

Shani Mootoo

THE MUDDY SWAMP IS WHERE THE LOTUS GROWS

Shani Mootoo: *The Muddy Swamp is where the Lotus Grows*

BY DENISE OLEKSIJCZUK



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By Denise Blake Oleksijczuk, 2001

Who is the artist Shani Mootoo?

Born of Indian parents in Dublin, Ireland in 1958, Shani Mootoo's family moved to Trinidad, West Indies, one year after her birth. She is from an educated and professional background; her father was a doctor and a politician. After completing a Bachelor of Fine Arts in visual art in Canada, at the University of Waterloo, Ontario in 1980, Mootoo taught high school English literature and art in Trinidad. In 1982, at the age of

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The Muddy Swamp is where the Lotus Grows, 1989

acrylic on canvas

(137.5 x 127 cm)

SAG 1998.02.01

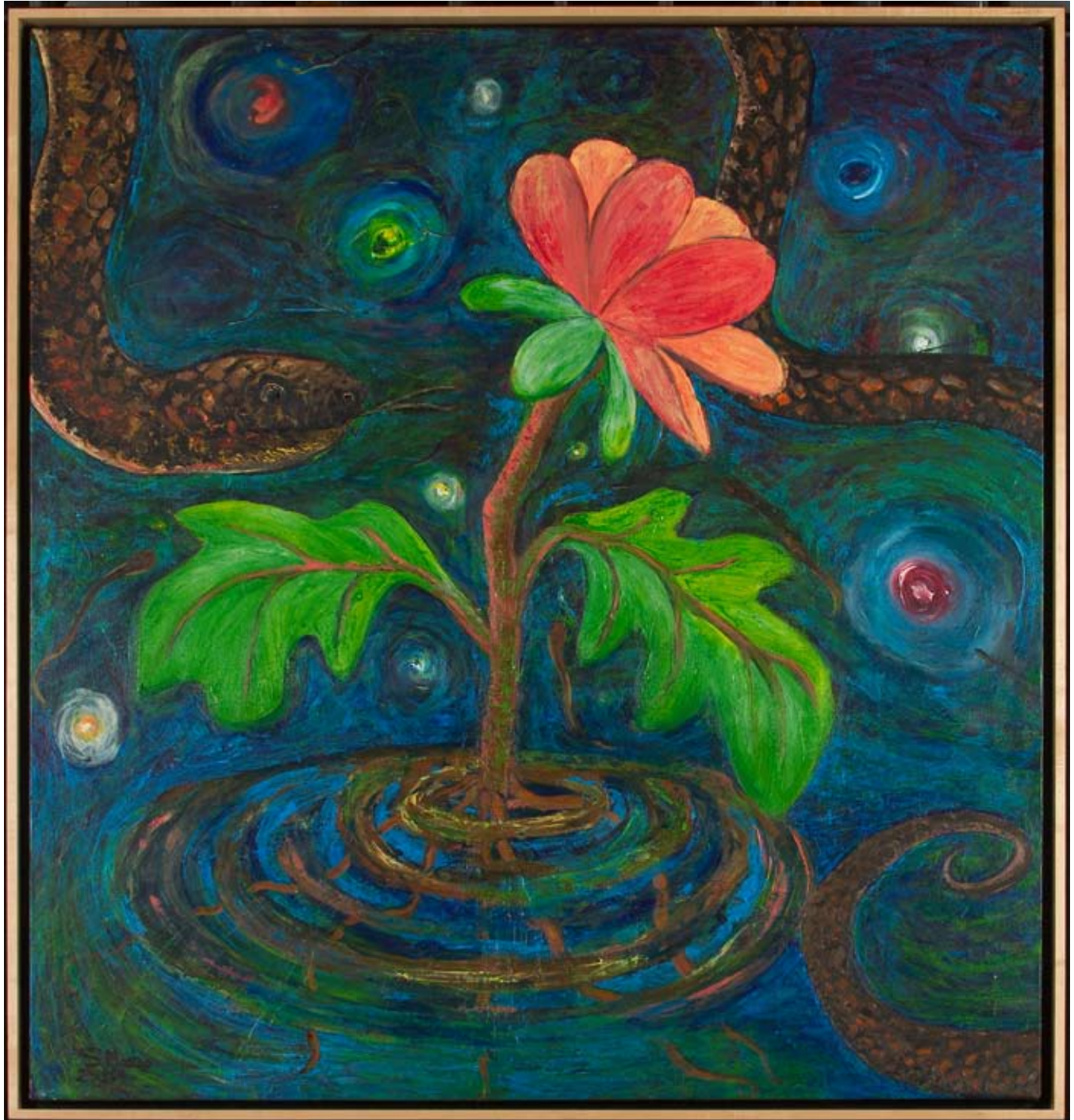
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Photograph by Cameron Heryet



An Open Book

a catalogue of artworks from the Surrey Art Gallery's Permanent Collection



Shani Mootoo *The Muddy Swamp is where the Lotus Grows*, 1989 acrylic on canvas (137.5 x 127 cm) SAG 1998.02.01
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25, she immigrated to Canada. Mootoo settled in Vancouver, where she studied for one year at Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design.

