



Sumaya Durrani, Barefoot 1995, Mixed Media on paper, 43.18 X 63.5 cm

## Feminine Space

Dr. Akbar Naqvi

In an exhibition of Punjab painters in 1988, which was organized during the first-ever Biennale in Lahore of artists from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Iran, and Libya, Sumaya Durrani displayed two huge canvases of a rough wasteland of pigmented passion.<sup>1</sup> The same year, she held more exhibitions in Lahore and Islamabad. She seemed to be making an assault on the two cities, so impatient was she for immediate recognition. Zubeida Agha commended her work in the Biennale exhibition. Contrary to her petite stature and attractive, composed presence, the paintings were very different from her look and demeanour in size and style. Such large canvases had been handled by Shakir Ali, Sadequain, Gulgee, and Ijazul Hassan, for example. Anna Molka was a painter on the grand scale. What made Sumaya's painting unprecedented was its almost monochromatic surface of roiled and churning pigmented fields. She had returned to Pakistan after completing a double Masters in Fine Art and 'one of a kind' jewellery-making course from Michigan University, Ann Arbor. She did a postgraduate course in commercial jewellery-making from the Sir John Cass School of Art in London in 1988. Her mother owned a boutique and she hoped to work with her and paint as well. Instead, she joined the faculty of the NCA Fine Arts department as a lecturer. She had been a student of NCA for only a year in the foundation class before going to the States. The painting in the exhibition mentioned above stood out from the rest of mostly Punjab landscapes, scenes from Lahore, and some abstract works of little consequence. Speaking of the art scene in Lahore, she said that painters gave no importance and respect to form and were painting set subjects. Sumaya had seen Shakir's work in the city but confessed that she did not understand it. Zubeida Agha was beyond her reach in her self-imposed seclusion. She spoke of how she became obsessed with the oil medium and celebrated her own zest for life and joy in her paintings. The images were commensurate with her feeling, and she normally used composite human-animal dancing figures from her fantasy. In a large painting she painted toy ducks in an abstract expressionist puddle of paint. She admired the works of Sonia and Robert Delaunay, Roberto Matta, Arshile Gorky, Max Beckman, and Anselm Kiefer, who were ironically closer to her than the pioneers of her own country<sup>2</sup>. The list was eclectic, and the works of the artists could not be reconciled, despite the fact that they were the off springs of the modern and postmodern art movements of the present century. They strengthened Sumaya's confidence and encouraged her to do her thing. She confessed that Gorky was much 'too clever for me'.

Even then, hers was an ambitious undertaking in so young a painter, what with Delaunay's colour theories, Beckman's 'Verism' and Kiefer's obsession with 'death.' It did not take long before she was affected by Lahore's intellectual culture of engaged art and exhibited works of socio-political commitment. She had a style of her own, and now she had its authentic text<sup>3</sup>. Quddus Mirza had done very fine works in this category when he used the portraits of the great Mughals as tools of criticism against the most oppressive dictatorship of the country. Even Zahoorul Akhlaque, the artist par excellence, had been engaged with public issues. In 1989, Quddus changed his position from commitment to political art, while Sumaya moved on to another kind of engagement, that of what it meant to be a woman. Despite this

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<sup>1</sup> Akbar Naqvi, "Feminine Space", *Image and Identity Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan 1947 – 1997*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 215

<sup>2</sup> Akbar Naqvi, "Feminine Space", *Image and Identity Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan 1947 – 1997*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 216

<sup>3</sup> Akbar Naqvi, "Feminine Space", *Image and Identity Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan 1947 – 1997*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 216

divergence between the two painters in their ideological positions, a study of their styles from this period will bear fruit because of striking similarities between the two.

This remarkable affinity can be seen in paintings which Sumaya and Quddus did from 1987-9. Sumaya had joined the NCA in 1987 to teach. She was also painting and exhibiting in Lahore and Islamabad. Many of the paintings are with her father and the rest with collectors in the country and abroad. A video recording made of some of these paintings is the only evidence of the sudden and radical change in Quddus Mirza's style which could have been inspired by Sumaya's painting. Why this matter has not been discussed is a reflection of the inner politics of Lahore artists, between those patronized by NCA and others on their own.

