From Word to Canvas

From Word to Canvas: Appropriations of Myth in Women's Aesthetic Production

Edited by

V.G. Julie Rajan and Sanja Bahun-Radunović

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INTRODUCTION

THE FEMININE GAZE: LOOKING BACK AND ACROSS THE LANDSCAPE OF MYTH

SANJA BAHUN-RADUNOVIĆ
AND V. G. JULIE RAJAN

Vashti, we are told, refused to obey the Persian king Ahaseurus', her future husband's, request to dance naked in front of drunken guests assembled in the banquet hall of the ancient palace of Susa. She paid dearly for her disobedience; she was dethroned and, as the biblical interpretation implies, executed (Esth. 1.9-22). But it is precisely because of this event that Esther, another important queen and historical–mythic woman, came to power. It was Esther who was in position to save Jewish people from the royal official Haman's genocidal plot, leaving Haman himself, in turn, to be seen by Jewish tradition as the spiritual ancestor of Adolf Hitler.[1] History is a convolute, and so is myth.

In Siona Benjamin's painting *Vashti* (Fereshteh, Finding Home # 89), featured on the cover of this book, the Persian queen, now augmented by layers of history and myth, peers back at the site of her tragedy—an empty banquet hall in a doll-house sized palace, its floor stained with blood. But Vashti's embracing hands indicate that she also protects the palace, as she

[1] See, also, Esth. 2.1, 3.8. Jewish scholars have pondered the ethical, personal, and ontological implications of Vashti's act for centuries. She is variably seen as a "heroine" and a "villain" in the Purim story. See, for a feminist perspective, Mary Gendler, "The Restoration of Vashti," in Elizabeth Koltun, ed., *The Jewish Woman*: *New Perspectives* (New York: Schocken, 1976), pp. 241-7; Rabbi Jeffrey M. Cohen, "Vashti—An Unsung Heroine," *The Jewish Bible Quarterly* (April-June 1996): 103-106. On the use of imagery of Vashti in Benjamin's painting, see Ori Z. Soltes, "Finding Home: The Midrashic Art of Siona Benjamin," *Nashim*: *A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 14 (Fall 2007): 173-178.

looks us straight in the eye—her sight stretching above and beyond the "chessboard of genocide."[2] It is through this property of "looking us in the eye" across a historical span that female-character centered myths from various cultures speak to us with force and with significance. The potency of this gaze is closely linked to what has frequently been neglected in the general assessment of myth, namely, its potential not so much to abstract historicity as to encompass and compress it, and to offer the result as a backdrop against which the move from word to canvas—or from a mythic tale to its new aesthetic appropriation—is performed. In contrast, this potential is frequently evoked and reconstellated precisely in female aesthetic production; the collection of essays *From Word to Canvas*: *Appropriations of Myth in Women's Aesthetic Production* is dedicated to a re-examination of this practice.

The relationship between myth and women can be envisioned and theorized on multiple levels. To begin with, as our knowledge of myths and mythic narrations from various cultures has grown and continues to grow exponentially, there seems to be less and less of a consensus nowadays regarding both what exactly constitutes a myth and how myth should be defined. Dictionaries are of modest help here, as they usually base their definitions on the elemental structural components of myths. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, defines myth broadly, as "a traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon." Yet, it is arguable that each segment of this definition could easily be queried. As such, if myths are based on observed phenomena and on their various creators' experiences over time, they cannot be perceived as fictitious narratives. Furthermore, myths and elements of myth may exist beyond or complementing the narrative verbal template. Supernatural persons, actions, and events, finally, become such only in the course of creating and re-creating a mythic narrative in each generation's cultural imaginary—so some myths waver into being narratives about natural and supernatural events while others may not. The essential questions thus still obtain: What is a myth? Is its connection to narrative as indisputable as we claim it to be? What happens to a "narrative" when it is appropriated by non-verbal media?

Various theorists have attempted to address these questions by connecting myth to all the possible realms of human experience, from

[2] See, Siona Benjamin, poem "*Vashti* (Fereshteh, Finding Home # 89)," this volume, 19.

physical movement/stature (Hans Blumenberg) and the observation of natural phenomena (Robert Graves); to rites, rituals, and religion (Mircea Eliade, Jessie L. Weston); to artistic expression (Jerome S. Bruner); to inner psychological dynamics (Sigmund Freud, Carl Gustav Jung, Joseph Campbell). They have elaborated, not only on the historic–moment specificity of myth (Eric Dardel) or on its eternal return/timelessness (Mircea Eliade), but also on its structure (Claude Lévi-Strauss), epistemology (Raffaele Pettazzoni, Colin Falck), ethics (Michael Bell), its closeness or openness as a system of thought (Marina Warner), and its role in the perpetuation or revision of societal customs, thence, its role in the cultural and political functioning of society (Bronislaw Malinowski, Simone de Beauvoir).[3] Responsive to the fact that a comprehensive definition of myth would have to include all these and many more characterizations, the Editors of this book, however, define myth