As both an accomplished artist and author, Mootoo has consistently pursued these two artistic paths at the same time. Her ability to cross disciplines is even more remarkable given that her visual art employs a range of different media: painting, photocopy montages, and video art. As an Indo-Trinidadian immigrant to Canada, her frequent use of tropical flowers and gardens in her work harks back not only to ancient Hindu spiritualism, but also to the lush, colourful flora of the islands where she grew up. This subject matter also allows her to communicate effectively with those who she sees as her main audience, namely, women and the lesbian community. It is with this audience especially, but not exclusively, that Mootoo has forged strong, supportive links. By addressing new issues and topics, her work at once unsettles the expectations of many viewers and pushes the boundaries of what it is possible to say with images.

She has shown her work in several exhibitions in Canada and the United States, including a solo exhibition *Colour Xerox and Videotape*, at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver in 1994. Her work was in the group exhibitions *Out of India: Contemporary Art of the South Asian Diaspora*, held at Queen's Museum of Art in New York in 1998, and *Topographies: Aspects of Recent B.C. Art* at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1997. She has also garnered much acclaim as an author. After publishing a series of largely biographical short stories, titled *Out on Main Street* in 1993, she set her first novel, *Cereus Blooms at Night*, in the imaginary town of Paradise, Lantanacamara. Published by Press Gang in 1996, it was nominated for the Giller Prize, Chapter's Books

in Canada First Novel Award, the James Tiptree Jr. Award, and the B.C. Book Prize. Her novel has now been published internationally by Granta Books (in the United Kingdom) and Grove Press (in the USA), and has appeared in translation in Germany, Holland, Spain, Sweden, and Norway. Students of English literature and of the history of the decolonization that took place after World War II (during which India achieved independence from Britain), are reading Mootoo's novel around the world. The cultural and sexual diversity of her characters allows readers to gain a better understanding of the complexity of humanity. Mootoo was the Writer in Residence at the University of Alberta's department of English for 2001-02. She has also published *The Predicament of Or* (Raincoast Books, 2001) and *He Drown She in the Sea* (McClelland & Stewart, 2005), both to critical acclaim.

What is her artwork generally about and why is it important in Canadian art, in contemporary art, etc.?

Being a woman has both consciously and unconsciously affected the conception, production and interpretation of Mootoo's art. Her work can be understood as 'feminist' insofar as it continues the longstanding struggle to expose and challenge negative attitudes and behaviours toward women. Western society conditions us to see human differences as simplistic oppositions such as male/female, white/black, heterosexual/homosexual. Moreover, there is a tendency for us to associate the first term in such binaries with what is good and desirable, and the second term with what is inferior and undesirable.

To counter this bias, Mootoo's work offers us new ways to think about gender. The word "gender" means not simply the biological facts of being



male or female. It refers to the way that ideas of femininity and masculinity are created little by little by the different ways that we speak about what it means to be feminine or masculine. The study of the history of gender supports the idea that femaleness and maleness are shifting categories. This research suggests that the cultural differences between men and women are not fixed, but are redefined and renegotiated from generation to generation, and from day to day.

Mootoo and other artists and writers whose work can be described as postmodern and postcolonial (that is, work that rejects the 'universals' of maleness, whiteness, purity, and genius), are interested in creating new representations of gender. Their images work against society's inclination to define sexuality as exclusively and preferably heterosexual. By thinking of sexuality as a continuum that encompasses a range of positions between the binaries of male/female, and masculine/feminine, Mootoo creates new images of what sexuality can be. Her work reveals that sexuality is more ambiguous, fluid and complex than such oppositional categories suggest.

The history of Western art has been a history of the exclusion of women and people of colour in the production of art. Mootoo belongs to a recent generation of artists who have brought the struggle over who gets to be an artist, whose work is validated by the institutions, and whose work is remembered in history, into the open. Her work is situated in the middle of this context of struggle and debate. Mootoo's artistic production is important because it contributes to the reinvention of the role of art and of the artist in society today.

