



Husain's Raj: Visions of Empire and Nation

Sumathi Ramaswamy

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- This will be the first monograph-length analysis of Husain's paintings
- Husain's Raj Series featured playful vignettes of the Raj that introduced the British Empire in India to a new generation of viewers
- Husain's signature modernist style is modulated to accommodate this playful engagement with his colonial past

This monograph forefronts the ludic quality in the work of Maqbool Fida Husain, postcolonial India's most iconic modernist and also arguably its most playful. His Images of the Raj or the Raj Series comprise paintings densely packed with bodies and objects, English and native, men and women (and some animals too), who are brought together in visual action in a manner that is enormously revealing of the contradictions of British rule in India, even as they expose the ironies of postcolonial India's tryst with its destiny.

Husain painted this series at a critical juncture in India's post-colonial history in the mid- 1980s, when the Nehruvian socialist state was beginning to unravel and one of his own key patrons, Indira Gandhi, violently assassinated. Many of the promises of secularism, proudly declared at the time of Independence, were under threat.

It was against this background that Husain turned for inspiration to his childhood and youth, which he had spent in various princely states, such as Indore and Baroda, in the waning days of British colonial rule that were also witness to the rising tide of Indian nationalism.

Sumathi Ramaswamy is Professor of History and International Comparative Studies, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. Some of her areas of academic interest include South Asian anthropology, colonial and modern history; Tamil studies; gender studies and history of cartography.

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