[3] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1974); Michael Bell, *Literature, Modernism and Myth*: *Belief and Responsibility in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985); Jerome S. Bruner, "Myth and Identity," *Daedalus* 88, no. 2: Myth and Mythmaking (Spring 1959): 349-358; Joseph Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: MJF Books, 1949); Eric Dardel, "The Mythic," in *Sacred Narratives*: *Readings in the Theory of Myth*, ed. Alan Dundes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 225-243; Emile Durkheim, *The Elemental Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*: *The Encounter Between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Reality*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Collins, 1970); Colin Falck, *Myth, Truth, and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James and Alix Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1957; New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), vol. 23, 1-137; Robert Graves, "Introduction," in *The New Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology* (London: Hamlyn, 1975); Carl Gustav Jung and Carl Kerényi, *The Science of Mythology*: *Essays on the Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis* (London: Routledge, 2001); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning*: *Cracking the Code of Culture* (New York: Schocken, 1995); Bronislaw Malinowski, "The Role of Myth in Life," in *Sacred Narratives*: *Readings in the Theory of Myth*, 193-206; Raffaele Pettazzoni, "The Truth of Myth," in *Sacred Narratives*: *Readings in the Theory of Myth*, 98-109; Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920). The reader is advised that this may be a representative but by no means comprehensive account of the various approaches to myth that have been proposed in the past hundred years.

differently, as an act of looking: looking back and forward, gazing at and across, and peering into or out from various "points of view."

The intertwined notions/activities of looking, gazing, and viewing are highly relevant to any critical writing concerning itself with the use of myth in female artistic production. As the example of Benjamin's painting from the *Finding Home* series indicates and as the majority of contributions in *From Word to Canvas* confirm, what characterizes twentieth century and contemporary female artists' engagement with myth in a variety of media is an effort to conceive of myth as a cluster of symbolic and metaphoric meanings that can be negotiated in such a way to constellate past historical moments and the moment of production of a work of art, and thereby to offer a more dynamic vision of subjecthood across centuries and in the present moment. In this way, female art, performance, and literature, avoid emptying out history of its variable and eventful historicity—histories of achievement, histories of oppression.

What is revisited and frequently contested in these female artistic practices is precisely what Simone de Beauvoir would isolate as the major properties of myth vis-à-vis femininity: its a-historical perpetuation of patriarchal paradigms and the visual-epistemic incarceration of woman in myth (Beauvoir, 161 *et passim*). By virtue of their closedness or openness, aesthetic techniques (and they include artistic negotiations of mythic structure) "transmit thought patterns"; as such transmitters, they can be instruments of control but also tools through which to question that system of control, as German writer Christa Wolf reminds us.[4] The contemporary female aesthetic gaze, we are tempted to propose, has learnt to wonder more freely across the mythological spatial–temporal spectrum, as well as to reflect back on its own position within it. *From Word to Canvas* thus positions itself as a contribution to a wider discourse that endeavors to theorize myth in conjunction with liberatory, subversive, or socially progressive interpretations of and repercussions from the act of female aesthetic production.

In the effort to forge new perspectives on myth and feminine artistic production, an approach to the works of art as practices of concrete materiality, historicity, and testimonial value has been too often sidelined. This is why *From Word to Canvas* opens with an artist's essayistic reflection on her own work. Siona Benjamin draws upon her unique life experiences to offer fresh approaches to the complex dynamics of cultural hybridity, identity politics, and myth. Benjamin was raised in the Jewish

[4] Christa Wolf, "Conditions of a Narrative," in *Cassandra*: *A Novel and Four Essays*, trans. Jan van Heurck (New York: Farrar/Straus/Giroux, 1988), 266 and 300. See, also, Sandrock, this volume, 73.

faith, grew up in the predominantly Hindu and Muslim nation of India, and now resides in the United States. It is her complex subjectivity that drives her to question in her work the rigidity of cultural boundaries ascribed by their various mythical traditions. Benjamin emphasizes the symbolic continuity among various cultures by collapsing in her works what may be perceived as their unique symbolisms to produce new feminist mythical narratives. Each of her pieces surfaces a distinct text that underscores how, despite their different origins and histories, cultures actually resonate with one another in how their myths have been interpreted to engender comparable forms of violence against women, and, also, how the same mythic patterns can be used to question this history of violation.

