



## Intimate encounters on the fractured landscapes

Works by Farhat Ali







Farhat Ali (b. 1988, Badin, Pakistan) graduated from National College of Arts Lahore, Pakistan in 2015. He currently lives and works in Lahore, Pakistan.



Short stories by Shanzay Subzwari

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## The musings of a matchmaker

## Numair A. Abbasi

'Eurocentric' has become a fighting term in the academe – and about time. The infrastructures within institutions are replicated from the west, and their modus operandi as well as most of the content that is taught is an evident trickle down effect of post-colonization.

Perhaps this unarguable focus on the Occident and the borrowed style of teaching is more noticeable in the formal dissemination of art as opposed to other disciplines. The distinguished Ustad-Sthagird dynamics of instruction (the lineage of which is more pertinent to our land and maps a longer history) slowly dissolved into a more diverse interaction between specialized professors and students. While one may debate over its pliability (or the lack of) it is however observed that this form of teaching is confined within hours at organized venues, where the instructors rein the education in their field of expertise instead of transmitting a way of thinking and living on a broader spectrum - a key feature of pre-colonization era. Nowadays, art students are more familiar with western art history as opposed to with a local trajectory. Stress is laid on terms formulated in the west instead of the terms that extend their roots in either local context or linguistics. To be conscious of various western art movements is informally set as a precedence in art schools, and to display a weak grasp on the subject is met with disappointing disbelief. The learning of skills and application of mediums conforms westwards to the century old practices, and only just recently are students asked to develop their own method and eventual language with whatever is before them. Given the post colonial mindset and the internally bred hierarchical imbalances between east and west, local artists and their creations have and perhaps will continue to be compared to and given examples of those made elsewhere, despite the chronology. Rarely, are foreign artists and artworks perceived as referential to those produced here. This certainly raises the vexatious question of Eurocentrism and historiography that predominantly infects the local art sphere.

It is apparent from Farhat Ali's current work, and his practice in entirety – that he has shrewdly picked up on this conflict. His paintings are a catharsis to his longstanding frustration he built from his academic experience. He questions the inflexibility behind the attitude similar to blinkered horses. Ali continues to develop his practice as an explicit challenge to this exercise.

Indeed, appropriation is a long-established technique and an increasing number of Pakistani artists are incorporating it in their work. What makes Ali's application unique is his intention behind using classical European iconographies. His visuals stand determined in an anarchy to Primitivism – a western art movement that borrows visual forms from non western peoples and lands. Furthermore, Ali's miniature paintings defiantly stand in polarity against an Orientalist mindset and serve a deviant voice on issues of eurocentrism, post-colonialism and globalization especially in the field of art.

Having previously used two dimensional animations from Disney and other sources, his current oeuvre amalgamates iconic figures – mythological or human – from movements like classicism or Renaissance into a more localized setting. He places them against Indo-Persian characters and renders the image in true form to the miniature style. In doing so, Ali raises a lot of other dichotomic discourses besides the juxtaposition of the orient and the west. He talks about time – the past and the present, about the real and unreal, and about colliding perspectives. His work is a negotiation where two entities meet half way – a solemn compromise.

Dialogue is integral in his images. By placing the two representatives opposite each other he takes charge as an impish playwright and cleverly directs the wilful actors to his command. Ali creates faux narratives but leaves it on viewers to determine the context of each dyad. Most of the visuals have visible overtones of humour, some on the other hand are surreal. And if one manages to overlook the absurdity and improbability of the depicted scenes, they will find the mournful poignancy embedded in many of the paintings. The artist reiterates the grief through his layered use of sombre tones. The choreographed gestures and their placement makes for a highly dramatized illustration. The paintings come across as contemporary (especially South Asian) movie stills for their displayed content. The artist ostensibly extracts his further inspiration from historical documentations - heroic chronicles and mythological epics - which have been exhaustively written on and picturized.

Farhat Ali's works debunk what are commonly classed as 'High art', associated with the upper class, aristocracy and wealth. They are preserved today in museums as examples of artistic finery and craftsmanship, along with other 'traditional' paintings based upon the European concept of art and of what art should represent. But Ali disputes this criterion and makes for a very striking comment. He explores identity, authenticity, class, globalisation colonialism and post colonialism through the convergence of oppositive cultural styles and imageries. In essence, his collection is a humble attempt at tipping the dominance of what once was primarily a European subject matter.

Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, a Prince sat with a soothsayer in the late hours of the night, weary from travel. This Prince was, in his land, known to be fair and just, and his empire was wealthy and prosperous.

Beneath the foggy, starless sky, the soothsayer prophesised the birth of a gifted boy to the Prince, who had travelled thousands of miles away from home on an expedition. He was now in Eriteria, a land where people looked very different from those in his homeland, and where customs and rituals were magical and fascinating.

