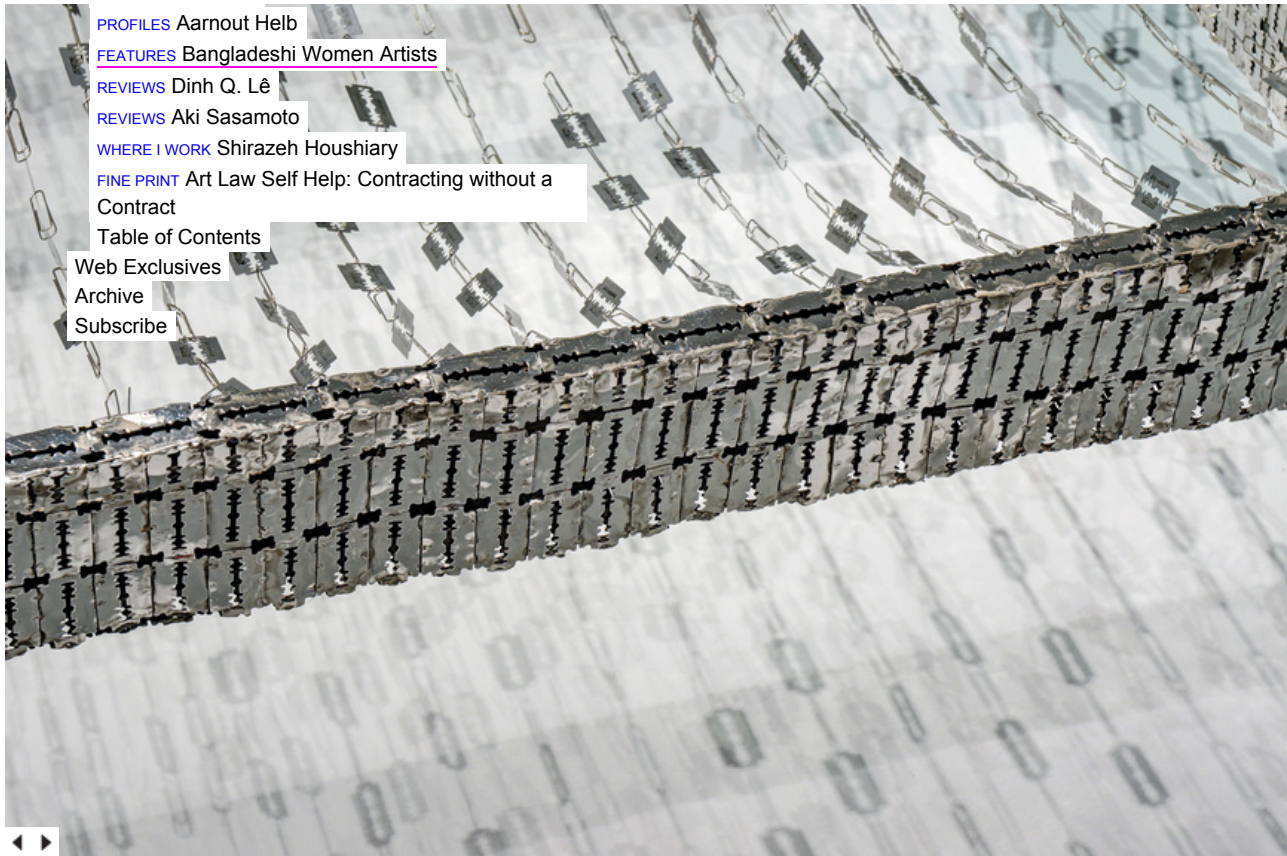




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TAYEBA BEGUM LIPI, *Love Bed* (detail), 2012, stainless steel, 79.4 × 184.8 × 221 cm. Courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and the Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore.

Unless otherwise stated, all images courtesy the artists.