Tudor Balinisteanu examines manifestations of female sexuality in contemporary poetry/poetic prose by Eavan Boland ("Pomegranate," 1994) and Liz Lochhead ("Lucy's Diary," 1986 [1983]). Through close readings of Classic versions of the Greek myth of Persephone, Balinisteanu considers how mythical projections of femininity may affect perceptions of proper feminine sexual behavior in patriarchy, and indicates how Boland's and Lochhead's contemporary approaches to female sexuality, while derived from the problematic projections of the same in the ancient mythical renditions of Persephone, also present acts of poetic transvaluation. Boland's and Lochhead's texts function as testimonies to the fact that, as Liz Yorke has put it, wherever "experience, memory, fantasy or dream can be retrieved, whether in words or images, it may [also] be revalued, and re-presented." Each such act re-configures the mythic (sub) text itself, allowing "different textures, colours, aspects, lights and shadings to be heard, seen and felt."[5]

Recording a contemporary artistic iteration of the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, Erika M. Nelson considers American playwright Mary Zimmerman's re-reading of the myth in her production "Metamorphoses," which premiered in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001. The mythic-literary subtext of this production is not only Ovid's famed rendition of the myth, but also German modernist poet Rainer Maria Rilke's re-reading of the myth in his 1908 poem "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes." The latter is of particular interest to Nelson, as it is historically and structurally positioned in a framework comparable to that of Zimmerman's drama production. Both versions of the myth emerged at the dawn of a century, at times when the present and future of the world

[5] Liz Yorke, *Impertinent Voices*: *Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Women's Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1991), 23.

was uncertain. Nelson considers how the gendered dimensions of the Orpheus myth, particularly in regard to his multiple experiences of and final loss of his beloved Eurydice, as well as the character of Eurydice herself, provided Rilke and Zimmerman with a mythical framework through which to contemplate the subject of loss—historical and personal.

In "Against Monologization: The Subversive Voice of Christa Wolf's *Cassandra*," Kristen A. Sandrock investigates German author Christa Wolf's re-orientation of feminine voice and visibility in her novel *Cassandra* as articulated in original projections of the ancient Greek mythical figure of Cassandra. Sandrock's examination is premised on the timing of the publication of Wolf's novel. The novel was produced in 1983, as Sandrock notes, when East and West Germany were divided, and "the reciprocal nuclear armament" divided the world. In her novel, Wolf draws parallels between her own anxieties about the stability of not only her native Germany, but the world as a whole, in the 1980s, and the mythical Cassandra's anxieties over the potential downfall of Troy, in ancient Greece. In Classic versions of the myth, Cassandra is represented as a seeress who, during the battle over and downfall of Troy, was perceived as mitigating against power structure and hence was silenced by men for her attempts to interfere into male affairs of war; by silencing her, patriarchy cast Cassandra's voice in negative moral terms and characterized her as deviant. Sandrock explores how Wolf's re-reading of the myth attempts to correct that misogynist projection of Cassandra by casting her as a woman who, like herself in her own time, should have been valued for challenging the oppressive imaginaries of nationalism; out of this exploration, Cassandra's voice (as much as Wolf's own poetic voice) emerges as dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense.

Raffaele Furno considers Italian playwright and actress Ermanna Montanari's feminist responses to (mis)representations of the mythical figure of Beatrice Cenci in her 1993 production, *Cenci,* at Teatro Rasi in Ravenna, Italy. Born in 1577, Beatrice was the youngest of the notable and wealthy Cenci family, who resided in Rome. In 1598, Beatrice killed her father, who is characterized in history-books as having been violent and incestuous. After killing her father, Beatrice was sentenced to death for what was construed to be her "crime." Montanari's performance questions the social labels of criminality that were projected onto Beatrice by highlighting her interpretation of the psychological repercussions on Beatrice of the sexually criminal relationship that had been enforced upon her by her own father. Montanari conveys her interpretation through highly symbolic performances, where stark visuality and innovative use of voice resonate across an unvarnished stage, underscoring the multiple

ways in which patriarchy renders suspect female social agency and hence normalizes violence against the female body and psyche.