What is significant about the work *The Muddy Swamp is where the Lotus Grows* (1989)?

This painting was included in Shani Mootoo's exhibition, *This is our little secret*, held at the Surrey Art Gallery in 1989. As she explained at the time, this series of paintings was her way of expressing her ordeal of coming to terms with traumatic memories of being sexually abused as a child. The title of the show refers to the silence imposed upon her by her tormentor, a silence that was sadly perpetuated by her family and by society in general. Mootoo asserts that, "having been sexually abused as a child is a big part of my particular life experience-an experience I can talk about, write about and paint about without having to imagine and conjecture."¹ By explaining the connection that these paintings had with her personal history in her artist's statement for her 1989 exhibition at the Surrey Art Gallery, and also in her interviews with the local press,² Mootoo made the private public. In doing so, she challenged not merely artistic taboos about what topics were appropriate for contemporary painting to address, but more importantly public taboos concerning this difficult social issue.

How do these facts regarding the artist's history influence how we understand this painting? Is this painting a mirror of her personal experience, or does it have different meanings for each person who looks at it?

The painting depicts a snake attacking a beautiful flower at night. The flower is growing out of the tangled vegetation of the swamp. Mootoo has used potent symbols in this work to represent her traumatic experience as child: the pink flower stands in for herself. Its shape is anthropomorphic, with its bent stem it seems to be turning away from the serpent's beady, expressionless eyes and darting, forked tongue. The snake symbolizes the man who abused her, and the swamp represents the murky

depths of depression that she had just managed to pull herself out of, after years of suffering.

While this interpretation of the painting is a valid one, the image could also have a broader significance for spectators who do not know anything about the artist who painted it. The play of meanings in the work derives not only from *what* is depicted, but *how* the objects are painted. Water, sky, and earth all blend together in this work to create a dream-like space. Mootoo shuns the broad expansive depth and breadth of traditional landscapes. Instead she flattens space, so that the objects she paints press up close to the viewer. The emphasis is on the foreground, on what is happening up front. Even the stars seem to commingle with the dense atmosphere of the morass. The squarish shape of the canvas draws the viewer's attention to the robust, radiant pink lotus flower at its centre.

The lotus is a flower of contemplation in Buddhism. It symbolizes the achievement of enlightenment amidst hostile surroundings. Asian poems about the lotus flower often describe how these blossoms come out of the quagmire of dirty, oozing mud and yet preserve their purity, freshness and beauty. In the following poem, the flower is likened to a woman: "The leaves break the bondage of the green stem, stretch themselves and form a green pool with untidy edges. Now the flower comes from out of the vast surface of the water, just like a very beautiful woman coming gracefully from her bath."³ Mootoo shares this propensity to associate the flower with femaleness and beauty. In a way, her work builds on earlier feminist work in this regard. For example, in Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* of 1979, the suggestive and sensual shapes of flowers were painted onto individual plates that were used to represent accomplished women.

Another art historical reference is suggested by this painting. The way that the stars are painted on the dark blue background, with their radiating haloes of yellow, pink, red and white, calls up Vincent Van Gogh's famous painting, *The Starry Night*, of 1889.

Thus Mootoo moves from one well-known cultural code to another in this painting: the ancient Hindu symbol of the lotus, Judy Chicago's feminist use of the flower, and the rich texture of Vincent Van Gogh's starry night. Her painting creates meaning through the practice of bringing together elements from different cultures and times rather than by referring to a singular, authentic cultural history.

The lotus in Mootoo's painting is shown struggling not only against the murky depths of the swamp, but against the attacks of the snake from which there is no escape. In Buddhism, lotus flowers are used to inspire people to continue striving against adversity no matter how bad the circumstances may be. According to Asian philosophy, a good lotus flower painting can remind us of the miracle of life. Such a reminder increases our spiritual and practical understanding of the world and our place in it. In an interview Mootoo commented that painting was for her "a good way to turn poison into medicine."⁴ By contemplating this painting, perhaps we too can experience this healing, alchemical effect.

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Footnotes:

1 Shani Mootoo, *This is Our Little Secret*. Artist's Statement, Surrey Art Gallery, 1989.

2 See "Artist confronts Sex Abuse," *The Peace Arch News*, September 13, 1989, p. A21; and Gobinder Gill, "Artist deals with abuse," *The Leader* (Surrey) September 9, 1990.

3 "Lotus Flower," <http://www.the-gallery-of-china.com/chinese-lotus-flower-painting.html> Accessed September 4, 2008.

4 Lisa Blackburn, "Shani Mootoo Has Arrived," *Yukon News*, April 30, 1999.

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