears to have overlooked his own thesis taught by “this most important of books, namely, Orientalism. For if Orientalism teaches us anything, it is that Orientalism is secularism.”160 Anidjar goes on to argue that Orientalism is vehemently secular because essentially, it is a critique of Christianity. In this sense, then, Orientalism is actually an essential book for the study of religion or for any religious studies program because essentially it is a quintessential example of oppositional criticism. It also affirms another viewpoint from which Said has orientalized religion, that religion is Said’s ‘other.’ This sort of reversal usually mirrors the very thing it opposes.

While this is an interesting and relevant essay, I want to take a somewhat different turn, and return to my contention that rather than postcolonial historical rupture that implies with it a negation of cultural traditions, many grassroots countercultural movements and many contemporary artists in particular, are reinventing, recreating, and reworking the very cultural and spiritual traditions that were marginalized by both colonialism and postcolonialism. There is a grassroots transformation of these traditions into cognitive categories of awareness and resistance currently taking place in many grassroots spheres and movements, and the arts are centrally located within these


That these new creative categories of awareness are emerging as reinterpretations of the very cultural and spiritual traditions which have been marginalized or colonized or rendered invisible is illustrated most expressively in numerous examples of Sikander’s work. Even in an ideological work under the patronage of *The New York Times* such as *TMFI*, it is the reinterpretations of cultural and spiritual traditions, as well as the activism of the three powerful women, Nawal El Saadawi, Asma Jahangir, and Hanan Ashrawi that predominates.

Mufti, who authored the above discussed essay in 1998, largely has not changed his position in the face of our current complex conflation of fundamentalist nationalism and religious fundamentalism after 9/11. For example, Mufti in an essay from 2004, asserts that a reanimation of Said’s notion of critical secularism is a viable critical tool for the cultural critic:

> This recognition of the need to declare oneself for secularism appears now, in light of the escalating forms of religious politics and violence that have come to dominate political life in multiple locations and across the globe, to have been anachronistic in a double sense, both behind and ahead of its time.\(^\text{162}\)

Mufti’s re-excavation of this notion is inadequate to present day realities, particularly post 9/11. This position overlooks the fact, that as Ashis Nandy succinctly states,

> Much of the fanaticism and violence associated with religion comes today from the sense of defeat of the believers, from their feelings of impotence, and from their free-floating anger and self-hatred while facing a world which is increasingly secular and desacralized.\(^\text{163}\)

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The participants of Mohr’s photo have more in common with Nandy’s interpretation. As Palestinians, their very identities are negated as a nation-state. Their impotency arises from this negation. I want to further discuss how these kinds of strategies are in collaboration with the South Asian theorist Ashis Nandy’s controversial essays on anti-secularism.

**Ashis Nandy’s Strategic Anti-Secularism**

The consignment of the spiritual to the intellectual borderlands of academia is common place at a time when grassroots counter-cultural and artistic expressions are using these very tools in which to craft alternatives. However, when theorists such as Dipesh Chakrabarty and Ashis Nandy take these sorts of avenues as cultural resistance seriously, they are usually maligned by theorists such as Mufti, who refers to such “antisecularist gestures” as a “temptation” that Chakrabarty has given in to, and that Nandy explicitly and vehemently defends.¹⁶⁴ Mufti has especially serious contentions with Nandy’s anti-secularism, and he addresses this at length following his discussion of Jean Mohr’s photograph.

Mufti’s argument centers particularly on Nandy’s point that secularism originated within a European Christian context, and that this context is inadequate to account for the idea of religion in South Asia as encompassing a way of life that goes beyond European categories of thinking, or the scientific worldviews used to both refute Christian fundamentalism as they also were used to further colonialism. Above, I discussed Said’s

¹⁶⁴ Mufti, “Auerbach in Istanbul,” f.n. 28.
use of Francis Bacon’s idols of the cave, and how Bacon’s structures of knowledge were indebted to a critique of Christian vs. Scientific worldviews in the European Enlightenment. This is part and parcel of the worldview of which Nandy is critical on the basis of the instrumentally scientific manipulation of knowledge which denies both the sacredness and interdependence of reality which is not just material. After all, it was based on such instrumental scientific knowledge systems that colonialism could function.

Nandy has actually written at least three such essays regarding the problems of secularism. The essay that Mufti references explains the idea that the modern state prefers to deal, not with religion as a way of faith, but religion as an ideology. By religion as faith, Nandy refers to “religion as a way of life, a tradition which is definitionally non-monolithic and operationally plural.” By religion as ideology, Nandy means religion as a “national or cross-identifier” of populations in the interest of protecting political and socio-economic interests.

Secularism has little to say about cultures. It is definitionally ethnophobic and frequently ethnocidal, unless of course cultures and those living by cultures are willing to show total subservience to the modern nation-state and become ornaments of adjuncts to modern living. The orthodox secularists have no clue to the way a religion can link up different faiths or ways of life according to its own configurative principles.

Nandy explains that to accept such an ideology of secularism is also to accept the ideologies of progress and modernity and the violence and domination used to sustain

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166 Nandy, “The Politics of Secularism,” 70.


those ideologies. Mufti simply does not consider Nandy’s definition of faith as a way of life or as a way of allowing its own configurative principles as important, stating that,

No amount of talk of the plurality of ‘traditions’ on Indian soil can erase the fact that these traditions have come to us in modernity differently located within the nation-space and, hence, differently and unequally authorized. The conceptual consequences of ignoring this are in fact on display in Nandy’s own search for traditions of tolerance in Indian society. For despite gestures towards ‘everyday’ forms of ‘Islam,’ what emerges from this search is an identification of national culture as Indic, an identification that, of course, has a long history in the conflict, now over a century and a half old, over the meaning of modern nation and community in South Asia. (Emphasis added.)

Mufti’s argument denies the agency of ‘everyday’ gestures as it centers on the historical rupture that postcolonialism creates. In contrast, Nandy’s form of critique is an “alternative mythography of history.”

TMFI, too, can be seen as an alternative mythography in its use of traditional elements and contemporary realities to image resistance against both orientalist, neo-orientalist and postcolonial categories. The multiple resistances imaged in TMFI have more in common with Nandy’s peon to these “participants in a moral and cognitive venture against oppression.”

Nandy’s emphasis on participation within a moral and cognitive venture finds itself at home with Sikander’s art which transforms culture into resistance and writes above all of the psychological (subjective) structures and cultural forces which resisted the culture of colonialism. Within such a ‘post’ colonial conscious, there is room to use tradition as contemporary resistance to oppression.

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169 Mufti, “Auerbach in Istanbul,” 116

170 Nandy, The Intimate Enemy, xi.

171 Nandy, The Intimate Enemy, x.
As if in collaboration with Sikander, in Nandy’s writing, there emerges a continual theme of the ‘other’ within. One of the paradoxes of Nandy’s idea of intimate enemy is that there are many sorts of intimate enemies, and they are never simply relegated to the ‘other.’ In fact, Nandy’s form of critique often points to the pathology of ‘otherness.’ One is struck by a continual awareness that the ‘enemy’ is not the despicable ‘other’, but perhaps someone who is endowed with parts cast out from the self, reflecting the Sikander work *Entanglement* above. There is the realization by both Nandy and Sikander that the enemy we see in others may well be what we are negating in ourselves. Additionally, when Nandy talks of resisting oppression, he couches it in ethical terms, and his explanation of this may just as well serve as an alternate description of *Entanglement*:

Ultimately, modern oppression, as opposed to the traditional oppression, is not an encounter between the self and the enemy, the rulers and ruled, or the gods and the demons. It is a battle between de-humanized self and the objectified enemy, the technologized bureaucrat and his reified victim, pseudo-rulers and their fearsome other selves projected on to their ‘subjects’. That is the difference between the Crusades and Auschwitz, between Hindu-Muslim riots and modern warfare. That is why the following pages speak only of victims; when they speak of victors, the victors are ultimately shown to be camouflaged victims, at an advanced stage of psycho-social decay.  