In "Female Appropriation of Autochthonous Mythology through Aesthetic Transmission to the Diaspora: The Case of Nguyen Nguyet Cam's Edition of Vietnamese Folk Tales in Two Cakes Fit for a King," Hanh Ngoc Nguyen and R. C. Lutz ponder the significance of Vietnamese author and scholar Nguyen Nguyet Cam's feminist interpretations of traditional Vietnamese folktales in 2003. The crafting of folktales and oral literatures over time may guide the establishment of a culture's earliest ideologies of moral propriety, but their subsequent re-rendition and re-recording may also transform (and re-transform) these ideologies, at various points in the history of a society/community. Accordingly, the authors point out how, although the earliest (traditional) Vietnamese folktales had developed a relatively affirmative framework for inter-gender relations, emphasizing women's rights and gender humanism in the discourse of legality, they were eventually transformed by patriarchal Confucian traditions, which introduced moral ideologies that sanction gender inequality and women's invisibility, and reinforce suspicions around female social agencies. The authors reveal how Nguyen Nguyet Cam, in her recent recording and translation of certain Vietnamese folktales into the English language, negotiates against those inequity-based cultural registers and generates new versions of the folktales for her readers in diaspora, versions that affirm the value of femininity by casting it in a positive light.

The last piece in our collection by Maria Cristina Nisco addresses the cultural and gendered (mis)interpretations of the Greek mythical figure of Medusa. Nisco suggests that original renditions of Medusa as "the horrible, dangerous and threatening monster" may in fact reflect Western anxieties about the non-European female Other. Nisco considers contemporary feminist revisions of the image of Medusa by two women artists of color residing in European geographies, both of whom draw parallels between their own racialized and gendered experiences and those of Medusa. Dorothea Smartt, an English poet of Caribbean origins, and Ingrid Mwangi, a Kenyan-German artist living in Germany, refigure the image of Medusa and hence reclaim for her—and through her, for themselves—a voice and visibility through which to articulate the challenges they have faced as women of color in Western culture. Through their aesthetic conceptualizations of Medusa, Smartt and Mwangi contest the racist and misogynist effects of the Medusa myth to claim a voice for women of color in societies that do not always understand them, effects that, in turn, they do not always understand themselves. Ultimately,

however, the questions that surface in their respective works are wider. Mwangi's art, in particular, structured as it is around the denouncement of the exploitation of ethnic stereotypes wherever they may be found, exteriorizes another thematic configuration that resonates with all the texts included in this volume: how the condition of cultural hybridity, increasingly common in contemporary life and art, informs aesthetic practices dealing with culture-specific myths, history, and "mythhistory."

It is befitting for a volume that opens with the self-examination of a Jewish-Indian artist to close with the artwork of a Kenyan-German artist. Such topicality is also a thematic exteriorization of and testimony to the multicultural and hybrid set up of the volume itself (and, thence, also of the state of contemporary scholarship on myth): *From Word to Canvas* features not only myths, and cultural-mythic patterns from across the globe, but also global contributors—Vietnamese, German, Romanian, Italian, British, Jewish American scholars, and others—working in and outside their points of ethnic provenance. It is thus with a certain amount of (not only performative) pride that the Editors sign themselves off as a Croatian-Serbian working in the UK, and an Indian-American working in the US.

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CHAPTER ONE

BLUE LIKE ME

SIONA BENJAMIN, USA

Rest at pale evening...
A tall slim tree...
Night coming tenderly
Black like me.
—Langston Hughes, "Dream Variations"

In my paintings I raise questions about where the place we call "home" may be, while evoking issues such as identity, immigration, motherhood, and the role of art in society.[1] I am a Bene Israel Jew from India. Although my family has gradually dispersed out of India, mostly to Israel and America, my parents remained in India. I am now also an American, living and working in New Jersey. With such a background, the desire to "find home," spiritually and literally, has always preoccupied me—a concern to which I feel many Americans can relate, as this comparatively young nation was largely formed by immigrants and their descendants.

I have never been able to set deep roots into the space where I am at any given moment, no matter where I am. This is unnerving, but there is also something seductive about the spiritual borderlands formed by the "displacements" in which I seem to find myself. In my paintings I explore those displacements by combining the imagery of my past with the role I play in America today, making a mosaic inspired by both Indian–Persian miniature paintings and Sephardic icons, by the oil lamps, the velvet- and silver-covered torahs, and a chair left vacant for the prophet Elijah in our Bombay synagogues. For I have always had to reflect upon the cultural boundary zones. Raised Jewish, I grew up in the predominantly Hindu and Muslim society of India, and was educated in Catholic and Zoroastrian schools; and I live in the US now. My family has married American,

[1] This paper is a substantially developed paraphrase of my artistic statement. See, Siona Benjamin's web-site: <http://www.artsiona.com>.

Yemenite, French, Ethiopian, Cochini, and other Jews. I am married to a Connecticut native who was raised Russian Orthodox, but who also has the Jewish faith as part of his family mix. In the 1970s he became a Buddhist and studied Indian classical music for some years with an Indian maestro in California. We now try to raise our children in the mosaic of all that we can bring to them from our backgrounds.

