



Somak Ghoshal

## THE MARK OF A MODERNIST

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**T**HIS WEEK, thousands of miles away from the country she called home, one of our most important but relatively less remembered artists is having a retrospective in New York City. Met Breuer, the new wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's contemporary art programme, opens an exhibition of the paintings, drawings and photographs of Nasreen Mohamedi, who has been consigned to the league of the venerable but obscure in India. Like VS Gaitonde, who came into the limelight a couple of years ago when one of his paintings fetched an astronomical price at a Christie's auction, Mohamedi's name, too, has come up in public discourse in relation to her international acclaim. Deepak Talwar, director of the Delhi- and New York-based Talwar Gallery, and the Kiran Nadar Museum of Arts (KNMA) are two of the most prominent champions of her art closer home. In 2013, the latter held a retrospective of her work, where the full measure of Mohamedi's sublime genius was conveyed to the public perhaps for the first time.

Born in 1937 in Karachi, Mohamedi is a classic example of a visionary ahead of her time. In her tragically short life of 53 years, she left behind a legacy we are yet to fully understand or appreciate. It will seem only fair to compare her with the best in the history of modern art, yet every cross reference also risks diminishing her unique distinction, not only among her peers in India but also around the world.

Her most mature work, which was intransigently difficult and abstract, is often associated with the style of another great artist, the American Agnes Martin. But Mohamedi, by her own admission, did not know of Martin's work until much later in life. It could well be that her gift was one of pure originality, not influenced by one model of Western aestheticism—a notion most of us, especially in South Asia, are unused to accept-

ing. We are taught to look at art, especially modern and contemporary art, through an overwhelmingly Eurocentric lens, and we usually blindly subject every artist from our part of the world to scrutiny from such a point of bias.

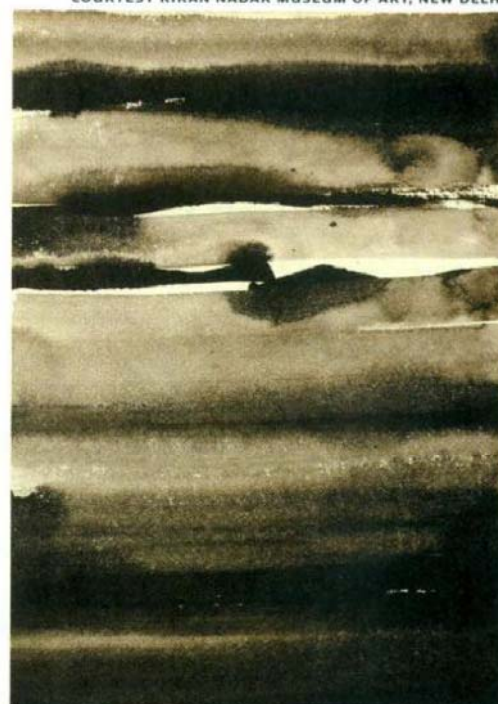
All this is, of course, not to deny the intrinsic cosmopolitanism of Mohamedi's sensibility. Educated in Bombay, London and Paris, she settled in Baroda in 1972, though much of her adult life was nomadic. She travelled far and wide, especially through Asia. Having lived in Kuwait, Bahrain, Japan, and the US, apart from several European countries, she absorbed a multiplicity of styles and accents. From the vast emptiness of the deserts to the intricate carvings of Islamic architecture to the ineffable beauty of Japanese Zen philosophy, her art drew on elements of both the so-called East and the West. But the language that it ultimately created was very much its own and, more often than not, unyielding of its inner truth.

Mohamedi's work evolved through several stages. From the 1950s till the mid-1960s, she worked on a series of collages bordering on representational art, though already showing affinity with her later style, which was more unapologetically non-representational. She emerged from this period into her 'classic' phase: years that were dominated by lines and grids, depicted with watercolour, pen and ink. Looking at these compositions, one is struck by the coexistence of a limpid lyricism and severe austerity. If the lines meander and intersect to create their own rhythmic patterns, they do not reveal the mysteries hidden between them. Like Mark Rothko, who explored the poetics of space through colours, Mohamedi embarked on a similar project, albeit using lines and grids.

Reclusive and retiring, Mohamedi left behind few clues to the history of her contemplative eye in her diaries. While she



Nasreen Mohamedi



Untitled, 1960, ink and watercolour on paper; (right) Untitled, 1960, ink and watercolour on paper

mentions the influence of Kazimir Malevich and Wassily Kandinsky on her drawings, her encounter with the history of minimalism was much more diverse, eclectic and serendipitous. In her peregrinations across Asia, she was struck by the sharp angles and exquisite curves of vintage Islamic architecture, of monuments and minarets. The geometric elegance of her style would also be enriched and accentuated by the minimalist ethos of Japan, where she spent some time. Her entire endeavour, as she once put it in her diaries, was to extract 'the maximum out of the minimum'.

The India she returned to in the 1970s was being kneaded into a new kind of modernist creature by the architectural brilliance of Le Corbusier, whose work she minutely noted. In Baroda, where she settled down, her colleagues included masters like VS Gaitonde, MF Husain and Tyeb Mehta, each of who had embarked on his path to greatness at the time. Of these three, Gaitonde and Mehta would leave a lasting impression on Mohamedi's art. And like Gaitonde, she would also have to wait for several decades for her work to get the global recognition it always richly deserved.

It is telling that unlike Husain and Mehta, who are now instantly recognisable as the luminaries of modern Indian art, the names of Gaitonde and Mohamedi do not have similar popular recall. One reason behind their relative obscurity was these artists' intensely inward-looking natures. It was also equally true that both of them did not make it easy for their viewers to engage with their work. Neither Gaitonde nor Mohamedi offer the quick pleasure of looking at their work and simply enjoying what one sees there—even though the former's paintings are marked by the interplay of colours and the latter's drawings stand out for the complex patterns made by lines and grids. In the case of both these artists, the only way to enter the worlds of their art is through

a slow and steady immersion. The force of the interiority of their work is such that in spite of hours of looking, the viewer may come back no wiser about their semantics. And yet, they are most likely to be enlightened, at a visceral level, and touched by the innate grace of their sublime imaginations.

One of the mediums which expresses the interiority of Mohamedi's art most potently also happens to be the one that she never seriously intended to make a part of her artistic expression: photography. Although she never wanted her photographs to be displayed to the public, her estate thankfully decided otherwise. At the KNMA in 2013, some of her most arresting work were in this medium, capturing the delicate splicing of light and space. A whole new vocabulary would be formed out of the interaction of shadows falling on a flight of stairs, or the fading silhouette of a form would deepen the drama of a moment. With the years, and the onset of a degenerative motor disease that would eventually kill her, Mohamedi would become obsessed with the manipulation of space on paper.

Although she lost most of her motor functions, she did manage to retain control over her right hand. As a result, her last work, made predominantly on paper with pen and ink, remains ethereal, meticulous but also filled with palpable gravitas. The astonishing legacy Mohamedi left behind in her limited time undoubtedly puts her in the company of the greatest modernists of the twentieth century: Carl Andre, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, John Cage and so on. But what she must be remembered most strongly for is her unique contribution to the making of a modernist idiom that drew on, but also significantly departed from, the hegemony of Anglo-European art. ■

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