There is no way in Said’s explanation of critical consciousness to account for the symbiosis of adversaries, or as Ashis Nandy terms it, “the other within.” This inability to understand the humanity and symbiosis of one’s adversaries is a point that is contained within Nandy’s completely different attitude toward the politics of secularism, and

172 Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy*, x.

further, it is the reason Nandy’s position on anti-secularism has remained so vehement. This is the position that Nandy also uses to counter the growing realities of violence. In an essay entitled “The Twilight of Certitudes,” he states:

> Over the last fifty years or so, the concept of secularism has had a good run. It has served, within the small but expanding modern sector in India as an important public value and as an indicator of one’s commitment to the protection of minorities. Now the concept has begun to deliver less and less. By most imaginable criteria, institutionalized secularism has failed. Communal riots have grown more than tenfold and have now begun to spread outside the perimeters of modern and semi-modern India. In the meanwhile, the ruling cultures of India, predominantly modern and secular, has lost much of its faith in – and access to – the traditional social and psychological checks against communal violence.  

The reasoning behind Nandy’s indictment of the introduction of secularism into India during colonial times, and the after effects of increasing violence in contemporary India is a stance rooted in the idea that anti-colonial resistance was only successful when Gandhi reaffirmed indigenous cultural-religious traditions which included an idea that resistance to colonial power was rooted within the common humanity of both oppressor and oppressed. Thus, Nandy views critical consciousness and social change as linked to such cultural-religious traditions, and views postcolonial critical consciousness as more helpful for the theorists practicing in the West than for those who have deeply experienced colonialism. Nandy turns the tables on postcolonial theorists in the United States by asserting that social change has historically, and more likely, emanated from those that have been oppressed than by their oppressors. In other words, the agency for transformation and change comes from the dispossessed.

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There is beginning to be a re-evaluation of Nandy’s embattled critical 
perspectives. Although in the past, Dipesh Chakrabarty has been disparaging of Nandy’s 
form of critical tradition terming it ‘decisionist’, he has recently written an essay that is 
both a rethinking and a tribute. Instead of looking at Nandy’s idealization of tradition as 
decisionist, he has awakened to Nandy’s particular form of democratic criticism and 
repositioned Nandy’s critical traditionalism as a modern tactical strategy. It is not a 
nativist position that Nandy advocates. After all, the past comes to us in ways that we 
cannot always see or figure out. It comes as embodied memories or as cultural training, 
and perhaps as categories that we do not even realize we carry. Pasts speak through us in 
ways we cannot imagine. Nandy uses critical traditionalism in a self-critical way from 
the vantage of a particular modernity. As he says, “The critical traditionalism I am 
talking about does not have to see modern science as alien to it, even though it may see it 
as alienating…” 175  In other words, Nandy is critical of modern scientific thought and its 
relationship to critical theory, but at the same time he does not entirely reject it. He 
incorporates it much as society incorporates its own intimate enemies. As he is aware of 
the dangers, he does not wholly reject it. It does not become an ‘other.’ It is a critical 
perspective, and like other critical theories, it has the ability to create or destroy. 
Chakrabarty has noted that Nandy motivates us to deepen our questions, from the 
viewpoint of using the past as we question our present. 176  ‘Theories are not static; they 
are transformative. And, as Chakrabarty notes, in a particularly self reflective mood, 

175 Nandy, “Science, Authoritarianism and Culture: On the Scope and Limits of Isolation outside the 
Clinic” in Bonfire of Creeds (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), 125.

176 Chakrabarty, “Modernity and the Past: A Critical Tribute to Ashis Nandy,” in Habitations of 
“[t]here are parts of society that remain opaque to the theoretical gaze of the modern analyst.”

The strategy of critical traditionalism, in a self consciously modern way, is a strategy that provides an ethic of living and working for a more acceptable future. Although the past as ideal is a decisionist perspective, does not our commitment to a better future allow us to construct a past in ways that are helpful and creative?

And, where theory cannot see, I can live only practically, the future ceasing to exist as an object of analytic consideration (while it can always be the subject of poetic utterance). Decisions, which have this factor of darkness built into them, cannot, therefore, be based on any ground of certainty that would justify the infliction of suffering on others in the name of progress.  

In any event, what we need are theories that enable the creation of mutual openness to the concerns of the other. Postcolonial theory has not and does not make enough room for such dialogues. Nor have contemporary postcolonial theories proven themselves capable of enlarging our understanding of the world beyond Eurocentric cognitive categories.

The ambiguities and ironies of Sikander’s *The Many Faces of Islam* are more illustrative of Nandy’s indictment of the limitations of secularism as a viable critical stance than Said’s secular criticism. On the other hand, Mufti’s use of secularism is simultaneously the preferred domain used by both politicians and critical theorists who “always prefers to deal with religious ideologies rather than with faiths.”  

Of course, Mufti denies this entirely on the grounds that Nandy fails to recognize, “that the resources of ‘faith’ itself in colonial and postcolonial modernity have come to be

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appropriated, shaped and saturated by the political.” Such an argument does not prevent the realm of secularism for Mufti as existing only with the realm of ideology. He ignores the idea that minority issues are often raised using religious categories. Often times one finds that minorities have taken the right to speak for themselves without the authorization of theorists like Mufti.

Nandy’s contention that Indian secularism has exhausted itself and fails to offer an alternative to the religious violence has been construed by Mufti as reactionary. Nandy is writing within the context of the rise of the Hindu right in South Asia, and contrary to being reactionary, Nandy’s understanding reflects an awareness of South Asian cultural politics and realities that Mufti seems not to understand. What I take Nandy to mean is that Indian secularism has taken the form of the very thing it opposes – religious intolerance. This has allowed for further divisions between religious ideology and everyday practices of religious belief. In other words, the Indian state has chosen to define religion as ideology, and so its secular character is reactionary, in reaction to religious belief. Although Mufti mentions the distinction Nandy makes regarding faith defined as a way of life which is “operationally plural and non-monolithic”, and ideology as organized religion which is identifiable with a set body of texts ignores this distinction. This oversight renders an inability to acknowledge that in everyday life, acts of resistance are couched in ordinary terms, or as Nandy would have defined it, in terms of faith.

A recent example of cultural analysis that I see as somewhat indebted to Nandy’s intimate enemy is a work by Faisal Devji that is a bold analysis of the ethical implications

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179 Mufti, “Auerbach in Istanbul,” 114
behind the global jihads being staged around the world and which are now a part of our
contemporary reality. Devji takes seriously Nandy’s contention that:

If that religious way of life cannot find normal play in public life, it finds
distorted expression in fundamentalism, revivalism and xenophobia. That which is
only a matter of Machiavellian politics at the top does sometimes acquire at the
ground level the characteristics of a satyagrahoa, a dharma yuddha or a jihad.\(^{180}\)

Devji, in *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity*, has argued that in a
chapter entitled “Intimate Enemies and Sociable Wars”, which I take to be a direct
allusion to Nandy, that:

Instead of addressing the West as something completely foreign, in the same way
that it is itself addressed by this West, the jihad posits relations of equivalence
between the two enemies….

