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The Bleeding Heart: Arshi I. Ahmadzai's Exploration of Feminine Identity

Arshi Irshad Ahmadzai and Isabella Schwaderer

Abstract

This article showcases the complex intersection of feminine identity and cultural heritage through the work of artist Arshi I. Ahmadzai. Drawing on Persian and Mughal miniature traditions together with the abstract aesthetics of the Bauhaus, Ahmadzai’s recent series explore how women experience emotional and physical transformations. Central to her work is the recurring symbol of the bleeding heart, which embodies pain, vulnerability, and a deep emotional connection. Through her use of fabric, natural pigments, and Urdu writing—often intentionally unreadable—Ahmadzai blends poetry with artistic expression, creating a unique visual language that resonates across cultural boundaries. Her experiences in India, Kabul, and Weimar (Germany) profoundly shape her art practice. This article captures how Ahmadzai’s art not only reflects her personal struggles with patriarchal norms but also offers a universal commentary on the sanctity of the feminine experience, culminating in a body of work that is both intimate and powerful. Her art engages deeply with Sufi tradition and is an exploration of pain, resilience, and the sacredness of the feminine in a modern, global world.

Keywords: Sufism, contemporary global art, Persian miniature painting, pregnancy diaries, feminine agency, Urdu poetry

How can the political and social situation of women in South Asia be explored artistically, and how can art become a universal form of expression, especially in the context of migration? The two authors, Isabella Schwaderer, a scholar of religious and cultural studies, and Arshi Irshad Ahmadzai, an Indian artist born in Najibabad, Uttar Pradesh and a specialist in painting and miniature techniques, met in Weimar in 2021. Since then, they have been discussing artistic visions and exploring the intersections of art, culture, and religion. This text presents these themes in a curated interview conducted shortly before Arshi's move to the United States. It focuses on the evolution of her work exploring the agency—or lack thereof—of South Asian women. The artist's travels from India to Kabul to Weimar have influenced her techniques and modes of expression. Her artworks draw on the poetry and Sufi literature of South Asia and the principles and techniques of Persian and Mughal miniature painting, transforming them into combinations of words and images. More recently, her encounters with the intellectual history of Weimar, its architecture, and the art of the Bauhaus movement have played a significant role in her work.

Arshi completed her undergraduate studies in Fine Arts at Aligarh Muslim University and her graduate degree at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. Having lived in India, Kabul, and Weimar, she is now preparing to move to New York with her family.

Isabella Schwaderer: *Arshi, how did you become an artist and why did you choose painting as your technique?*

Arshi I. Ahmadzai: *Like many parents in South Asia, my father had hoped I would become a doctor. But instead of learning how the human heart functions, I found myself drawing it. This heart introduced me to art, and from that moment, I knew it was my calling. My mother, who writes in Urdu, also played a role in this. She introduced me to the rich world of Urdu poetry, with poets such as Mirza Ghalib, Mir Taqi Mir, Parveen Shakir, Allama Muhammad Iqbal, and Altaf Hussain Hali inspiring me from a young age.*

At art school, we learned a variety of techniques—from miniature painting to video art—but painting has always remained my favorite. It carries less risk than other mediums; you can paint under almost any circumstances; all you need is a pen and a sketchbook. But after completing my master's degree, it took me eight years to realize that painting is finally my calling.

I met my husband, the musician Waheed Saghar, while he was studying music in India. When we moved to his hometown of Kabul, the city's environment and living conditions

had a profound impact on my artistic practice. I transitioned from using paper to fabric, which transformed my approach to art. Fabric can be folded, molded, or crushed. It can be small enough to fit in your hands but can open up as large as a shaamiyaana*—a canopy or tent. I use papier-mâché on the fabric, which adds texture and depth. I work with a specific upholstery fabric, and I soak it in rainwater, because I want to embed a sense of narration into the material. The rainwater adds a poetic layer to the fabric. In the end, art is about storytelling, and we are all stories.*

Once the fabric is soaked, I iron it and apply paper-mâché. The preparation of the fabric is a time-consuming process, but it's one I enjoy. After that, I paint on the fabric. I started using paper-mâché in Kabul, but this technique exists across many cultures. It also brings back memories of my mother, who would teach me how to form toys from paper-mâché. In many ways, this material holds pieces of my past—my emotions and memories. It feels more poetic and nostalgic to me, making the process deeply personal.

