

Home is a Foreign Place: Zarina Hashmi

With just a single word, a hand-drawn line or an incision on paper, Zarina Hashmi (1937–2020) manages to tell a complex story about memory and displacement. Let's explore how her works that draw from her memories of Partition and the loss of her childhood home have defined the movement of minimalist abstraction in India.

The 1947 Partition divided British India into the separate nation-states of India and Pakistan, impacting the lives of millions. This was a defining moment in Zarina's childhood in Aligarh, as she saw several of her family members displaced following this event. Her woodcut print, *Dividing Line* (2001), references the Radcliffe Line, which divided the two nations. Here the personal collides with the political as we see traces of the artist's hand clearly in the jagged, roughly carved line representing the border between India and Pakistan. In this print, Zarina zooms into the line itself, which despite its abstract form remains legible and resonant to many. Similarly, in her series of prints titled *Atlas of My World* (2001), she emphasises the geo-political boundaries of nations and regions across the world that she had lived in. In her representation of the Partition in this work, the dividing line extends far beyond the Indian subcontinent itself, highlighting its brutal impact.

'How can one ignore what is happening in the world: the injustices, the violence perpetuated on innocent civilians, the wars fought over fraudulent claims. I can not join the resistance, I protest through my work. I drew the maps of cities destroyed, violated. Some of the cities I had visited, others needed to be memorialized.'

- Zarina

In the late 1950s, Zarina's family migrated from Aligarh to Pakistan resulting in the loss of her childhood home. This, accompanied by her subsequent moves around the world, initially through her brief marriage to a diplomat and then independently, left a deep imprint on her practice, which dealt intimately with a longing for a place to call home. We see this evoked through prints that show real and imagined maps, architectural ground plans and grids of triangles that she termed 'spaces to hide'.

Memories of Home

In her most ambitious project, *Home is a Foreign Place* (1999), she features abstract images accompanied by single-word captions in her mother tongue, Urdu, through a series of thirty-six woodcut prints. In the first print in the series, titled *Home* (1999), we see a simple geometric composition that represents the floorplan of the house she grew up in. This nostalgic representation has been a recurring theme in her works and is also reflected in her series *Letters from Home* (2004) that comprises eight prints, centred on deeply personal letters that her sister wrote to her in Urdu, describing painful memories of loss. Here, Zarina overlays the calligraphic text of the letters with abstracted imagery like maps and floor plans that evoke their shared memories.

'Home is the centre of my universe; I make a home wherever I am. My home is my hiding place, a house with four walls, sometimes with four wheels.'

'I do not feel at home anywhere, but the idea of home follows me wherever I go.'

- Zarina

In addition to invoking memories, her move to New York in the 1970s also influenced her practice in other ways. Here, she felt an affinity with the prevalent Minimalist movement, which led her to experiment further with her medium.

Minimalism and Materiality

Adopting the visual language of Minimalism, Zarina shifted the focus from the printed image to the materiality of her surfaces. Instead of using ink, her images would be formed from within the paper itself, through acts of incising, perforating and scratching the surface– like in her pin drawing series from the late 1970s. Completed shortly before her estranged husband's death in 1977, this series is imbued with a meditative character through the disciplined act of repeatedly puncturing the sheets of paper. The resulting image and condition of the surface recalls the impact of her personal memories as well as her lasting impressions of socio-political crises like the Partition.

By abstracting complex images, Zarina transforms intangible emotions of longing, nostalgia or loss into material forms. Through her practice and approach to Minimalism, we see how simple lines and forms can be charged with both deeply intimate memories as well as political and historical meaning.

We refer to Zarina (1937–2020) by her first name as this is how she preferred to identify herself professionally. Her practice, which spanned several decades, has been recognised through a number of awards and solo exhibitions. The first retrospective of her work was held in 2012 at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and travelled to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and the Art Institute of Chicago. She was also one of four artists to represent India at its first national pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2011.

The representation of the Partition depicted in this video takes reference from an archival map and is used for illustrative purposes only. We recognise that some of these borders remain disputed to this day, and are interpreted differently by different sources. Additionally, the film makes reference to the Radcliffe Line that demarcated Pakistani territories in the erstwhile Punjab Province in the West, and the erstwhile Bengal Presidency in the East. While East Bengal was known as East Pakistan following Partition, this region has been recognised as the People's Republic of Bangladesh since the Liberation War in 1971.

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