Between the two, fairy tales and myths were exchanged as the Prince sat captivated by her mystical prowess. Soon, rife with anecdotes and experiences, he returned back home to what was known as the Land of Spices.



Untitled 1	
Farhat Ali	
Gouache on wasli	
32 x 25 cm	
2016	



Little did the Prince know that the land that he thought unexplored and unknown was often visited by his father- the Emperor- in his youth, as well as by other countrymen from where he lived. The Emperor had travelled to Eriteria years ago by accident, and chanced upon a young maiden who he fell in love with, with her light eyes and pale skin a contrast to the dusky, big-eyed beauties of his exotic land.

As the sun shone down upon the green meadow, the Emperor and maiden promised to meet frequently.



Untitled 2	
Farhat Ali	
Gouache on wasli	
67 x 52 cm	
2016	



Back in the Land of Spices, many years later, brave warriors battled each other for sport while cupids hovered above with their own secret plans, ready to aim. Only one of the three would come out alive, becoming the lucky victor whose heart would be struck, and consequently melt for the doe-eyed Princess of the land.

The dusky sky evoked both fear and hope as the raging battle went on.



Untitled 3	
Farhat Ali	
Gouache on wasli	
67 x 52 cm	
2016	



The doe-eyed Princess, however, was not as innocent as she seemed. Scarcely interested in love or marriage, she proved to be viler than people could imagine.

Just as locals (often secretly) visited Eriteria, Eriterian travellers had often (under cover) frequented the Land of Spices to learn about its mysteries. Possessive about her land and competitive in nature, the cunning Princess regularly found comfort in furtively discovering, kidnapping and torturing 'foreigners' who dared take back the secrets of her land to their own. She would lock them up and shoot them with poisonous arrows.



Untitled 4	
Farhat Ali	
Gouache on wasli	
67 x 52 cm	
2016	



After they had died in her wake, the Princess would, ironically, step out in the sunset and pray for the deceased. Then, upon whim, she would send the bodies for a decent burial, or leave them to rot in the forest for ravenous beasts to feast upon.



Untitled 5	
Farhat Ali	
Gouache on wasli	
52 x 67 cm	
2016	



As it goes, the less-popular Prince of the Land of Spices, known for his gluttonous behaviour and womanising attributes, often travelled to nearby lands for recreation. One night, as he walked down the dusty path on a solitary stroll, he chanced upon an injured Eriterian woman fallen to the floor.

Quickly wondering what to do, he lifted her on the pretext of taking her to a nearby healer, but instead, took her home



Untitled 6	
NYS TOO TY POLITY	
Farhat Ali	
Gouache on wasli	
67 x 52 cm	10
2016	



Many travellers (nearly all male) would travel to Eriteria by foot, and the only way to find their route would be to ask the 'fairy women', or nymphs, who inhabited the isolated paths, for help.

Often, for fun, these women would trap weary travellers with their magical powers by offering them gifts of food and clothing, frequently their own. If they accepted, the travellers would be entranced into becoming slaves or workers for the nymphs forever.



Untitled 7	
Farhat Ali	
Gouache on wasli	
50 x 32.5 cm	30
2016	



Modesty of clothing was not a key trait of the Eriterian woman. While at the Land of Spices it was a norm to see fully clothed, ornately dressed women, Eriterians did not emphasise on that aspect of living. They did not deem it significant or important.

This is why men from the Land of Spices, who often had Eriterian ladies as secret lovers, would not reveal the existence of this land to their women. And if local women came to know of its existence, the men would not encourage them to visit it, lest they became 'lewd' and 'immodest' or their secrets were revealed.



Untitled 8	
Farhat Ali	
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Gouache on wasli	
32 x 24.5 cm	-
2016	



Not all magical creatures from Eriteria had cunning intentions. Some winged angels (cousins of the ever-youthful Cupids) would secretly visit the Land of Spices and spend their hours cheering up despondent men and women.

The angels would drop their 'arrows of love' at unsuspecting, morose victims, and watch amusedly as they morphed from sadness to the ecstasy of heightened enamourment.

Sometimes, unfortunately, the angels' kindness would backfire, as the victims fell into a deeper pit of despair with their 'love' slowly fading away and eventually becoming dormant.



Untitled 9	
Farhat Ali	
Gouache on wasli	
50 x 32.5 cm	
2016	



Trumpets sounded and fanfare ensued at the birth of a baby boy in Eriteria. The news of this birth spread far and wide, and special convoys were sent from neighbouring lands to celebrate the baby. That's because he was proclaimed by the local wise elders to be gifted, and lucky for those who he would rule.