In her paintings, Arshi applies the principles and techniques of Persian and Mughal miniature painting. It begins with the care with which she prepares the ground for the artwork and the production of colors from natural pigments. Arshi explores the agency—or the absence of it—of South-Asian women, creating pieces that merge words and images, often evoking the feel of arcane, fragmented texts. One notable example is the early work *An-Nisa III* (*The Women III*, 2019, fig. 1) in which a larger-than-life figure of a woman blends into her own reflection. Faces are unrecognizable, reduced to mere silhouettes, while her body is overlaid with sweeping but unreadable words in Arabic. The entire series was inspired by *Sura An-Nisa* (*The Women*), the fourth chapter of the Qur'an. This sura is named for its numerous references to women, addressing their rights, responsibilities, and societal roles throughout its verses. A red, veined heart throbs at the center of both the woman and her reflection, vibrant and raw against the monochrome background. She has no hands to defend herself, no mouth to voice her pain—only uncontainable emotions that pulse beneath the surface.

Figure 1:
An-Nisa III (Women III, 2019)
Image Courtesy: Phalguni Guliani.

I.S.: *I am fascinated by the symbol of the Bleeding Heart. What is the story behind it?*

A.A.: *I created a series called Nafas (Soul) - Isolation Diaries. This consists of 140 letters to my husband during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. The title Nafas refers to the Arabo-Persian concepts of breath and soul and is also used as a term of endearment to refer to one's beloved. Art supplies were unavailable, so I turned to my mother's garden for inspiration. I made colors from the flowers I found there. The garden later became an ever-present part of my work. The idea of the garden resonated deeply with me because it reflects a space that we all carry within us—a sanctuary of our own.*

This series emerged from the personal and challenging experience of the lockdown, a time when we all retreated into isolation. My husband and I were separated—he residing in Kabul, while I remained in India. The emotional strain of this separation became the impetus for a collection of illustrated letters in which the symbolic representation of the heart plays a central role. The painting June 7, Dil... Gosht ka Ek Tukda hi Toh Hai! (The Heart Is But a Pound of Flesh, 2020, fig. 2) critically engages with the reductive notion that the heart is merely a muscle, a biological organ within the body. The accompanying text raises a profound question: "If the heart is simply a muscle, why is it the source of such intense emotional pain?" It is present in my artwork as a symbol of things that we cannot think of but only feel. Words are not enough to explain this experience.

Many of Arshi's artworks feature her distinctive symbol: a bleeding heart. Both in everyday language and religious metaphor, the heart often embodies the true self and is considered to be the seat of emotion in many cultures including Sufism, or mystical Islam. In Sufi poetry, the heart is a metaphor for the longing of the soul, the pain of separation from the Beloved, and the joy of reunion. Through this juxtaposition of anatomical and affective perspectives, the series explores the complex interplay between physicality and human emotions.

From the very beginning, this emblem has been central to her artistic vision and emotional expression. It is a metaphor for the soul's pain—both delicate and vulnerable. The heart is also a language that no one speaks, but everyone understands instinctively, even if we don't have the words for it. Whereas scientists describe the heart as merely a muscle, for poets, it holds far deeper significance. As Arshi herself notes, she is still in the process of exploring the heart's many facets and what it truly represents in her work.

Figure 2:
June 7, Dil... Gosht ka Ek Tukda hi Toh Hai! (The Heart is But a Pound of Flesh, 2020).
Image Courtesy: Artist and Blueprint.

I.S.: *Gardens play an important role in your work. How did this start?*

A.A.: *As I mentioned earlier, I used flowers from my mother's garden to create natural pigments. This led me to explore gardens depicted in historic paintings, particularly in Persian, Mughal, and Pahari miniatures. Initially, the connection to these gardens was not always intentional, but over time, I began to focus on them more deliberately, incorporating their essence and materiality into my technique. When I worked on a series inspired by Bagh-e Babur (Babur's Garden) in Kabul, I mixed soil from the garden into the paper-mâché paste I applied on the fabric. Those fragments of the garden may not be visible, but they're present for me, adding personal connections, memories, and emotional warmth.*

In Kabul, there are many gardens—some open, some closed—each with its own significance. Some are for men, others exclusively for women, like the Bagh-e-Zanana (women's garden). It has been closed since the Taliban took over in 2021. While the architecture of these spaces may not stand out, it is what happened inside that made them remarkable. In a city where there were few places for women to gather freely, this garden became a sanctuary. Here, they could take off their burqas*, revealing the beautiful clothes worn underneath. They would cook or bring food from home, creating a space for shared celebration, for singing and dancing. They played around the trees and braided their hair with flowers from the garden. They adorned each other's hands with* henna*, shared their stories, and offered support—sometimes even showing their scars. It was one of the only places where women could talk openly. In this series, I used gold to capture the sunlight on fabric, reflecting the sun women once enjoyed in the garden.*

Zameen ka Aftab hona (***The Illumination of the Earth***, 2023, fig. 3) is a part of the ***Bagh-e-Zanana*** series inspired by the Women's Garden in Kabul—a square painting, all gold with neutral stripes. On the uniform blocks of the background, Arshi paints Persian trees, a row of elegant cypresses (*sarv* in Persian), slightly swaying and dancing in a line, each independent but all together.

