

Zarina Hashmi: A Critical Study on the Exhibition 'Paper like Skin'

Anshu Singh

Abstract

Indian art consisted of many distinct artistic styles where artists blended traditional and western art traditions and created art depicting the rapid change in the society and even in the art styles. Zarina Hashmi is a semi-abstract artist who stepped into the Indian art world to express the after effects of partition indicative of migration from India to Pakistan. Her relationship and engagement with paper has been very unique. The involvement of Paper in her artworks is surrounded by themes like exile, isolation and displacement evoking her inner feelings. Through paper she identifies her belongingness which she compares with skin.

The study enquires about the artworks created by Zarina Hashmi and related to home revolving around paper which were exhibited in the popular exhibition 'Paper like Skin' at Hammer Museum, Los Angeles featuring approximately 60 artworks. It focuses on few of the important artworks which reflect the artist's nostalgic memories back at home in India.

The concept of using Paper as the common medium in most of the artworks has been studied here. The paper also focusses on the observation that the medium Paper has been an essential element during the artist's journey. Zarina being the strong woman of her times has been able to distinguish her longing for a real home; detached from all the temporary houses she resided in. The process of her learning art depicts her attachment with Paper, whom she personifies and compares her with her own life situation.

The interpretation done through the artworks indicate that the artist did not

choose to return back to her real home in India as she could not erase the pain and suffering, she underwent during partition. The faded memories in her mind where she was separated from her home and her childhood memories are quite visible through her artworks.

Keywords: *Displacement, Exile, Home, Partition, Paper.*

Introduction

The artist, Zarina Hashmi daughter of a university history professor, was born in 1937 in Aligarh, India, a sizable city southeast of New Delhi in the region of Uttar Pradesh. She was 10 when the partition of India and Pakistan occurred. She attended the Aligarh Muslim University and graduated with a bachelor's degree in mathematics in 1958, with hopes of becoming an engineer. It was then that her family moved to Pakistan, where their Muslim faith encountered less resistance. She married a diplomat in the Foreign Services and since then lived and worked in Thailand, France, Germany, Japan and the United States first Los Angeles, then New York. During her stays at these places, Hashmi learnt about several techniques in painting and art. She studied woodblock printing in Bangkok and Tokyo, and intaglio with S. W. Hayter at Atelier-17 in Paris. The artist currently lives and works in New York.

A glimpse of her life story reveals that Zarina's artistic practice on the whole remains overwhelmingly enmeshed in the experience of political, territorial and social rupture that we know today as Partition. So do the various places that she visited in her lifetime. Themes of displacement, exile, search for home and social fracture, a result of the experiences Hashmi underwent, became the underlying theme in her work. Not only do her paintings but her choice of material also present the themes artistically. The present paper examines select works of Zarina Hashmi to study the vivid and varied ways in which her themes find expression in her work of art.

Surfaces as metaphors

Hashmi's use of surfaces; paper, woodcut etc. play a major role in the work that she produces. They seem to be integrated with the theme that she portrays in her work. The imagery in her early works derives from the material that is Paper which is typically made from wood pulp, and she printed simple designs from inked fragments of wood. While the remaining artworks are non-figurative, the

grainy compositions suggest elements revolving around her first home fences, screens, walls and pens, or else the shapes seem to fold back in on themselves. Throughout her travel experience, she collected paper as a souvenir. She was curious to work with unconventional printing processes and to discover new uses for paper. She explored a number of methods including cratching, folding, cutting, knitting and sewing paper. She also experimented with pulping paper, which initiated her to create paper sculptures.

“Paper is the most organic material, almost like human skin. You can scratch it, you can mould it, it even ages.” (Pesenti, 2011, para. 1) Paper is central to her as a surface to work on material with its own individualistic properties and history. According to her, the paper itself has a biography of its own and serves as a vehicle of memory. It bonds people with history, identity and a sense of commonality. Paper fixes the memory of facts and immortalizes men providing a fundamental nexus between past and present.