A politics based on national causes is being made increasingly irrelevant by an
ethics founded on global effects. The jihad is a global movement in this sense, a
perverse call to ethics in an arena where old-fashioned politics can no longer
operate – because it can no longer control.\(^{181}\)

Where Faisal Devji analyzes recent post 9/11 terrorist groups, such as Al Qaeda in the
metaphysical terms that interpret the contemporary jihad of Islamicists as an ethical turn,
Devji goes beyond material spatial landscapes of territory and culture to different
landscapes of mysticism, and the media – landscapes which we all share. It is an
example of cultural critique that attempts an iconoclastic re-inscription of contemporary
jihad as an ethical intervention. Devji nowhere excuses the violence. He simply argues
that attention needs to be paid to the ethical aspects of these types of religious
fundamentalisms. Devji’s book is an example of recent cultural critique that is proof that
cultural resistance is now being waged in the vocabulary of ethics, even if it is a perverse

\(^{180}\) Nandy, “Science, Authoritarianism and Culture,” 126.

\(^{181}\) Faisal Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (New York: Cornell University
Press, 2005), 139.
ethics. In many ways, this sort of iconoclastic discourse echoes ideas that are found in *TMFI.*

If the struggle for postcolonial forms of knowledge that are egalitarian must invent a language into which already translated objects are now able to emerge into newly translated spaces, artists like Sikander are creating and inventing such languages which have multiple genealogies in pre-colonial aesthetic theories and histories and contemporary idioms. However, within Mufti’s secularism and postcolonial modernity, these languages will remain forever untranslatable. While the medium of the humanities that Mufti studies are those objects of the literary canons of the world, what I propose is that artists such as Sikander offer powerful insights into enlarging our conceptual categories. I would like to take seriously this idea as I think that this area is where artists like Sikander are most successful.

While postcolonial discourses may be among many strategies we can call on as cultural theorists, what we need now are multi-layered and multi-perspectival strategies that draw on shifting geographical locations beyond nation-states that reflect the indisputable concept of plural identities. As I have demonstrated, one is not able to conceptualize the work of Sikander without recourse to multiple aesthetic strategies which rely as much on contemporary art movements as they do on the aesthetic traditions and contemporary realities of South Asia.
Chapter Five: Venus’s Wonderland

This chapter discusses how Shahzia Sikander re-incorporates sacred and traditional epistemologies into visual cultures as lost parts of feminine subjectivities. In effect, she reclaims South Asia’s rich multicultural pasts linking them to alternative forms of cosmopolitanism, leading not only to a re-incorporation of feminine subjectivities, but to male subjectivities as well. Such a hermeneutic practice approaches the past as a resource one can draw on freely to re-imagine the present and reconfigure the future, re-sacralizing present day realities beyond national barriers and beyond the ever present chauvinist rhetoric of terrorism. This remembering of the past beyond postcolonial identities is definitely not a nostalgic idealization, but more precisely a politics of the will to remember or to retain one’s consciousness, to recall and/or reintegrate the elements of the past that resacralize present day realities. This renders these sacralized traditions as quintessentially modern. Indeed, in many cases, they have not been interrupted either in the memory or practice of South Asia. They have been and still are being migrated into the present as resources of empowerment.\footnote{This creative hermeneutic approach to re-sacralizing traditional pasts is precisely what prompted Dipesh Chakrabarty to rethink Nandy’s critical traditionalism in terms of what Chakrabarty has come to see as a very pragmatic response to contemporaneity. See “Modernity and the Past: A Critical Tribute to Ashis Nandy,” in Habitations of Modernity (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 38-47.}
Feminism’s Challenge to Postcolonialism

Feminist scholars have been among the first to challenge Western historicism within postcolonial theory. As Anne McClintock has pointed out, if postcolonial theory has sought to challenge this historicism and its proliferation of the dichotomies such as ‘self’ and ‘other’, ‘center’, and ‘margin’, and ‘secular’ and ‘religious’, the very term of postcolonialism nonetheless re-orients the globe in terms of colonial and postcolonial histories. There is still a reluctance to see the world in terms that might question this notion, as McClintock notes that the term postcolonial itself is problematic:

The term also signals a reluctance to surrender the privilege of seeing the world in terms of a singular and ahistorical abstraction. Rifling through the recent flurry of articles and books on postcolonialism, I am struck by how seldom the term is used to denote multiplicity.\(^{183}\)

The malaise within contemporary critical theory is demonstrated by the pervasive use of ‘post,’ as in poststructuralism and postcolonialism. As McClintock has demonstrated, the “curious ubiquity of the preposition ‘post’ has created its own paradigm of an historical rupture that allows us, in some ways, to see ourselves as separate from our own histories, a point of view which, “belie[s] both the continuities and discontinuities of power that have shaped the legacies,” of the former colonial empire builders, while also pointing to a pervasive crisis within critical theory itself.\(^{184}\) Additionally, the past that is generally referred to has been written from a largely Eurocentric perspective which is restrictive, yet nevertheless has been presented as universal. Such a restricted historical construction


has become deeply embedded, not only in understandings of the past as inferior, but as a way of marginalizing formerly colonized countries in the neocolonial language of ‘developing nations’ or ‘Third World’ countries. These terms which are really economic categories are now epistemological, and they form borders of inferiority in our perception, and these terms become ways of promoting the superiority of one’s own culture in contrast to the ‘other.’

Today’s use of the preposition ‘post’ also implies such a rupture and instantiation of dichotomies like tradition versus modernity, and by extension the religious versus the secular. These understandings pervade not only postcolonial discourse, but other disciplines as well. In other words, tradition is very often positioned as the ‘other’ in postcolonial and postmodern discourses. Certainly, this is the way in which art histories have been written, and it may explain partially why revolutionary and radical forms of art seek to break from the past.

In contrast, some feminist scholars and artists are reinterpreting multicultural pasts or ‘traditions’ that are able to speak beyond issues of identity and race in ways that transcend the ideas of an avant-garde.\(^{185}\) It is what the feminist critic Benita Parry refers to in a recent essay entitled “The Presence of the Past in Peripheral Modernities.” She eloquently describes how the:

> ‘Simultaneity of the non-simultaneous’ was structural to colonized societies and continues to be so in post-independence nation-states. For here vast rural populations living in village communities provided and continue to provide the

\(^{185}\) For example, see Constance Cortez reworking of the Aztec idea of Nepantla within the art of Latino/a artists in “Nepantla (and Other Sites of Transmogrification),” in *The Road to Aztlán: Art From a Mythic Homeland* (LA County Museum of Art, 2001), 358-73.
material ground for the persistence of earlier social practices and older psychic dispositions.\textsuperscript{186}

As Parry tells us, this pervasive crisis in intellectual critique (which McClintock refers to) can, in many ways, be healed by a reinterpretation and reorientation of diverse traditional pasts in collaboration with the present.

