

Study of Depiction of Muslims in post 9/11 Contemporary Visual Art of Pakistan

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Abstract

The world today has become insensitive towards the works of art. All kinds of artistic works such as paintings, sculptures, architecture etc. are influenced by the socio-political environment around them. Artists are known to portray whatever they feel in their art work. Throughout the historic period and even in the pre-historic period, art has served as the mirror of the contemporary life of the period it was created in. Thus, it serves as an important source of history as well. The event of 9/11 affected the whole world directly or indirectly. Due to this event Islamophobia mushroomed in most of USA and other parts of the world. Artists across the world portrayed this event and its aftermaths in their perspectives. Pakistan was no exception to this influence. Artists in Pakistan represented their thoughts and feelings through their respective art forms. These papers focus upon various such artists and highlight their work.

Introduction

In Pakistan, till recent past, conflicting forces were in full swing like never before. On one side, human moral values were being degraded through suicide bombings, target killings, sectarianism, kidnappings etc. and on the other hand human rights activists were busy reinstating and restoring human rights(Zaidi, 2013). Pakistani Art has not been progressing in a bubble of art for art sake but Pakistani Artists remained busy documenting social, cultural, Political history of Pakistan through their art form. The society in which from killing of people for a mobile phone, to the massacre of innocents; from parading one's affluence, seeking distant horizons on the shoulders of credit, to making elected Presidents ask for loans. Artists have expressed about such happenings through their art works and they know for good or for bad, things are not what they seem, especially, in our times.

“Crows started to pounce on hawks..... And sparrows are feasting on eagles”.

Horses graze on dirty piles of wastes.... Donkeys are offered lush green grass (Baba Bulleh Shah ... Kafi # 26)(Zaidi, 2009)

In order to comprehend the current trends of Pakistani Contemporary Art, one needs to go through the Social History of Pakistan and India from pre-partition times. The way contemporary Pakistani artists are documenting social and cultural history in early twenty first century has its roots in the efforts of some visionaries and what they did. First, in the early twentieth century, Gorakhpuri started translating contemporary Philosophical debates in Urdu for the general audience. This way of thinking of was the result of scenario prevailing in the days of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's time. In Syed Ahmad's time, Muslim Society in India happened to be the victim of “Culture of Silence”. Colonial forces and their allies had ruined all kinds of national and communal aspirations. To come out of the clout of this oppression the only way was to create awareness about the ongoing oppression and

about how to do counter measures. Muslims were at the cross roads where one way led to the past and that conflicted with the acquisition of New Areas of Knowledge. The other way offered mere dreams about future. Both Sir Syed and Majnun Gorakhpuri opted for the middle way. Gorakhpuri wrote essay on Heraclitus who is famous for his insistence on ever-present change in the universe and in 1921 such a message was the need of the hour(Siddiqui, 1984).Second, in 1932, Angaray was published by Sajjad Zaheer(Khan, 1986)and in December 1935 the important Short story “Kafan” was written by Munshi Premchand. The Social Realism presented by Premchand inspired the other writers to borrow stories from their actual surroundings(Khan, 1986).

The third revolution arrived in 1935 in the form of Progressive Writers Movement that brought arts closer to people and their lives and they could relate their lives with the stories and other art forms(Khan, 1986). This movement detached the short story from the impulses of Romanticism and presented literature as an expression of the social problems and used it effectively to show how to combat such evils. Though, earlier, Sir Syed used literature as a source to counter Romanticism and made Science, Rationality and Social Awareness its major topics and following this way Progressive Writers Movement paved the way for Literary Tradition to start exploring things on their own(Khan, 1986).

From the discussion presented in earlier paragraphs one could gauge the importance and emergence of the Social Realism in Urdu literature years during 1932 to 1935. Similarly, when we go through Pakistani Painting and Sculpture in post 9/11 till present time; we see clearly that Pakistani Contemporary Art has been catering much more than mere representation of nature and abstract ideas and busy documenting presenting issues with which our society is in direct contact. Sectarianism, Terrorism, Politics and other social issues have found places in the discourses of Pakistani Artists. When the British granted independence and divided their colonies in South Asia along religious lines in 1947,

fourteen million people migrated from one part of the subcontinent to another. Sectarian violence among Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims at the time resulted in one to two million deaths, and upward of 75,000 women raped (Ali, 2013).

Post-Partition Pakistan collapsed with the war of 1971, when Pakistan cut itself in half, East Pakistan now known as Bangladesh. The 1970s saw the Zulfikar Ali Bhutto era, when Islamism, partially inspired by Qaddafi's anti-imperialism, gradually moved away from socialist egalitarianism. Symbolic recognition of Urdu as the national language was inscribed in the 1973 constitution, but English continued to dominate higher education. It was this period under Bhutto which also saw the first mediatization of the miniature as a gift to foreign officials. His socialist Islamicist policy promising '*roti, kapra, aur makan*' (food, clothing and shelter) gave the practice of miniature painting a role as a cultural 'curio' in his nationalist scenario, thus combining commodification with diplomacy in ways not unlike previous and devious rulers: the Mughals and the British Raj (Whiles, 2010).

