

# Metaphor, Memory, and Socio-Political Discourse in the Paintings of Nilima Sheikh

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**Abstract:** This paper examines how Nilima Sheikh employs visual metaphors to construct layered narratives that engage deeply with memory, tradition, gendered experience, displacement, and socio-political critique. Drawing upon traditional South Asian art forms, literary references, and personal histories, Sheikh's metaphoric strategies generate a poetic visual language that negotiates between the personal and the political. Through a critical analysis of selected bodies of work — particularly *Each Night Put Kashmir in Your Dreams* — this study situates her practice at the intersection of narrative painting, cultural memory, and political commentary. Supported by artist interviews, archival material, and exhibition literature, the paper argues that Sheikh's metaphoric structures operate not simply as aesthetic devices, but as epistemological tools that reveal hidden histories, fractured geographies, and gendered modes of witnessing within contemporary Indian art.

**Keywords:** Nilima Sheikh, visual metaphor, memory, contemporary Indian art, narrative painting, Kashmir, displacement, feminist aesthetics, tradition and modernity, socio-political art, intertextuality

## 1. Introduction

In contemporary Indian art, metaphor functions as a crucial visual strategy for negotiating complex emotional, historical, and political realities. Rather than offering direct representation, metaphor allows artists to articulate ambiguity, trauma, and layered memory in ways that resist closure (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Mitchell 1986). Nilima Sheikh (b. 1945) occupies a significant position within this discourse. Her practice is distinguished by its lyrical visual language, rooted in traditional painting formats yet deeply responsive to contemporary socio-political conditions (Dalmia and Khandekar 2010; Ocula 2021).

## 2. Literature Review

Existing scholarship frequently emphasizes Sheikh's engagement with tradition, narrative, and feminist concerns (Dalmia and Khandekar 2010; Ocula 2021). Writers and curators have discussed her hybrid visual language, which draws upon Persian, Central Asian, and South Asian manuscript traditions while remaining

embedded in contemporary realities (Asia Art Archive 2019). Critical responses to *Each Night Put Kashmir in Your Dreams* describe the series as an evocative meditation on contested territory, loss, and poetic remembrance (Ocula 2021). However, detailed analysis of the mechanisms of visual metaphor in her work remains limited — an omission this study aims to address.

## 3. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology rooted in visual analysis and art historical inquiry to examine the role of metaphor, narrative, and socio-political symbolism in Nilima Sheikh's work. The primary method is close visual reading, focusing on composition, colour, iconography, spatial construction, materiality, and recurring motifs in selected paintings. This approach draws from the traditions of interpretive art history, semiotics, and visual culture studies, enabling the artworks to be understood not only as aesthetic objects but also as cultural texts embedded within historical, political, and gendered contexts.

The study is supported by archival research and secondary qualitative sources, creating a triangulated framework. Published interviews with Nilima Sheikh (Indian Express, 2018; India Art Fair, 2017) are used to access the artist's own reflections on memory, feminism, history, and narrative strategies. These statements provide insight into her conceptual intentions, working processes, and philosophical positions, which are then critically correlated with visual evidence from the artworks.

In addition, archival documentation from Lines of Flight at the Asia Art Archive (2019) is consulted to contextualize Sheikh's practice within broader curatorial, historical, and transnational discourses. Exhibition texts, curatorial notes, and critical essays are analyzed to trace the evolution of her imagery, her engagement with miniature traditions, and her responses to themes such as displacement, violence, and women's histories.

By combining formal visual analysis, artist interviews, and archival material, this methodological triangulation strengthens interpretive validity. It allows the research to move beyond purely stylistic description toward a layered understanding of how metaphor operates in Sheikh's art—as a visual strategy for storytelling, resistance, and the recovery of marginalized histories. This integrated approach ensures that meaning is constructed through the dialogue between image, text, and context rather than relying on a single analytical lens.

#### 4. Theoretical Framework: Metaphor in Visual Language

This study is grounded in theories of visual metaphor and pictorial semiotics, which distinguish visual metaphor from its linguistic counterpart. While linguistic metaphor typically functions through direct substitution—where one term stands in for another—visual metaphor operates through layering, spatial relationships, material associations, and juxtaposition (Mitchell 1986; Forceville and Urios-Aparisi 2009). Meaning in visual art emerges not from a single fixed equivalence, but from the dynamic interaction between forms, images, and surfaces.

W. J. T. Mitchell's concept of images as "theory-bearing objects" emphasizes that pictures do not merely illustrate ideas but actively produce meaning through visual structure, cultural memory, and viewer interpretation

(Mitchell 1986). Similarly, Force Ville and Urios-Aparisi's framework of pictorial metaphor highlights how visual metaphors are constructed through cross-domain mappings, where associations are suggested rather than stated, requiring the viewer to cognitively and emotionally participate in the production of meaning.



Figure 1 - Nilima Sheikh, Construction Site, 2009-10, Tempera on canvas

Within this theoretical context, Nilima Sheikh's works can be understood as metaphoric visual fields rather than narrative illustrations. Her pictorial surfaces often resemble palimpsests—densely layered with miniature-inspired motifs, fragments of text, architectural forms, botanical imagery, and historical references. These layered compositions resist hierarchical or linear reading and instead invite a mode of viewing that moves across time, memory, and space simultaneously. Metaphor here is not confined to individual symbols but is embedded

within the very structure of the image, where past and present, myth and history, intimacy and violence coexist.