I should like to present to the reader the portion of this fruitful diversity that most significantly influences my work. There are three distinct Jewish communities in India: the Bene Israel, who have remained the largest; the Cochini Jews, who once formed the second largest group (but who have now mostly immigrated to Israel); and the Iraqi Jews, who now form the second largest community. All three sections follow the same religious rituals and recite prayers in Sephardi intonations. Some customs vary among them, because the place in which they reside has influenced their rituals. Mostly one will find Jews in the coastal parts of India: Bombay, Cochin, and Calcutta, although there was also a small community of Jews in Delhi, which had one synagogue. There are also synagogues in Pune (in the state of Maharashtra) and Ahmedabad (Gujurat). Smaller synagogues can be found in some of the coastal villages in the Konkan (i.e., the west coast of India, south of Bombay).[2] The community from which I come, the Bene Israel community of Maharashtra, is ancient. According to the story that has been handed down through the generations, the Bene Israel were said to be shipwrecked on the Konkan coast, near the Kenneri islands (about 6 miles south of Bombay), about 2,000 years ago. As related in the Books of Maccabees, after the Greeks conquered what is today Palestine in 332 B.C., life there became extremely oppressive for the orthodox Jews. The situation became insufferable when, in the year 167 B.C., the king Antiochus IV Epiphenes of Syria tried to impose Hellenistic religious practice on the orthodox Jews, an event which would eventually lead to what is known in Jewish and Christian traditions as the Maccabean revolt and the story of

[2] For the information from this section, as well as the following account of the Bene-Israel Jews, see Shirley Berry Isenberg, *India's Bene Israel*: *A Comprehensive Inquiry and Sourcebook* (Berkeley: Judah L. Magnus Museum, 1988), and E. M. Jacob Gadkar, *The Religious and Cultural Heritage of the Bene-Israels, Book II*: *A Fantastic Story of Their Allegiance to Judaism* (Bombay: Gate of Mercy Synagogue, 1984). See, also, "Abraham's Children in India," *The Sunday Statesman Magazine* (April 18, 1976); Renu Mehra, "India Nurtured Jewish Heritage without Prejudice," *India Worldwide* (February 1988). I am indebted to Samuel Daniel for helpful discussions and editorial assistance with the information on the Jews of India.

Chanukkah.[3] It is said that, prior to these events, a group of Jews from Galilee managed to flee into Egypt. In 175 B.C. they boarded a ship, probably sailing for Cheul, a major port city on the Maharashtra coast of west India. When they were within a couple of hundred yards off the port of Konkan, about fifteen miles from Cheul Creek, the ship ran aground and sank. Most of the people on board, together with all their possessions, including the Torah scrolls and prayer books, were lost. Out of all those on board, legend has it, only seven men and seven women managed to swim ashore. After being given shelter by some Hindus from Navgaon (a village twenty miles south of what would later become Bombay), the Jews found permanent abode on the Konkan Coast. The bodies of the people washed ashore were buried separately in large graves. There is a monument marking this site at Navgaon, India.

Another version of the legend states that the ancestors of the Bene Israel came from northern Palestine. According to Biblical history, that area was inhabited by the ten tribes which formed the ancient Kingdom of Israel in the 8th century B.C. When the Assyrians captured the capital Samaria in 722 B.C., most of these people fled the country for fear of persecution and conversion by the Assyrians. It is said that some people belonging to the tribes of Asher and Zebulun boarded a ship, sailed via Egypt to the Indian Ocean, and were ship-wrecked on the west coast of India. They were offered shelter by the indigenous population, and they continued living there for centuries, as the Indian people have been welcoming. The Jews of India are one of the few communities in the world that did not face anti-Semitism in their "home" state. They adopted the mode of dress, some customs, and the local language (Marathi). They derived their family names from the names of the villages in which they settled (i.e., Kehim—Kehimkar; Pen—Penkar; Cheul—Cheulkar). The Bene Israel have certain rituals that are uniquely their own, such as the Malida ceremony, an event structured around the recitation of the Eliyahu-ha-navi prayer and a ceremonial offering of sweetened rice and dry fruits to the Prophet Elijah. There are now about 5,000 Bene Israel left in India, as most have immigrated to Israel, Canada, and the Unites States of America. My destiny has been similar.

