

Paisley by Dr. Suneel Mehmi (BA., LLB, LLM, PhD)

THE MEHMI PRESS

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AUTHOR'S FOREWARD

This book is special to me because it is my first artbook which I have written, designed and illustrated completely by myself. I have been inspired to do just a few paisley designs, but the process has been quite important to me.

The chain of images that I created stemmed from a book review I did. At the time, I was contributing writing as a volunteer for the Contemporary Small Press website, a project at my university. A Pakistani poet had written a book of poems called 'Paisley'. You can see my thoughts about the book and the paisley design in the review I have included below.

I hope you enjoy reading this small book and looking at the pictures. It has been my ambition to become an author since I was six years old. I have achieved this ambition as an academic author and I have also been published as a poet. Now, I want to write for myself and not for a publishing company. I hope you will share this small book with others as a free book. I wish I could make all my ideas free for the world as a gift. The work is done out of love, not for gain (although recognition would have been nice).

Dr. Suneel Mehmi



Rakhshan Rizwan is described on the back of this slim poetry pamphlet as “an emerging Pakistani poet”. The focus on nationality is apposite because Rizwan’s poetry bears all the marks of a postcolonial history and perspective, with an emphasis on politics of identity, resistance and belonging. However, the focus on the nationality of the author is somewhat misleading as the work deals largely with the migrant experience in Western Europe rather than with Pakistan. The introduction to the work, by Leila Aboulela, a Sudanese writer, emphasises this aspect of the writing as well as its preoccupation with language and languages. The poetry is thus not confined by the parochial dimensions of nation, but enlarged through engagement with the clash of East and West and its situation within the larger frameworks of contemporary globalisation. Furthermore, in its exploration of issues of gender, the work clearly marks itself out as “intersectional”. That is, gender and race overlap and inform the perspective.

The figure of the paisley, which is woven into the fabric of several poems, stands as a symbol not just for the work, but also the poet. This originally Persian design became popular in the west and eventually took on an English name. The poet herself, like paisley, comes from the East and yet writes poetry in English, speaks other European languages, as the symbol of the paisley now does, beyond its original language, and lives in European countries, like our paisley shirts belong to English fashions. Rizwan’s identification with this appropriated and displaced figure is therefore resonant on several levels which are explored. One instance is when Rizwan engages with how Westerners say her name differently from its originally intended pronunciation in “Noon”. She writes further in “Migrant” how no one in the West can understand her. The emphasis is on how the symbols, and the people and language of one culture cannot be understood by another but are always productively misunderstood and aligned with the structures of meaning which are peculiar to one society over the meanings that other groups bestow on them.

Paisley also has another significance which adds a larger dimension to the work. The design is formed like a teardrop. It is the symbol of suffering. Rizwan’s work is wracked by the sceptre of suffering. In “Buffet”, Rizwan explores the “gaping hole” (5) which the spectacle of suffering in the media caters to, yet image upon image in this collection obsessively encounters the same sight and panders to the same appetite. Atrocities against Pakistani women by men are listed in “Eve”, a short prose poem and the theme is continued in the poem named after the title of the collection. In other poems we are presented with the bleak picture of life as a misunderstood and marginalised migrant woman who sheds pounds “working two jobs,/ in hopes of securing/ a paper-thin/ ticket home” (15).

This collection of poetry is thoroughly familiar to a British Asian reader such as myself. I know the themes it explores well and have met many people and writers with similar life experiences and preoccupations. The writing style of the work did not particularly appeal to me, hence I have concentrated on subject matter in this review. In my opinion, the poet is suitably described as an “emerging” voice as the collection is clearly the work of a promising young hand. However, I do not wish to lavish too much praise on this collection, which is certainly worth reading. In places, the work suffers from that exuberance and cock-sure confidence of youth by becoming preachy and insisting on the points that are made quite repetitively. Sometimes the work marginalizes the perspective of competing voices which is worrying in a work which aims to disclose a migrant perspective which has itself been marginalised. In “Eve”, critics of western feminists, with their western ethos, are presented as deluded monsters who uphold atrocities against women. Certainly, men can pretend that all Pakistani or Indian families are perfectly happy when all is not well and there are real and even widespread issues of domestic violence, exploitation and rape in society. Some men do want to sugar-coat reality in their own interests. However, the “deluded monsters” still make a perfectly valid point in “Eve”: that western structures of thought like Western feminism can’t just be transplanted and exported everywhere as though they were incontestable, universally valid and applicable ideas about people and institutions like the family. It is perhaps surprising, but ultimately revealing, that Rizwan’s postcolonial outlook conflicts with her feminism in this example. It begs the larger question of how coherent an intersectional approach to life can be and how near and far we are as a people from colonial and neo-colonial structures of thought. The collection as a whole, however, is a serious instigator of thought. It will certainly appeal to a Western audience so that they can see what integration means to those that they want to integrate and what kinds of things their ethnic minority brothers and sisters from the Sub-Continent are experiencing and thinking about.





PLATE 1

This was the first paisley design that I created.