Trees are frequently mentioned as metaphors in the Quran, such as the "good tree whose root is firm and whose branches are in the sky" (Q 14:24). Mughal miniatures depict cypress trees in most renditions of gardens (Aamir and Pervaiz 2018, 13). In Persian and Mughal poetry, tall and elegant figures are often compared to the tall and slender cypress, but these trees also symbolize the immortality of the soul, because

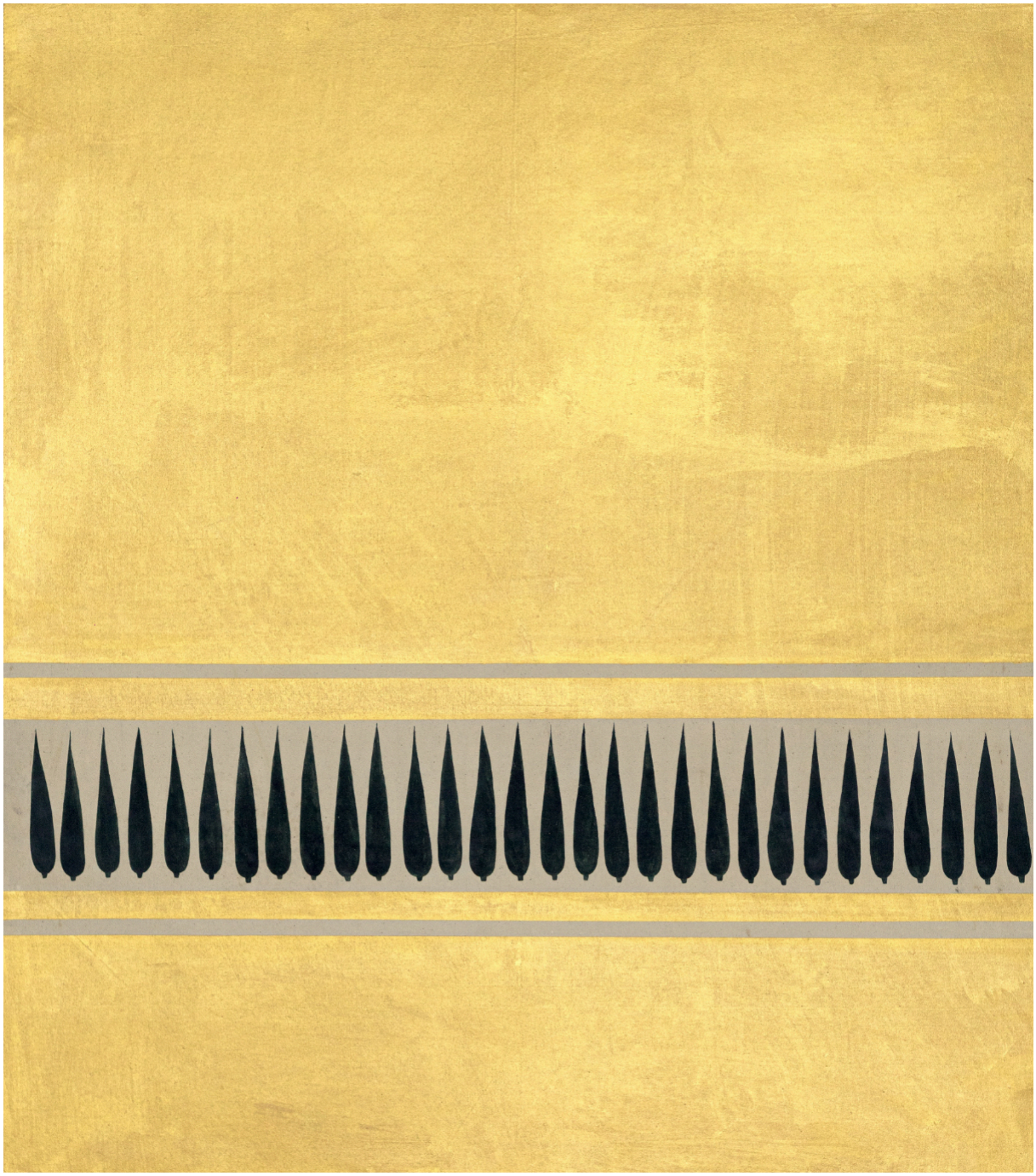

Figure 3:
Zameen ka Aftab hona (The Illumination of the Earth, 2023).
Image Courtesy: Artist & Blueprint.