Paper from Khadi Gram Udyog Bhawan was used in the creation of the artworks with the intention to promote traditional craft which was quite prominent in both Hindu and Muslim cultures. She imparted an individuality of her own character to each print generated by coupling the fragile paper with the hardwood. Her motive was to transform the flaws of the paper used into virtues which was made possible through sharpened lines, tightened compositions, open spaces that gave the paper an escape to breathe freely. She considered her life with the paper and in order to fulfil her desires she allowed the paper to breathe even when she was suffocated with the happenings in her life.

Zarina used specific types of papers to express a specific sense of identity. Paper according to her understanding was fragile and resilient in literal and metaphorical realms. She merged a carver and a draftsman to bring out scratches, folds, perforation and many more physical qualities. Hashmi's ruminations on place are a central consideration of her prints: A sheet of paper functions as her portable but constant home. She took help of bold handcrafted lines and shaved surfaces to express the cultural diversity which marks notions of boundary, loss, displacement and home.

The woodcuts are wrapped in themes of home and displacement, exile and social fracture and tend to uncover the marks of her own biography. The whole process is graphically constructed in woodcuts through space and time. She has

inscribed memory through geometric lines, mapping locations and dislocations in cities that have been destroyed by political conflicts. What is new to her creation is the shift from her own identity to a shared identity. She draws an analogy between her life and the different borders on the map.

Zarina's artworks are not only monochromatic, but also symmetrical and filled with geometric shapes. The artworks are the influences of exile, displacement and search for one's origin which have persistently concerned her since childhood. She consciously attempts to simply lay her concerns bare and raw to her audiences. She makes use of the starkness of paper and bronze and metamorphoses them in several ways that are embossing, casting or laminating and mixing patina with the bronze. The several combinations of paper and other materials (generally inked fragments on wood) on paper giving rise to newer metamorphoses, symbolize new identities that man acquires with every new displacement faced. The geometric shapes which are abstract in nature symbolize doors, boundary walls, floor plans, fences, jail (ornamental screens) and the archetypal house form in her works indicate a longing for a lost shelter.

Artworks:

Homes I Made/ A Life in Nine Lines



Figure 1: Zarina Hashmi, "Homes I Made/ A Life in Nine Lines", 1997.

Note: Portfolio of 9 etchings and one cover plate printed in black on Arches Cover white paper, Chine Colle on handmade Nepalese paper.

It is a portfolio of woodblock prints from 1958 to 1997, which depicts the floor plans of the houses and apartments in which she has lived, mostly during those two decades of travelling with her late husband. She calls their Paris apartment Watched the Seine flow by and waited for him to come home; she deems their residence in Bonn an uncertain time; and she anoints the outline of her New York City loft A space to hide forever. (Beth, 2012, p. 115) She inks almost exclusively in black as she believes that black makes one read. In the portfolio, she has included the nine places where she has resided in with her husband right from Bangkok, New Delhi, Paris, Bonn, Tokyo, Los Angeles, Santa Cruz to New York.

The portfolio was the only memory of her stay with her husband in different parts of the world. She effortlessly withdraws attention covering the themes of home and homelessness at the same time. She conveys that one cannot have many homes but home is a single unit providing shelter and peace.

Letters from Home



Figure 2: Zarina Hashmi, "Letters from Home", folio I- VIII, 1984.

Note: Woodblock and metalcuts printed on handmade kozo paper and mounted on somerset paper, 11½ x 8¾" smallest image size, 12 x 9" largest image size, 22½ x 15½".

“Letters from Home” is a portfolio of eight monochromatic woodblock and metal cut prints, produced using original letters written in Urdu to Zarina by her sister Rani. From the letters, the artist made printing plates which she used to print onto handmade Kozo paper. The letter imprint was then surrounded or overlaid by the outline of a house, a floor plan or the map of a geographical location, using a woodblock print.