When, twenty-one years ago, I came to do my postgraduate studies in the United States, I could not imagine that I would stay on there and that I would feel so solidly American one day; yet I also never considered that I

[3] These events are described in The Second Book of Maccabees. While the festival of Chanukkah has become one of the most widely celebrated Jewish holidays, Jews do not accept as scripture The Second Book of Maccabees where the actual story is related.

would be in such a flux about where the borders of my homeland lay. In the meantime, I have come to the conclusion that the perfect "Place" or "Home" for anyone does not exist; it is precisely the sense of "non-belonging" that has given me an opportunity to encounter a home perhaps at any given time or place; and also to celebrate in art the impossibility of fixedness in any single "home." After having struggled long with my own hybrid background and complex cultural experiences, I am beginning to see more clearly now that this blend can be humorous, enlightening, and revealing. At first the ornate culture from which I came seemed difficult to apply to and unnecessary to my work. As my life in art progressed, I have found a way to use my background, to be able to weave current issues and parts of my life in its intricacies, thus making this ornateness meaningful and generative. This is also the reason why my work celebrates my womanhood: my abilities, my strengths, and my ambitions. Now my art attempts to create a dialogue between the personal and the cultural, between the ancient and the modern times, and to force a confrontation of unresolved issues marking our lives in history. In this multicultural world I feel a strong need to make art that will speak to my audience of our similarities, not of our differences; thus I emphasize how the art-making process contributes to conversations about subjects like stereotyping, and religious and gender intolerance. By making images that problematize and question monolithic cultural identity, I feel I can contribute to a much needed "repair" (*Tikkun* in Hebrew) in discussing those issues. I would like my audience to re-evaluate their notions and concepts about identity and race, thus understanding that such misconceptions can lead to racism, hate, and war.

Technique-wise, my artistic practice has been importantly influenced by Indian and Persian miniature paintings. These paintings were made on paper in India between the 14th and 19th centuries. They are small works of art, originally intended to be held in the hands of a single person and examined closely. They originated in the court workshops of the Indian kings and are like jewels. They are known for their fine colors and their status as courtly accessories. The primary aim of these works, whether a religious epic or a portrait, was to tell a story, created primarily for private enjoyment, to illustrate religious, heroic, or domestic narratives.[4] My mixed-media paintings reflect the tradition of these miniatures. In my work I collage found objects and paint them, thus making a playful assemblage of disparate traditions, stories, and forms. For instance, in my

[4] See Darielle Mason, B. N. Goswamy, *Intimate Worlds*: *Indian Paintings from the Alvin O. Bellak Collection* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2001).

mixed-media series of paintings entitled *Spicy Girl*, I address contemporary American culture in context of my own background, having lived in two diverse cultural settings. My mixed media piece, *Spicy Girl*: *Sefer Torah* (box exterior and interior) bespeaks this heterogeneity. On the one hand, this mixed media (gouache on wood, baked enamel on steel, and found object) evokes the *sefer torah* of my childhood, the one my father bid for during the Simha Torah ceremony. When I was a little girl, I would sit in the synagogue and gaze at the mysterious chair always left vacant, wondering for whom it was reserved. Later, in the grounds outside the synagogue, we would "pick" fruits that had been fastened to a canopy made of palm fronds woven around a bamboo frame. These recollections are colored by the glow of my mother's *sabbath* lamp. She would recount stories about the family, how the Jewish women, even in their *saris*, were distinctly different from their Hindu neighbors. When my grandmother used to go about the city, she said, the Hindu women would remark: "She looks like a Chitpavan Brahmin, but where is the red *sindhoor* on her forehead? Who is she?" When they learned that she was a Jew, they would whisper "Israel" as she passed. An ornamented Indian woman in the painting represents that part of my childhood world and my heritage. The "spicy girl"—a bluish self-portrait—stands next to this Indian woman. The "spicy girl" on the left (myself) tries to imitate the ornate woman by wearing a veil over jeans. She is a poor copy, a hybrid clinging to this ornamentation. But the "spicy girl" also projects an "in-your-face-attitude" toward, not only certain aspects of American culture, but also toward American stereotypes of Asian women. Distance sharpens my vision; far from my former home, I see more clearly what once was.

But this search for home is most thoroughly explored in my gouache-on-paper *Finding Home* series, where I combine traditional styles of painting, such as Indian/Persian miniatures, Byzantine icons, and Jewish and Christian illuminated manuscripts, with trans-temporal mythic and contemporary pop-cultural elements, to create a new artistic vocabulary of my own. This is a highly iconographic series. While growing up in India I recall being surrounded by Hindu idols and iconography that were taboo in my Jewish world. I eyed those figures from a distance, captivated with their radiance and richness. Since Judaism stressed monotheism and iconoclasm, I somehow resisted the lure of figurative drawing for years. Initially, I made abstract work, and, later, if I did venture to depict the forbidden fruit, my figures were shrouded with darkened faces. Then my work was filled with graven images, as suddenly it became clear, during my years studying and designing sets for theater, that I liked the narrative, the theatrical, the decorative lyrical line, this ornateness I carried with me

all along. These figures have thus become characters in my paintings, actors that act out their parts, recording, balancing, rectifying, restoring, and absorbing, like in the paintings of surrealist women artists Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo. Through all this experience, I understood how I can dip into my own personal specifics and universalize, thus playing the role of an artist/activist.