## ENTANGLED TENSIONS BANGLADESHI WOMEN ARTISTS

FEATURES BY MELIA BELLI BOSE FROM NOV/DEC 2015

BANGLADESH

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*We are undergoing a national identity crisis. Who are we? Are we South Asian, Bengali, Muslim?*

—Nazia Andaleeb Preema

Bangladesh has undergone near constant political and cultural flux since its two independences: the first from Britain in 1947, after which it became East Pakistan, and then from Pakistan in 1971. Over the past four decades the nation has endured military dictatorships, natural and industrial disasters, rapid globalization and engagement with “Western” and developed Asian countries, primarily through nongovernmental organizations, businesses and factories established by multinational corporations. Concomitantly, there has been social, religious and economic engagement with the wider Islamic world as hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshis travel to the Gulf and Saudi Arabia annually for employment, or to perform *hajj* and *umrah* pilgrimages to Mecca. These events and interactions contribute to constructions of national and personal identities, as well as relationships to the collective past and the world. Many Bangladeshis appear to subscribe to the late Palestinian-American activist and literary critic Edward Said’s notion of “many Islams,” comfortably marrying their Bengali identities with their Muslim ones. They wear *saris*, read the Koran in Bangla, celebrate Hindu holidays and perform *namaaz* (Muslim prayer). However, many other Bangladeshis feel compelled to conform to the version of the faith they encounter during their travels abroad.

Responding to this pronounced emergence of hybridity in their country, several contemporary Bangladeshi artists have been grappling with issues of national and personal identities, and with the impact of global interactions. Among their many peers, three women artists—Tayeba Begum Lipi (b. 1969), Dilara Begum Jolly (b. 1960) and Nazia Andaleeb Preema (b. 1974)—explore these issues via the lens of gender. Through their use of different media, messages and content, each confronts what it means to be a woman in a changing Bangladesh that nevertheless still retains very specific gendered expectations. Lipi, Jolly and Preema are part of an international group of artists, which includes Mona Hatoum, Lalla Essaydi, Shirin Neshat, Yoshiko Shimada, Suk-nam Yun and others, who address the multiple binds of being

## The World Has Changed— Have Gender Roles?



**TAYEBA BEGUM LIPI** and **MAHBUBUR RAHMAN**, *Toys Watching Toys*, 2002, cast fiberglass, textile, wood and fabric, dimensions variable. Installation view at Alliance Française, 2002.

Tayeba Begum Lipi is one of Bangladesh's most active artists. In 2012, her razor-blade sculpture of a modest bed frame, *Love Bed* (2012), was acquired by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, making her one of the few Bangladeshi artists whose work is in the permanent collection of a major international museum. She is also dedicated to creating opportunities for other Bangladeshi artists; in 2002, Lipi and her husband, the artist Mahbubur Rahman, founded Britto Arts Trust, the country's first artist-run nonprofit organization.

Both Lipi's and Rahman's work were profoundly influenced by the September 11 attacks in New York in 2001, and the July 7 London bombings in 2005; their countrymen's responses to these events; and how the world subsequently treated them as Bangladeshi Muslims. While they recall experiencing racial discrimination during their travels in Europe prior to 2001—where they participated in residencies, exhibitions and workshops—afterward it noticeably intensified. The two artists also observed Bangladeshis at home and abroad suddenly questioning their own identity and feeling compelled to announce their allegiance to their faith. "People felt that they had to stick to only one identity," Lipi noted. "So, they turned to religion."

One of the most perceptible responses to this sudden call to reckoning were changes in dress. Like Muslims throughout the world, post-9/11, many Bangladeshis became what professor Emma Tarlo terms "visibly Muslim." For women, this manifested in an increased popularity of veiling. (Both hijabs and burqas have become more prevalent since 2001.) Lipi and Rahman's collaborative installation *Toys Watching Toys* (2002), first displayed in 2002 at Dhaka's Alliance Française, addressed gendered performances of identity through dress and the prevalence of suspicion and judgment in post-9/11 Bangladesh. The installation was divided into two sections. In one, four life-sized figures with white fiberglass casts of Lipi's head mounted on chair backs were seated in a semi-circle. Each chair-figure was draped in a burqa, facing an oil-on-canvas triptych of Lipi's self-portraits. In the wall-size painting, Lipi appears with her hair down, wearing makeup, exposing one shoulder. The two "Lipis" observe each other accusingly, each questioning the alliances and identity of what Said termed "the Other."