they are evergreen and survive in hostile environments and harsh winters (Mahmoudi Farahani et al. 2016, 14). The cypress also comes to show the straightness of the direction in the path of love leading to spiritual elevation. The poet, Islamic scholar, and Sufi mystic of the thirteenth century, Jalaluddin Rumi wrote:

> *I am the tall cypress, which I can show you a sign of straightness, there is no sign of more straightness, other than the cypress height.*
> *(Aamir and Pervaiz 2018, 10).*

In *Zameen ka Aftab hona*, the cypresses point upward toward the celestial sphere, yet they are rooted in the earth and suggest an interior world of spiritual emotion (*batin*) and growth (Minissale 2021, 263). Precisely painted one by one in dark green, the cypresses float in the golden atmosphere of the background. The composition combines elements of Persian miniatures with Western modern art; the simplified figurative elements, single-colored fields, and rhythmic arrangement of forms reflect influences from the Weimar art tradition. The cypresses stand in an imaginary space where the art of the Mughals meets the Bauhaus in a female solidarity: tall, prideful, rebellious, fresh, young, and regal.

I.S.: *How did you finally come to Weimar?*

A.A.: *I came to Weimar to meet my husband, Waheed Saghar. He left Kabul for Weimar while I was still in India, and later, he brought me here. We were in Kabul when the Taliban took over on August 15, 2021. We were outside when we suddenly saw people running in panic. Waheed quickly realized what had happened, and we hurried back to our home. Inside, the situation was bleak—people feared to lose their jobs and livelihoods, but no one wanted to talk about it. Outside, I saw men in three-piece suits going into washrooms and emerging in* salwar qameez*. It struck me as strange—how did they know to change? Did they carry the clothes with them?*

The day I went to the Indian embassy to seek evacuation for my family was chaotic. People were running, and so were Waheed and I. I remember a woman running alongside me. I was wearing modest clothing as expected—trousers, a long shirt, and a headscarf—but as we ran, part of my trousers peeked out from under the shirt. This woman turned to me and said, "It's because of women like you that they are coming after us!" It was painful to hear such words from one woman to another while we were both fleeing for our lives.

After five or six days, my embassy evacuated me, but Waheed stayed behind. As a

musician, he was at risk of being pulled off the bus to the airport, which was happening to many men at the time. I was carrying my artwork with me, and during the evacuation, before reaching the airport, our bus was hijacked. They asked countless questions, and I remember thinking if they had asked me, I'd have had to deny the artwork was mine. That thought still weighs on me. My studio in Kabul held much of my work, and I had already destroyed all the pieces featuring women, fearing what might happen. Waheed also destroyed his musical instruments because the Taliban were raiding houses.

Yet, despite everything, others faced much worse. I decided to focus on moving forward. Eventually, I made it to India with my remaining artworks, though many pieces were unfinished, marked by the chaos we had endured. Later I joined Waheed in Weimar.

Waheed had connections to a major musical and cultural initiative supported by the German Foreign Office. The Afghanistan Music Research Centre (AMRC) was established in the fall of 2014 through the Transcultural Music Studies department at the Institute of Musicology at the University of Music Franz Liszt Weimar and the Friedrich-Schiller University of Jena. This connection enabled Waheed to be evacuated to Germany and secure accommodation in Weimar.

The situation following the withdrawal of the U.S. army from Afghanistan and the subsequent Taliban takeover of Kabul in 2021 was marked by tragedy and chaos. Many individuals who had developed ties with Western institutions over the previous two decades were suddenly in grave danger, and not all of them managed to escape.

I.S.: *How has Weimar shaped your thinking and artistic practice?*

A.A.*: Before arriving in Weimar, I had been separated from my husband, and the entire experience was deeply traumatic. However, Weimar has become a place of healing for me. The artwork I've created here is a reflection of that healing and my new surroundings. In Weimar, I lived between the Nietzsche Archive, Goethe's Garden, and Liszt House. The works done in Weimar are closely tied to the environment, the art, and the architecture. Moreover, they are inspired by the gardens in Weimar as well as Goethe's and Nietzsche's writings.*

Figure 4:
The Birth of Tragedy (2024).
Image Courtesy: Artist.