Thus, in the *Fereshteh* ("angels" in Urdu) subseries of *Finding Home*, I invoke the women of the Bible to make them agents of a present day battle against wars and violence. In *Finding Home* (*Fereshteh*) *# 74 "Lilith"* (see figure 1-1), I explore the character of Lilith. Based on Jewish Midrashic literature and legends, Lilith has been identified as the predecessor to Eve who was created from the earth at the same time as Adam. Unlike Eve, *The Alphabet of Ben-Sira* relates, Lilith was unwilling to forgo her equality with Adam and demanded sexual equality. Rebuffed by Adam she took her case to God, who responded to her seductive powers by revealing His divine name. Speaking His name out loud she earned her ticket out of *Pardes*, or Paradise, and into eternal exile. Thus Lilith has been called and has represented a mother of demons, slayer of newborns, corruption, indulgence, the serpent in the Garden of Eden, and the seductress of men.[5] Lilith has made a return in feminist history many a time as an iconic symbol that represents the oppressed, both as a goddess and as an example of female strength, power, and mystery.[6]

In my painting Lilith dons symbols from many faiths. The snake armband perhaps symbolizing Hinduism, the head covering turns into a *tallit* (Jewish prayer shawl), the soldier's bracelet is recast as the *hamsa* (or is it the hand of Fatima?), and the bullet wound invokes St. Teresa's stigmata. Bringing her forth to today, the character of Lilith becomes the woman targeted, the sacrificing mother, the mourning war widow, the brave woman soldier, the rape victim in war. She cries out at this injustice

[5] The Hebrew Biblical figure of Lilith, appearing in The Book of Isaiah 34:14, has been identified as an heir to the Mesopotamian wind and storm demon Lilitu. The story about Lilith as Adam's first wife appears first in the collection of stories *The Alphabet of Ben-Sira*, collected by an anonymous and dated between the eighth and the tenth century. For more on Lilith in midrashic tradition, see Judith R. Baskin, *Midrashic Women*: *Formations of the Feminine* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2002), 58-60 [editors' comment].

[6] For the most influential feminist re-evaluation of Lilith, see Judith Plaskow, "The Coming of Lilith: Toward a Feminist Theology," in *Woman Spirit Rising*: *A Feminist Reader in Religion*, eds. Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1979), 198-209.

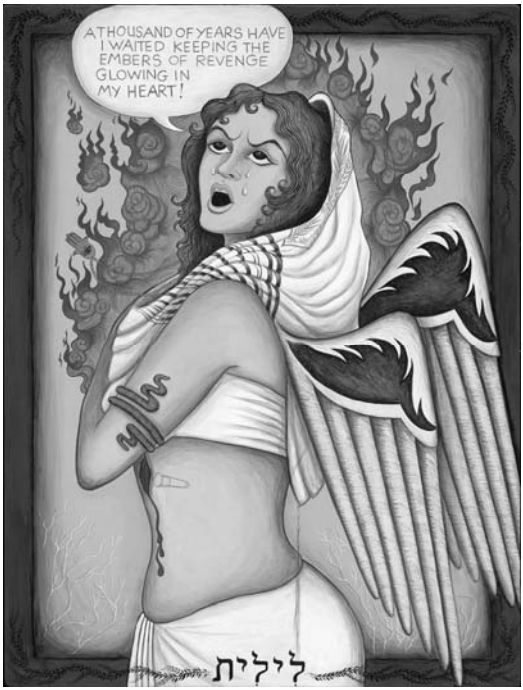

Fig. 1-1: Siona Benjamin, *Finding Home* (*Fereshteh*) *# 74*: *Lilith*, 2006 (gouache on wood panel); courtesy of the author

after "a thousand of years" of waiting: Where is peace, justice, freedom, and equality?