It is not only postcolonial time that is problematic. Just as the past is seen as inferior to the present, so too, have women in both colonized and colonizer societies been marginalized. That the language of postcolonialism is by no means gender neutral may be demonstrated by many examples. Let me point to several. Said’s negative usage of ‘midwife,’ as a term that assists in giving birth to more stereotypes that reinforce only the negative dependency of academic criticism related to political agendas.\textsuperscript{187} The positive meaning of midwife – as one who assists in the miracle of physical birth, or as a means of assisting in the intellectual birth of new ideas -- a word that has powerful connotations of life, birth and transformation, is construed by Said in its most negative sense. It is interesting to consider whether Said’s negative usage of such words demonstrates a misogyny that not only colors our language, but also, by extension, contaminates our theories. Anne McClintock has analyzed how the male gaze is often conflated with the colonized and the perceived inferior feminine position demonstrating the foregone conclusion of the superiority of both the male and the colonizer.\textsuperscript{188}


\textsuperscript{188} McClintock, \textit{Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest}. 6-7.
As with other scholars such as Chandra Mohanty, McClintock argues that the idea of postcolonialism becomes especially unstable with respect to women, because representations of national power, both colonial and post-colonial, rest on pre-existing pre-colonial and ‘post’ colonial gender inequalities. The upshot is that if there is one thing that emerges from postcolonial feminist interventions, it is that these perspectives have transformed both postcolonialism and feminism. This is so because their scholarship puts the emphasis not on cultural conflicts, but on the unequal gender distributions of global wealth and power, while also exposing the power-knowledge nexus of Western feminism.

In contrast, Sikander draws on a variety of ‘traditions’ as both a critique and an antidote to the present, signaling positive aspects of the past available for re-interpretation. Particularly, with regard to representations of women, she re-mythologizes multiple pasts refuting both gender hierarchies and a linear historical progression. Her changing locations: Pakistan, Rhode Island, New York, Texas, and back to New York, have enabled her to reflect on questions of gender inequalities and politics beyond national, cultural and geographical boundaries. This has been evident in so many of the works we have looked at throughout these chapters. In Sikander’s more recent work as well, the ability to re-mythologize gender hierarchies into motifs of empowerment and to use tradition to challenge the present becomes even more clear.

For example, in Pleasure Pillars (Fig. 15), not only the image, but the title itself is a satirical play on words, as women have been represented in both East and West as the focus and pleasure of the male gaze. There is possibly an allusion to the idealization of
women in ancient India. *Nayikas* are heroines from classic Indian legends that are found as often in painting as in dance and drama. According to the emotion they express, *nayika* paintings are often inserted among the pages of collections of *ragamala*, or musical modes. For example in the *Todi Ragini* (Fig. 16), a *nayika* appears playing a musical instrument so beautifully that a deer approaches. The tree is positioned so its branches harmonically frame the scene. This musical mode and its accompanying image is associated with a *ragini*, a feminine form of the *ragas*, or melody types, visualized in poetry and painting.
Fig. 15. *Pleasure Pillars*, 2001, vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, ink, and tea on wasli paper, 12 x 10". Collection of Amitta and Purnendu Chatterjee, New York.
The experience of listening to these various *ragas* and *raginis* was meant to evoke emotional feelings of *rasa*. Thus, the connection of these musical modes to this ancient aesthetic theory is something that is a connection that is taken for granted, in that the
images were meant to evoke the flavors or emotions of *rasa* with its nonphysical properties in the minds of the viewer. These manuscript pages were also intimately connected with poetic traditions as B. N. Goswamy quoting an ancient theoretician of the 14th century Vishwanatha, tells us:

*Rasa* is an experience akin to ultimate reality, ‘twin brother to the tasting of Brahma.’ In Vishwanatha, the very definition of poetry involves invoking the word *rasa*. His dictum is often quoted: ‘Poetry is a sentence the soul of which is *rasa*.’

Goswamy goes on to note that the term *rasa* is so pervasive within the context of the arts in India, that is evoked by common viewers and critics, and forms a central part of the vocabulary of art. It may not be stated in so many words by everyone, but in a very real sense, it is what the viewer is looking for in a work of art. As explained above, *rasa* denotes flavor or taste. In other words, the viewer participates, becomes one with, or is absorbed into the artistic work, whether poetic, musical or painterly. By extension, there is an unnamed, though widely understood meaning, of merging or at least participation with inherent or sacred elements.

In Sikander’s reinterpretation, her appropriations of the figures of women in the four corners allude to the multiplicity of meanings associated with these elements of the *ragas* and their collaboration with the idea of *rasa*. The associations are not specific. These figures can well allude to aspects of *The Gita Govinda* story as they can to other emotions evoked in a multiplicity of contexts and settings. In other words, there is a multiplicity of sacred, poetic and musical ideas surrounding the figures of women in Northern Indian manuscript paintings. As women are the pillars or supports of their

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families, the reinterpreted nayikas are positioned in the four corners, simultaneously idealizations as well as the anchors for the image. The idea of support here applies to the cultural and sacred aspects of these figures.

In the center are two headless figures, a decapitated Venus de Milo mirroring a similarly headless South Asian sculptural form who ascends a transitory staircase that seems to lead nowhere. Between the two figures are a joined heart and liver. Above the two figures is the self portrait of Sikander herself with encircled motifs on either side of her head, an appropriation of the circled horned motifs seen on ancient images of Alexander the Great. A flyer jet zooms out of the space above and in the lower right is a circular arrangement that is ambivalent, as it could be either fighter planes or hummingbirds. Out of the multiple layers, we can ascertain images of beasts who prey on one another, an allusion to the many manuscript pages depicting the sport of hunting, one of the favorite subjects of both Mughal and Rajasthani manuscript illustration. The subtheme of how both human and animal creatures prey one on the other is brought into play through this and the ambiguous fighter planes. But these are relegated to the margins as well as layered within the complexity of the composition itself. It is the central headless figures united by the conjoined heart and liver which emerge into the fore of the composition with Sikander’s self portrait above. It is as if the realization that women, although equally marginalized in both East and West, share the same lifeblood and humanity and are reliant on each other, just as liver and heart are both necessary for life. The self-portrait above, signifying her position, has part of this conjoining of East
and West. It is also a powerful icon of determined empowerment that unites the entire image.

In another and more obvious appropriation of this particular Todi Ragini (Fig. 16), entitled Intimacy (Fig. 17), the nayika in the 18th century composition above now appears in a multi-layered composition in which she links arms with the headless Greco-Roman Venus figure on the far right. To the left of these figures is yet another Venus figure, and looking carefully, one can discern the barely sketched in form of another South Asian female figure that Sikander also employs in other compositions. These figures are entwined with various animals. The deer of the 18th century manuscript page now becomes entwined with the Venus figure, and an eagle is also part of the layering. The intertwining of female figures from South Asian manuscript traditions employing musical modes, with the female figures of the Greco-Roman and European traditions, layered together as they are with the deer, eagles and other hybrid creatures brings up several references, some of them heavily ironical. This intertwining may connote the close relationship of women to nature, yet it also references the marginalization of women in all regions of the world historically, while simultaneously drawing from the fact that figures of women have been used by male poets and painters to typify what is ideal, beautiful, and poetic. The title of the work, Intimacy, references all of these meanings and more. If we view the image, and its multiple layers, as referencing a multiplicity of aesthetic systems, then the title also refers to the interdependent nature of humanity and the natural world beyond contemporary categorizations. Multiple histories and multiple aesthetics are slyly referenced in this image, and it is up to the viewer to recognize the
ironies, the diversities, and the ambiguities here. It is no longer sufficient to consider
works of a contemporary artist such as Sikander from solely European aesthetic ideas. In
effect, she is setting the bar at a much higher level, and cultural and aesthetic theories
must now catch up. The interdependent world that is coming into view in Sikander’s work
can no longer be explained from one point of view. Additionally, there is a sly allusion
here to the idea that despite the global marginalization of women the world over,
cognitive categories of our interdependence will emanate from women.