The installation's second section parodied South Asian Muslim wedding receptions at which the newly married couple is displayed before their friends and relatives. Half a dozen burqa-clad chairs with Lipi's face were assembled before a pair of chair-figures dressed as a traditional Bengali bride and groom; the former bore a fiberglass cast of Lipi's head, the latter, Rahman's. The groom stares blankly ahead, the veiled bride stoops forward, deflecting the gaze of the crowd to indicate her modesty and *lojja* (shame, reserve). Behind the bride and groom figures a video of a cow being slaughtered was projected. The installation likened marriage—which in Bangladesh is typically arranged by families for their young adults, or even children—to a *Korbanir Eid* (a ceremonial sacrifice, traditionally of a cow). The work calls attention to the fact that when individuals are forced into their gender roles too young, their futures and aspirations are sacrificed for the sake of family honor.



TAYEBA BEGUM LIPI, *I Wed Myself*, 2010, still from two-channel video: 3 min 2 sec.

Wedding rituals and other performances of gendered domesticity continue to fascinate Lipi. In her two-channel video projection *I Wed Myself* (2010), shown at the first Bangladesh Pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale (2011), which Lipi herself co-organized, the artist seems to offer a solution to fraught gender divisions and the lack of agency of those forced into arranged marriages. The three-minute video features the artist performing wedding preparations—on one channel as a bride, on the other, as a groom. For the latter, she sports short hair and a false mustache. The video concludes with the couple seated side by side on a dais, eyeing each other coyly. In appropriating both roles, Lipi acknowledges the fluidity of her own gender, and in so doing, challenges the normative South Asian (and gendered) hierarchies in institutions of religion, marriage and family.

Lipi is perhaps best known for her use of razor blades, which she employs in sculptures of feminine everyday objects: handbags, dresses, bras, bathtubs, baby strollers and, in *Love Bed*, the marital bed. From a large family in rural northern Bangladesh, Lipi has an early memory of secretly witnessing her sister-in-law giving birth at home under the care of a midwife, who cut the umbilical cord with a razor blade sterilized in boiling water. The event remains emblazoned on Lipi's mind. Reminiscent of Freud's "primal scene," the razor blade symbolizes her recognition of her own entry into the world, and entanglements of love, domesticity and physical pain. The delicately constructed *Love Bed*, with its glimmering chains of blades, exposes matrimonial paradoxes in rural Bangladesh: beautiful and inviting, yet—by virtue of its potential to inflict pain and even death on the wife—dangerous.

Safety pins are another synecdochical object Lipi employs in her sculptures, signifying gender violence and agency. She recalls how, like many women across the subcontinent, as a college student in Dhaka she was frequently groped in crowded public spaces. And, like countless other South Asian women, she armed herself with safety pins to defend herself against the disembodied hands. As with *Love Bed*, the safety-pin installation sculpture *Comfy Bikinis* (2013), first displayed in her solo exhibition "Never Been Intimate" at Pi Artworks, Istanbul, is fraught with contradictions. The work offers four delicate mesh bikinis fashioned from golden safety pins that dangle tantalizingly from hangers. Anything but comfortable, their form evokes the most intimate areas of the female body, while their material transforms them into armor—and a warning to those who would touch without invitation.

Through the use of symbolic materials, reconsiderations of gender roles and satire, Lipi's artworks expose paradoxes and social tensions. Lipi does not consider herself above these faults. The artist herself features prominently in her work, through the use of molds of her body and self-portraiture, and her materials are taken from her own life, making her work self-reflexive. "I criticize myself first," she stressed in a conversation with me. "I am part of the country and culture that I depict in my work."

## Social Justice and the

## Feminist Gaze



DILARA BEGUM JOLLY, *Tader Bola 4*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 90 × 90 cm.

While Lipi's worldview and art were altered by 9/11, the early work of Chittagong-based Dilara Begum Jolly responds to a different, local religious-political milieu. Jolly began her artistic career in the early 1980s, during the military dictatorship of Hussain Muhammad Ershad, which was characterized by media and artistic censorship, and the further erosion of secularism after Islam was officially designated the state religion in 1977. The Ershad years afforded little room for artistic engagement with the intersections of gender, religion and politics. Nevertheless, since this politically tumultuous era, Jolly's work, which draws from literature, politics, the media and her commitment to social justice, has focused on the rights of women in Bangladesh and the world.

