

By Asim Butt

ARMOUR

PARAMOUR

Naiza Khan puts together an exhibition of dour dowry that will impale the wearer and anyone who embraces it

How white dazzles. White purrs the silence of extreme heat and extreme cold. It mourns, bearing testimony to its own purity. It scorns its own stainlessness. From being breathing room, holding that which it contains in its place, white can, however, swell out and smother. On display against the white of the waxing moon through the latter half of April, Naiza H. Khan's Canvas gallery show "Heavenly Ornaments" presents a dowry of armour, chastity belts with zippers, bras with blades for hooks, corsets drawn on a corporeal white and negligees photographed against a clinical white.

No one complicit in patriarchy can come away feeling unharmed — least of all the late Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi (1864-1943), who wrote *Bihishti Zewar*, to which the title of the show alludes, in the first decade of the twentieth century. The second-generation Deobandi maulana sought to instruct a woman entering into marriage to the extent of how she slept and performed any bodily or social function. This detailed — and by no means little — fantasy stands exploded, quite comprehensively, by Khan's show.

Hammered and welded in the smithy of irony, for every possibility from menstruation to menopause, with pouches for posies or joeys, with spikes on the inside and out,

even for bellies swollen with pregnancy, these "Heavenly Ornaments" take on the text by its horns. Perhaps, then, Ifitikhar Dadi's reading of the relationship between *Bihishti Zewar* the text and "Heavenly Ornaments" is at least a split hair's breadth (but probably much further) away from the artist's own interpretation. In his [Dadi's] essay published in the catalogue accompanying the show, he points to a liberating aspect of Thanawi's instruction manual saying that the text is as much intended for men as it is for women and that it also empowers women by making them agents of religion equal to men. This position is informed by Barbara Metcalf's sympathetic translation of the Deobandi maulana's instruction manual and further distorted by a Foucauldian prism that makes the pockets of power, which the powerless have against the powerful, appear disproportionately large.

Although Khan uses these very pockets of power in seduction and subterfuge, the voice of this show is anguished, even as it sniggers behind its cool whisper. Irony only softens the blow. This dour dowry will impale the wearer and anyone who embraces it with its spokes and spikes and is too heavy, besides. Its bullet-proof protection from the slings and arrows of society hardly make up for its myriad impossibilities. Choice has been inserted into a chastity belt in the form of a zipper but it would still be an awkward fit. "Unstitched" made in collaboration with Sonya Battla, a bra with Treet blades for hooks, cuts deep into the Achilles' heel



▲ "Armour Corset"

of patriarchy with its jingle: "A Treat for Your Face". And finally, the body has left this paraphernalia of patriarchy behind, but only after having stomped its corsets shapeless in "Worn Corset" I through III. Could critique be more clenched or clinched?

A triumphant challenge to patriarchy, this body of work is also a personal victory for the artist. Khan has made the switch from drawing to sculpture with a spellbinding leap. With sculpture so strident, it's a wonder then that the palette of the drawings has nothing black or definite to offer. A range of stains simulate bodily fluids and water but there is nothing black. Form and weight are sacrificed to mark, the mastery of which becomes increasingly evident in Khan's drawing.

In its sculptural incarnation, this temperament of ambiguity produces much more engaging results: is the bullet-sized depression in the armour a displaced belly button or a residual mark from target practice? Even the relationship of negative and positive is more playful in the sculpture than in



▲ "Wall Corset"

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the too-often repeated whites of the drawings and digital prints. Concave end facing the wearer and convex out allows for a traversal through the roles that the "Armour Corsets" are made for as well as against just as their functional details such as their strap buckles taunt their otherwise hopeless dysfunctionality.

Elsewhere in his essay, Dadi dwells on the elision of the veil, or more generally the Indic and the Islamic, from Khan's symbolic repertoire, and concludes that this is a matter of strategic choice. I would argue that it is more personal experience than anything else. If Khan uses Susanna and not Sita, she merely betrays her hybridity and not a self-conscious evasion of a geographically particular symbolic universe. A comparison with Sumayya Durrani, who casts a net of references as wide, reveals the modus genesis of her symbology. Where Durrani employs pastiche, using the reference in its entire received significance, Khan reloads familiar symbols with highly personal, experienced meaning. A wall, part of various symbolic systems as

something that immures and creates claustrophobia, is re-interpreted as that which encloses an expansive space experienced at the Temple of Hathor on a sojourn in Egypt. In "Wall Corsets" remembering, dismembering, and re-membering of the body, the wall also simulates the barrier between a body and the space it inhabits — different from the spectacle of Durrani's taut nudes as chalk is from cheese.

As Metcalf says in her note on the translation to *Bihishti Zewar*, "[a]lthough Maulana Thanawi consulted the women of his family about their problems and customary practices [in writing *Bihishti Zewar*],



▲ "Lingerie I"

he did not utilise the dialect of Urdu particular to them, known as *begumati* Urdu." Khan's "Heavenly Ornaments" are similarly wrought in a visual lingua franca even as they mine a universal experience of the modern South Asian Muslim subject. It is this act of critical translation that universalises the confrontation against patriarchy embodied in "Heavenly Ornaments". Perhaps then in pursuing the challenge of painting and video to further expand the parameters of her practice, Naiza Khan will reveal her empathy for an even broader spectrum of subject positions in the patriarchal web that entangles us all. Scholarship such as Luce Irigaray's *The Love Between Us*, that tackles the interface of male and female subjectivity would make for a good starting point. ■