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THE ELEPHANT IN  
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It was a sight that haunts me. Humans can be frightfully mean without giving it a second thought.

ALSO BY  
[Betwa Sharma](#)



THE HEADLEY  
TESTIMONY AND THE  
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## OPEN > lounge



11 June 2011

# The Baggage We Carry

An artist from Pakistan and another from India tell the same story in their works—of women in chains

BY [Betwa Sharma](#) EMAIL AUTHOR(S)  
TAGGED UNDER | [Pakistan](#) | [women](#) | [cruelty](#)

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BONDAGE



Gazing at the full breasts and amputated arms of a couple of steel sculptures at an art exhibition in New York is like reading an abridged narrative of the cruelty inflicted on women. They look like dented milk cans. A handle sticks out of their heads, a chain runs down their necks, and rusted shackles clamp their severed thighs down.

The sculptures, by Nausheen Saeed, a 41-year-old artist from Pakistan, are part of an exhibition titled 'Palimpsest' at the Aicon Gallery in Manhattan, which shows contemporary Asian art.

As with most contemporary art coming from Pakistan, Saeed's works too stem from the extreme violence being witnessed in a state where the rule of law has practically come to an end.

Saeed explains what made her see women like this. In March 2009, gunmen attacked the Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore with grenades and rockets. This happened very close to her house. A month later, a teenage girl was flogged in Swat Valley by the Taliban. A video showed her squealing and writhing in pain as she was whipped by a turbaned man with a flowing beard. "I could feel violence everywhere, so I couldn't work with soft fabric anymore," says Saeed, speaking from Lahore. "I needed a hard metal to express myself."



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EVENTS TO CATCH



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So, should he consider himself re-elected in 2012?  
14 MAY 2011

For the artist, though, an equally powerful element is the milk held inside the battered bodies. “You see, there can be purity in milk,” she says. “It can make women strong.” Saeed was nursing her baby during the time she was working on the sculptures.

In another installation by Saeed, three women are depicted as luggage bags made of cloth with vibrant prints. The thick black zips that run across their bodies exude an intense feeling of suffocation. They are called *Carrier*, *Transitory* and *Belonging*. *Bojh* or burden—as girls are often referred to in India and Pakistan—leaps to mind. The luggage bags symbolise both the weight that needs to be lugged around, as well as the transition, which happens when the *bojh* is passed on. Saeed also sees the loss of identity in her work. “A woman is always a mother, sister or wife,” she says. “Luggage also belongs to someone else.”

While luggage can be impersonal, the things inside it can be deeply personal. The artist modelled for the bag-woman sculpture called *Belonging*, herself, which bound her even more closely to the drama she fashioned. Her forehead touches the ground as if she is in *sajdah*, but her bottom is lifted in a revealing pose. “It started off with a praying position, but then it became a sexual position,” she says.

Indian and Pakistani female artists are innovating relentlessly to tell an old story of the heartache and abuse that plagues women in both countries. Their subject may be one of the oldest in the book, but they are just getting started on styles, textures and audacity.

The exhibition also features a series called *Birth Marks* by Mumbai-based artist Vidya Kamat, who depicts the female body as entombed by cultural values, which have translated into *sati*, honour killings and dowry deaths.

A great deal of Kamat’s work is based on her academic work. The artist studied fine arts in college and has a PhD in Indian mythology, which she teaches at the University of Mumbai. She questions why the stories of Sita and Draupadi are celebrated, given that they too were victims of the same societal strangulation. They were punished as a consequence of actions taken by men, says the 44-year-old artist.

In two close-up photographs, she has shot her own hands and legs sparkling with *zardozi*. The golden-metallic embroidery is woven into patterns that look like *mehndi*. But they also look like they have been sewn into the skin. “These decorations are seen as celebration, but I wanted to reverse the motif of zari to the element of pain... as permanently scarring the body,” she says.

Kamat grew up in the conservative Saraswat Brahmin community of Goa, devotees of Shanta Durga, a goddess. Much of the pain she locks in her work stems from her childhood. She recalls a community practice of dressing up young girls who hadn’t started menstruating as goddesses and praying to them. Kamat too was dressed up as a deity until her periods started. She recalls being rather upset when she was suddenly shorn of goddess status. “They said, ‘Now you are a woman and no longer a goddess.’”

“We did feel angry, we hated our bodies,” she says, speaking collectively for girls with similar experiences. “You ask why was I special then and not now.” She was furious at the custom that thrust divinity on women and then snatched it away. The custom came to represent the controls placed over women that dictate the choices they make. “They control your body, your sexuality and your psyche,” she says. “It is fixed in the system, so men don’t even realise that they are doing it and then they ask you, ‘What’s wrong?’”