Fig. 17. *Intimacy*, 2001, watercolor, dry pigment, vegetable color and tea on hand prepared wasli paper, 11 x 8.5”.
(Collection of Michael and Jeanne Klein and the Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin.)
I would like to enlarge the discussion of the Venus figure to the left, which is another appropriation from a Mannerist painting dated in the mid sixteenth century by Bronzino entitled *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time* (Fig. 18), which has its own ironic history.

![Fig. 18. Bronzino, (Agnolo di Cosimo), Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time, ca. 1546, oil on wood, 5' 1" x 4' 8-1/4", (National Gallery, London 1545).](image)
Created as an allegory, this eccentric composition by Bronzino may have been commissioned by the Duke of Florence, Cosimo Medici to be given as a gift to the King of France. The erotic imagery of the image would have appealed to the tastes prevalent in both the Italian and French courts. The painting is an allegory and the theme seems to revolve around the dangers of love, lust and jealousy. The central figures of Venus and Cupid figure prominently in the painting, with the allegorical figure of Time to the upper right hand corner of the painting. The painting is controversial for many reasons, most predominantly because of the incestuous nature of the kiss between the figures of Cupid, who is Venus’ son. For many years, this painting was marginalized in the tradition of Italian art. Recently, it has received a lot of attention. In this sense, it is an example of a much maligned painting in the European canon. Yet, recent scholarship has revealed that Bronzino’s aesthetic sensibilities were highly motivated by poetic traditions, including Dante. Bronzino’s own poetry has been analyzed for its transgressive and ironic ambiguities. There is here a similarity between the connection of eroticism, and poetry and painting in South Asian manuscript traditions of the 18th and 19th centuries. Sikander extends the ironical ambiguity of this marginalized tradition in 17th century Italy and the similarities that this little known tradition brings to light. Additionally, the appropriation of the Bronzino is an interesting choice, not only because of its obvious eccentricities, but because there are allusions in this painting to unacknowledged erotic influences that have been marginalized within the trajectories of art historical scholarship from its European inception. In pre-colonial South Asian traditions, these erotic influences were celebrated

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and acknowledged until colonial and other influences silenced them. Similarly, as the poetic and painterly influences of artists like Bronzino were marginalized by certain art historical trajectories, the Pahari manuscript paintings of Todi Ragini and other subjects had become increasingly anachronistic after the colonial period. Sikander appropriates in ironic multiplicity all of these marginalized traditions.

As we have seen in *Intimacy*, irony is further extended into word play. There is a subtle play on words in another work, where Sikander specifically alludes to art historian Partha Mitter’s seminal work, *Much Maligned Monsters*, a history of how South Asian sculpture was largely misunderstood and therefore maligned within European discourse from the Middle Ages through colonial times.191 Sikander cleverly takes up the idea of *Much Maligned Monsters*, but subverts Mitter’s thesis as her imagery points to the fact that in both traditional South Asian accounts as well as in European accounts, the erotic nature of the feminine was suppressed. In any case, this is just one of the allusions in this image which now celebrates the idea of the erotic feminine, not from a male gaze, but as a re-sacralized idea of the interdependence of material and spiritual. The feminine erotic has long been celebrated in South Asian traditions and it is a thread that I want to explore below in the scholarship of Dehejia. Before exploring this trajectory, it is necessary to understand why the idea of re-sacralization is so important within present day realities.

By her own assertion, Sikander has been interested in understanding feminism’s different brands and roles across the globe. The question that continued to arise for her was always about the discourse outside accepted canons, whether art historical, historical,

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philosophical or religious, and how could representation exist outside of these binary oppositions that permeated much of Western discourse. What does representation look like in the in-between space, the third space became the essential question. Her experiences taught her that efforts to bridge the gaping holes of knowledge with regard to South Asian culture did not necessarily lead to changing perceptions as people were not willing to change their assumptions. Particularly in a post 9/11 environment, assumptions about Islamic militancy and oppressed Muslim women have become a sort of madness. In this regard, her work reflects not only a deep awareness of South Asian aesthetic traditions, but an awareness of the limitations of Western feminism as well. Yet these alternative aesthetic feminisms have, while explicitly highlighted in Sikander’s work, remain largely unexplained within Western cultural and art historical resources. The multiple layers that Sikander negotiates reflect an awareness of multiple ideas of femininity and feminisms that incorporate contemporary cosmopolitan identities that merge sacred traditional trajectories. These multiple awarenesses have their correlation in recent South Asian feminist scholarship which views secularism as a dangerous antidote to contemporary problems.

Feminists of every stripe have emphasized that the body is more than just biological entity; particularly the body of woman is historically specific and heavily invested in cultural ideologies. The re-mythologizing of the past, particularly in regard to images of women, has a particularly complex genealogy. South Asian art historian Vidya Dehejia’s scholarship on the auspicious nature of representation of women in

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ancient India explains how the feminist scholarship regarding the gaze of the male spectator in European art is not really translatable to ideas of the auspiciousness of the voluptuous woman in ancient India. Below is an example of an Indian figurine, a *yakshi*, which was found buried in the ruins after the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 c.e. in Pompeii, Italy (Fig. 20). The small figure is made of ivory and was perhaps a mirror handle. The figure attests to the trading links between India and Italy that existed in pre-Christian times.

Fig. 19. *Yakshi* Indian figurine buried in the Vesuvius eruption of 79 c.e. Ivory, 9-1/2” high. (Archaeological Museum, Naples).
The reference to the figure in *Fleshy Weapons* (Fig. 20) is tantalizing. The similarities of this *yakshi* figurine with the figure in *Fleshy Weapons* is suggestive of Sikander’s appropriation. The torso in both is distinctly similar, and neither are in the traditional *tribangha* pose. Sikander has exaggerated some aspects and of course the feet in *Fleshy Weapons* are now transformed into a self-rooted motif. In this, Sikander draws on a popular method of depicting *yakshi* with arms and legs entwined around a tree. However, in the case of *Fleshy Weapsons*, the figure is now self-rooted. It is no accident that she chooses this particular *yakshi* figurine. *Fleshy Weapons* is one of Sikander’s early signature motifs, and as this tiny figurine traveled from India to Pompeii in ancient times, Sikander, too transcends boundaries both in her life and in her art.

Fig. 20. *Fleshy Weapons*, 1997, acrylic, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on linen, 96 x70”. (Private collection.)
The motif of the *yakshi* is an ancient idea on the subcontinent and the history of these motifs is fascinating. The earliest surviving *yakshi* figures were found on Buddhist monuments all over the subcontinent, from Sanchi to Mathura, and over to the Ghandharan region which is now located in present day Pakistan. At Sanchi, *yakshi* figures have one leg wrapped around the trunk and the other arm pulling the branches downward in a prevalent motif appearing prominently on Buddhist stupas, which were public sites of worship transcending sectarianism. (Fig. 21)

Fig. 21. Bracket of a woman and a mango tree, east gateway, Great Stupa, Sanchi, c. 50-25 b.c.e.
Later, images of sensuous women were used to decorate numerous Hindu temples. The association of woman with auspiciousness is a predominant theme within visual culture in precolonial India. In ancient India, it was believed that, by her very touch, a woman could cause a tree to bloom or bear fruit. Dehejia and Devangana Desai affirm the connection of the auspicious nature of women on early pan-Indian monuments from the time of Sanchi in the first century b.c.e., and certainly at Khajuraho in the 11th century c.e. Dehejia notes that the art texts known as the *Shilpa Shastras* confirm that the equation of woman, fertility, growth, abundance and prosperity were connected to images of females on places of worship. She tells us that a shrine was considered inauspicious if lacking these images:

In fact, women seem to have served an apotropaic function whereby her auspiciousness was magically transferred to the monument upon which she was sculpted or painted. A royal palace, a Buddhist stupa, a Hindu or Jain shrine, gained in auspiciousness and fortune when adorned with the figure of a woman. An Orissan art text of the tenth century, the *Shilpa Prakasa*, that provides guidelines for practicing temple architects and sculptors, categorically states that figures of women are a prerequisite on the walls of temples.