Figure 5:
Ek panna Beyond good and Evil se (A page from 'Beyond Good and Evil,' 2023).
Image Courtesy: Artist and Chatterjee & Lal.

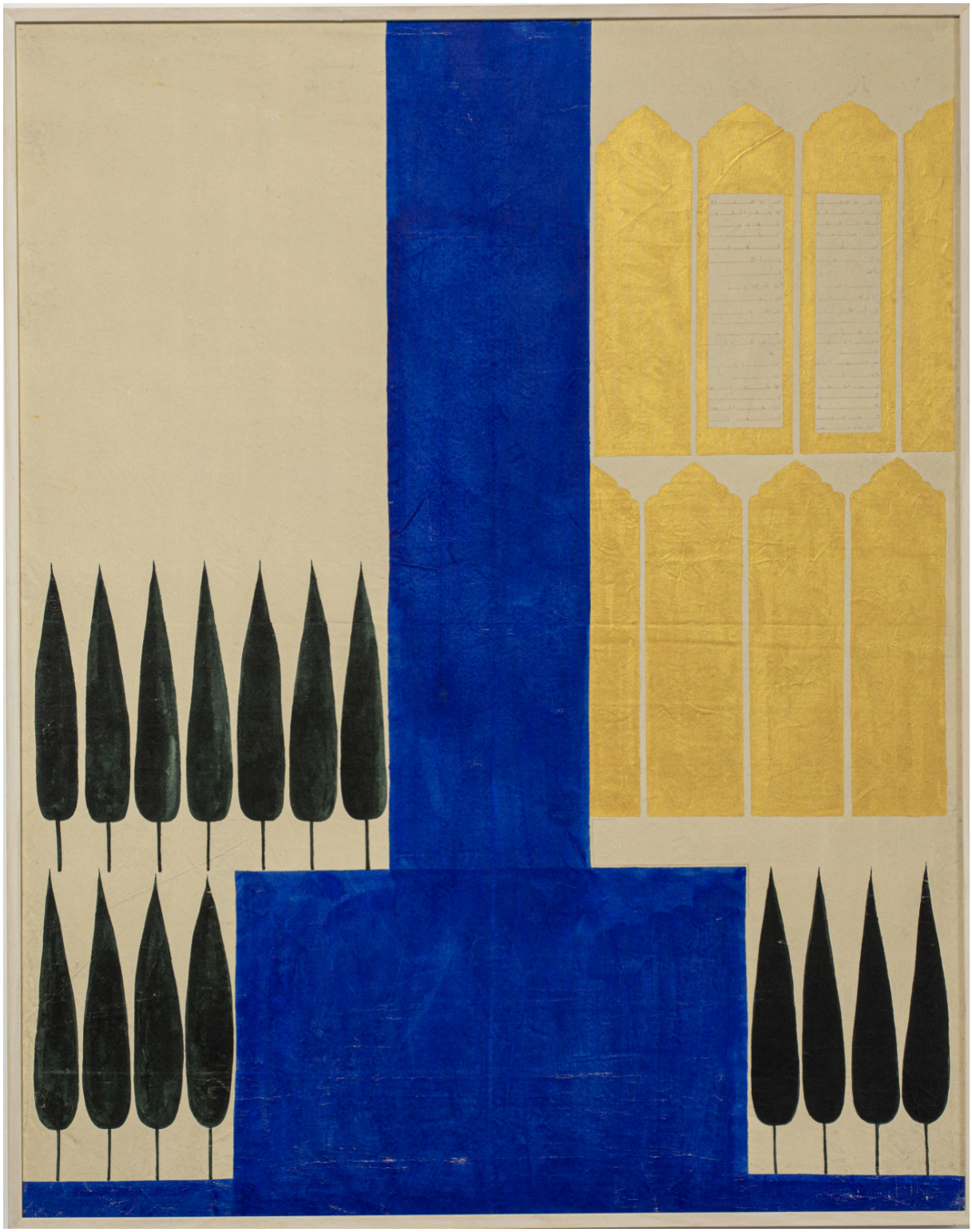

Figure 6:
Bagh-e-Falsafi IV (A Philosopher's Garden IV, 2022).
Image Courtesy: Artist and Chatterjee & Lal.

