

ESSAY

'Unveiling the hijab and the head: translating all areas of controversy towards her race and gender, Shahzia Sikander's art leaves her untitled.'

by Dana Nahhas

Being raised in Pakistan, and then moving to the United States alone to pursue a dream, Shahzia Sikander accomplished what people often call "The American Dream." She is known for her miniature paintings, drawings, animation, videos, performances, and large-scale installations. Miniature painting is a medium that has been practiced and favoured for decades in Pakistan, but its significance faded away with time. Nonetheless, Sikander transforms this tradition into modern perspectives that spoke to people differently. Through her respect for memories and the past, Sikander's imagery crosses boundaries and deconstructs the representation of Islam and gender. The representation of Islam and Islamic women initiates with a piece that becomes a prominent element in Sikander's work and one of the very few works that Sikander left untitled.

Shahzia Sikander, the first Pakistani woman artist to be recognized internationally was born in Lahore, Pakistan. Lahore is the largest city of the Punjab region, which is located in the east-central region and has changed hands from Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Muslim, and Greek rulers (Schmitz 2010). Sikander attended the National College of Arts in Pakistan where she received a bachelor degree in fine arts. Through her schooling, she was taught the principles of Indo-Persian miniature painting. Indo-Persian miniature painting dates back to 13th century during the Mongol and Timurid periods. They are small artworks and often communicate ideas through texts and illustrations while combining Byzantine, Chinese, and Arab style. Traditionally, miniature painting is impersonal, it does not reflect the artist's opinions or thoughts, and it is created on smaller scales with fine details that are completed in the intentions to be held by the audience and respected (Farooqi 1979).

Breaking away from the traditional techniques, Sikander revives miniature painting while discussing controversial issues towards Islam and gender; "My main purpose has been to rejuvenate miniature painting" (Hashmi 1992). A great example is *Many Faces or The Resurgence of Islam*; a work completed couple years after Sikander moved to New York,

where she currently resides. *Many Faces or The Resurgence of Islam* was the result of the excessive 1990's politics of identity studies where Sikander began to see her own identity "as being fluid, something in flux" (S. Sikander, *Nemesis: A Dialogue with Shahzia Sikander* 2004). *Many political faces* outline the miniature painting. It also presents a Hindu goddess with several hands on the left, and a veiled woman on the right. The Hindu goddess and the veiled woman are both rendered as the largest figures in the painting and are holding an American money bill.



Many Faces or The Resurgence of Islam, 1998-1999.

"Who is veiled anyway?" is a text held by the veiled woman. It describes the perception of Sikander when she covered herself in a veil to experiment the reactions that could be evoked from "strange" clothing:

I wore a costume that disguised my body thus made me transparent at times. The work got read as a plea for liberation for women who are subjected to

wearing veils. I am amazed even now how limited people's understanding is. Pakistan is not Iran and Iran is not Lebanon and Lebanon is not Saudi Arabia. My being from a so-called "Muslim" country often became my primary categorization. Unfortunately it still persists (S. Sikander, *Nemesis: A Dialogue with Shahzia Sikander* 2004, 3).

The veil rendered Sikander invisible to other people. Perhaps the word "veil" in the text "Who is veiled anyway?" reflects the word "invisible". In other words, it mirrors the stereotype of being invisible that a veiled woman faces in the United States. It questions the phenomenon that humans cannot be invisible. *Many faces or The Resurgence of Islam* also duplicates *Fleshy Weapons* on a smaller scale; a painting completed in 1997.

Fleshy Weapons is a striking piece that manipulates the untitled prominent piece. It portrays a Hindu goddess in a veil. Sikander replaces the face with a veil, which hides the facial expressions of the Hindu goddess. Also, she does not refer to a particular goddess, but rather to the idea of the goddess (S. Sikander, *Shahzia Sikander: "Chaman"* n.d.) In *Fleshy Weapons*, Sikander draws the goddess with many hands carrying weapons, some are raised ready to strike and others pointed downward combining both offense and defence scenes. One arm is left without a weapon and grasps a circle within which is a girl. The girl is not veiled, but instead a pink band with ribbons is placed on her head and the ribbons are splashed down to her waist leaving her featureless face visible. Like *Many Faces or The Resurgence of Islam*, *Fleshy Weapons* negates the stereotype associated with Islam and Islamic woman, especially in the United States. Furthermore, people often relate terrorism to Islam and underestimate a veiled woman. Thus, the power or strength of the veiled woman is avoided or seen as "invisible". Sikander depicts a goddess that strives for courage and power underneath the veil to affirm the strength that a veiled woman can have. Her interpretation disarms the preconceptions expected from the viewer of a veiled woman:

Again, it's about raising issues about stereotypes with the veil and the goddess and the interplay of both. And yet the goddess as such becomes a problematic issue, and the veil also, because it's not like the oppression, or the subversion. So, in that sense, the veiling and revealing becomes the cause and effect for me, because I'm also investigating these things as I grow as an artist (S. Sikander, *Shahzia Sikander: "Chaman"* n.d.).

From veiling to revealing, Sikander steps away from miniature painting and begins to construct large-scale installations such as *Buoyant Fragmentation*. Many of the installations consist of overlaid tissue papers. The tissue papers will sometimes have sketches and drawings on them using pigments that purposely bleed through. "Light shines through the sheets, building a three dimension on a complete platform. The seemingly irrelevant objects weave together, challenging harmony and competing for dominance" (Feng 2013). The purpose of using tissue paper is to reveal everything, opposing the idea of the veil. Sikander constantly points out, yet opposes the stereotypical images related to Islam and Islamic women either through her paintings or installations.



Buoyant Fragmentation, 1999.

In addition, *Buoyant Fragmentation* presents a repetition of the same element that was first created in 1993, also used to depict the Hindu goddess in *Fleshy Weapons*. It is repeated on many tissue papers in different configurations, either rotated or scaled down. The element itself seems to be fragmenting throughout the installation. The figure in purple draws attention as it is turned sideways and is covered in broken strips of chador (Feng 2013). A tissue paper beneath it showcases the same configuration. As objects and elements seem to be fragmenting in the installation, a white veil is detached from any entity. The veil alone

comes alive with the ribbons splashing down and dispersed throughout the tissue paper. Moreover, as the veil covers the physical appearance of the woman, it is drawn on a clear tissue paper in which it unexpectedly becomes unmasked.

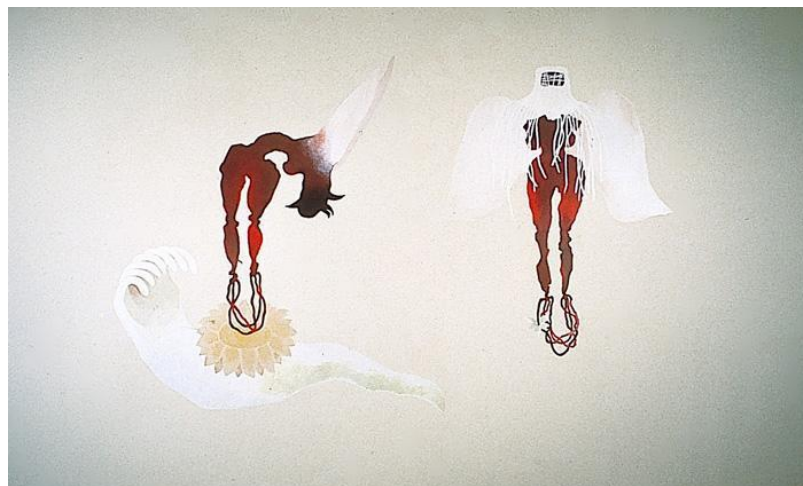


Fleshy Weapons, 1997

In *High & Low*, the veil returns to cover the element. A fallen figure, standing on a lotus accompanies the veiled figure. The fallen figure is also drawn using the same element. This time, Sikander does not add configurations to the element only, but she transforms its movement. The female figure is stooped and the face of the element is replaced with the face of a bird (David n.d., 136). A veil is removed as the element bends downward. As Sikander manipulates the element, she does not point to one single meaning. “I want to frustrate meaning by maintaining that edge of multiplicity and contradiction” (Minds Wide Open: 400 Years of Women Artists 2010). However, *High & Low* resembles to the way most people perceived Sikander’s work at the time. Throughout the first exhibitions, people would classify the work as “Pakistani” and coming from “a Pakistani woman artist”. Sikander was confronted with “a perception of herself that confined her within a framework: the ‘Muslim woman’” (Daftari 2003, 181). Sikander speaks to the perception through the veiled figure in *High & Low* and points out the reality through the fallen figure. The element falls