I was aiming at the time for the look of sperm, which I thought the paisley pattern represented, something which reminds me of a whale with a tail.

So, the very first design I did emphasised the fecundity of the paisley symbol, something expressive of the fertility of the Indian eye and Indian thought. This was a masculine symbol for me, a symbol of power.

Looking back on the design now, a few years later, the paisley pattern in my hands seems to resemble a host of eyes. I had already noted that the paisley pattern seemed like a tear in my initial book review. This connection between vision and the paisley pattern would persist in my work.

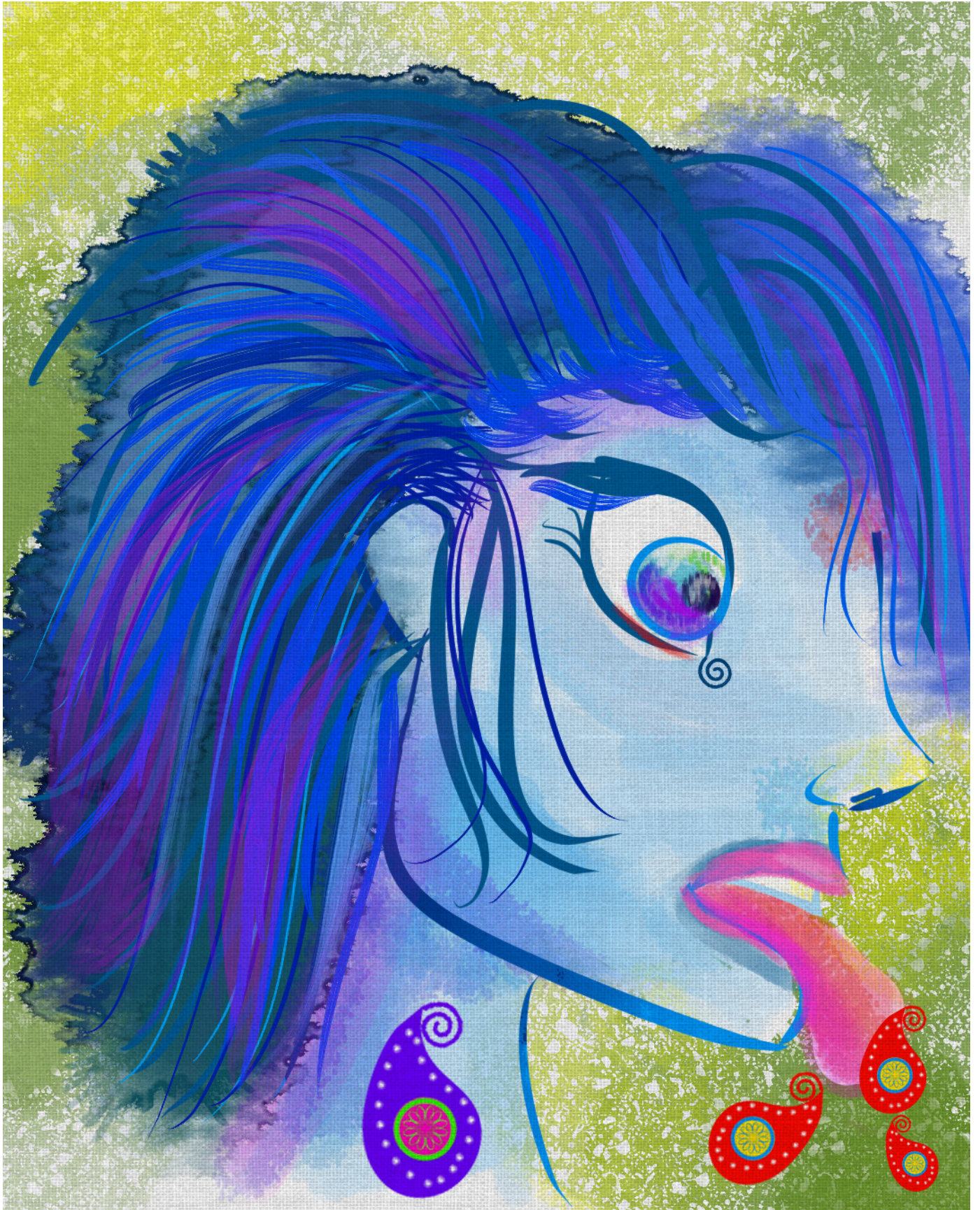


PLATE 2

This was my second use of the paisley symbol, to garnish my image of Kali, the Dark Mother. I have a statue of Kali from Nepal and I look up to what she stands for. Now, the paisley symbol becomes associated with violence, the blood on her tongue, her throat (her worshippers the Thugs used to suffocate others in her name).



PLATE 3

Recently, I began drawing more and more patterns. I returned to the paisley symbol as a decorate element around a star. Actually, I have a star in my name 'Sun' (Sun-eel). I am surrounded by the paisley symbol, like the sun is surrounded by the planets, by the symbolism of India which has been misappropriated negatively by the West, like Hitler's ruination of the Hindu Swastika.