These three paintings were inspired by the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, who spent the last months of his life in Weimar in mental derangement. His sister, Elisabeth Förster Nietzsche, moved into a villa and converted it into her Nietzsche archive with the modernist architect and forerunner of the Bauhaus, Henry van de Velde. The archive houses some of Nietzsche's personal belongings and his manuscripts, many of them small notebooks, barely legible in closely written pages. The prophetic and gloomy pages of Nietzsche's books inspired numerous German modernist artists and are as much a part of Weimar's heritage as the poets Goethe and Schiller.

The Birth of Tragedy (2024, fig. 4) shows a dark green on earthy tone; fine lines divide the fabric further and, in the center, flows an illegible text whose letters—without diacritical marks—do not conceal their Urdu origin. The text gives the impression of intimate notes, like a dream that one cannot remember after waking up. The viewer's eye moves back and forth between the evenly curved letters, following their hidden rhythm. Splashes of green and gold adorn the fabric, embodying exuberant creativity and the spontaneous bursts of inspiration reminiscent of the philosopher's fragments. Below the text is the artist's signature, the bleeding heart.

Ek panna Beyond Good and Evil se (*A page from 'Beyond Good and Evil*,' 2023, fig. 5) plays with the color relations of large, nested blocks separated by fine construction lines. Spread across the page, they evoke both calm and movement, a steady rhythm of small steps in the center. These paintings combine the rhythmical structure of abstract paintings from the Bauhaus era and Persian tradition. Gold leaf was an extremely versatile medium in the Persian palette. It was often used in text illumination, in painting, and in the decoration of the borders of manuscript leaves. In this painting, the thick block of gold adds divine light to the otherwise earthy tones. It is also a reference to the style of paintings by the Viennese artist Gustav Klimt. The use of borders to separate the blocks of color is reminiscent of Persian miniatures in which lines form a frame—that is, a border containing a series of lines of varying thickness. The border defines a frame for the painting and represents an opening to an ideal world of beauty and a glimpse of eternity.

At the Bauhaus school, the use of color was a central, often debated topic. Its key influences were Goethe's *Theory of Colours* ([1810]2019) and the color model developed by his Romantic contemporary, Philipp Otto Runge, in the same year. For Runge, as with Goethe's holistic view, the effects of color could not be understood in purely scientific or technical terms. Artists like Kandinsky, Itten, and others at the

Bauhaus continued to explore and systematize the optical and psychological impacts of color, building their teachings on this foundation (Gage 1982). Through their use of color, the Bauhaus artists derived universal patterns of explanation and development for the diverse manifestations of artistic form. While it is not possible to speak of a single unified style of painting within the Bauhaus school, the use of large blocks of color in abstract compositions—exemplified by artists such as Paul Klee and Johannes Itten—is considered characteristic of this unique form of modern painting. The principal colors of red, yellow, and blue became paradigmatic for the clarity of expression and also the hidden meanings of colors beyond their realistic perception.

In *Bagh-e-Falsafi IV* (*A Philosopher's Garden IV*, 2022), Arshi once again introduces the motif of the *sarv* (cypress tree), symbolizing the metaphysical garden, and combines it with Nietzsche's presence in Weimar. A bold block of Bauhaus blue—representing a river—separates the cypresses from a series of golden frames inscribed with poetry. These frames feature multilobed arches at the top, inspired by the architecture of seventeenth century Mughal buildings in Agra and Delhi (Koch 1991, 103–124). The painting merges the Bauhaus approach to color with Persian motifs, metaphysics, and philosophy, creating a harmonious fusion of Muslim South Asian and European cultures.

I.S.: *What does the writing mean to you? Many of your pictures show writings, what do you write, and why?*

A.A.: *Urdu writing plays a crucial role in my art, nearly as important as the images themselves. It's like keeping a diary, but without a fixed meaning. For example, when I write poetry, I intentionally remove the dots from the Urdu letters. By removing the dots, the text becomes unreadable, even to me. This transformation allows the words to open up, carrying multiple interpretations almost as if they start to float freely. The titles of my works, mostly aphorisms in Urdu, serve as windows into the image, inviting a deeper exploration. Since moving to Weimar, I've found myself writing more and more. Poetry, in particular, has become a way for me to express myself. Yet I consider myself an "inept poet" because I feel uneasy reading my poetry aloud. Perhaps that's why I began removing the dots in the first place.*

I.S.: *In Weimar, you became pregnant. You documented this incisive phase of your life in the "pregnancy diaries."*

A.A.: *I kept a regular diary of my pregnancy and painted every day from May 2022 to January 2024—there are more than 300 drawings on paper. The whole project was*