The series was made in her New York studio in 2004. As the title indicates, “Letters from Home” acts as a preserved archive of the letters sent to her by her sister over a period of time. Since her departure from India in 1958 to accompany her husband Saad Hashmi, the artist has moved frequently between cities, countries and continents. Immediately after her departure, her family was required to relocate to Pakistan, resulting in the loss of the family home. They moved from Delhi in India to Karachi in Pakistan, where her sister still lives.

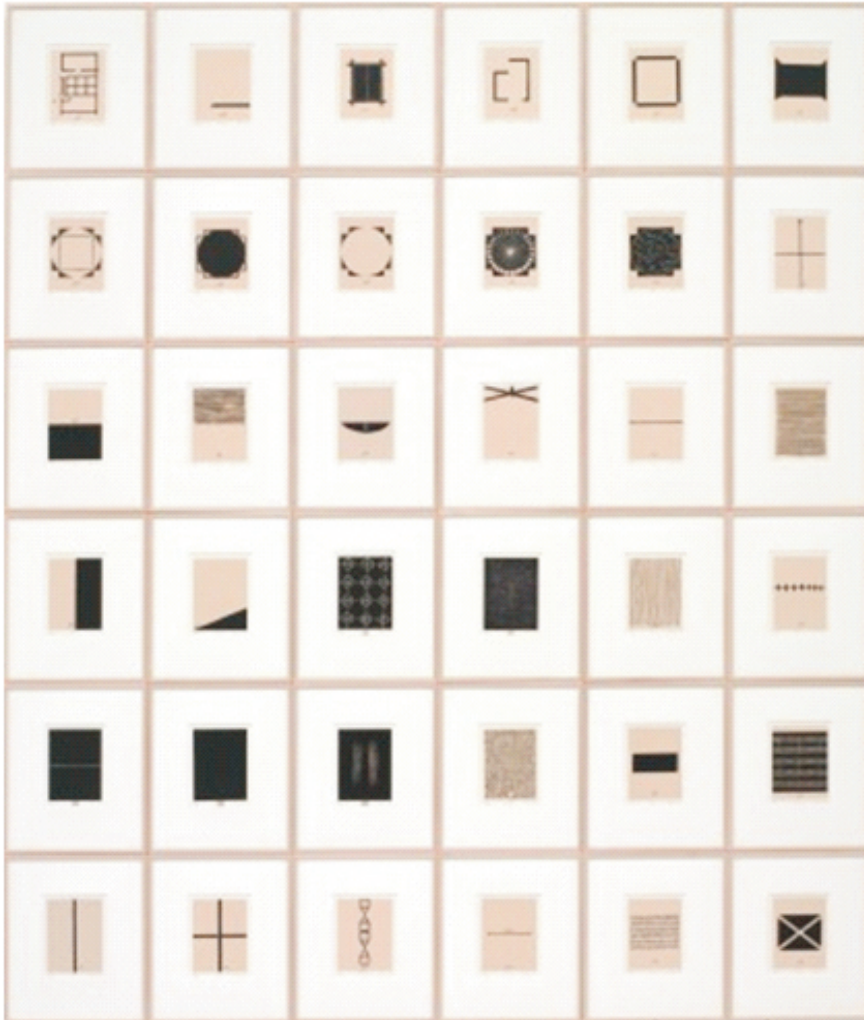
The loss of the home and the birthplace as the home are the main themes. Home plays an important part in her work. She has said: 'Home is the centre of my universe; I make a home wherever I am.' (Sen, “A conversation with Zarina”, 2006, p.13) It draws on a range of sources, from her childhood home in pre-partition India to her sojourns across the world. The portfolio functions as a series of maps that trace the artist's journeys and record the places in which she has lived. Working with actual geographical locations, she acts as cartographer, preserving communication from her sister within the sites of her own memories. Homes, floor plans and routes are printed onto the letters, presenting her life as an atlas, one that is both a universal document and a record of personal experience. It reveals her experience of being distanced from home and loved ones, and functions as a diary of the activities of the family she had left behind.