The connection between auspiciousness, creative power, and the representations of women are ideas associated with images of the goddesses which are exemplified in a seminal text called *Devi Mahatmayam*. This fifth century text recounts how *Devi* is created to combat certain demons who were causing suffering for humanity and which the male gods could not or would not combat. These demons are captivated by the beauty of *Devi* (in the form of *Durga*), and wish to marry her, but she forces them into a

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battle, which she wins. This emanation of Devi challenges the stereotype in that she is on her own and does not need male protection. Additionally, her power is overwhelming when she is provoked as she turns into Kali, the fearsome goddess capable of great destruction. In all of these examples, Devi overturns stereotypes of the male spectatorship model of the West, and in all of these examples her connection with the active forces of nature is pronounced. As Dehejia notes:

One may affirm that sensuous female images...were not produced to satisfy the viewing pleasure of men. Whatever the actual position of women in society during the first century b.c.e. such imagery is likely to have sent out a positive message and been viewed by women as a powerful affirmation, and a sign of affirmative engenderment. As twentieth century viewers, inundated with exploitative female imagery, we perhaps tend to overlook the ambience, and the relative 'state of innocence' prior to the mechanical reproduction of visual images.¹⁹⁵

As demonstrated, there was already, long before the British colonization of India, a strong indigenous critique to orientalist constructions inherent within the rhetoric of South Asian visual culture. Additionally, there is also inherent in Dehejia’s scholarship a critique located in tradition of recent ideas of the gaze from the viewpoint of a male spectator. Thus, her slightly tongue-in-cheek reference to the state of innocence prior to our age of mechanical reproduction implies the mistake of progressionist history and male dominance. Dehejia notes how this rich visual record with its numerous examples have been marginalized in favor of the logocentric texts which the British Indologists reconstructed their own history of India. And this logocentrism is not only the result of British Indology, but it is also due to the prevalence of textual sources written by educated male monastics in precolonial times. She states that one such text, the Laws of Manu, probably written roughly two centuries after the sculpture of the yakshi above was

¹⁹⁵ Dehejia, Representing the Body, 8.
sculpted, and a text which marginalizes women’s position in society, was taken as one such seminal textual example by both “logocentric British and Indian scholars,” who “marginalized both inscriptive evidence and visual artistic material in favour of the literary text.” However, numerous examples from visual culture together with their inscriptions tell an entirely different history from the textual sources. Such examples were prevalent on temples and other public sites, so we can surmise that where the textual sources seem to have been accessible to restricted members of the elite, the visual examples would have been more representative of the values of society in general as their prominence and prevalence on public sites of worship would demonstrate. The visual culture of ancient India was not just a visual backdrop; it was an integral part of culture. Based on Dehejia’s research, the female body is one that can be interpreted and grounded in an alternative historical perspective that links the feminine to creative power.

Dehejia’s insights bring to awareness a strong indigenous critique to orientalist constructions of the feminine.

Turning back to the detail of Sikander’s similar figure in *TMFI* (Fig. 7), the self-rooted, multi-armed female goddess now assumes the ability to overturn Eurocentric understandings based on a re-interpretation of the past that now implies a new present. But whereas the *yakshi* is specifically rooted, Sikander’s woman now carries these roots within herself. As the *yakshi* was not necessarily connected with any one religious point of view, so Sikander’s many armed woman floats among letters that recall Arabic text. In other words, the image exists much as the trope of a palimpsest text, where the pre-modern, the modern, and the ‘post’ modern coexist globally. The image is plural and

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contradictory, and its aesthetic is an aggregate of historically dated styles randomly reassembled in the present. But Sikander’s image is not so much random as strategically constructed. She has re-excavated the notion of feminine power into a multi-religious present. The self-rooted woman is not the exilic subject of Said’s postcolonialism. The woman is able to locate her rootedness in a judicious re-excavation of tradition.

Sikander employs much the same strategy when she uses the manuscript tradition, a multi-lingual tradition which has also existed on the peripheries of art historical constructions. It is a well known fact that Art Survey textbooks marginalize vast subjects like traditional Islamic and South Asian art by allocating these subjects to minimal chapters existing on the margins of European narrative. By situating these multi-lingual traditions within contemporary global art, Sikander effectively overturns these stereotypes, in favor of a perspective that brings the palimpsestic nature of manuscript painting into multicultural dialogue, reminding us that this dialogue is not of recent date, but has existed for generations. Sikander situates manuscript painting in such a way that makes it possible to see that Europe itself is a synthesis of many cultures, Western and non-Western. The notion of a Europe originating in classical Greece is a premise that does not hold up when one considers the multicultural influences that existed around the Mediterranean. There has long been a multi-directional flow of aesthetic ideas across the Mediterranean. This is reflective of a resistant postmodernism, to a notion that sees modernity as plural, and as capable of encompassing the mythic, as well as continuity and discontinuities. This may or may not encompass postcolonial histories, but it is also capable of viewing these histories in collaboration with alternative histories, pre-colonial
histories and spiritualities that reflect the ability to interpret and deal with reality in more creative ways. This strategic use of tradition is capable of interpreting modernity as plural.

Ultimately, what all of this does is remind us of the ever changing geographies and how various genealogies have developed, both politically and religiously. Questions of home and belonging refuse to be grounded in set historical notions or ideas of nation-state. Sikander’s images do not allow settled notions of any one territory, geography or history to coalesce. What does it mean to be South Asian when one lives in the diaspora of the United States? What does it mean to be born in Pakistan when the identity of that nation which originated in the aftermath of the violence of partition dictated its identity as an Islamic nation-state? Sikander both defies this identity, and affirms another sort of identity, drawing freely on multiple histories.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in a recent essay on the genealogies of home and community reflects that as an NRI (non-resident Indian), living in the United States has necessitated that she negotiate multiple identities. Nowadays, identities are profoundly complicated and how one understands and defines home is now a profoundly political one that cannot leave out religion. Within India itself, in the aftermath of the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992, and the resulting Hindu-Muslim violence, there are numerous efforts to redefine religion against the mobilization of Hindu fundamentalism. Some of the complications of this mobilization are expressed by Mohanty when she states:

Arguing that India was created as a secular state and that democracy had everything to do with equality for all groups (majority and minority) got me
nowhere. The very fundamentals of democratic citizenship in India were/are being undermined and redefined as Hindu.

