

Images on Water

By Zehra Hamdani Mirza

As I write this, the image of bodies falling from a plane in Kabul's sky has already been imprinted in the world's eye. The US have stepped away from a fight around the Euphrates River and the Hindu Kush mountains—ancient lands that inflect Meher Afroz's art. These are places where prophets walked, and blood was shed, where soils and waters are worthy of conquest. This East—South or Middle, depending on where you are standing—has filled Meher Afroz's 50-year practice with a mysterious longing and power. "Standing here", according to historian Peter Frankopan, opens "new ways to view the past."

Hazaras and *Hilm* (Forbearance)

One of Afghanistan's largest ethnic minorities, the Hazaras have been systematically discriminated against throughout history: in the late 1900s, Pashtun King Amir Abdul Rahman Khan ordered the killing of all Shias in central Afghanistan, leaving tens of thousands of Hazaras dead; the Taliban proclaimed they can be killed as they were "not muslim".¹ Violence has dispersed the Hazaras around the world, with families like those of artist Khadim Ali seeking sanctuary in British-ruled India.

In 2013 when a Quetta bomb blast killed 100 members of the community, the mourners refused to bury their dead. Meher, deeply affected, attended protests in the aftermath. One of these events, held at Karachi's Teen Talwar had a young Hazara protestor with a banner "I am a Hazara Am I next?" inspired Meher, and a bow and arrow symbol printed on one of the posters surfaced in her work. This series uses pattern and ornamentation to convey brutality and senseless violence. Combining the colours of the ocean with an agitated texture, the works are figureless and beautiful.



¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2016/6/27/afghanistan-who-are-the-hazaras>

Created in two panels, the painting reads like day and night. On one side there is the tranquility of an ordered silver symmetry, and on the right, troubled markings and layers of texture in sapphire tones. Like her 2010 works that offer contemplation on honour killings, the overall impression of the piece is decorative, with patterns appearing in an ordered manner. (Ali A. , 2020) But Meher's title is a clear proclamation and proud stand with a stateless, ignored community— *Main Hazara Hoon II* (I am Hazara). With grace and courage, she also shows that beauty belongs to this group that has been chased through geography and time, not anonymity or disdain.

Interestingly, by employing pattern and abstract motifs, Meher is able to discuss difficult subjects and allow viewers to “transcend the earthly in order to reach the divine” (Ali A. , 2020). The restraint she employs to depict injustice is reminiscent of Hazrat Imam Zainul Abidin²'s speech in Yazid's palace, in the aftermath of Karbala, where he poetically showcased his father's family, and thus conveyed the atrocity of Yazid's actions. Chained and wounded, the Imam begins not by mentioning the brutality afflicted on his father, or the women and children he is accompanying, but instead, by introducing himself. Opening with their lineage to the monotheistic prophets, he references Abraham, as well as Jerusalem and Makkah— the ancient hearts of the three monotheistic faiths.

“I am the Son of Makkah and Mina
I am the Son of Zamzam³ and Safa
I am the son of the best of men to have performed the rites of the sanctuary
I am the son of the man who was led by Buraq⁴ through the air
I am the son of the man who led the angels in prayer (Nakshawani, 2014)”

In its poetic cadences and images: “the one who flies with wings, and the lion of God”, “the one who was backed by Gabriel”, there is a connection with eternity and the realm of the celestial. This is the space of stars, and planets, of angels and otherworldly creatures, like the flying horse Buraq. Meher captures this loftiness, and ethos of the divine truth, with its beautiful rewards. She alludes to heavenly gardens and spaces, the tranquility of the noble and righteous. In the manner of Imam Zainul Abidin's successfully conveying the magnitude and barbarity of killing the Prophet's grandson, by alluding to their purity and closeness to a beautiful and noble realm, Meher echoes a restraint and dignity. She uses flowers and rain clouds to show murder.

² The fourth Shia Imam and only surviving male after Karbala. In Shia belief he is revered for his supplications and forbearance.

³ A miraculously generated source of water from [Allah](#), which sprang spontaneously thousands of years ago when [Ibrahim's](#) (Abraham's) son ['Isma'il](#) (Ishmael) was left with his mother [Hajar](#) (Hagar) in the desert, thirsty and crying. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zamzam_Well

⁴ The Night Journey Mairaj, where the Prophet visited Makkah and Jerusalem as well as to the skies and heavens, where he observed the stars and the system of the world and conversed with the souls of the previous Prophets, with the angels of the heavens and saw the centres of blessing and torture (Paradise and Hell). <https://www.al-islam.org/the-message-ayatullah-jafar-subhani/chapter-22-meraj-heavenly-ascension>



*(detail) Graphite on Nepalese paper layered down on canvas
107 x 66 cm
2012*

“...You cannot remove us from the minds (of people), and you cannot fade our message. You will never reach our glory and can never wash the stain of this crime from your hands. (Shahin, 2002)”
--Lady Zainab’s sermon in the court of Yazid

