

Artist in Spotlight: MALAK MATTAR

‘To paint to tell our stories is resistance’: An interview with Pragna Patel and Rashmi Varma*

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Pragna Patel: Thanks for joining us, Malak. *Feminist Dissent* is so honoured to showcase your artwork. Please could you tell us a bit about yourself and why you got into art.

Malak Mattar: Thank you for having me. I was born in the Gaza city, and I am the granddaughter of refugees. Both my ancestors, paternal and maternal, were forcibly displaced in 1948. But they really had a passion for art, poetry, literature--it was part of everyday conversation. Going to school, the Palestinian curriculum was heavily immersed in literature, in painting through art courses, and different subjects. Growing up I was really encouraged by my parents to pursue art, specially by my mother because her family is the artists' family. My maternal uncle is an art professor, a multi-media artist. My mother's maternal uncle is also a renowned Palestinian artist, educator and calligraphist.

But I didn't really pursue art seriously until I was 14. I was still in Gaza in 2014. War was launched and my neighbourhood was changing, it was being flattened by the airstrikes. In one of these buildings that was two buildings away, I saw my neighbour being brutally torn off by the airstrike that struck her house. After this scene, and inspired by the environment, I came to appreciate that art is a way of self-expression and of discharging your emotions. So, I saw myself working with pencils and papers.



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Rashmi Varma: Also tell us about your journey to the UK. When did you come here and in what circumstances?

Malak: Before I came to the UK I was denied entry twice by the Home Office—once in 2018 and then 2022. I had applied for a visa on the basis of being an artist and wanting to exhibit my work. I applied to the UK from Istanbul where I had managed to go in 2017 and from where I have a degree in Political Science. I was officially resident in Istanbul when I applied for my UK visa which would make you think it would be easier to travel because Istanbul is not under military blockade like the Gaza strip. In 2018 I was supposed to come for an exhibition as part of the popular Greenbelt arts festival that happens every year. Everything was set up—my hotels, my flight. Unfortunately, I was presented with a paper that said how I am not honest, how I am not really coming for the exhibition. That was really devastating. I had felt once I am out of Gaza, because I saw it as like a prison, once I am out, the world will open its arms. I was literally trapped. But after that, I applied to go to Europe, to France, and I got the visa. Then travelling started getting easier. In 2022, thinking that I had a good travel history, and the UK will say yes because I have shown I am not overstaying in any way, I am being punctual, I got denied entry again for very similar reasons.

Then a friend of mine who lives in Essex said Priti Patel was his MP. No one believes in my story till I show them the evidence of Priti Patel writing to overturn the decision. She called the Consulate who then called me and said ‘oh we think we made a mistake. Come to get the visa’. I got a 6-month visitor visa to the UK. I was starting to apply for a master’s in fine art and I got admission to Central St Martin’s.

Rashmi: This is the only positive thing we have heard about Priti Patel in all this time!

Malak: And you know she resigned days after!

Pragna: Why do you think she supported your visa application?

Malak: She did because when I was denied entry in 2018, I wrote a Facebook post about how devastating it was. It was racist to deny me entry. I was only 21 or something. It got a lot of publicity and started getting into news. I would think, it is only speculation, I really don't know for sure, maybe she saw these articles when she looked me up. Maybe she liked my works. Maybe she wanted to do one good deed.

Pragna: I suspect it was more the publicity side of things...

Malak: And in one of these articles the headline was: A teenager slams UK racist policies!

Pragna: Malak, I have had the privilege and pleasure of seeing your artwork which is absolutely stunning and beautiful and powerful. What strikes me is the central role of women and the focus on women in your art. Can you tell us a little about why did you decide to focus so much on images of women?

Malak: I wouldn't say it was that conscious. It was not a very conscious decision when I was only 14 years old starting to make art. But I would say that I was heavily influenced and inspired by women. A lot of them were successful but a lot of them were survivors of the Nakba, survivors of Israeli wars, survivors of occupation.

Growing up I lived in the house of my grandparents—they lived on the first floor we lived on the second floor. I learnt about where we came

from because I am a refugee. I learnt about my village Al-Jura from my grandmother who spoke about it with so much emotion and that is what made it different from my grandfather's speaking about the story which was very static. I could see tears in my grandmother's eyes, how much she really missed her home and how much she was really believing in the idea of return. She had nine children, and she got married below the age of 18. I was fascinated by stories of how she raised her kids, how she really worked with my grandfather, hand in hand to make ends meet.

