

**Revisiting history through Visual Art –
Zarina Hashmi and the history of Partition**

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Background

This paper is largely based on an illuminating lecture delivered by art historian and curator, Sandhini Poddar, on Zarina Hashmi's work at Jananpravaha Mumbai (2018) where I was fortunate enough to be a student of Critical Theory, Art and Practice.

As someone who has grown up in a household where my grandparents survived the horrors of the partition in 1947, Zarina Hashmi's work resonates with me on a personal level, carrying forward the truth of times past.

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This essay examines specific works of visual art in *'Directions to My House'*, a memoir by visual artist Zarina Hashmi (with Sarah Burney), and a series of works titled under *'Home is a Foreign Place'*. These works speak vividly of her life, in relation to the 'politics of space'¹ and the history of Partition; the division of the Indian subcontinent that took place in 1947, which in its eventuality created Pakistan.

I will critically look at the narrative that surrounds Partition history, as well as an overall analysis of visual art and its correlation to understanding fragile historical terrain, where the history of memory and art converge. Zarina's work through use of cartography and her predilection towards minimalism and imagined abstraction of spaces; lived and lost, presents a unique capacity that maps and recognizes the inherent dialectic of history and memory.²

¹ Butalia Urvashi, *The Other Side of Silence* (Durham: Duke University, 2000) 3-5, 57.

² The lecture titled *'Floating on the Dark Sea'* delivered by Sandhini Poddar, art historian and curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum at Janapravaha Mumbai (Dec. 2018) highlighted the politics of space as well as the dialectical relationship between memory and history. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K22u0fm8So8>

The eve of 14th August 1947, saw the division of the Indian subcontinent, and the birth of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.³ This was simultaneous with the departure of the British after centuries of colonial rule. The partition of India was a moment of separation and socio economic uprooting of countless peoples, a line that was drawn across the lives of 400 million human beings; a moment that initiated an ‘archive of memory’⁴ — one of the most poignant archives in the history of contemporary India.

In her book Zarina begins with: “Memory is the only lasting possession we have”,⁵ a reminder that we do not imagine our experiences, they are authentic to our socio-economic and political identities.⁶ A period that marks the tumultuous restructuring and codification of the political landscape of India is survived by oral histories and personal accounts like Hashmi’s poetry and art. Her works many of which are minimalist etchings printed on Kozo paper⁷ or handmade paper⁸, depict the fractures in her own biography, mirrored by the themes of displacement and exile⁹. Thus, her overall practice remains enmeshed in this experience of political, territorial and social rupture, and she is one of the few artists that continually engages with something she has lived through.

³ Collins and Lapierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, Ch 9, Ch 10, 168-23.

⁴ Malhotra Aanchal, *Remnants of a Separation, A history of the partition through material memory*, Preface, xv-xxvi.

⁵ Hashmi Zarina (with Burney Sarah), *Directions to My House*, Asian/Pacific/American Institute at NYU

⁶ Notes from the lecture titled ‘*Floating on the Dark Sea*’ delivered by Sandhini Poddar, art historian and curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum at Janapavaha Mumbai (Dec. 2018) highlighted the politics of space as well as the dialectical relationship between memory and history. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K22u0fm8So8>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Kumar Aparna, *Lines of Inquiry: Partition, Historiography and the art of Zarina Hashmi*, 7-9

Zarina Hashmi's work also contends that visual art can contribute to the narrative and discourse of Partition history in the past and present. The historiography of the partition is almost always a point of contention.¹⁰ Most historical accounts focus on the fact that never before in history had there occurred such a divorce of a population¹¹. The existing narratives also shine an ever-burning light on the politicians, bureaucrats, and other personalities that made possible the transition of India into a modern nation state.¹²

By recalling and revisiting this status of Partition in public narratives, the 'Partition Industry' as Bhaskar Sarkar defines it in his book 'Mourning the Nation', has directed more attention to partition historiography and violence in contemporary times.

This poses an opportunity for artists and intellectuals alike to confront the communal and political disharmony through this 'living history',¹³ that persists in the subcontinent even today.