Text plays a key role in her work and the inclusion of characters written in her native Urdu, act as a reminder of the geo-political specificity of her cultural heritage and identity. The Partition of India not only dislodged the physical connection of north Indian Muslim families to a particular place, but it also disrupted a sophisticated cultural milieu. Hashmi has said: 'The words are in my own language, recalling a time, a sensibility of thought and feeling.' (Sen, “A conversation with Zarina”, 2006, p.13) In light of the relative decline of the

literary form of Urdu in parlance in pre-partition India, which acts as an assertion of personal identity and a statement of post-partition defiance.

Home is a Foreign Place

Figure 3: Zarina, 'Home is a foreign place', 1999, portfolio of 36.



Note: Woodcuts and letterpress, mounted on paper.

The work speaks about the theme of exile. It is a work that represents a very difficult moment in Zarina's life, she made it right after she was being threatened to leave her home in New York, her working space, her life space.

What does the home mean for her? When one thinks about the title, Home is a Foreign Place, it represents so much of what Zarina's work is about. Home as a notion seems to be confusing for her. She represented India at the Venice Biennale yet she does not have an Indian passport. Her family lives in Pakistan but that country too is somewhat alien to her. In each of the 36 woodcut prints that make up the artwork Home is a Foreign Place, there is an inscription in Urdu, the language from Zarina's childhood.

The use of a single-word inscription in Urdu represents another element of Zarina's memory. It refers to the artist's notion that home can be described as a foreign concept. Language is central to the artist's work, and in the series the Urdu text pays homage to a place, she left several decades ago. Zarina said that home is wherever she is, that she carries her home with her (Pesenti, 2011, para. 2).

She experienced multiple political conflicts and their side effects such as the partition of India when she was just 10 years; the progressive loss of Urdu, her mother tongue; religious wars or displacement of borders including that of a separate India which resulted in the emigration of her family to Karachi giving rise to an irrevocable nostalgia for lost ground. Without further reason to return, Zarina in the thirty-six woodcuts demonstrates her interest in both the perception and remembrance of one's place, or in her case, the memory of the house where she grew up. The six rows of prints, to be read from left to right, depict specific sites from her childhood home and abstractions of particular moments that the artist recalls. For instance, an image of a ceiling fan, titled Afternoon, refers to the fact that the artist "can't think of an afternoon in India without a ceiling fan." (Pesenti, 2011, para.2)

Below each print is a corresponding single-word inscription in Urdu, which represents another element of Zarina's memory and refers to the artist's notion that home can be described as a foreign concept. Language is central to the artist's work, and in the series the Urdu text pays homage to a place she has left several decades ago. Zarina's portfolio comes from a deep appreciation for the minimalist sensibility she uses to communicate her personal attachment to and memory of a place.

Atlas of my World

The title, "Atlas of My World" is derived from Adrienne Rich's book of poems *Atlas of a Difficult World*. People who were exiles from their own country: Holocaust survivors, or people who had the desire to return home are part of this artwork. "I realize that if you tell your story and if someone can come and cry on your shoulder, I think that is sharing." says Zarina (Hoskote, 2009, pp. 6-13). She does not do anything that is not a part of her own life. If she makes a prayer bead, she uses it; it is not something that is decoration. She does believe in a spiritual life, and she is not embarrassed by that. That's how she is.

Through a retrospective that spans over three decades, Zarina creates a visual landscape that examines the perception of personal histories and geographies. Using delicate geometric forms and fluid composition, she reduces complex ideas to their essential and evocative elements. "Cities" is an elegy to nine cities (Grozny, Sarajevo, Srebrenica, Beirut, Jenin, Baghdad, Kabul, Ahmedabad and New York) that have suffered violence or destruction in varying forms. In the black and white woodcuts, each skeletal area is delineated in eloquent tones to embody a relic of a forgotten past. In "Atlas of My World", six maps of nations and countries are drawn in arresting black lines, to exemplify the geographic territories she has made her own; "to signal her symbolic possession of those sites, on which she superimposes her own meanings, the artist identifies each nation in Urdu script. By claiming these far-flung territories for her personal atlas, the artist emphasizes the multiplicity of contexts in which she locates herself." (Hoskote, 2009, pp. 6-13)