Sumaya did a red, black, and pale blue painting, in 1987 while she was in Pakistan and called it *Red Behind Black, Like in a Stove with Black Coals*. The occasion was the Ojhri blast. Uncalled-for death, due to a criminal conspiracy. Torn and tattered rags of red, black, and pale blue inducted Rauschenberg as a witness<sup>4</sup>. Encounter with the medium took a turn in the direction of Kiefer, though her stove was not Kiefer's holocaust oven. She painted white and black ladders standing upright in the midst of exploding colours as an image of escape from her oppressive environment. Pure form and personal angst in a social context were joined together as colour activism. In the words of Rauschenberg, 'reflection of life...your self-realization is a reflection of your surrounding'.

During 1987-88 Sumaya painted several ladder series to climb out of her oppressive surroundings into yet another phase of 'self-realization'<sup>5</sup>. As 1988 closed, she started using collage<sup>6</sup>. These works were small, 3ft x2ft, compared to her colossal canvases, and she used orange and red fluorescent papers in them as the ground from which the ladders stood out. Paint was still active and expressionistic in the design, and paper was used as relief. She was not done with the oil pigment, however, and painted stridently abstract images of foreboding in black and white<sup>7</sup>. In other paintings that followed, and which were exhibited in Rohtas Gallery in Islamabad, her gestural movement changed to thin and thick layering of imageless colours.

She got out of Pakistan in 1988 for a change of scene when Lahore became unbearable. She lived for a year and a half in London. By now she had become acutely aware of her identity as a suffering woman, and this found expression in her experiments with collage and the nude in mixed media. On return to Pakistan, she assembled androgynous figures from pictures cut out from magazines in innovative designs and held an exhibition of these works at Chawkandi Art in Karachi.

In the same year, she went to Turkey as Assistant Professor to the Bilkent University, Ankara. A solo exhibition that she brought from Turkey to Chawkandi Art the same year, consisted of collage from offset prints and without a touch of paint, 'as if something had died

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<sup>4</sup> Akbar Naqvi, "Feminine Space", *Image and Identity Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan 1947 – 1997*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 216

<sup>5</sup> Akbar Naqvi, "Feminine Space", *Image and Identity Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan 1947 – 1997*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 216

<sup>6</sup> Akbar Naqvi, "Feminine Space", *Image and Identity Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan 1947 – 1997*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 216

<sup>7</sup> Akbar Naqvi, "Feminine Space", *Image and Identity Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan 1947 – 1997*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 216

in her<sup>8</sup>. She seemed to have entered the dark night of the soul. At this stage fabrication, what Sumaya calls working with hand, was important because she wanted to distance herself from brush and paint when art seemed to have become meaningless<sup>9</sup>. She was reflecting on the Gulf war and, in her mind, the violation of Iraq and its people<sup>10</sup>. The dark collages were abstract doors, which were done with a sense of outrage over the Gulf War while she was in Ankara, an American base, and a target of possible missile attacks from Iraq. She felt that Baghdad had been raped and violated. She saw that the *ummul harb*, mother of all wars, as Saddam Hussain called it, was a white male thrust under the name of Desert Storm. It was the battering of doors and forced entry, the violation of a country with which she empathized. Obviously, the empathy went beyond politics to personal outrage.

After her paintings of protest against Ojhri and the Gulf war in styles of what can be called naturalized Abstract Expressionism, Cubist collage, and Gestural painting, she moved on to mixed-media works of acrylic paint, graphite, and offset print paper to comment on yet another issue of deep personal pain. She had looked at national and international political issues with the mind and heart of a woman; it was the personal politics of pain and outrage over the treatment of women in a male dominated society that engaged her unswerving attention. Colin David's sumptuous nudes were handy for mounting her attacks against the genre. It may be added that he and Jamil Naqsh were said to be avid collectors of glossy fashion magazines.