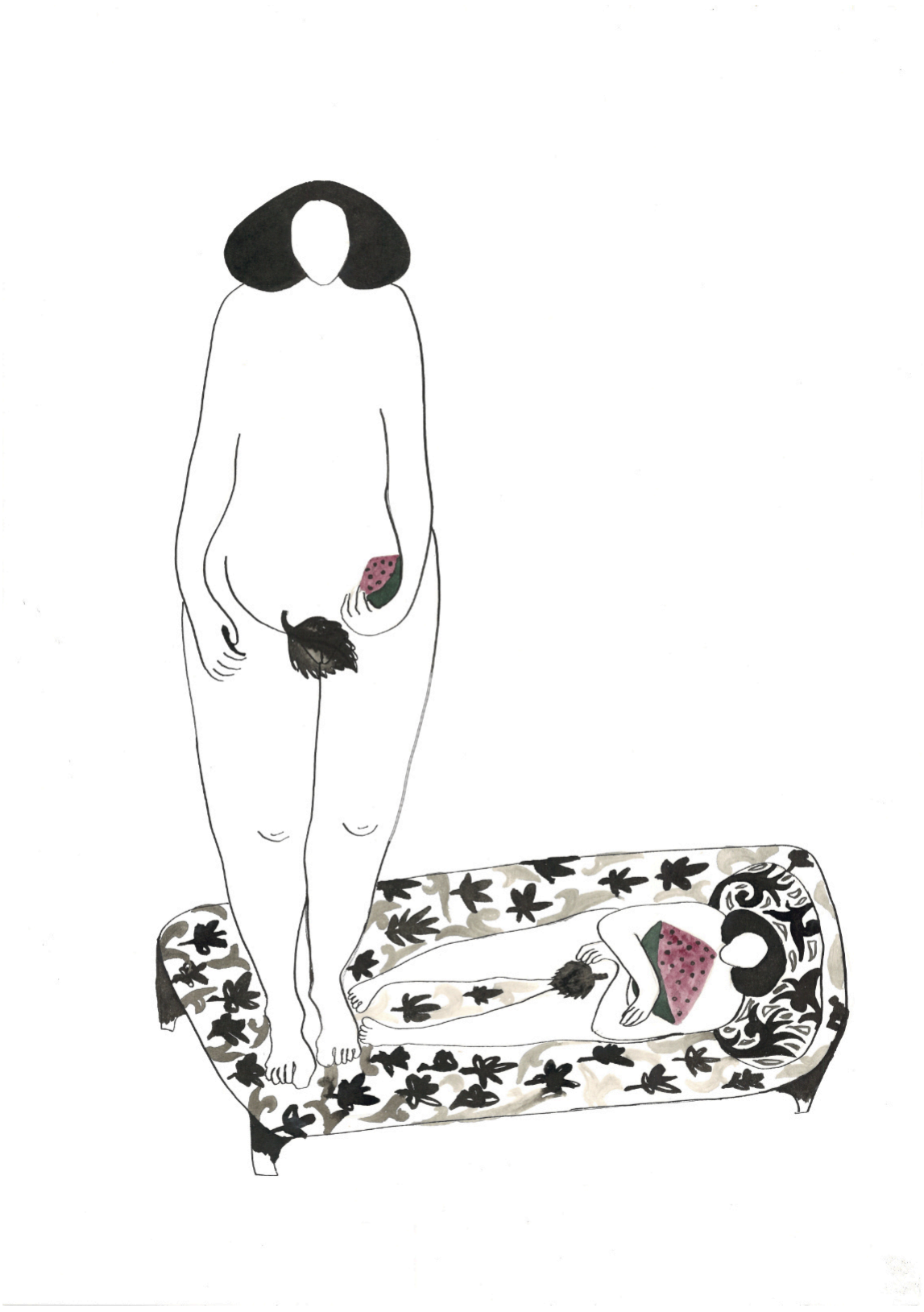

Figure 7:
July 2nd, 2022
Image Courtesy: Artist.

Figure 8:
October 3rd, 2022
Image Courtesy: Artist.

part of a fellowship granted by the Bauhaus University and the Martin-Roth-Initiative. While creating, I was in a meditative state of wholeness. Feeling life inside me, I forgot about the uneasiness and pain.

The *Pregnancy Diary* series portrays the physical and emotional experiences of an expectant woman. As in much of Arshi's work, the central figure is a faceless, shadowy outline with black hair, always nude and solitary in each frame. The scenes depict everyday moments—lying on a *charpoi* (a traditional woven bed from South Asia, fig. 7), sitting in a chair, or performing simple tasks such as showering. However, these seemingly ordinary activities are rendered differently, reflecting the challenges of pregnancy. Even a simple act, like trying to scratch an unreachable part of the body (fig. 8), becomes symbolic of the changes and limitations brought on by this new reality.

