

# Book Review

KAMAYANI SHARMA



Nafas: Isolation Diaries  
Author: Arshi Ahmadzai  
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As a young person growing up in Najibabad, artist Arshi Ahmadzai occasionally served as *katib* (scribe) to her teacher, writing Urdu letters on the latter's behalf to her husband who stayed in another city. As dictated, Ahmadzai would close the messages with a valedictory "yours, in waiting". During the COVID-19 pandemic, sundered from her own husband by the lockdown in 2020, Ahmadzai returned to the form and spirit of the epistle, this time as original author. Between 25 March and 1 Dec of that *annus horribilis*, she composed 128 artworks that began as letters to her beloved in Kabul, using Manjarpat cloth, ink, and materials as varied as flower dye paste, Multani mitti (fuller's earth), saffron, and gold. Published in two volumes by the Delhi gallery Blueprint 12, the series *Nafas: Isolation Diaries* combines the idioms and intensities of multiple formats—billet-doux, calendar, and illustrated manuscript—becoming a record of anticipation, of being "in wait" for respite and reunion.

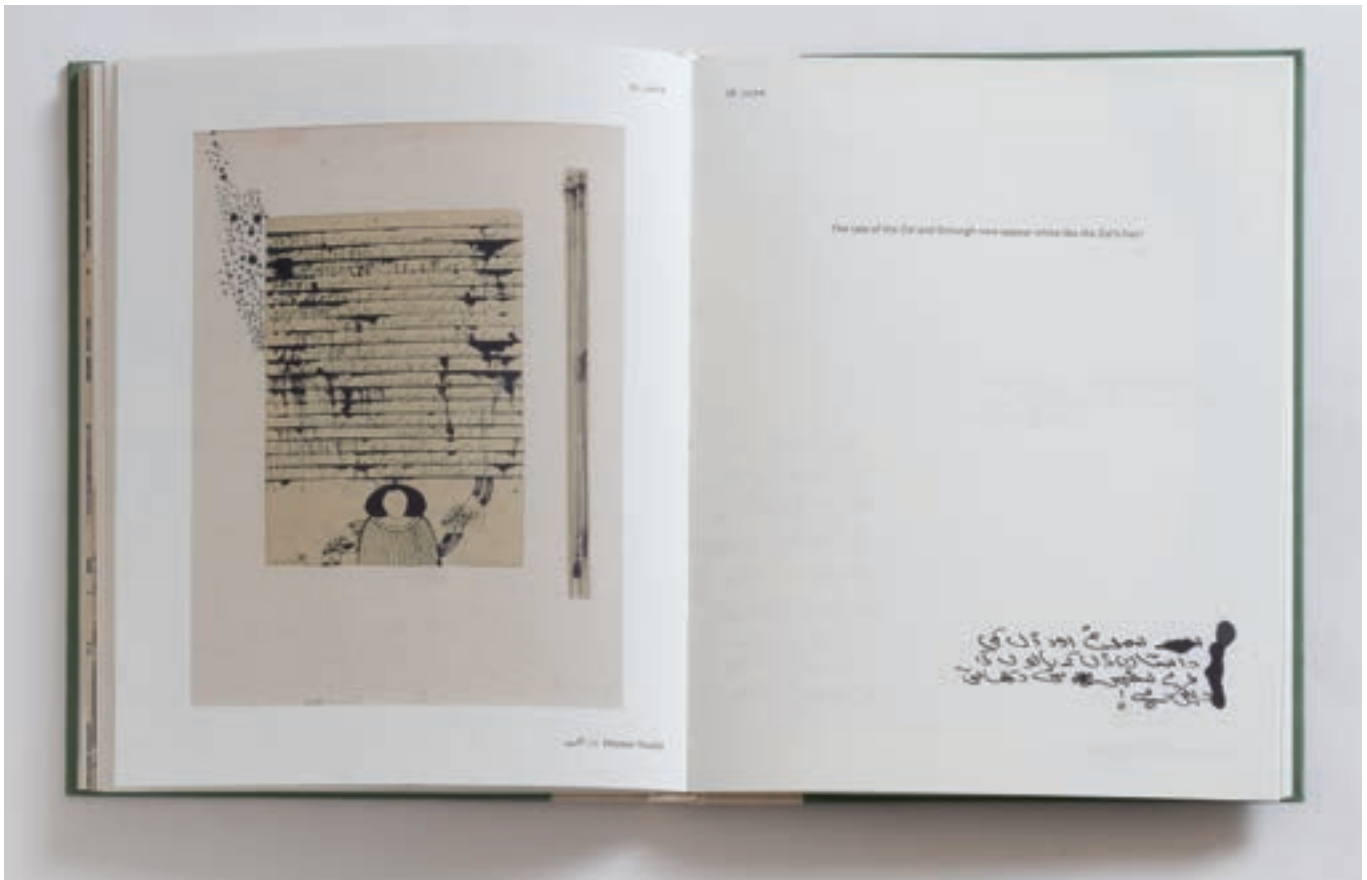
Inscribed, illustrated and pigmented, the Manjarpat surface of the *Nafas* works bears the rigours of the artistic process, in the form of blots, smears, splatters, and tassel-like bleeds, as both the cloth's exposure to the elements and the kinesis of the artist-scribe's body leave performative traces on the works. Accompanying the Urdu calligraphy of Ahmadzai's letters—in the sense of both alphabet and mode of communication—in the first volume (March-June), a distinct iconographic

ensemble emerges in the pages, which the artist developed in her art school years, and which has recurred in her later works: the anatomical drawing of a heart, the faceless woman, the hand, the chair, the *takhti*, and the pomegranate. These disparate motifs are placed in various figure-ground arrangements, suggesting the whimsical spatiality of dream and memory: chairs floating here, a heart nestled somewhere or affixed on the border, a black-wimpled human outline looming elsewhere, and a lush pomegranate peeled and seeded. In the second volume (July-December), this symbology is somewhat restrained by the regularity of sentences, ruled lines and grids that organise space, bringing it into a conversation with the coordinate geometry experienced by the body in the world, in the atelier and the *aangan*. The featureless female body—perhaps a figuration of the artist's own—and its relationship to domestic interiority, is articulated as a kind of homology, the aniconic and architectonic transforming of boundaries into portals.