PLATE 4

My most recent paisley design, inspired by a visit to the Victoria and Albert Museum and the designs of greats like William Morris, as well as the Japan gallery. The work reflects my current preoccupation with patterns and with the celebration of crafts, rather than fine art and representational art.

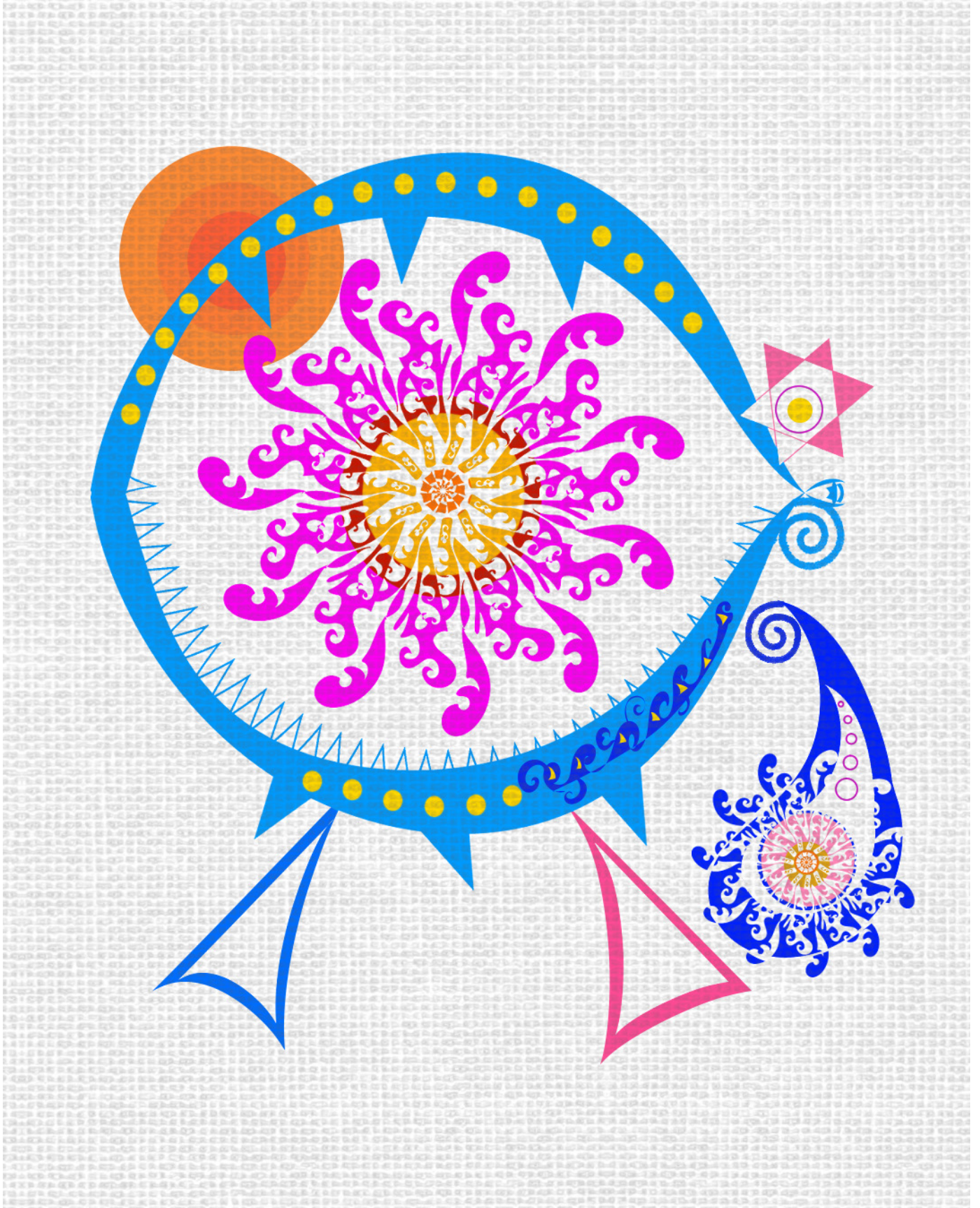


PLATE 5

This image returned to the paisley symbol as a tear, which I talked about in my book review of the poetry. The paisley symbol for me will always be the tears of India as the motherland is devalued and dishonoured by Western society. They are tears of anger, not just sadness. But if you look carefully, the sun (Suneel) is there to rescue and protect his mother's honour.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I am a scholar, a published writer, poet and artist, as well as an amateur photographer and a voracious reader and learner of languages. I have several creative projects on the go at the same time, but I always try to take time to draw regularly. Each of these drawings in this book have been done before bedtime, as I lie in the bed with my tablet.

I am Punjabi and I live in East London. In my house, we always had religious images, including those of the Mother Goddess, Durga. It is therefore my great honour to have included an image of Mother Kali in this, my first book, as she is another reincarnation of Durga (the Invincible). Hinduism is my mother's religion. I am continuing the tradition of religious art and Indian culture which is thousands of years old.

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