Jolly's art is also guided by the goals of the now disbanded Shomoy ("Time") artistic group of which she, together with her husband, Dhali al-Mamoon, was a founding member. Throughout the 1980s, Shomoy members sought inspiration from Bangladeshi politics and visual cultures and attempted to cast off the mantles of the colonial artistic legacy and representational, figural painting that dominated art of the previous decade. Jolly's influences are also international and include Louise Bourgeois, Frida Kahlo, Georgia O'Keeffe and Judy Chicago. Jolly's videos, installations and paintings—predominantly acrylic on canvas—are characterized by a surrealistic style and, building on Chicago's description of herself, "an inward critical feminist gaze."

Since the 1990s, Jolly has used her art to respond to local and global cases of abuse against women. In 2006, the Bengal Foundation Gallery of Fine Art hosted "Excavating Time," Jolly's exhibition of paintings made between 2001 and 2006, many of which are caustic critiques of the US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The works highlight the plight of those the artist perceives to suffer the most in such conflicts: women. In an approach she developed in the early 2000s, the "Excavating Time" paintings render tragic events with a paradoxically bright, joyful palette and rich, organic symbolism that celebrate the female body and its potential fertility, cut short. In *After the End of Time 3* (2006), a seemingly picturesque image of delicate, blazing orange, fuchsia and azure blossoms is subverted by the menacing intrusion of bullets that displace the flowers' stamens. The upper section of the painting is dominated by an ovary encircling an Iraqi flag. Jolly regularly renders ovaries, uteruses and breasts not with the aloof precision of an anatomical text, or as titillating subjects of the male gaze, but as soft, fluid, nurturing forms that link these organs—and their owners, in this case Iraqi women—to the natural world. Here, resonances between the female body and nature are underscored by the presence of a germinating seed. As in several of Jolly's war-protest paintings the message conveyed through her fecund, organic symbolism is that armies and their instruments of death arrest the cycle of life.

Jolly's next series, "Tader Bola" ("Their Words") (2008), depicts female reproductive organs as if they were stitched in *nakshi kanthas*, or Bengali embroidered quilts. As a child Jolly sat with her female relatives who gossiped and shared their trials as they embroidered—hence, the title of the series. Paradoxes of pain and domesticity, the stitches are a link to the artist's ancestors and other Bengali women. Reminiscent of the traditional female-made textiles in Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1979), *kantha* embroidery also provided Jolly with nonacademic formal influences that have historically been produced by women. In several drawings and paintings, such as those in "Tader Bola," Jolly represents stitches through precise, regularly placed dots, lines and dashes. *Tader Bola 4* (2008) is a delicate yellow and crimson composition executed with crosshatches evocative of embroidery, in which a lotus-like ovary is punctuated by women's heads, mapping matrilineal descent. A lotus bulb with eyes for seeds emerges from the ovary, recalling a placenta. Jolly borrows from *kantha* imagery, in which lotuses signify fertility and endurance as they are known to emerge from village ponds and survive the dry season.



DILARA BEGUM JOLLY, installation view of the series "Object," 2014, resin and found objects, dimensions variable.

After the 2012 Tazreen Fashions factory fire, in which more than one hundred workers burned to death, and the collapse of the Rana Plaza factory in 2013, which killed over one thousand, Jolly began to address the exploitative working conditions of Bangladesh's garment industry. Her most recent solo exhibition, "Boyon Boyan" ("Threads of Testimony"), hosted by the Bengal Art Lounge in 2014, was a multimedia memorial for the victims of the disasters, the majority of whom were young women. Throughout the exhibition, Jolly featured posters made by family members for their missing relatives. Exchanging the vibrant palette of her earlier works on paper, in "Boyon Boyan" Jolly employs exclusively monochrome pen and ink drawings rendered with delicate, painstakingly executed lines. One drawing, *Bayana 2* (2014), presents a woman—a mother, sister or wife—whose tear is linked to a missing poster superimposed on a shirt, signifying the industry for which the featured young man lost his life.

In "Boyon Boyan" Jolly went beyond highlighting the plight of the Tareen Fashions and Rana Plaza victims; she squarely placed blame for the tragedies and called for justice. In the center of the gallery, Jolly laid a table for her guests of honor—or rather, shame: the owners of both factories. They were to be served from resin plates in which were embedded casts of victims' possessions—hair clips, combs, identification cards, DNA lab reports used to identify the corpses—that Jolly had collected at Rana Plaza. The intention was to confront the guilty, demanding their accountability and the acknowledgment of their victims as individuals.