My grandmother from the other side—she was a very bright, strong leader in her house. I really remember how much she cared about flowers, about the design in her house. Sometimes she would commission her clothing from tailors. She never wore black--she said 'I am too young for black'. When she saw us wearing black, she said 'no, you need to love life, you need wear colours, and this is how you shine'. She was always proud and always very wise. She had love for art, she was the one choosing where to place paintings of my uncle, where to place posters of western artists. She had a collection of Van Gogh, Edgar Degas, Leonardo da Vinci. She was a curator in her house. She cared so much about the beautiful details of living in Palestine, the landscape.

And of course there was my mother. She is a fantastic person. She is very positive. She loved her students. For 25 years she taught English, but she really was more than a teacher to her students. Oftentimes the students would come to our house, having a meal, preparing for a theatre performance. She was so giving.

Pragna: One of the things that struck me as you say your grandmother, in particular, loved colour, and saw colour as the love of life. What strikes me about your paintings is also colour. They are incredibly colourful. I don't know how conscious you were or are but there are elements of

Frida Kahlo in the way in which you use colour and the images of women. Were you conscious of that? Was she an influence?

Malak: Based on my art education in school, it was broadly focused on art history from a Western perspective. But also, most of it was about Palestinian art history. It was about Sliman Mansour, Tamam al-Akhal. It was about how art was really part of the political struggle, how artists were resisting occupation and how even painting your own self, and your own story is an act of resistance. We were also told a lot about how art works were confiscated, how artists were arrested, how they were interrogated. Even the colours of our flag were not allowed in paintings. The flag was not allowed to be visible from the windows or the streets or schools. Having this art education has really given me a lot of consciousness about why art is important and why I need to be an artist.

I was particularly interested in women artists and women poets. These women spoke to me—they spoke about patriarchy but also about occupation. One of the most important poets in the history of Palestine is Fadwa Toukan. Her brother was Ibrahim Toukan. He was encouraged by society to be a poet, and he was given all the platforms. But the family of Fadwa Toukan told her, ‘He is a man, and you are not’. It was only because she was a strong, important woman who believed in herself and had the support of her brother who believed in her voice, that we read her stories and poetry today. She was in the curriculum that we studied as kids.

So, part of me, when I saw these examples, I felt empowered to become the person I want. I was not limited just because of society or occupation. If these women could do it, I could also do it. That was the environment I grew up in. Were there stories of oppression? Absolutely. Were there stories of patriarchy that I could see through my eyes? Of course. But these women inspired me, and my mother was a direct influence.

Rashmi: One of the things we argue in *Feminist Dissent* often is that our criticism of patriarchy and of oppression and occupation, in whatever form and in whatever geographical context, must be carried out together. Whereas some people argue that we cannot be criticising patriarchy now. This has been the story of so many nationalist movements in which women were told, ‘hang on, present your demands, once we have independence we can look at your demands.’ And of course independence came and nothing much happened. What do you think about this perspective—that this is not the time to talk about patriarchy? Let’s all focus on the fact of occupation and oppression.

Malak: That is a very strong question, and I am going to be really honest. I don’t think there is a special time of patriarchy. If patriarchy is affecting us on a daily basis, its criticism cannot be postponed or delayed. What I have a real problem with is when I share my testimony about patriarchy, the western media uses it and weaponises it against me. They use it out of context, see it as blaming the government as if this justifies occupation. I am really left in a very difficult situation—do I speak out openly knowing it will be taken out of context? Will it be taken against me at the end? I get questions from journalists like ‘what is your dad like, has he ever oppressed you? We saw your photo in this newspaper saw-- does your dad allow this?’ Sometimes this is what the western media wants to highlight. That is why I keep saying as an artist, and this is really my personal view, but the main reason why I am being censored is Israel.

I remember I was only 16 years old; I was so excited at that time. I was packing my things as I got permission to travel to Jerusalem which is really exceptional for someone from Gaza as such a thing doesn’t happen. So, I was packing my work, framing them, packaging them and going to fly. And I was denied entry as a 16-year-old. Another story: I went to ship my work as a teenager and the post office asked me ‘what is

the content of the painting?’ I was like ‘it is a tree’. I was told, ‘if it has any political content, it will be confiscated. And you cannot ask why’. As a teenager hearing this, I questioned what is political. I do not even know what politics means at such a young age. Metaphorically speaking I felt handcuffed. I felt like whatever I am painting should not have any political symbols. As a colonised person, the only factor stopping me from becoming an artist is the fact that occupation is taking place and is really assassinating everyone I know.