when the veil is removed, the power of the element is shattered. In contrast, when the veil comes on the head, it empowers the element. The work revolves around the stereotype again. The notion of the veil persists in her work conceptually and literally. Sikander draws the idea that an artist's work must not be identified through his or her religion or identity, but instead through the work itself:

there was a greater focus on identity in the 1990s and it is very different moment now. I was from another country, and people's understanding of who I was or what my work dealt with needed to be partly culturally specific. Because of this, identity issues were a natural point of discussion, but I was acutely aware that I didn't want to get stuck in any one category (S. Sikander, *Nemesis: A Dialogue with Shahzia Sikander* 2004).



High & Low, 1996.

Either through *Many Faces*, *Fleshy Weapons*, *Buoyant Fragmentation* or *High & Low*, Sikander reflects her identity found in a powerful freed element that emerged in 1993. Previously mentioned, the purpose behind many of Sikander's work is to frustrate meaning by upholding contradictions. Her work does not necessarily have a direct explanation. Yet, in several interviews and essays, Sikander clearly describes the intentions behind each work of art. *Untitled* is a work that not only Sikander did not title nor describe, but critics never wrote about. At the time *Untitled* was completed, Sikander was eager to develop a personal vocabulary. The time she refused to have her work categorized as the work of the "Muslim woman". The element is constantly reconfigured to depict and oppose the stereotypes with Islam and Islamic women. Further, Sikander utilizes the element to embody the Hindu

goddess. Both Hindu and Islamic traditions are constantly presented in the work of Shahzia Sikander.

Untitled consists of a female figure with legs tied together in thinner strings. The female figure is headless and the arms are also drawn with several thin strings. The thin strings may reflect again on the goddess with many arms.

This constant representation of the veil and the Hindu goddess becomes the art of Shahzia Sikander. These intertwined identities are prominent in the contemporary work of Sikander from the 1990s until today. As her imagery deconstructs the representation of Islam and gender, Sikander regularly defies structuralism. In order to conceal all possible hints of “linear narrative”, Sikander intentionally complicates the visual information. Thus, she challenges “the natural inclination to derive meaning and define the world in order to comprehend human existence” (Feng 2013).



Untitled, 1993.

The stationary drawings in the Many Faces to High & Low delude to transformation, which has been a major concept in Sikander's work. However, Sikander today elaborates more on transformation through animations, videos, and performances. To Sikander, transformation is the "understanding that change is constant" (Feng 2013). As the focus on identity is no longer a subject in the work of Sikander, she still exists through the untitled painting. Untitled has grown to become Sikander's signature and no longer an artwork. It was never critiqued nor described by her unlike other works. The frequent use of that specific form must have a meaning to the artist. *Fleshy Weapons* depicts the stereotype, the influence of Hindu and Islam is affirmed in *Many faces* or *The Resurgence of Islam*, and the veiling and revealing is present in *Buoyant Fragmentation*. All these works revolve around the female figure in *Untitled*. The female must be Shahzia Sikander and the figure hints at a Muslim Hindu goddess. Shahzia Sikander is not the "Muslim woman." Sikander is *Untitled*.

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Biography:

Originally born in Beirut, Lebanon then migrated to the United States at the age of fourteen. I received a bachelor degree in Interior Architecture from Chatham College located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Afterwards, I returned to Beirut to complete writing and research merged from the subconscious and based on human behaviour and language. By 2016, I attended Pratt Institute to complete a master's degree in Architecture and Urban Design, however, I took the route of underground art and began teaching movement and producing abstract paintings. We built a community in Bushwick where we published magazines, curated art works from local emerging and professionals. From Bushwick, we scoped out to Brooklyn Boroughs. Since my time in New York, I had joined forces with my sister, who has starred in the season finale in OITNB. During the pandemic, we left our place in New York and returned to Beirut a few days before the explosion. We decided to integrate our principles to the country at such a rough time, we gathered fresh graduates and began collaborating and creating theatre, short and feature films. Merging poetry, performance and screenplay, we work towards a global understanding of our current situation hoping for a positive change.