Untitled 10	70
Farhat Ali	
Gouache on wasli	
52 x 67 cm	
2016	



It was a dark night, and the Prince lay deep in thought over his Empire's failings. After the death of the Emperor, the Prince's rule had brought nothing but disarray and he was trying hard to keep it together.

For days, the soothsayer had travelled all the way to the Land of Spices to inform the Prince about the prophecy she had given him many years earlier; it had now come true. However, when she spoke, the words would not leave her lips. Strangely, she was mute. She tried capturing the Prince's attention by gesturing to him, but upon seeing her silhouette in the dark he shrugged her away, thinking she was a beggar woman.

Dejected, she travelled back to her land, her message travelling back with her.



Untitled 11	
Farhat Ali	
Gouache on wasli	
32 x 25.5 cm	
2016	



The vile Princess of the Land of Spices once encountered an Eriterian woman who had 'strayed' into the area around her palace. She ordered for the woman to be captured, so she could carry out one of her treacherous acts of torture.

However, the Prince chanced upon her in preparation of the deed. He was furious- he did not want to see his sister, or other native women in the company of an Eriterian woman. Eriteria was a secret land whose secrets were to be kept with just him and select few from the nobility, or known purely as a myth.

Upon seeing them together, the Prince ordered for the Princess and visitor to be tied to the tree outside in the scorching heat, in a manner where they could not glance at each other or communicate. After a day, the Eriterian woman was banished to her land, never to return, and the Princess sent back to the palace.



Untitled 12	
Farhat Ali	
Gouache on wasli	
49 x 33 cm	27.
2016	



A plague ensued, and the gifted baby boy in Eriteria was soon left motherless. He had grown a few months older and turned out to look different from the locals, and his promised 'gifts' were soon forgotten in the sickly atmosphere.

An older Eriterian woman decided to take him away secretly to the Land of Spices and sell him to a nobleman and his wife. She told them of his prophesised powers, and they bought him for a fair price, in order to make him their slave when he grew up. As for the wings he had sprouted, they clipped them off to make him look like one of their own.



Untitled 13	
Farhat Ali	
Gouache on wasli	
46 x 31 cm	- 00
2016	



As time passed, the baby grew up in the Land of Spices to be a handsome young boy. He once accompanied his master, the nobleman, on one of his visits to Eriteria, which had now recovered from the plague. There, a group of nymphs, excited at a young child in foreign garb, surrounded him and gushed over him.

One of the magical women was the soothsayer. She recognised him almost instantly, and revealed to him that he was the gifted son of the Prince, destined to bring glory to the Land of Spices.



Untitled 14	
Farhat Ali	
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Gouache on wasli	
100 x 147 cm	
2016	



The boy went back to his land and worked as a slave, confused about his identity. One day, as an adolescent, he ran away from the nobleman and began living among regular, ordinary people who supported him and provided him with a living.

Upon hearing his story, one of his caretakers believed him, and encouraged him to reveal his true identity to his father, the Prince of the Land of Spices.



Untitled 15	
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Farhat Ali	
Gouache on wasli	
49 x 32.5 cm	- 00
2016	



And so, the young man took his chance. Scantily clad and dishevelled after days of trying to reach the palace, he caught sight of the Prince in his garden. Immediately, he ran towards him and, grasping his legs, uttered out his story.

The Prince did not believe him. How could such a scrawny figure be his son? The young man begged and pleaded, but was sent away.

One day, a few months after, the Prince sat upright with a jolt. He suddenly remembered the prophecy the soothsayer had made decades earlier, about him having a gifted son. To date, he had none. Could that man have indeed been his progeny, perhaps as the result of one of his trysts in Eriteria?

The Prince regretted his decision and asked for the young man to be searched for and called back.



Untitled 16	
Farhat Ali	
Gouache on wasli	
49.5 x 32 cm	
2016	



Initially, when the news of the search spread across the Land of Spices, the young man was not elated. He had decided that those who had accepted him and nurtured him, namely the ordinary folk of the land, were whom he belonged with, and whom he wanted by his side; not those who had clipped his wings, enslaved him, or rejected him. He thus did not reveal himself for a long time.

However, his wise caretaker advised him that the greater good lay in returning to his father and taking over the kingship, thus contributing towards the prosperity of his land with his gifts as had been prophesised.

He decided the caretaker was right. Bidding an emotional farewell to the ordinary folk whom he loved, the young man went back to the Prince, who accepted him wholeheartedly.

Little did the Prince know his son was more like him than he had imagined. His father, the Emperor, had loved visiting the magical land as much as he had, after all.



Untitled 17	
Farhat Ali	
Gouache on wasli	
50 x 30 cm	
2016	