Pragna: I totally understand in the context of occupation nothing feels real for you except the occupation. But your focus on women as resilient, as survivors, that women can do anything—those are some of the interpretations of your paintings. That appears to be as much about a response to patriarchy which you may not have experienced personally because you have a very loving family, but which other women do, like the poet you were describing who was told initially you cannot do what your brother does. That must have influenced you, right? The idea that women are equal to men, that women are survivors, they are resilient, they have a voice. Your focus on women expresses those views.

Malak: Absolutely. I remember the first solo exhibition I had. It was a really big success and we had a lot of support from lecturers, students. There I got comments like ‘women paint beautiful things’; ‘leave politics to men and focus on portraying beauty’. That made me think: why can’t we be political? Why can’t I make painting of criticism? It opened my eyes to this social structure of what is expected from a woman, like a pre-existing order and expectation.

Rashmi: You mentioned western media and how they tend to weaponise anything that you may say that is critical of patriarchy or of Palestinian

society to use it against Palestinian resistance. In that connection I also wanted to hear your views on the reception of Palestinian art in the west. As a Palestinian artist—how do you keep your art really resistant and politically sharp when there is also a market for political art like there is a market for beautiful things and through consumption of that they can then drain it of politics? It is a really difficult predicament, I am sure.

Malak: Absolutely. I have to also say about the shift of my work after October 7, 2023, which lost its colours. After 7 October, I only use black and white in my work. I wouldn't say it was an act of protest; it was just a shocking reaction of what I have been witnessing and seeing. My family was in the middle of the genocide while I was in the UK. It was tormenting. When I started using black and white I did receive comments such as 'we want colours back. You need to give us some hope'. Building your career with a style, with a significance--suddenly you decide to change all of that because your instinct is telling you something else. It was such a difficult move.

Speaking of the market, people tend to buy more colours, interact better with emotions, with objects like oranges and olive trees and things like that. But when they see art in black and white, it reflects the genocide. But that is not necessarily art they want to have and wake up for it every day. What I really feel as an artist is that I want to sleep at night feeling that 'I am really responding to my instinct'. I want to be true to myself and be true to what we are going through as people because we are being ethnically cleansed. That was the overwhelming feeling I had.

Pragna: Where do you think you are now as an artist? Has anything changed in terms of how you see things?

Malak: A part of me is really reclaiming some power in my own practice, to not make it only a response to what a criminal regime is doing to my people. But rebelling against it and insisting and finding elements of hope. My family is starting life again as refugees.

I also feel part of my work is to dedicate it to artists who have been killed. Some of them were friends. We exhibited together; we worked together. So, a part of me is responding to Dr Refat Alareer, one of the most important academics from Gaza who said, 'if I die, you must live to tell my story'. And indeed, after hundreds of death threats he was assassinated in December 2023. Telling the stories of those who were killed, who believed in their art is an act of resistance. I feel responsible as a fellow artist to talk about them, to highlight them and to also advocate for the lost lives.

And it is also about the loss of cultural heritage. I was recently at the Victoria and Albert Museum, on a panel titled "Culture in Crisis". Although it is significant to speak about Gaza in these big institutions, in the end I had to say that 80% of cultural heritage has been demolished by war machines. We are a population stripped out of its culture. We breathe culture, we celebrate it. To be taken away from us, it is cultural genocide, it is not an accident, it is not a collateral damage. In mainstream media you do not see much about this. Culture is the people who built it. It is cumulative. It is collective.

I saw a clip two days ago in which one woman screams on television: 'Where are the Arabs?' You know what a woman said: 'I am not going to call for anyone. Where are you women?' When you look at the genocide, it is a feminist issue. When I have my menstruation cycle and I cannot use a bathroom, when I give birth there is no anaesthetic available—these are feminist issues. Feminism cannot be selective—if the women in

Europe matter, women in Gaza matter equally. We need more action, more mobilization.

Rashmi: Thank you, Malak, for giving us so generously of your time. We hope that by spotlighting your words and your art in this issue of *Feminist Dissent* we can do one little thing to bring your message of resistance to more readers.

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