Aanchal Malhotra in her book *Remnants of a Separation* follows a position similar to Hashmi's, where she attempts to bring to light the communal mass killings and violence that took place after the partition. She does this by resisting the 'Partition Industry'¹⁴ through material objects carried across the border that have absorbed the memory of an unparalleled moment in history; memory that has remained latent for almost 70 years, piecing together an alternative history.¹⁵

Zarina's work makes visible the hidden strife, violence and collective trauma that countless families carried with them post-partition. This in turn bridges the chasm between traditional history and memory, a rhetoric that continues to exist in the dark. To begin with, Zarina's woodcut prints

¹⁰ Malhotra Aanchal, *Remnants of a Separation, A history of the partition through material memory*, Preface, xv-xxvi.

¹¹ Collins and Lapierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, Ch 9, 168.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Kumar Aparna, *Lines of Inquiry: Partition, Historiography and the art of Zarina Hashmi*, See Also: Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition* (New Haven: Yale University, 2007) 6, 211

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Malhotra Aanchal, *Remnants of a Separation, A history of the partition through material memory*, Preface, xv-xxvi, Introduction, 5.

on handmade paper are centered around her unique minimalistic style - abstract yet formal, and sometimes aesthetically linear,¹⁶ rendered in different textures she encountered later in life through her travels around the world.

At first glance the black lines look abstract but are deeply symbolic of places of habitation, works such as *'Homes I Made'* and *'Father's House'* are a reflection and reimagining of blueprints and architectural plans of her childhood home.¹⁷ In her work *'The Dividing Line'*, the black line construed across the map of India, indicates spatial fragmentation of the country, and at the same time encapsulates a writhing curvature, recalling the violence and uncertainty of that period.

Interestingly, the titles in most of her pieces are written in Urdu at the bottom of the artwork, a language that was one of the many intangible artefacts people could carry with them, a juxtaposition of being able to carry remnants of an identity in spite of the displacement after the partition. This labels the image with complexities of national and religious identity.¹⁸

However, the concepts of home, displacement and exile are only a starting point in an analysis of Zarina's many works. In his essay *Cosmopolitan Cartographies*, Ram Samantrai contends that Hashmi's practice is an 'exemplification of potential cosmopolitanism'¹⁹ and the same time replete with contradictions, including harmony, resistance, secularity and spirituality. For Samantrai, it is in many ways the embodiment of ambiguity and paradox.

Similarly, Aamir Mufti propositions Zarina's work as a practice that encapsulates the 'unlivability'²⁰ of modern life, at the same time grappling the themes of global instability and

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¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Samantrai Ranu, *'Cosmopolitan Cartographies: Art in a Divided World,'* *Meridians* 4.2 (2004) 188.

²⁰ Mufti Aamir, *'Zarina Hashmi and the Arts of Dispossession'.*

statelessness; a persistent state of loss that engenders populations around the world. However, it can also be argued that in works such as *'Atlas of my World'*, the abstraction of her works are a direct reflection and embodiment of transnationalism and cosmopolitanism. While Zarina's work has most popularly been termed as secular and open in nature.²¹ In contrast, the Partition of the subcontinent brought forth a point in history where the very term 'secular' was brought into question,²² where it no longer was a definite concept; and has been subject to continual definition or re-definition even today, which is almost inseparable from Partition historiography.²³

I find this significantly reflected in Hashmi's work; a consistent resonance with the debates that surround the contentious concept and philosophy of secularism, through her simple geometric forms that are at the same time variable and abstract in nature; a mingling of tensions with no resolution. A further expression of her internalized contradictions fraught with negotiations of identity, secularism and spirituality can be seen through the works titled under *'Noor'*,²⁴ which includes a sculptural work made from maple wood, gilded with gold leaf,²⁵ strung on a leather cord, a reimagining of prayer beads central to the Islamic world, thus, representing the nexus between the 'material and transcendental'²⁶ tensions within and at the same time isolating the tensions between secular and spiritual.

Thus, this essay has attempted to challenge the unfixed understanding of Partition history by presenting Zarina's practice as a model of critique and a dialectical of visible contradictions

²¹ Notes from the lecture titled *'Floating on the Dark Sea'* delivered by Sandhini Poddar, art historian and curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum at Janapavaha Mumbai (Dec. 2018) highlighted the politics of space as well as the dialectical relationship between memory and history. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K22u0fm8So8>

²² Ibid, Kumar Aparna, *Lines of Inquiry: Partition, Historiography and the art of Zarina Hashmi*

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Finbarr B. Flood, *'Memory in Material and Light,'* Zarina Hashmi: Noor (Paris: Galerie Jager Bucher, 2011) 13

²⁵ Notes from the lecture titled *'Floating on the Dark Sea'* delivered by Sandhini Poddar, art historian and curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum at Janapavaha Mumbai (Dec. 2018) highlighted the politics of space as well as the dialectical relationship between memory and history. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K22u0fm8So8>

through dialogue, as well as observing the artist's relationship through a lived history, that unfurls uniquely through visual arts contributing to the rewriting of Partition history in the present.