Sumaya required distance from women artists who were doing similar works all over the world, and she found it in the tradition of nude painting represented by Colin David, Jamil Naqsh, and before them, Shakir Ali. Incidentally, none of them had worked in mixed media<sup>11</sup>. Collage led finally to another phase in which she used acrylic paint, offset print, and graphite to depict photogenic nudes presumably in protest against the painting of the nudes by Colin David. She turned the genre, which was used to romanticize, sexualize woman for pleasure, against Colin and art history which was seen as a male domain. Her mixed media works were parodies which was new in Pakistan. Jasper Johns had painted bronze sculptures of a pair of Ballantine Ale as parodies of realism as a style, as well as a critique of the materialism of American consumer society. Claes Oldenburg's *Two Cheeseburgers with Everything* was both an affirmation and debunking of the same culture. Mixed media works of Sumaya's kind were being done by a number of women artists as well in America. She used the style in Pakistan because she believed she was searching for her female identity and needed American Feminist art ideology for this. Its use also distanced her from painting and gave her greater freedom to vent her anger against men without restricting herself to hallowed media categories. Mixed media was man's invention of protest against conventional art which was turned against man as American Feminist artists had done. Ideologically, she crossed over to America, which Lubna Agha had not done in her Pakistan-based works, and Nahid Raza ever. Sumaya wanted a perspective other than Lahore from where to take Colin and other men to task. She smouldered with anger against Manto and Mushtaq Ahmed Yusufi, the first for using woman as a sex object in his stories, and the other for treating her lightly in his

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<sup>8</sup> Akbar Naqvi, "Feminine Space", *Image and Identity Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan 1947 – 1997*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 216

<sup>9</sup> Akbar Naqvi, "Feminine Space", *Image and Identity Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan 1947 – 1997*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 216

<sup>10</sup> Akbar Naqvi, "Feminine Space", *Image and Identity Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan 1947 – 1997*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 216

<sup>11</sup> Akbar Naqvi, "Feminine Space", *Image and Identity Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan 1947 – 1997*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 216



essays. Jamil Naqsh was lucky to have gone unnoticed. That she did not understand Manto's art, and his human concern, did not matter because anger left little room for sympathy. A miniature size inset of Rembrandt's Bathsheba in her bath, when she receives King David's letter asking her to leave her husband Uriah and enter his harem, was set off against an array of blondes cut out from some glossy magazines leave no doubt about what she wanted the work to do<sup>12</sup>. Bathsheba's icon in Rembrandt, and her tragedy, which is sacrosanct as high art, was presented against the use of woman and consumer delectation and that too in the Pakistani consumerism as foreign media. Sumaya used Pop Art with a vengeance against her crusade, against man. Not only did she subvert the hallowed genre but fabricated the artefact with cheap, non-artistic materials. She had no answer when asked why she used blondes. This is not the place to deconstruct Sumaya's silence, except to point out that she used them because they featured in English and American magazines. This silence is problematic, and she guards it with tenacity. It is possible that the Hollywood legend of sensible men losing their heads over dumb blondes may have been at the back of her mind<sup>13</sup>.

As in the works of the American artists, her art asserted itself in the midst of its ruin. While she berated Colin David, and his favourite genre, she salvaged the woman hidden in his traduced image. The remarkable preponderance of prawn-size nudes was set off against images of confirmed female domestic felicity which is her domain. In fact, the background, and the decor in the design was the real image of female identity; the nudes were in the nature of abuse thrown at man. Flower pressed between the pages of books was one obvious sign of adolescent romance; there was the space of elegant interior furnishing complete with lace curtains; and a table set for dinner with expensive linen, cutlery, and crockery on it. What was served was a gourmet feast of nudes which the artist called tasteless. Man was the gourmet, but the feast was served by a woman as if to kill his appetite. Sumaya presided invisibly over the feast and served choice bits with bad intentions. Her dinner parties were lethal, and the artefacts were examples of black humour.<sup>14</sup>

Rosemary Betterton wrote that:

'Food offers a way of exploring the pleasures and dangers of the body's limits in ways that are particularly relevant to women, both because food is culturally gendered as feminine and because it provides means of discovering the contradictory, ambivalent and often unresolved feelings relating to feminine identity and material loss.... Body horror is converted into pleasures, but the ultimate horror (for men at least?) may be the discovery that the source of that pleasure lies not in men's bodies...'