Materiality forms a crucial component of Sheikh's visual metaphor. Her frequent use of handmade paper, natural pigments, and traditional techniques evokes tactility, fragility, and temporality. These materials operate not only as aesthetic choices but as metaphoric agents, suggesting memory sediment over time, erasure and reappearance, and the vulnerability of lived histories (Asia Art Archive 2019). The staining, bleeding, and layering of pigment echo processes of remembering and forgetting, reinforcing the palimpsestic quality of her surfaces.

By integrating theories of visual metaphor with material and surface analysis, this framework allows Sheikh's practice to be interpreted as a form of metaphoric historiography—where images function as sites of remembrance, resistance, and re-narration. Metaphor in her visual language thus becomes a methodological tool through which suppressed histories, women's experiences, and fractured geographies are reimagined and re-inscribed within contemporary painting.

## 5. Tradition and Narrative Formation

Sheikh's recurring use of female figures and domestic objects operates metaphorically as markers of witnessing, endurance, and narrative continuity (Gupta and Ganguly 2012). These figures are rarely heroic or monumental; instead, they appear absorbed in acts of waiting, remembering, or inhabiting interior spaces, positioning the feminine body as a site where history is quietly registered rather than publicly performed. Domestic objects—such as vessels, textiles, beds, windows, and architectural fragments—carry the weight of everyday life, functioning as repositories of memory and affect.



Figure 2 - Nilima Sheikh, Dark tale of an arranged marriage, 2 1945, Tempera on canvas.



Figure 3 - Nilima Sheikh, Each Night Put Kashmir in Your Dreams, 2003, Casein tempera on canvas.

By foregrounding interiors, everyday artefacts, and embodied presence, Sheikh deliberately shifts attention away from grand political events and official histories toward intimate, lived experiences that are often



excluded from dominant narratives. This emphasis on the domestic does not signify retreat from politics; rather, it reframes the political through the lens of care, vulnerability, and persistence. In doing so, Sheikh constructs a feminist visual language in which personal memory, emotional labor, and feminine subjectivity become forms of historical testimony, enabling private spaces to emerge as powerful sites of resistance and narrative continuity.

## 6. Landscape, Displacement, and Metaphor

In *Each Night Put Kashmir in Your Dreams*, landscape is reconfigured from a physical or geographical site into a metaphorical and mnemonic field, where memory, displacement, and contested histories are visually inscribed. Mountains, rivers, architectural fragments, and interior spaces dissolve into one another, forming unstable terrains that refuse cartographic certainty. Rather than depicting Kashmir as a fixed location, Sheikh constructs it as a psychic and historical space, shaped by longing, fracture, and remembrance.



Figure 4 - Nilima Sheikh, *Each Night Put Kashmir in Your Dreams*, 2003, Casein tempera on canvas.

Through fragmented spatial constructions, shifting perspectives, and layered textual elements, Sheikh destabilizes fixed notions of place and belonging. This visual disjunction produces what Andreas Hussein defines as “post memory”—an affective, imaginative, and mediated relationship to traumatic histories rather than direct representation (Hussein 2003). The paintings operate less as documentary records and more as sites of emotional encounter, where traces of violence, absence, and loss surface through metaphor, silence, and poetic inscription. Sheikh’s own reflections on “losing home” resonate throughout the series, infusing the imagery with both personal vulnerability and political urgency.



Figure 5 - Nilima Sheikh, Each Night Put Kashmir in Your Dreams, 2003, Casein tempera on canvas.

Her evocation of exile is not limited to individual biography but expands into a collective condition, echoing the experiences of displaced communities and fractured identities. In this way, the series transforms private memory into a shared visual metaphor, positioning landscape as a carrier of unresolved history, mourning, and ethical remembrance rather than a passive backdrop.

## 7. Gendered Witness and Domestic Metaphors

Sheikh's recurring inclusion of female figures and domestic objects functions metaphorically as sites of witnessing, endurance, and narrative continuity (Gupta and Ganguly 2012). These motifs—such as interiors, vessels, textiles, windows, beds, and solitary women—invoke the everyday not as a neutral backdrop, but as a charged space where history is quietly lived, absorbed, and transmitted across time. The domestic realm in her work becomes a repository of affect and memory,

where gestures, objects, and architectural fragments carry traces of lived experience.



Figure 6 - Nilima Sheikh, Thinking Historically in the Present, 2011

Female figures in Sheikh's paintings often appear absorbed in states of waiting, contemplation, or quiet action. Rather than occupying heroic or monumental roles, they function as embodied witnesses, registering the emotional residues of violence, migration, and loss. Their presence anchors historical and political realities within the intimate sphere of the body, transforming personal subjectivity into a mode of historical testimony.