Images

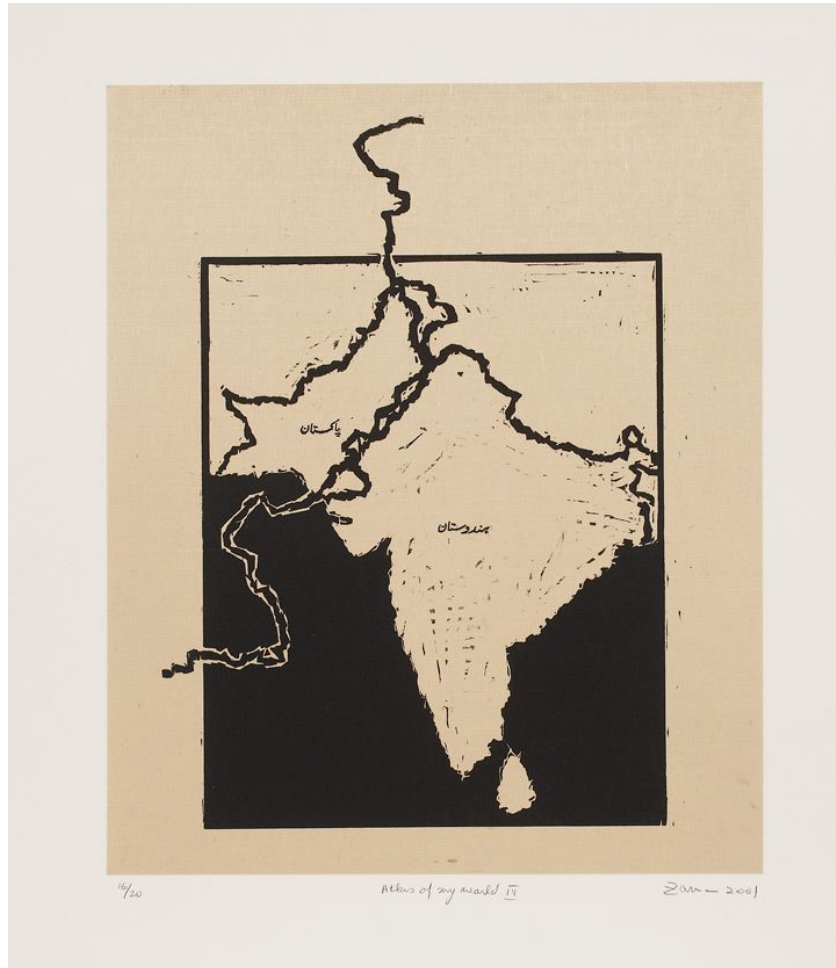


Fig 1: *Atlas of My World I*, Signed and dated 'Zarina – 2001', Woodcut on handmade paper, 32X34.5cm

Source: Flickr



Fig 2: *Dividing Line*, Woodcut on handmade paper, 25.50 x. 19.5 in.

Source: Flickr, Photo by Robert Wedemeyer



*One of the many works exhibited under the title — Noor (Divine Light),
Maple wood gilded with gold leaf
Source: Flickr*

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2. Collins and Lapierre, *Freedom at Midnight*.
3. Finbarr B. Flood, 'Memory in Material and Light,' *Zarina Hashmi: Noor* (Paris: Galerie Jager Bucher, 2011)
4. Malhotra Aanchal, *Remnants of a Separation, A history of the partition through material memory*.
5. Hashmi Zarina (with Burney Sarah), 'Directions to My House, Asian/Pacific/American Institute at NYU
6. Kumar Aparna, *Lines of Inquiry: Partition, Historiography and the art of Zarina Hashmi*.
7. Mufti Aamir, 'Zarina Hashmi and the Arts of Dispossession'.
8. Samantrai Ranu, 'Cosmopolitan Cartographies: Art in a Divided World,' *Meridians* 4.2 (2004).
9. The lecture titled 'Floating on the Dark Sea' delivered by Sandhini Poddar, art historian and curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum at Janapavaha Mumbai.