In regard to this complication, Mohanty states that the adherence to secularism is no longer a critical stance of any value:

Secularism, if it meant absence of religion, was no longer a viable position. From a feminist perspective, it became clear that the battle for women’s minds and hearts was very much center-stage in the Hindu fundamentalist rhetoric on the social position of women.\(^{197}\)

In other words, since religious fundamentalisms everywhere are constructing their identities on the embodiment of women, then these constructions are vitally important for a feminist critique. As a South Asian feminist living in the diaspora, Mohanty’s point that secularism is no longer a viable position, is also a critical stance that is reflected in Sikander’s art. For both Mohanty and Sikander, home is not a place of rootless exile. Although living in multiple locations, whether in the diaspora or South Asia, one begins to reflect as Mohanty does:

That there is no clear or obvious fit between geography, race, and politics for someone like I am always called on to define and redefine these relationships – ‘race,’ ‘Asian-ness,’ and ‘brown-ness’ are not embedded in me, but histories of colonialism, racism, sexism, and nationalism, as well as of privilege (class and status), are involved in my relation to white people and people of color in the U.S.A….. [H]ome, community and identity all fall somewhere between the histories and experiences we inherit and the political choices we make….\(^{198}\)

Whereas it may seem that connections made between the spiritual and women of color reproduce dominant narratives, this is not the case.

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\(^{198}\) Mohanty, “Crafting Feminist Genealogies,” 499.
It is not only South Asian feminist scholarship that is exploring these important influences. Chicana scholar, Laura E. Perez, explains that addressing the politics of spirituality from an indigenous perspective is a reclamation of a belittled spiritual worldview that is crucial to women, particularly if it is a personally and socially empowering worldview. As she explains, to adapt the politics of the spiritual is the ultimate subversion because:

These knowledges, which are as old as humanity, and which have outlived pseudoscientific and culturally parochial philosophies that rationalize imperialist capital and racism and consign the non-Western to the primitive prehistory of civilized ‘man,’ remain as alternatives to the growing solitude, alienation, despair, and illness of too many of today’s societies of rampant consumerism, spiritual emptiness, ethical confusion, and the visible crimes and duplicities of government, big business, and institutional religion.199

In my interpretation, Sikander uses a similar strategy with South Asian aesthetic as a politics of the spiritual within a subversive politics of remembering. Like the Chicana artists that Perez discusses in her monograph, Sikander’s strategic use of ironical allegories plumbs the depths of South Asian histories in her multiple references to forgotten and marginalized precolonial histories that celebrated the auspicious nature of women. In doing so, she transcends the, “pseudoscientific and culturally parochial philosophies that rationalize imperialist capital and racism”. She draws on alternative metaphysical concerns that have multiple aesthetic genealogies, and thereby celebrates alternative histories that subvert the spiritual emptiness and ethical confusions of contemporaneity. Yet, for all of the alternative aesthetic references that act as an antidote for our present day confusions, Sikander is not blind to contemporary political and

divisive dangers. In effect, her work is an intervention, a warning, a plea for the re-invention of positive alternatives.

_Venus Wonderland_ (Fig. 22) demonstrates these multiple re-incorporations while also overturning stereotypes. It is an image from the mid 1990s wherein Sikander appropriates a magical and wide diversity of sources from Buddhist and Christian stories to South Asian popular culture and European folk tales, exemplifying a palimpsestic approach in employing many layers, and therefore many meanings, all of which cannot exactly be pinned down.

![Venus Wonderland](image)

*Fig. 22. Venus Wonderland, 1994-97, opaque watercolor, vegetable dyes and tea wash on wasli paper. 12 x 10-3/4".*
The main part of the image itself is set within a large border populated by diverse animals and landscape reflecting Safavid-inspired Mughal art. The monkey hanging from a tree is actually a sly reference to a Buddhist *jataka* tale from ancient India. The *jataka* tale relates how the Buddha, who in a past life was a clever monkey, subverted the attempts of a crocodile to capture him as he crossed the river. In doing so, he employed a strategic wisdom which not only prevented his own demise, but taught the reptile an approach of kindness and collaboration. In other words, it was a wisdom that protected not only himself but the crocodile as well. In Sikander’s image, the monkey is veiled and therefore female, and hangs from a tree by the tale holding what appear to be apples – probably a veiled reference to Eve in the story told in Genesis. Sikander turns the tables on Eve as responsible for the original sin of the human race. Instead, the veiled and monkey who appears with a halo now holds the apples of wisdom. This wisdom now enables the monkey to divert the crocodile from killing him. Through such a compassionate action, the monkey not only saves herself, but prevents the crocodile from committing a murder. It is an act of kindness that not only turns the tables on the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis, but also introduces how, in saving herself, the enlightened monkey also saves others from their worst selves.

The crocodile from the Buddhist *jataka* rests in the shell of Venus, which has been appropriated from the Italian Renaissance artist Sandro Botticelli’s painting of *The Birth of Venus*. The head of Venus now floats to one side near a veiled black hybrid half-lion, half-eagle image, a motif which Sikander employs frequently. In European iconography it is what is termed as a griffin. In contemporary Punjabi terms, it is referred
to as a *challawah*, a reference for someone who moves very fast from here to there and cannot be pinned down, as Sikander herself informed Homi Bhabha in an interview.²⁰⁰ Sikander’s reinterpretation strongly resembles the hybrid image from a popular Art Survey I of a Griffin from the Islamic Mediterranean, probably from Fatimid Egypt, 11th century. Art Survey texts are long known for their brief, generalized histories of other regions outside of Europe. This recent edition by Marilyn Stokstad is no different, with its brief chapter on Islamic Art, collapsing the varied regions around the Mediterranean from the 7th century through the fall of the Ottoman Empire into less than thirty pages. As discussed previously, this particular bronze Griffin which suspiciously resembles Sikander’s veiled re-interpretation, was taken as booty during the victory of Pisa over the Egyptian fleet in 1087, and it was exhibited on top of the cathedral in Pisa until 1828 (Fig. 10).²⁰¹ It is another reference to the ‘other’ within, and it is a reference that Europe itself was constituted by other multiple histories.

The central figure of a red-cloaked woman who is no longer the young innocent girl of the story of “Little Red Riding Hood” appears just below the monkey holding the three apples. In the story, she is a young girl threatened by violence from a wolf. In Sikander’s reinterpretation, she is a veiled woman who holds one red hand over her heart, while a lotus flower blooms on her right. A half concealed apple floats beneath her, perhaps being held by her other hand. It is another reference that overturns young innocent girl into sophisticated woman who is now very capable of taking care of herself,

²⁰⁰ Homi Bhabha, “*Chillava Klatch: Shahzia Sikander Interviewed by Homi Bhabha*,” (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998), 20.

and who uses wisdom in the form of an apple to overturn the crocodile’s murderous intentions. Additionally, the crocodile who sits in Venus’ half-shell is now rendered ineffectual as his gigantic mouth is encircled by two rings. As Eurocentric narratives have usually marginalized and even cannibalized the very cultures without which the Italian Renaissance would not have been possible, Sikander silences these cannibalizing tendencies by closing the crocodile’s mouth with two rings rendering the crocodile ineffectively voiceless and no longer able to nourish itself through minoritarian cultural accomplishments.

We have already noted the iconic figure of the veiled goddess, and how her polyvalent iconic signals constitute a resistance to neo-orientalist feminist inscriptions. What Sikander has done here in every case, is to turn stereotypes around, to turn weaknesses into strengths and self-empowerment. Just as the monkey in the Buddhist *jataka* tale, although he is physically weaker than the crocodile, manages to outwit the aggression of the crocodile through kindness and cunning, so too, has Nandy encapsulated the strategies of non-violent critique that Sikander demonstrates in *Venus in Wonderland*.