OPEN SPACE



RAMLILA

Baankelaal Chaturvedi, 63, falls asleep while waiting to go on stage and play Ravana during a Ramlila performance at Girgaum Chowpatty, Mumbai. Baankelaal has been portraying Ravana for the past 35 years. A former mill worker from Ghaziabad—he has been unemployed since 2000, when the mill he worked for shut down—he lives off income earned by offering his services as a pandit at religious ceremonies. While he doesn’t make much money playing Ravana, he continues to perform in Ramlilas as this allows him to tour a little, and also gives him some company at his age. Sometimes, though, he forgets his lines or cues for the evil laugh  
-- Ritesh Uttamchandani

IN LOUNGE > Books



‘LIFE WITHOUT WRITING BORES ME’  
Gruelling research is just preparation for that moment when the story comes to possess him, says Amitav Ghosh  
BY Shruti Ravindran

QUIZ

I first heard Personville called Posionville by a red-haired mucker named Hickey Dewey in the Big Ship in Butte.

Which book starts with this line? Hint: This is as pulp as it gets.

ANSWER

The hypocrisy of the girl-goddess ritual in such orthodox and patriarchal surroundings wasn't lost on the artist, who saw women in her family in powerless positions all their lives. Her mother, a young widow, had to raise three children, but she was not allowed to work or marry again. "Society tried to humiliate her because she did not have a husband," Kamat says. "They never allowed her to be what she could be, and I saw her pain."

Her own husband, a Marxist artist, was the antithesis of the conservative trappings of her childhood. They met when she was 15 and married a decade later. Books and debate became a cornerstone of their relationship. She considers him to be part of a tiny percentage of Indian men who would respect their wife's decisions—even ones like not having children.

Her series also has two blown-up photographs of her and her husband's tongues, wrapped in *zari*. The blend of gold, red and black in the image makes it hard to instantly recognise the body part. "I wanted to show how culture gags women," she says.

She photographed her husband's tongue and made it look like a penis. To her mind, the artist says, rape and other forms of physical abuse have been used to control women, but words could be an equally humiliating tool of suppression. "A man's tongue can also be a form of covert aggression that is ugly."

The series is called *Birth Marks* to denote that it can be near impossible to break from tradition. Women who try have to first convince themselves that they are right. In India, for instance, the worth of a woman has traditionally been defined by her ability to bear and nurture children.

After years of mulling it over, Kamat decided not to have children. If the maternal feeling was absent, she argues, it wasn't for anyone else to say what she did with her body. If her husband had protested, Kamat admits, she would have needed more guts to make that decision. "I wanted to break the myth of motherhood," she says. "I can be a complete woman without being a mother." She, for one, refuses to be scarred by outdated societal rules.



OLDER COMMENTS FIRST

2 COMMENTS

PERMALINK

The essay by Betwa Sharma is good, but we must know that economic independence of women has to be a solution. Then, there is the stability of relationships coming from extended family systems through which violence and errant behaviour victimizing women is controlled. Such joint families are now declining. Media has a big role, but the media often is not part of the lives of those sections where violence occurs. Much has been written in recent times on honor killings - some judicial pronouncements in the last few weeks have been timely.

11 JUNE 2011 | SARITA

PERMALINK

The artists have been creative, but it has to be pondered whether the women in captivity kind of art and the new mediums being used can capture the subject of violence against women. It is accepted that women empowerment can be portyayed through images of goddesses. Bollywood has also managed portrayals of strength. The other side, pain and violence, is difficult to reflect. Sometime ago I had read about the use of



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MORE

an ironing board to bring home the point. The present article covers more, it is also on control and dominance.

11 JUNE 2011 | N MANAV

 COLLAPSE COMMENTS

 ADD YOUR COMMENT

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A People's Painter

A famous artist who was happy to oblige a friend and paint Mickey Mouse cartoons on her children's furniture

18 JUN 2011 | BY [Akbar Padamsee](#)

How the Stage Got Upstaged

With his Third Theatre, pioneer Badal Sircar (1925—2011) took the art of drama off the conventional stage, straight to the people

28 MAY 2011 | BY [Anjum Katyal](#)

Fluid Form

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28 MAY 2011 | BY [Avantika Bhuyan](#)

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POKER

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+



SATYAGRAHA

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Chances are he might have gone on a long unconditional fast himself to convince them that their ways weren't kosher

+



SIEGE

Advantage Buddhadeb

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+



SLEAZE

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+