Figure 7 - Nilima Sheikh, Dark tale of an arranged marriage, 2011

By centering interiors, everyday artefacts, and feminine presence, Sheikh deliberately shifts attention away from grand political events and official histories toward intimate, often overlooked experiences. This reframing challenges dominant patriarchal and nationalist narratives that privilege spectacle, power, and territoriality. Instead, Sheikh proposes a feminist visual language in which personal memory, care, vulnerability, and resilience become forms of counter-history.





Figure 8 - Nilima Sheikh, When Champa Grew Up 1 (1984). Set of 12. Gum tempera on vasli paper.

Through this strategy, the private emerges as political, and the domestic becomes a critical site where alternative histories are preserved, imagined, and quietly resisted.

### 8. Myth, Text, and Intertextual Metaphors

Text in Sheikh's work is not supplementary or illustrative but structurally embedded within the pictorial field, producing intertextual metaphors that collapse the boundary between visual and verbal registers. Words appear as inscriptions, fragments, or flowing scripts that inhabit the surface alongside figures, architecture, and landscape, refusing to function merely as captions. Instead, text becomes an active compositional element, shaping rhythm, spatial movement, and semantic density within the image.



Figure 9 - Nilima Sheikh, Sarhad 2 (2014). Tempera on Sanganer paper.

Quotations from poets such as Agha Shahid Ali, along with references to regional folklore, oral traditions, and historical narratives, introduce multiple voices into the pictorial space. These textual traces operate as cultural echoes, layering the visual field with memory, lament, and longing. By weaving poetic lines into her imagery, Sheikh extends the temporality of the work, allowing personal reflection, collective memory, and literary history to coexist within a single visual plane.



Figure 10 - Nilima Sheikh, We Must Bear (2013). Casein tempera on canvas.

Through this fusion, language itself becomes visual material—a line, a texture, a trace—deepening the metaphorical resonance of the work. The viewer is invited not only to see but also to read, to move between sensory and intellectual modes of engagement. In this way, Sheikh transforms the image into a site of poetic and historical convergence, where visual form carries the weight of speech, and painting becomes a space in which cultural memory is both inscribed and reimagined (Ali 1992; Sheikh 1999).

### 9. Political Subtext and Poetics

Sheikh's socio-political engagement operates through metaphor, indirection, and poetic layering rather than explicit protest imagery, aligning her practice with what Dalmia and Khandekar describe as a "poetics of resistance," in which historical empathy, affect, and introspection are foregrounded (2010). Rather than

employing overt iconography of violence or confrontation, Sheikh embeds political realities within symbolic landscapes, domestic interiors, and fragile surfaces, allowing meaning to emerge gradually through visual association and emotional resonance.



Figure 11 - Dying Dream, 2007, Casein tempera on canvas.

Her works do not seek to shock or persuade in a literal sense; instead, they cultivate spaces of quiet intensity where personal memory, cultural history, and collective trauma intersect. The subdued palette, delicate materiality, and layered compositions encourage prolonged viewing, drawing the spectator into a contemplative relationship with the image. In this slowed encounter, the political is experienced not as spectacle but as a lived, ethical condition.

By inviting sustained looking and emotional attunement, Sheikh positions painting as a mode of ethical

engagement rather than ideological assertion. The viewer is called upon to inhabit ambiguity, to acknowledge absence, and to respond to traces of violence, displacement, and loss that resist closure. Through this strategy, Sheikh redefines resistance as an act of remembrance and care, proposing art as a space where historical responsibility and human vulnerability are quietly, yet insistently, negotiated.

## 10. Conclusion

Nilima Sheikh's paintings exemplify how visual metaphor can function simultaneously across formal, narrative, and socio-political registers, transforming the image into a multilayered site of meaning that engages both the intellect and the senses. By interweaving traditional visual forms—such as manuscripts, miniature-inspired compositions, and scroll-like arrangements—with poetic texts, carefully chosen materials, and densely layered imagery, Sheikh constructs pictorial fields where personal memory, cultural history, and political critique converge and resonate. The resulting works operate not merely as representations of events or stories but as active environments for reflection, where the viewer negotiates multiple temporalities, affects, and ethical questions.

These metaphoric strategies enable Sheikh to collapse distinctions between past and present, individual and collective, private and public, positioning painting as a space in which histories, experiences, and vulnerabilities are both preserved and questioned. Her use of layered imagery, domestic and feminine motifs, textual integration, and fragile surfaces invites slow, contemplative engagement, encouraging viewers to inhabit ambiguity and to recognize the persistence of memory, trauma, and resilience.

In this way, Sheikh extends the possibilities of narrative in contemporary Indian art, demonstrating how visual language can operate as a critical and poetic tool. Her work offers a compelling model for how painting can carry memory, resist erasure, and re-imagine dominant cultural discourses. Through metaphor, materiality, and multilayered narrative strategies, Sheikh foregrounds the ethical and affective potential of art, establishing a

practice in which aesthetic experience, historical consciousness, and political reflection are inseparably intertwined.

If you want, I can now combine all your elaborated sections—female figures, text, landscape, socio-political engagement—into a fully integrated, cohesive discussion section or conclusion for your research paper. This would read like a complete, polished scholarly analysis of Sheikh's work.

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## Author Profile



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