Jolly's nearly three-decades-long career has been an almost single-minded call for social justice, gender equality and, more recently, labor equality. Although tragic, her subjects are often rendered in an effort to inspire hope and the will to demand change.

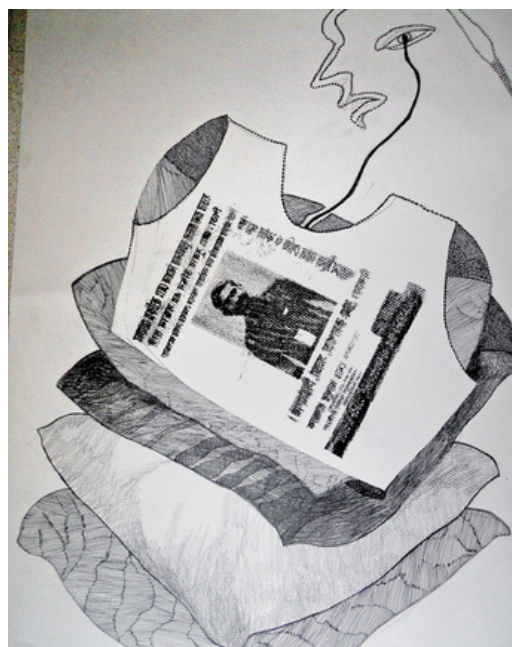
## An Engaged Gaze

Nazia Andaleeb Preema is an anomaly in Dhaka's social and artistic circles. Both an artist and a director of a national marketing organization, she intertwines her identity and art and flirts with public scrutiny to great success. She is unmarried and often appears in social media and in her exhibition catalogs flaunting a cigarette or cocktail—illegal for Muslim nationals in Bangladesh. While many educated, upper-class Bangladeshi women engage in such "unladylike" behavior, Preema is among the few to do so openly. Her art both luxuriates in its creator's sensuality and responds to her society's condemnations of her lifestyle. "My life itself is an inspiration for my art," she has said. In Bangladesh, such freedoms are not enjoyed without professional and personal consequences; Preema has been the subject of criticism in Dhaka society for her unconventional lifestyle, and some of her works have been censored due to their perceived inappropriate content.

Preema examines manifestations of womanhood in a post-9/11, increasingly globalized Bangladesh. First exhibited in her solo show "Staring Women" at the Bengal Gallery of Fine Arts in 2010, Preema's best-known paintings are mixed-media depictions of wide-eyed young women resolutely making eye contact with the viewer. *My Pair of Eyes* (2008), arrestingly executed in red, white and black, features two women with their hair unbound—a metonym signifying invitation and sexuality in South Asian art—who coolly regard the viewer. Faceless, smoky, kohl-rimmed eyes punctuate the canvas. Not content to be the passive subject of the male gaze or to perform the submissive stance of exhibiting *lojja*, the women in Preema's paintings frankly surveil their (male) viewers, claiming their power to equally delight in the gaze and in doing so uncannily subvert an otherwise alluring scene. The painting's title is playfully ambiguous: does the artist at once offer herself for the male gaze and return society's judgmental stare?

Like Lipi, for Preema the burqa is a trope of the nation's growing conservatism. Western fashion and other commercial goods are also now readily available in Bangladesh; they represent a luxurious secularism as well as a means for veiled women to express themselves—at least in private. In numerous paintings, Preema explores the hybrid world many upper-class Bangladeshi women inhabit. The somber-toned canvas *Desire* (2009) presents a half-veiled face with eyes that are a network of red veins, suggesting a secret rage or sorrow. Rather than returning the gaze, here the eyes stare pointedly past the viewer to the object of their desire—an opportunity, a person, an object for sale?—oblivious to our presence. Another unveiled face engages the viewer's gaze, coquettishly smiling through fuchsia lipstick. In place of the central figure's mouth, a stiletto shoe precariously balances on a lotus. Preema's staring women occupy a world colored by confluences of *lojja*, desire, high fashion and consumerism.

