

Beyond shackles of biography and geography

[S. Anandan](#)

: During her initial years in England, artist Mona Hatoum made several installations dwelling on the harshness of London's low-income housing setting and on the prevailing surveillance regime.

However, these were terribly misread by some onlookers for the architecture of Palestinian refugee camps. "Such reductive readings stemmed from their prejudiced look at the works through the prism of my background. In fact, there is nothing systematic about Palestinian refugee camps which rose organically," says Ms. Hatoum, bearing a hyphenated identity. Ms. Hatoum was born in Lebanon to Palestinian parents, but chose to live in London.

She fiercely dispels notions of her work having a direct connection with her biography, maintaining she doesn't try to illustrate anything as that is 'restrictive' and renders the works 'one-dimensional'.

"If you look at my career that spans over 35 years, there are only a handful of works that speak directly about my background — like the video ' *Measures of Distance* ' (1988) based on the letters exchanged between myself [in London] and my mother [back home in Lebanon]. It's quite a complex, layered video with many issues, very much trying to contradict the stereotypes that are usually put on Arab woman as mother and therefore, a non-sexual being.... They were intimate conversations, therefore called ' *Measures of Distance* '," the artist, whose installation, ' *Undercurrents* ' is on show at the ongoing Kochi-Muziris Biennale, told *The Hindu* in an interview.

"I think the language of art is very abstract; it's slippery and the meaning

can go one way or the other. It can mean different things to different people." Her works doubtless are informed by her experience, but they just happen and remain open-ended.

' *Undercurrents* ' , for instance, has a carpet in the middle, from which cloth-covered electric wires grow out in a circle like tentacles with pulsating electric bulbs on the fringes.

It has an undercurrent of malevolence about it. An inanimate thing, it transforms into an animate Medusa-like creature, uncanny, and offers an unnerving experience, she says.

On another level, it incites a sense of trepidation to realise that the whole thing is electrified, that there's electricity under your feet. It gives a feeling of being on unstable, shaky ground, she says. Adept at choosing household objects to embody amorphous unsettling issues, Ms. Hatoum had made a metal cradle as part of ' *In Communicado* ' hinting at the issues of child abuse (whether you are with the victim or perpetrator inspires your perception of the work, she says) and created an electrified kitchen table full of wired utensils to suggest imprisonment in domestic chores, caged-existence of women and the dangers lurking in the domestic environment in works like ' *Home* ' and ' *Homebound* ' .