The architectural conceit is expressed in the *takhti* or wooden board of the artist's childhood that recalls Indo-Islamic pointed archways, and the rectangular arrangements bespeaking planimetric diagrams. The practice of South Asian abstractionists such as Zarina, Nasreen Mohamedi, and Lala Rukh comes to mind, especially their play with linearity, light, and negative space. Indeed, Zarina is explicitly referenced in the series: her demise on 25 April 2020 inspired the diary entry from 27 April, "It's been 3 days since Zarina passed, and my pen moves like a broken pulse." Ahmadzai's use of Urdu as an index of a historical lifeworld, echoes the late artist's implication of the *zubaan*—the gnomic titles of the works become riddles to be deciphered, verse to be savoured, or a protagonist itself (15 April, *Hamza Meem aur chaar lakeerein* and 15 June, *hazaar nuqta*, for example). In its graphic grammar as well, *Nafas* speaks to Zarina's works that grapple with exilic loss like *Fathers's House 1898-1994* (1994) and *Letters from Home* (2004), where "interiority is presented through darkness, and exteriority through light"<sup>1</sup>. But the nostalgia for home has a mirror image: the waiting for the one who is away. In *Nafas*, in works like 7 Aug, *siyaah deewarein*, 26 Aug, *Khalipan aur na hona hi tou Mohabbat hai*, 23 Sept, *masjid wala darakht aur roshandaan* and 21 Nov, *Ret ke zarro mein chipi ek tanha parchai*, through strategies like contrasting colours and deploying text as shading, shadows are cast. In the *roshandaani* interstices and on the saaya-haunted edges is enacted a sciography of melancholic longing.

Shadowplay is the game of absence and presence, the self and its negation, *khudi* and *bekhudi*. Appropriately for a coronavirus chronicle, *nafas* means

<sup>1</sup> Shazia Shirazi, 'A Room of One's Own', *Zarina: Weaving Darkness and Silence*, Gallery Espace Art Pvt. Ltd., 2018.



'breath', from the Arabic word for soul or self, perhaps seeking to sublimate the agony of what the Sufis call *hijr*, separation from the loved One, towards union with the Beloved. Taking a cue from Nasreen Mohamedi's engagement with negative space in her architectural photographs (her "love of...Islamic architectonics and the sublime sense of design that notates the invisible paradise"<sup>2</sup>) and the "spiritual graffiti"<sup>3</sup> of her drawings, the second volume of Ahmadzai's series teases a parallel between mystical *ishq* and worldly romance. Made by hand, the linear regimen of logbooks and notebooks is almost tender. In one title, the ruled lines (*lakeerein*) are identified as sites where dreams are strung; in another they are likened to creases (*shikan*) wrinkling a love letter that has been folded and unfolded many times. Love letters have a long history in the Indo-Islamic tradition, as part of the Persianate *murāsala*t epistolary genre. The Urdu word for letter, *khat*, is derived from the Arabic for 'line', a type of mark that spans distance, connecting the writer to the paramour-addressee, both taking turns expecting a response, as loving and waiting become co-constitutive. The delicate lines drawn across or criss-crossed as grids constitute a map to locate the lover, securing them in a graticule of erotic yearning. The temporality of expectation between letter and response provides the affective plane on which the lines are drawn in *Nafas*. This is the artist as

*virahini*, that ancient South Asian heroine afflicted with the pain of separation or *viraha*, waiting for reply or return through the *barahmasa* of plague, composing her penelopiad on Manjarpat cloth.

But the diary is not only an indulgent exercise. For the one who waits also keeps watch; looking out not just for love but for redemption. Between the songful lines and amidst the cryptic iconography of *Nafas* is a defiant reticence, a refusal to speak the unspeakable and rob it of its horror. As the pandemic raged, so did the wrathful bombast of those in power, in a public culture of mendacity, excess, and din. Not so the forms of the diary and the letter, which are for private consumption, and can protect truths better. In her prefatory essay for Marg's issue on abstraction, Geeta Kapur contends that "there is place for retraction that counts as resistance"<sup>4</sup>. The watchful awaiter quietly records for the future the full extent of the terrible present, so that nothing is forgotten. For *Nafas'* entry for 30 September, Ahmadzai inks an archway into the corner of a vast empty wall. The archway is half-occluded by the wall itself, which threatens to come down on it. The title is 'Babri ka qissa bhagwe rang ki adalat mein'. *Nafas* is an account of *viraha*, but it is also an expression of the hope for reunion. As we asked at the beginning of the pandemic while we waited for deliverance, so must we ask again on the threshold of the dark archway: will we be restored to our selves; will we meet again on the other side?

<sup>2</sup> Geeta Kapur, 'Elegy for an Unclaimed Beloved', *When Was Modernism*, Tulika Books, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Geeta Kapur, 'Preface', in focus: Abstraction, *Marg* (Sept-Dec 2016).