This is why men are hungry for women, and Sumaya would feed them with tasteless junks. The Junoesque woman of Colin David, as a male fare, was voyeurism of a blatant kind, which was served by Sumaya in small morsels. Man's sexual gluttony was excoriated through parody, and cheap art borrowed from magazines. Sumaya's fixation with the nude, apart from her political correctness, was also an anger against herself too, which could be seen in the symbolic tearing of pages and her invitation to cannibal dinner in high taste. These paintings were also an initiation through which she wanted to rid herself of her body

<sup>12</sup> Akbar Naqvi, "Feminine Space", *Image and Identity Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan 1947 – 1997*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 216

<sup>13</sup> Akbar Naqvi, "Feminine Space", *Image and Identity Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan 1947 – 1997*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 216

<sup>14</sup> Akbar Naqvi, "Feminine Space", *Image and Identity Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan 1947 – 1997*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 217

which was served in the tasteless images of the small pictures of blondes. She also seemed to have a fascination for intricately woven, circular table mats. We were witness to a ceremony in which the metaphorical deployment of repetitive nudes was a private ritual.

It was not Sumaya's intention to please, but to deny the pleasure of the female body in the kind of art she was plying vengefully<sup>15</sup>. Quoting Freud, Richard Webster wrote that 'Tables, tables laid for a meal...stand for women - no doubt by antithesis, since the contours of their bodies are eliminated in the symbols'. In Sumaya's case, the use of collage flattened the contour of the body, cheapened it as print, and made the idea of pleasure dubious<sup>16</sup>. According to Paula M. Cooley 'the history of idealizing the female body in ways that efface women's subjectivity as women, and the voyeurism correlative with this effacement, require drastic measures', and Sumaya undertook to take these measures<sup>17</sup>. Women artists who reacted against the violation and humiliation of her body at mans' hand used their own imagery and strategy. Some chose to be victims, but Sumaya found Feminist ideology as her potent weapon. The female body as perishable food was also painted by Frida Kahlo, who celebrated 'female sexuality with a humour that liberates and anticipates Judy Chicago's Dinner Party'.

There ought to have been a bizarre humour in Sumaya's works, but polemicists are without humour. Her accusation that men were only interested in cannibalizing women may be immoderate, but this was how she could outrage them and get the better of them. The strategy was to throw them off balance and on the defensive. At the same time, femininity was expressed metaphorically without the nude through flowers, laces, domestic decor as if woman was an empty room of grace and ornamentation. The spirit of a woman filled the space of the works, and this is how she overcame the world of man by casting off her body.

Body as a shell, a dead object, was the favourite trope of American Feminist art, and Sumaya used a version which suited her social background and class. Women of Pakistan and their problems did not feature in her work, for which she would have had to develop a new technique of grappling. Not distance, but involvement, not artistic political correctness, but something indigenous would have had to be engaged. For the present, the issue must remain a question only!

From Zubeida Agha's Nude in which the artist had sighted her body for the first time, the genre had a passage of over four decades in Pakistan in which women artists were familiar with it from their own short art history. The subject was a discourse. Sumaya has never painted a nude like Zubeida Agha's whose single attempt in the genre was prompted by the desire to see her body in the mirror out of daring curiosity<sup>18</sup>. She plucked photographic images of the nude, tiny and toylike, from magazines because she did not want to be a party to the genre's exploitation of women for male pleasure. Colin David and Jamil Naqsh were

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<sup>15</sup> Akbar Naqvi, "Feminine Space", *Image and Identity Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan 1947 – 1997*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 217

<sup>16</sup> Akbar Naqvi, "Feminine Space", *Image and Identity Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan 1947 – 1997*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 217

<sup>17</sup> Akbar Naqvi, "Feminine Space", *Image and Identity Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan 1947 – 1997*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 217

<sup>18</sup> Akbar Naqvi, "Feminine Space", *Image and Identity Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan 1947 – 1997*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 217

said to have used photographic images of the nude from glossy magazines in order to glamorize their paintings<sup>19</sup>.

