



ROOTED LANDSCAPES

The Art of Rini Dhumal

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The Empress of Solitude

Ina Puri

“What must always be remembered is that myth is a double system: there occurs in it a sort of ubiquity: its point of departure is constituted by the arrival of a meaning. To keep a spatial metaphor, the approximative character of which I have already stressed, I shall say that the signification of the myth is constituted by a sort of constantly moving turnstile which presents alternately the meaning of the signifier and its form, a language-object and a meta-language, a purely signifying and a purely imagining consciousness.

This alternation is, so to speak, gathered up in the concept, which uses it like an ambiguous signifier, at once intellectual and imaginary, arbitrary and natural.”

—*Mythologies*, Roland Barthes

Devi
fired glass
46 cm (d), 1998

Somewhere between the drawing board and the final image on her canvas, a conjuring trick has taken place; the artist has forsaken historicity and transformed her *dramatis personae* into a deity, magnificent and awe-inspiring, a *devi*. How did this representation come about? Was there a Sita-like trial of fire that lent the domesticated, diminutive woman her mantle of divinity? Or were other rituals performed, an invocation of mantras chanted, unbeknownst to the rest? Steeped in anonymous ideology and myth, Rini Dhumal’s abandoned heroines, cast aside from society gravitate into an arena where they rule the universe, as goddesses of all she surveys. A virtual Mahishasur Mardini, slayer of evil... Around her, meanwhile, her *vahana-vahini* (mounts) collect: the impatient bull stamping its hooves in fury and the lion, raging and ferocious, readying for battle of the gods and demons.

In her diaries from her girlhood, Rini’s flowery script spoke of her initial association with the family *puja* (prayer) room when she was asked to offer prayers and *prasad* (offerings) to the family deity, Lakshmi, on the days that her mother was indisposed. One wonders what went on in her mind, as a little girl, a *kumari*, she knelt before the *vedi* and said her prayers? We learn from her jottings that it did not end with *puja*; she



Behind the upheaval was the turmoil of Partition. Though Rini is from the generation immediately after that cataclysmic event in our history, its repercussions began to assert themselves gradually even in their cloistered environment. Suddenly their neighbours looked at them differently; where earlier there was carefree intermingling, there was now obvious suspicion. The family which had been so boisterous in the assertion of its Hinduism suddenly became aware of its minority status and thus began to feel like foreigners in their own land. The sense of insecurity, of alienation, shows itself in *The Ancestral Tapestry* through highly contrasting light and dark yarns and through depictions and portraits which suggest nostalgia while others hint at sadness veering towards distress. There is, in Rini Dhumal's words, "Yin and Yang there".

What is predominantly present in the body of her work is the all-pervasive presence of Shakti. A powerful face, huge eyes, a strong nose devoid of any fragility... There are variations of this face whenever you see a Rini Dhumal work. The lines are strong, the textural density intense and the colours are almost somber, even though she uses red, orange, green and blues quite often, they have been deliberately subdued as if the painter doesn't want her paint to overpower her subject.

When this face looks straight out of the canvas, though not necessarily at you even if you are in her range, what mood is she in? You can call it solemn if you wish. The look could possibly be interpreted as defiant; though I sense that it goes beyond defiance. This is a face that has seen it all, that has gone past anger and defiance and come into a blissful state of acceptance that isn't passive at all.

The woman so depicted may be Rini Dhumal. She may be Every-woman. She may be Durga. She may be Saraswati or Laxmi or any other *devi*. She may, ultimately, be Shakti, female energy, the feminine life force. She is always surrounded by enigmatic emblems, symbols and animals. There are lions and large birds and virtual gardens of flowers...some of the symbolism is Hindu, some Egyptian, some elements even drawn from Greek mythology. Overall, the effect is mysterious and even mythic in its impact.

Many of the women have wings. These aren't made of delicate feathers. They are as strong as the face and in paintings where you see legs or feet, those are almost trunk-like and planted firmly on the ground. Perhaps these grounded winged-women want to fly; perhaps they can fly but are just biding their time. Maybe these are the women she knew as a child in her ancestral home, the mothers and aunts and cousins, some prematurely widowed, some perennially

Bengali Woman
mixed media on canvas
56 x 65 cm, 2006