DIVIDING LINE

The work "Dividing Line" (2001), a woodcut print on handmade Nepalese paper, represents the delineated border that separates India from Pakistan, and a period of turmoil in which Zarina was personally affected. As explained in the *Guggenheim* news release about the exhibition, "the border between India and Pakistan that was demarcated by the 1947 partition caused the displacement and death of millions of people, and eventually forced Zarina's family to leave their home in 1959". (Jumabhoy, 2011, pp. 306-307) She is, therefore, one of the few artists in contemporary times who engages with the subject of partition in her work in significant ways and who has also lived

Figure 4: Zarina Hashmi, “Dividing Line”, 2001



Note: Woodcut printed in black on handmade Nepalese paper, mounted on Arches Cover white paper, 40.6 x 33cm, image; 65.4 x 50.2cm, sheet, edition 16/20 UCLA Grunwald Centre for the Graphic Arts, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Purchased with funds provided by the Friends of the Graphic Arts.

through it, through the process of nationalization, the devastation and great personal loss that Partition naturally engendered in the mid twentieth century.

More specifically, Zarina's “Dividing Line” raises poignant questions around what the artist or the visual arts can uniquely contribute to the writing of partition history, to an understanding of partition in the present. It endeavours to position 'Dividing Line' as a historiographical 'threshold', as the space between “severed histories” (Zamindar, 2010), the point at which divergent histories of the subcontinent and marginal histories lost or ignored can be sutured together to constitute something new whether it be a more complete history of partition, a new perspective or merely further questioning. It exhibits

a unique capacity to both recognize and 'map', the tensions and contradictions inherent to the historiography of partition, namely, the disparity between nationalist and subaltern accounts of partition violence, although alluded to previously, yet enabling the artist to further harness them to new ends. It highlights Zarina's evolving use of cartography and abstraction in her practice on the whole in an effort to interrogate the ways 'Dividing Line' especially makes visible contending histories of partition. It is also an attempt to place Zarina's work in dialogue with the current debates unfolding around secularism in South Asia. She further negotiates the historical terrain, arriving with 'Dividing Line' at new questions and directions for the historiography of partition. It is forceful and tenuous in character, the line carves the surface of the print into two disparate sections, recalling the precision and the spatial fragmentation of a map.

Conclusion

Displacement and memory, and a keen yearning for order, are the very compelling and personal key themes running through Zarina's exhibition 'Paper like Skin'. Her first ever retrospective, spanning fifty years, presents not only a deeply felt personal commentary on a life lived in exile, but also a catalogue of the remarkable breadth of technique that has become integrated into the printer's art.

Paper is central to Zarina's practice, both as a surface to print on and as a material with its own properties and history. Her works include woodcuts as well as three-dimensional casts in paper pulp. Zarina's vocabulary is minimal yet rich in association with her life and the themes of displacement and exile. The concept of home whether personal, geographic, national, spiritual, or familial resonates throughout her oeuvre. Zarina's oeuvre explores themes of diaspora, nostalgia, and memory. Paper reveals the breadth of Zarina's vision and the versatility of her practice, as explained by Hammer director Ann Philbin. Her mature works display interventions on paper that are at once fierce and delicate; creating textured surfaces that invite intimate viewing and extended contemplation. The artist emphasizes on the sculptural sensibility that underlies printmaking, originating in the carving of a woodblock or the assembly of a relief collage. 'Paper Like Skin' presents a survey of Zarina's

career that encompasses the autobiographical topographies of distances travelled and time spent, superimposing historical events and personal experiences by way of the elusive, ineffable, yet essential, idea of home.

Zarina Hashmi's life in an undivided India, the freedom struggle, followed by independence and partition and then travels around the world inform her works. Home and exile are the issues that concern her the most in her works. Zarina's art has no temporal destination because her journey never ceases, she is always and never at home in the world.

The home is not real. The real home is where we die. That is where we will live for eternity.

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