

Gazelle Samizay: Claustrophobic Spaces, the Art of Tucking Away and Radical Self-Making

By: *Zohra Saed*



Left, Video Still, 2011

What is this flat landscape where we find this squatting woman in a loose dress, bare arms and hair over face? Perhaps the more important questions are where and who? And what is she pulling out from her chest and from beneath her skirt? Where is her face? And perhaps more importantly, what is this undulating anger at the core of Gazelle Samizay's new video work, *Left* (2011), a particularly potent feminist piece that is as much an audile act of defiance as it is visually.

There is an ache to this beauty, to female form and landscape. Unlike Samizay's earlier works, the woman here is engaging in the gestures of release. She untucks from her chest, or possibly her heart, dried red petals. From beneath her skirt dried white petals emerge, offering the crunchiness of release, which is later as textured a sound as her footsteps, weighed and measured, footsteps as she walks away

and we are inevitably "left" by her.

In Samizay's earlier video pieces women are enclosed in what film theorist Hamid Naficy calls, claustrophobic spaces that define transnational visual culture. Women are trapped in the rituals and ceremonies to continue the family and tradition--the woman entangled in the process of "washing away" indiscretions in "This will be the last--," (2009) or mummified in bridal fineries, in *Upon my Daughter* (2010). In *Left*, the woman is in loose clothing, unbound and barefoot. The lack of architecture and the expanse of flat space is a space without words, writing, or symbols of confinement. It is then a ripe space for feminist self-making. *Left* offers a bare canvas, an emptying out just before something. Samizay's set of video art, which I would call her first set of art, has been usually set in gendered domestic spaces, but where the familiarity has been ripped off

and beneath we are privy to the skeletal structure of a secret, revealed or still dripping in shadows. Her work is the unsecreting of family structures and a removal of the face without effacing the character. Hands tells a greater story of labor, of resilience, of obligation and of concealing for the sake of survival. Samizay has mastered giving nuance to faceless.

What does it mean to be without a face? In 9,409 miles (2009), the distance between her hometown in the U.S. and Kabul, Samizay records a father who is faceless. He is every exile's father, the father who is cluttered with the past, unable to continue and stuck mourning the loss of status. However, in this loss of class status, and break up of patriarchy, it is the mothers who come to the forefront. In this piece, the mother is engaged in the present and involved with the process of continuing to care and keep the family together. This theme of the mother in the present and the father lost in the past repeats itself in Afghan American cultural production. In poetry, in memoir, the father remembers when he cannot return. His space is also claustrophobic. There is no room for the bread or the tea, because the past still occupies the table. And even though the scribbles are reconstructed on ephemerals, a series of napkins, the loss of the memory, the reconstruction of home, plays out an earlier trauma. The father loses home again and while we are left to mourn the bleeding ink of futile images, we mourn the greater tragedy, the loss of homeland.

In *Upon my Daughter*, the bride has a face, but one that soon becomes covered by a matriarchal hand who applies makeup in preparation for the wedding. A ritual that begins as a loving and attentive act, just as the stitching on her wedding dress by more matriarchal hands, soon spirals into a frenzy of stitches and swift hand movements that end up cocooning her in the very things that would beautify her.

In the act of preparing the bride, the women have partaken in continuing patriarchy and enmeshing, very much like a captured fish, in the veils and traditions of marriage, not only for the young girl, but the family as well. Samizay's circle of matriarchs leave the young bride on the burgundy Afghan



«This will be the last--» (The quote and dashes are part of the title), C-Print, 20x30» (50.8x76.2 cm), 2009

carpet tucked into herself and almost corpse-like at the end of it. Marriage has effaced and conformed the young woman into expected strictures.

“Tucking away” is another theme that appears often in Samizay's work -- and I do not mean a polite “tucking” as if tucking a secret to bed. I mean the kind that is crippling, overwhelming and claustrophobic. In *Nosh-e-Jan (Bon Appétit)* (2008), the women sit around a dining room table covered in a table cloth handed down from mother to daughter, as they wrap up *mantu*, a traditional Afghan dumpling. Instead of meat, the filling for the dumpling are women's secrets written on pink tissue paper, narrated and written in a trilingual weave that make up the Afghan American experience: Dari, Pashtu, and English. This is Samizay's most talkative piece, where the palimpsest of voices and languages criss-cross, pushing on a

sort of audile claustrophobia, especially when one can understand all three languages. In quick swivels of words, the women articulate stories of domestic violence, abusive husbands and mothers, scandals, unwanted pregnancies, and the trauma of war. The mantu, itself carrying a feminine symbol within Afghan culture, holds all the secrets. Finally sealed, steamed and served to the entire family including father, who eat the secrets silently.