The patience and valor of Lady Zainab, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH’s) granddaughter and aunt of Imam Zainul Abidin, deeply inspired Meher, who regularly references her when identifying female role models. She valiantly saves Imam Zainul Abidin’s life and defiantly responds to the Governor of Kufa with the famous “I saw nothing but beauty” when taunted about how her brother was butchered at Karbala (Shahin, 2002). Meher is guided by this belief that suffering in the way of God is beautiful. Her mixed media, material rich works gesture to brutality and tenderness, darkness, and light. Employing exquisiteness, she shows us the error of our ways, “our forsaken yet niggling conscience” and “the emptiness at the core of the human condition” (Hanif, 2012). In her 2012 show *Naqsh bur Abb*, which translates to writing on water, she speaks to the idea of fading enlightenment. The works glisten and glow giving a sense of moonlight and pearls; several golden works in the series refer to pools of water reflecting light, with momentary flashes of divine clarity.⁵ The works are a gentle echo of Lady Zainab’s prophesy, despite aggressive efforts to erase and silence, truth is hard to escape.

⁵ (Farrukh, 2012)

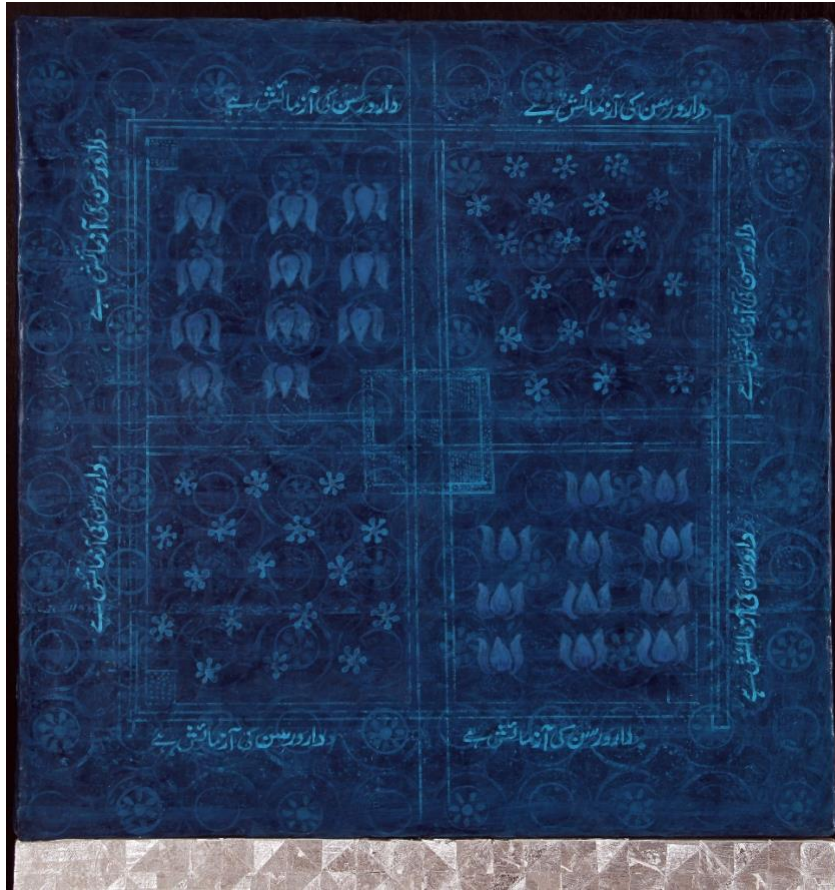


Image 2 (detail) Silver leaf and Acrylic on canvas, 2012
66 x 31cm
(text translates roughly to baptism by fire)

In a two paneled work, that reads almost cartographically, Meher flings a question to us, how do you hope to enter Paradise, depicted by the perfect geometry of the Charbagh, without understanding the baptism of fire, “*dar-o-rasn ki aazmaish*”, to use Ghalib’s words? (Hanif, 2012) When you speak the truth, she says, you are alone. You can even be jailed (Afroz, 2021). In the lower panel of the painting, the disposition of the work changes. Through the poignant inclusion of Aaley Raza’s *Salam I akhir* (The final salutation)—a farewell poem read to mark the tragedy of Karbala on the 10th of Muharram—she shows us who has successfully persevered, with dignity and patience. The aural rendering of *Salam I akhir* combines the cadence of a dirge and ballad, and its public recitation is a solemn occasion revered by all South Asian Muslims. Meher’s use of it in a collection devoted to faith provokes a larger discussion on the destruction of a collective homage that is being replaced by sectarianism (Farrukh, 2020). It is a notion that comes back to the dispersal of the Hazaras through the ages and the world.