Preema also imagines confrontations between two worlds, as



DILARA BEGUM JOLLY, *Bayana 2*, 2014, pen and ink on paper, 76 × 56 cm.

in *Cosmopolitan* (2009), titled after the women's magazine that offers sex, dating, fashion and career advice. The canvas offers contrasting planes of light and primary colors and black, evocative of its subjects' tensions. In the middle ground a phalanx of riotously hued supermodels cut from the pages of *Cosmo* strut aggressively toward a line of women in burqas, their faces half shadowed, in the foreground. One of the women meets our gaze. Her head is veiled, but her arm is exposed—the metamorphosis has begun. The woman clutches a rose, a symbol of both the passion and the *lojja* she is compelled to safeguard. The figure's eyes are wide, one eyebrow cocked in alarm. What will happen when the two worlds meet?



NAZIA ANDALEEB PREEMA, *Desire*, 2009, mixed media on canvas, 153 × 122 cm.



NAZIA ANDALEEB PREEMA, *Cosmopolitan*, 2009, mixed media on canvas, 122 × 153 cm.

The artist is also known—in certain circles, infamous—for her female nudes. In 2012, Preema was marooned in her hotel room one rainy day in Paris. There she produced a series of drawings of provocatively posed nude women, several of which subsequently inspired oil

paintings. Reminiscent of Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde* (1866), the delicate gray-, black- and fuchsia-colored *Objectified* (2012) offers a close-up of the lower half of a supine woman with her legs parted. The well-known story of the painting's origin is playfully suggestive, leaving the viewer to wonder: if the artist was alone in the hotel room, surely it must be a self-portrait? Preema remains coquettishly silent on the matter. The title, however, is unambiguous—Preema takes control, objectifying and offering herself for visual consumption. The painting and several of the drawings were displayed in the Bengal Art Lounge in 2013, only to be promptly removed due to public outcry. While an uncommon subject in Bangladeshi art, nudes of both sexes feature in the paintings of Shahabuddin Ahmed—the most commercially successful artist in Bangladesh—whose nudes are engaged in athletic-like activity, their genitals discreetly obfuscated, and are painted by an older man. Perhaps scandal arose from the fact that Preema's nudes are seductively posed, clearly inviting the male gaze, and painted by a woman. Significantly, other female Bangladeshi artists were and remain among her most ardent critics.

It is not only Preema's subjects that are controversial. Throughout South Asia a woman's status as a wife and mother are indices of her cultural capital and questions about both are routinely among the first she is asked. In response to these ubiquitous questions and the well-meaning warnings from friends and family about her diminishing fertility as she neared her mid-30s, Preema performed and made the video *Marry My Egg* (2011). During the nearly three-minute video, she appears in succession as a Bengali bride and then a wife in hijab eating dozens of fried eggs while pointedly fixing the viewer's gaze. By consuming "her" eggs and casting off her reproductivity, Preema claims an identity that is independent and beyond conventional Bangladeshi definitions of womanhood.

Preema's artistic and personal choices have garnered her condemnation in Dhaka social circles—particularly from women—and in one well-publicized case, censorship of her art. However, for many of her collectors, the value of Preema's art lies precisely in its creator's eccentricities. Her calculated risks are winning her acclaim in wider professional circles. While Preema provides daring alternatives in her life and art for other Bangladeshi women artists, her path is perhaps only viable for the independently wealthy, who, like her, do not depend on the sale of their art, and who ignore the whispers of gossips and art critics.

Tayebe Begum Lipi, Dilara Begum Jolly and Nazia Andaleeb Preema choose daring content and messages for their work, pushing social conventions just enough to be provocative and yet have their voices heard—even if, as in the case of Preema's nudes, they are quickly hushed. Each artist examines tensions between circumscribed gender roles and Bangladeshi women's quotidian realities through her own unique visual language of symbols and cultural references. Collectively, their work highlights tensions between modernity and tradition, global and local, faith and secularism, and how these intersect with gender in Bangladesh today. As much of their work attempts to demonstrate, these issues can give rise to distrust, lack of self-knowledge and oppressive restrictions. In their work and lives, these three artists are themselves heartening examples of agency, creativity, courage and revelation. Each enjoys national and, to varying degrees, international recognition, enabling their art to speak to large audiences about their society, women's places within it, and greater possibilities for both.

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