In “This will be the last--,” Samizay is an artist who documents labor, particularly women’s labor. She pulls her bed sheet and we see her washing her sheets. Whether it is her secrets, or the indiscretions of her partner, she is actively engaged in washing. In the act of washing, rather than become clean, the sheet seems to grow larger and more unwieldy. The water is dirtier and dirtier. And soon the woman becomes completely entangled in the wet sheet. Her breath is labored and exhausted; she is finally consumed by the sheet. The secret cannot be hidden, tucked away, washed even – it comes to the surface and overtakes the holder of the secret.

The faceless becomes defiant in *Left*. If we may return, in this swirl and swivel of Samizay’s collective work. The female protagonist here, seems to refuse showing us her face. Her hair covers her face in an act of unwillingness to conform, to make neat, to make presentable her body, her face. Almost animalistic in form and in stance, there is something untamed about her.

She is like the sheeshak in Afghan folklore, the woman whose power is in the length of her hair and in the power that comes from being unclean, unkempt. What makes the sheeshak most frightening is her fierce independence. In her is the pearl of destruction for patriarchy. And this is where her power lays. And it is our mothers who are first to warn us against becoming a sheeshak (so we cut our hair, trim our nails, act properly and selflessly).

This female power, with a tinge of the dark and the disturbing, does not show her face, and there are no longer matriarchs holding her in place, defining her, passing the rituals to respect the lines and boundaries of patriarchy. *Left* carries an entirely potent and new level of meaning in Samizay’s work,

marking a clear transformation from the art of tucking away to the art of radical self-making. The claustrophobia of family and culture and traditions give way to the frightening immensity of possibility and the nothingness, sometimes terrible and empty, required to construct the feminist self, unburdened of the secret notes handed down from woman to woman in a family, and ready to construct a new visual narrative of self.

Zohra Saed is the co-editor of *One Story, Thirty Stories: An Anthology of Contemporary Afghan American Literature* (University of Arkansas Press, 2010)

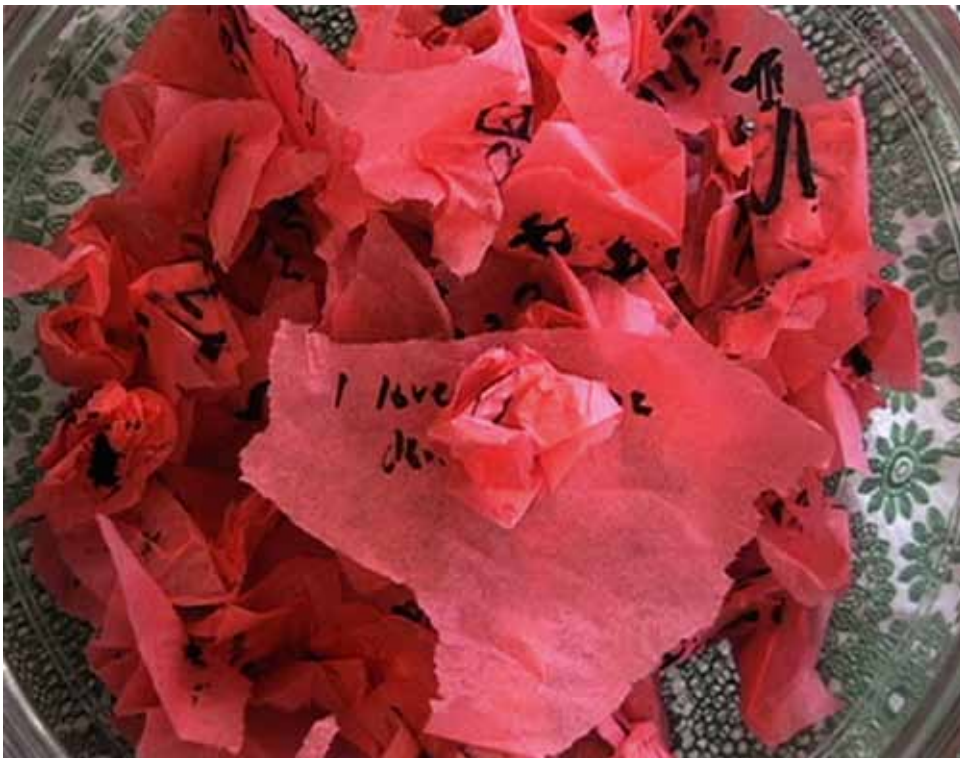
Gazelle Samizay is represented by the gallery “Lawrie Shabibi”



Upon my Daughter, C-Print, 20x30» (50.8x76.2 cm) 2010



9,409 miles, Video Still, 2009



Nosh-e-Jan (Bon Appetit), Video Still, 2008