It is the same strategy that Nandy uses in the *Intimate Enemy*, when he explains the way Gandhi’s own androgynous self construction enabled him to challenge British imperial masculinist constructions of superiority, and how this self-construction was borrowed from “the great and little traditions of saintliness in India, and also probably from the doctrine of power through divine bi-unity in some of the *vamachari* or left hand...
sects…”\textsuperscript{202} Within this understanding, not only are manliness and womanliness equal, but the ability to transcend the distinction is the marker of godlike qualities. Certain images of Hindu Gods encapsulate these qualities. Shiva is sometimes seen as half woman, half man in some sculptures. Rama, the avatar of Krishna, and hero in the \textit{Ramayana} defeats Ravana, not through his macho physique, but through his superior character coupled with his martial abilities. Nandy further explains how Gandhi, by conjoining the idea of power as a moral force with traditional notions of femininity, overturned the British colonial construction of itself as the masculine aggressor.\textsuperscript{203} Gandhi constructed an androgynous self image that turned around, on an embodied level and an epistemological level, the hierarchy of masculine over feminine that the British propagated as a means of colonial control. Gandhi was able to transform the meaning of what masculine and feminine signified, and in fact disrupt the very notion of masculinity as superior. He employed a self-embodied use of traditional wisdom as a creative means to disrupt and overturn masculinist epistemological colonial categories in favor of creative feminine categories. In a similar way, Sikander, too, reconstructs notions of gender that defy Eastern and Western categories. The feminine is now typified by multiple images of self-empowerment, as she now refuses to inhabit the shell of Venus wherein the crocodile is located, and instead opts to exercise her cunning and wisdom. The palimpsest surface of this image wherein layers are inscribed on top of one another, simultaneously carrying the past and present, also speak to multiple geographic and

\textsuperscript{202} Ashis Nandy, \textit{The Intimate Enemy} (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), 52.

\textsuperscript{203} Nandy, \textit{The Intimate Enemy}, 52-55.
temporal realities. Within references to multiple pasts, stereotypes which usually serve as signals of female oppression are now transformed into empowerment. This re-animation of multiple mythologies is a complex means of re-conceptualizing pasts as a means of altering and re-animating the politics of the present. This creative approach is both a remembering and re-introduction into the culture of cognitive categories which go beyond self and other and beyond the oppressed feminine stereotypes. Simultaneously, this applies to nation-state boundaries.

Fig. 23. *United World Corp*, 2003, watercolor, dry pigment on wasli paper, 20.3 x 24.1 cm.
In more recent work, Sikander references geopolitics without buying into dichotomies. *United World Corp*, the title of which has a double allusion to the United States as neo-colonial power through its corporations, and the word “corp” as an alternative reference (in French) to the body, whether nation or person, is actually an appropriation from a 16th century Safavid drawing from Iran. Sikander’s appropriation of the image also includes numerous contemporary allusions within its multiple layers.

Fig. 24. *Garden of Heavenly Creatures*, Iran, Safavid period, mid-16th century. Black line, gold and silver on paper; tinted with red and blue, 11 x 6-13/16".
The scene in the Safavid drawing (Fig. 24) depicts a garden with a group of *peris*, mythical creatures who are usually women and came to represent fallen angels. The *peris* populate the garden scene along the bottom of the composition and up the stairway itself to a platform where the queen of the *peris* is seated. The platform is actually a kind of treehouse which is guarded by a *jinn*. It is the upper section of the drawing which Sikander has appropriated in *United World Corp*. The *peri* queen of all of these heavenly creatures sits on the balustraded platform, leaning against a cushion where she picks fruits from a bowl offered by an attendant while another *peri* sits in one of the branches playing a lute. However, Sikander has changed the Safavid composition in that the queen is being offered the scales of justice instead of fruit. In this paradisiacal garden landscape, Sikander has added two circles. Embedded within each of them are the rough outlines of the United States, imprinted in blue, and the lute player to the left emerges into one of the maps of the United States which is the mirror form of the other. In Sikander’s appropriation, these mirrored maps are cloudlike illusions, as the *peris* insertion into the fabric of the map on the left demonstrates.

The *peris*, like the *yakshis*, are semi-divine beings who transcend the boundaries of institutional religion. They are associated with natural phenomena and the belief in these figures plays and diffuses the boundaries between material and spiritual, divine and human. They are both associated with indigenous popular belief systems.

The mirrored maps, a contemporary allusion to the global reach of the United States in today’s world, are really illusionary cloudlike forms, here today and gone tomorrow. The scales of justice held by the *peri* Queen represent the culmination and
true nature of the message of this image, that is, the garden which exists beyond nation-state boundaries and global capitalist realities, is what remains populated by indigenous and closely held popular beliefs represented by the peris.

Just as Intimacy (Fig. 17) alludes to the “other” within as it does to the marginalization of women in all geographic locations, so too does this composition, but now on a geophysical level. As in Chaman (Fig. 1) in Chapter 1, the allusion to a paradisiacal garden is again evident. The garden is implicit as a layer beneath the diaphanous cloudlike mirrored maps. It is not the garden of paradise that exists in an afterlife, but a garden without boundaries that exists in the present. It is a garden beyond east and west paradigms, beyond colonial and postcolonial paradigms, beyond gender stereotypes. Implicit amid the contradictions of this image is a message of a more socially respectful vision of global coexistence. After all, the neocolonial illusion of the twin maps of the United States are cloudlike, and easily pierced by the peri carrying her lute. In these mirror forms, there is a reminder that in both visible and invisible ways, we are each other’s other selves.
Conclusion

I have argued that, in contrast to Saidian postcolonial discourse and its inherent critical secularism, Sikander is reinterpreting the idea of the sacred as imminent and necessary within daily life, and as an antidote to implicit notions of ‘the other’. The images that have been discussed all have multiple allusions, messages, and aesthetic trajectories both in and outside of the Eurocentric visual realm. Thus, they demand a more complex knowledge of not only diverse aesthetic systems, but of multiple approaches to religious traditions, to aesthetic traditions, and to the contemporary problems that plague our globe. There is a concern throughout all of these images, although it is not blatant, that the inequities and contradictions of the world we live in must be addressed in more complex and positive ways. In many of these images we have examined, Sikander certainly exposes the negative stereotypes and false projects of the oppression of Muslim or Hindu women, as she exposes the limitations of Eurocentric illusionism. Additionally, in spite of all of the recent intellectual emphasis toward multicentral inclusion, and the pretensions of postcolonialism in this regard, the ethnic ‘others’ are still being reinscribed on the margins, at least in contemporary theoretical discourse, and the images we have looked at present multiple challenges to this textual-oriented theoretical discourse.

Sikander’s art demonstrates that what is necessary now is a shift out of the purely theoretical and textual mode of discourse, to ways wherein we all become participants
within global culture. Remaining within a postcolonial paradigm, and within the secular textual tradition that Said advocates, and which subsequent postcolonial scholarship has done nothing to de-center, will not lead to these multiple modes of understanding. Sikander is reintroducing and migrating alternative notions of the sacred into the present, and in doing so she enacts a critique of postcolonial identities within her work that provides a vehicle for stepping out of a re-colonizing mode. The turn to the aesthetic such as Sikander enacts, is also a turn towards resacralizing and enlarging our theoretical discourses.

Above all, Sikander has created and continues to create images that do indeed mirror the many conflicts of the societies we live in, and yet simultaneously these images embody and facilitate a critical and daring consciousness that is necessary to both our social and spiritual well being.
Bibliography


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