Roy Lichtenstein, the pop artist, and the drama of the Indian Amar Chitra Katha comics served as an inspiration for the Lilith series. Indian/Persian miniatures and Jewish and Christian illuminated manuscripts also creep into parts of the painting style. The blond heroine in Lichtenstein's paintings has been recast as a blue maiden in my art. Very often I look down at my own skin and in my perception, it has turned blue. It tends to do that when I face certain situations of people stereotyping and categorizing other people who are unlike themselves. Over the years I have therefore developed many blue-skinned characters in my paintings. While, in some stories and cultures, such as that which created traditional Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints, a bluish hue to skin connotes sickness, death or something alien, the turquoise blue skin of my characters portrays quite the opposite: a confidence in their difference,

health, and radiance, and a definite will to survive. Making them come alive and enacting their stories as they reach out from a mythological past, (besides Jewish myth, I am also inspired by Indian goddesses like Kali and the famous blue god, Krishna), I show how these characters use their blue skin to tell or retell stories. In this process of recycling and rejuvenating, they remind me (and hopefully my audience) that myth-making is cyclical and timeless.

This blue self portrait takes on many roles and forms, and theatrically enacts many ancient and contemporary dilemmas. In *Finding Home # 45 "Sister"* I employ an autobiographical dual blue figure to respond to the Middle East crisis (see figure 7-2). Since most of my family immigrated to Israel from India, I formed this two-headed, several-armed woman—half-Jewish and half-Muslim, both whose hands display the rich *henna* of the similarities between both religions. Although the juxtaposition of these symbols seems peaceful, a blasting plunger and wires that indicate a bomb connected to them are in front of them. The tension between the symbols surfaces questions such as: Will they destroy themselves, or, Is there any hope that they will be saved…from themselves? This global uncertainty informs many other paintings of mine, and it informs works such as *Finding Home # 46* "*Tikkun ha-Olam.*" The latter phrase refers to "the restoration/repair of the world," an inspirational story from Kaballah. The story compares the world to a pot or vessel that contains all the virtues. Because the cosmos was unable to contain this divine energy, the pot shattered, but the broken shards retained the divine light or energy. It is humanity's task to reconstruct this vessel, and this is accomplished through various ethical, spiritual, intellectual, and aesthetic acts that re-establish values in our world. By making images that contribute to this "*Tikkun*," I am participating in my own small way in this process of "Restoration."

I would like to conclude by saying that making transcultural art is like sitting on top of a fence. Sometimes it feels safe to fit into a compartment and fall either way from the fence, but then I am reminded, that although precarious, this position gives me a wider perspective of being able to see both sides. Sometimes I share my art world with the rising group of South Asian-American artists and sometimes with diasporic Jewish artists, both of which feed the core of my being. I am also solidly an American artist, as the environment in which I live inspires me. It is sometimes discouraging, though, when I am asked for information about the Jews of India, not in a research effort, but to ground me in a single valid category, in my Indian/Asian/Jewishness or my Indian/Asian/Americanness. Similarly the Jewish world has been sometimes puzzled by the hybridism of images

Fig. 1-2: Siona Benjamin, *Finding Home # 45*: *Sister*, 2000 (gouache on paper)
Courtesy of the author

of Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, and Jewish tradition in my work. Since the work does not fit into the typical Ashkenazi Jewish category, it becomes difficult to digest and process the images. This is exactly what interests me in de-categorizing my work. These are persistent issues that disturb me, so I choose to present them. I do not wish to be a token artist for any one category, as tribal impulses and nationalism are deeply ingrained in us and too easy to assume. Because of the lack of tribal security and comfort, I (as an artistic outsider) pursue special insights into this situation. This is the reason why I have always been on a quest for making hybrid images or characters in my work, a sort of universal being that comes from one point of view but that leads the viewer to unexpected destinations.

I feel that there is a vigorous transcultural movement, now more than ever, and that this movement will only get stronger. The word

"transcultural" seems especially pertinent here because it connotes the potential of crossing or straddling numerous boundary zones. It is this potential that enhances the possibilities of the artist coming from, not just one, but numerous influences, countries, and backgrounds. An artist "transcultured" in this way becomes an artist less static and more mobile, an artist able to continue to change identities and to be in a constant state of flux, engaging dialogically in numerous points of view. The characters in my world thus have to shed the skin of religion while in turn celebrating it, shed the skin of nationalism while at the same time being proud of it, and completely shed the skin of tribalism and the wrong use of power. Once these skins are shed, one can construct a new language of understanding, because what was once "the other," is none other than—oneself.

Finding Home # 89 (Fereshteh) "Vashti"

Vashti was cast out
Now she looks in

A black and white setting from yesteryear
Postcards from another target
A chessboard of genocide
The *ner tamid* of a lost synagogue
A palace of another dictator
Smoke stacks of your ancestor's crematorium

I search during my journey
But cannot find
How can they erase without a trace
I wonder
Now more than necessary
Along with her dignity
Will she restore yours.

—Siona Benjamin