So absent from mainstream literature and imaginations is the persecution of the Shia Imams and their followers, that the perpetrators are sometimes even romanticized. Rulers like Harun Rashid occupy a place of mystique, making appearances in the fictional One Thousand and One Nights. History books record his thousands of pairs of boots lined with sable and mink; gifts of gold bowls piled with silver for

wedding guests (Frankopan, 2015). These details contrast dramatically with Rashid's paranoia and beheading of the Shias and his fifteen-year imprisonment, torture and killing of the 7th Shia Imam Musa al-Kazim (Nakshawani, 2014). By continually referencing the *Ahlul Bayt* and their teachings, Meher holds our collective memory up to scrutiny. The works also form a wider critique of power and narrative. Known for her surfaces, she revels in textures and erasure, as if providing a moral and political atlas. With layering of paper and surface, it is as though she wants "the viewer to experience this search into the past, as she worked to embed and push the imagery into the distance." (Ali, 2020).

Home and its Vocabulary

In Pakistan language became a highly politicized issue shortly after independence; Bengali speakers (in East Pakistan until 1971) protested against Urdu as a National Language, as well as Sindhi nationalists who felt their mother tongue was being marginalized (Farrukh, 2020). When Meher migrated to Karachi from Lucknow in the 1970s, she found Urdu beleaguered. (Niilofur, 157) The national education system had taken a page from Thomas Babington Macaulay's book, where local literature and language was "less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England" (Thomas Babington Macaulay, 2021). Whether self-inflicted orientalism, or Macauley's continued success, there was no common vocabulary, "language or identity or cultural reference point" in the city. Meher's determined use of Urdu can be seen as an intervention, creating a new lens to reclaim fading cultural memories (Farrukh 2020). It also signifies Meher's efforts to make Urdu the language of Pakistan's art discourse (Farrukh 2020). In her interviews and public appearances at art events, there is often a scramble to find a suitable interpreter due to the complexity of her ideas and Urdu skills. She combines a love of literary and philosophical traditions, interlacing her work with quotes and texts from Iqbal and Faiz, and avidly reads Ali Shariati and Ghalib. Her years of handling *marsiya* books and the Quran brought the *Haashia* frame—synonymous with miniature paintings—to her work.



Mein (detail)

Mixed media

22 x 22 cm

2017

The late Zarina Hashmi shares Meher's experience of displacement after the splitting of Pakistan and India. In a piece from the Letters from Home series, Hashim uses a letter from her sister giving news of their mother's death, it reads 'Meri ma hamaisha saaya talaash karti rahi' ('My mother was always searching for shade.') The word 'saaya' literally means 'shade' and metaphorically means 'protection'.⁶ Zarina draws the frame of a black house around the letter, creating a home, and comforting 'saaya'. This wordplay, and longing echoes Meher's practice.

⁶ <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-46-summer-2019/kamila-shamsie-art-of-the-word>



Zindaan
Etching, print on paper
20 x 27cm
2004

“Decades after leaving Lucknow, this onrush of emotion, a fountainhead of her work, is apparent in every conversation with Meher. Merely invoking the city of her birth suffices to rouse the nostalgia which nourishes her practice and is inexorably woven through the warp of memory and the weft of her personal history (Apte, 2020).” The symbol of the House—the guidance, security and feelings of affection it provokes, takes on a larger significance in Meher’s thoughts and motifs. Gesturing not just to the Lucknow of her past, but also to her belief system. Mentioned in the Quran, “Ahlul Bayt” translates to ‘The people of the House’. Specifically representing the Prophet (PBUH), his cousin and son in law Ali, his daughter Fatima, and their two sons Hassan and Hussain (thus forming the 5 pure souls of the *Panjatan* symbol of the palm), this house shines like a sun in Meher’s firmament. It nourishes, guides, and enriches her visual vocabulary with majestic motifs. In *Majalis*⁷ the continuous violation of the sanctity of the *Ahlul Bayt*’s mausoleums and homes is a frequent lament.

We live in an age of testimony, according to Aasim Akhtar, bearing witness to, and forever reshaping the past (Akhtar, 2020). The Founder of the Mughal Empire, Babur tended a garden called *Bagh-i-Wafa*⁸, with a pool surrounded by orange and pomegranate trees and a clover meadow. “A most beautiful sight” he’d proudly say (Frankopan, 2015). This garden was in Kabul. Meher Afroz offers a mirror to places and beliefs considered peripheral and forgotten as stations of grace and knowledge. In a world fighting over the future, Meher gestures to the past. It is a place that speaks of love and truth, and guides us to another world, an afterlife beyond the tumultuousness of this one.

⁷ Majalis is a gathering of devout people seeking to obtain religious virtue by listening to the story of Imam Hussain and his companions. https://www.instagram.com/p/CShJLuYpWlt/?utm_medium=share_sheet

⁸ The Garden of Fidelity

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