Small, decorative elements—such as a bright red watermelon with its numerous tiny black seeds—elevate the scenes from the mundane into the realm of universal feminine experiences. The embroidery on the bed evokes a sense of homey comfort, but it also mirrors the concept of the garden as an ideal space of beauty and harmony. The intricate patterns suggest both the warmth of a familiar domestic setting and the serenity of a lush, cultivated garden—a place where nature and human creativity come together in perfect balance. The sensation of carrying life, feeling the child move within, and adapting to the transformed body are experiences shared by countless women, yet they are rarely depicted with such intimate detail in art. This series captures the artist's ongoing confrontation with her own body and the role of motherhood as shaped by patriarchal expectations, giving the works a unique intensity and emotional depth.

The piece titled *September 29th, 2022* (fig. 9) depicts a woman showering alongside two pulsing, bleeding hearts. The connection between mother and child is established not only through the physical umbilical cord but also through an emotional bond—two hearts already sharing joy and sorrow within the womb.

Figure 9:
September 29th, 2022
Image Courtesy: Artist.

Figure 10:
January 19th, 59 x 42 cm, Ink on paper, 2023
Image Courtesy: Artist.

January 19th, 2022 (fig. 10) is a portrait in a garden full of flowers against the backdrop of blue mountains. The woman is in pain and giving birth. She spreads her bent legs and the baby's head is already visible in the wide-open birth canal. A deep connection runs through the bleeding heart from mother to the child. From behind, another faceless woman assists the mother giving birth. She is a pregnant woman with large wings and a fiery halo.

This motif shows another aspect of Persian miniature painting: the portrayal of significant religious figures, angels and prophets adorned with a radiant halo. The painter's approach to this tradition, however, is a very personal one, a reinterpretation from her own point of view. Throughout Islamic history, depictions of the prophet Muhammad in Islamic art were rare, though a notable corpus of images exists. One of the most commonly represented scenes is the *Mi'raj*, the legend of his ascension to the heavens, where the aureole of flames often signifies the sacred presence of Muhammad, other prophets, or angels (Gruber 2018). Traditionally, women are not adorned with this symbol of holiness in Islamic art. However, Arshi challenges this convention by portraying the pregnant body as a symbol of holiness, elevating the sacredness of femininity and emphasizing the sanctity of the female form.

Conclusion

Arshi uses her personal experiences and artistic techniques to challenge traditional narratives surrounding femininity, motherhood, and holiness. By blending Persian and Mughal miniature painting with Bauhaus-inspired architecture and color structures, her work emphasizes the often-overlooked sanctity of the female form. Through her evocative use of fabric, writing, and symbolic imagery, such as the bleeding heart, Arshi creates deeply personal and culturally rich art that transcends geographical and social boundaries. Her journey, from India and Kabul to Weimar and beyond, reflects her dedication to exploring the complexities of South Asian women's identities and their agency within patriarchal societies, offering a powerful, intimate portrayal of struggle and resilience.

Bio

Arshi Irshad Ahmadzai, an Indian artist based in New York, weaves a tapestry of memory, identity, and agency in her evocative works. Born and raised in Najibabad, her journey has taken her across the cultural landscapes of India, Afghanistan, and Germany. Educated in Fine Arts at Aligarh Muslim University and Jamia Millia Islamia, her art defies boundaries, exploring a rich array of themes and mediums. Through recurring motifs like pomegranates, chairs, takhtis, gardens, and bleeding hearts, her work reflects a thoughtful meditation on her identity as a South Asian woman. Influenced by Sufism, philosophy, literature, architecture, Mughal miniatures, and poetry, Arshi's art invites a meaningful dialogue on agency, existence, and the delicate interplay of culture and self-expression.

PD Dr. Isabella Schwaderer is a lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Erfurt, Germany, and a fellow at the Humanities Centre for Advanced Studies "Religion and Urbanity: Reciprocal Formations" at the Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies, Erfurt. Her research focuses on the intersections of religion and modernity, as well as religion and art, with a particular emphasis on dance in South Asia. Her recent publications include: Religious Entanglements Between Germans and Indians, 1800–1945 (2023, co-edited with Gerdien Jonker) and "Exotic Sensation" or "Völkisch Art"? Press Reviews of the Indisches Ballett Menaka (Menaka Indian Ballet) on Tour Through Germany, 1936–1938" (NTM, 2023).

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