This was clear from a painting from Sumaya's 1993 exhibition, titled *Works in Progress*. She rested her drooping head in a stage of grief or embarrassment which was reflected in an oval, ornamental mirror. The image was also seen through the veil of undulating lines provided by Bridget Riley, the British Op artist, whom Colin David had used to set off his nudes.

According to Susan Sontag photography has a 'voyeuristic relation to the world, which the apparatus reduces to the unreality of a phantasm'<sup>20</sup>. Sumaya's works on the gender theme were innocent of voyeurism because they questioned and destroyed the genre's authority and invited her viewers to disengage from its delectation in revulsion<sup>21</sup>.

There is the joke about a mother's response to an admiring remark on her baby: 'Oh, that's nothing-you should see her photograph!' The images of the nude in Sumaya's works were photographic and were collected as forensic evidence for her case against man. Emile Zola said that you cannot claim to have really seen something until you have photographed it, but it was against the pleasures of the eye that Sumaya's invective was levelled. Sumaya wished to reveal what the genre hid of truth and reality. The inequity of art was set up for discussion and the use of non-art materials showed what she thought of art. Sumaya used the eye of the camera from the print media as her own critical gaze. It was suspected that both Colin David and Jamil Naqsh used glossy magazines to study their nudes. The terrain Sumaya occupied in her works from 1993 to 1995 gave her detachment so that she could, in considering woman as a male artefact, use it as a metaphor of revenge. She says that she has come to terms with herself as a wife and a mother. But she wants to throw away the body, burn and destroy it, so that she is rid of it, not biologically, but as the male image and what it stands for. In America Miriam Schapiro treated the body as an androgynous costume in her ten-panelled *Anatomy of a Kimono* called *Femmage*. Kiki Smith made a seven-foot-high unisex dungaree to represent the human body. Since Sumaya is determined to cast off the woman's body, Adam's rib that is to say, and man's image of her made with the complicity of art and commerce, we have to wait to see what shape her works take. As for ridding off of the female body, is Feminist noise!

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<sup>19</sup> Akbar Naqvi, "Feminine Space", *Image and Identity Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan 1947 – 1997*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 217

<sup>20</sup> Akbar Naqvi, "Feminine Space", *Image and Identity Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan 1947 – 1997*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 217

<sup>21</sup> Akbar Naqvi, "Feminine Space", *Image and Identity Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan 1947 – 1997*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 217



Click on link to access video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmkG9LLIJ6U> <sup>22</sup>

Dr. Akbar Naqvi (1931-2016) was a distinguished Pakistani scholar and art critic. He was born on February 21<sup>st</sup>, 1931, in Hajipur, Bihar, British India. Dr. Naqvi received his Masters in English Literature from Patna University and briefly served on the faculty. He went on to earn a Doctorate in English Literature from the University of Liverpool. Dr. Naqvi's critical essays on Pakistani art have featured in leading magazines and journals. In 1997, he published his seminal text, *Image and Identity: Fifty Years of Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan*. The following year, he released the textbook entitled *Pakistan: The Making of Art*. In 2007, he published a collection of essays entitled *Shahid Sajjad's Sculptures*, and in 2011, he released *Khujwa Recollected*, a compilation of biographical essays followed by *Sense and Insanity*, a book on the art of Shahid Rassam. Dr. Naqvi's last book, *Glass Lamp*, has yet to be published.

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<sup>22</sup> Khursheed Abdullah, "Dr. Akbar Naqvi (Art Critic): Life Story - Exclusive for Audio Archives of Lutfullah Khan", YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmkG9LLIJ6U>



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