Under Zia-ul-Haq, militant imposed strict censorship on any imagery seen as unacceptable within the Islamicised ideology; thus, second only to calligraphy, miniature painting was officially celebrated. Configurations of 'populist' views on art and identity through regional folk art, *music* and literature were officially patronized, if they played the game in Urdu. Punjabi revivals of Sufi poetry and activist street-theatre groups such as Ajoka or Lok Raqs were as censored under Zia as folk theatre had been under British Raj (Sundar, 2017). Meanwhile the traditional miniature was informing the developing curio market by its faith in copies as near as possible to the 'authentic' original. Ironically, it was this very 'vulgarization', via popular media such as calendars, cushion covers and advertisements, which - together with an anarchic refusal to toe the nationalist line - sparked the radical 're-invention' of miniature painting at the NCA, under the inspiration of Zahoor ul Akhlaq (Whiles, 2010).

When the nation achieved independence, artists did not engage with the local culture and politics. Instead, many adopted modes of painting coming from Europe, namely cubism, to make conventional images like still life, landscapes, and portraits. In post 9/11 years, when suicide bombings, indiscriminate shootings, and militant attacks became daily occurrences, a significant number of practitioners have started presenting works with loud expressions of political understanding. Some might suggest that the American-led war on terrorism and its involvement of Pakistan as an ally have prompted the most recent violence occurring in the South Asian nation. Growing up in the turbulent environment that defines Pakistan, artists today who live in the nation or have moved elsewhere choose to confront issues that plague a society in turmoil. Contemporary Pakistani artists have utilized their works as a platform for discussing topics like Islamic fundamentalist activities, and furthermore have not simply looked to Pakistani society for subject matter but also to fine art and local mass culture for methods. From two-dimensional paintings to digital prints and from mixed-media constructions to sculptures, these artists have found many artistic practices to discuss Islam and the politics surrounding it. They often have done so in an indirect manner, perhaps as a way to cope with possible repercussions from the religiously conservative society (Ali, 2013).

In a miniature project *Homage to Hope Street IV* (2002, Plate 2), Imran Qureshi resumed the theme of cartography. This became the prime vehicle for works reacting to the abuse of power by those involved in political war games - 'the way they're handling the world' is how Qureshi describes his references to the American invasion of Afghanistan and to the Bush rhetoric on the 'axis of evil' after 9/11. In *Game of Tenses* (2002, Plate 4) a missile reveals itself as illustration to an English-Urdu grammar exercise on the verb 'play', leading to a cogent reference to US/Iraqi tension. In *Take It or Leave It* (2002), loosely painted boxes or cubes are decorated with patterns of camouflage, evoking the 'mechanical

parcels' dropped onto Afghani villages by the US military(Whiles, 2010).

In the miniature painting project *I love miniature* (2009), Hasnat Mehmood suggests that many aspects of Pakistani society are quickly being edited to support religious extremist views—an insidious correction extending as far as representations of Pakistan's founder, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, who, though secular in public and private life, established Pakistan on the basis of religion (Ali, 2013).

In one part of *I love miniature*; Mehmood includes a stamp that is a portrait of Jinnah in the style of Osama bin Laden. Underneath it "Talibanistan" is written in Urdu. He renders the image in a highly realistic manner, utilizing an actual postage stamp as a reference, inserting a beard that resembles the one worn by bin Laden. In doing so, Mehmood posits the transformation of Jinnah's image and Jinnah's Pakistan into something suitable for the zealots who aim to use the nation as a launching ground for religious war against the West. Mehmood references Osama bin Laden in *I love miniature* because the Al-Qaeda leader allegedly masterminded attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 that spawned the so-called war on terrorism—a battle that has involved Pakistan because of its strategic position as Afghanistan's neighbor(Ali, 2013).

The potent subject-matter in Khadim Ali's work was generated by his experience as an Afghan on fronting the Taliban regime. Born into an Afghan family of seven in the Hazara tribe exquisitely painted series on the destruction of Bamiyan is possibly the only documented art work on this catastrophe. Similar to his mentor Qureshi's practice, his work fuses the seductive with the disturbing. Works such as *Bamiyan Series 1* and *11* (2003, Plates 25 and 26) and *Roz-e-Niyayesh* ('the day of worship', 2003, Plate 27) reveal his familiarity with the sites within a frame of tender yet bloody homage. As a child he used to play in the caves there, and had returned to ask the elders about previous destruction. He had later

witnessed the massacre of the Hazaras near Bamiyan in 1998(Whiles, 2010).

What Khaldim Ali thinks about the miniature as a vehicle for political commentary, and according to him Miniature painting should be used to express what one feels today, I don't have any choice in my subject matter, romance has nothing to do with miniature work today, people who treat them in that way by copying the older style are doing it for the money. Our times are not romantic(Whiles, 2010).

Huma Mulji lives in Pakistan, her work addresses a new reality for Pakistanis anywhere in the world—to be treated as a potential terrorist. Whether they live in the West or only travel there, Pakistanis must cope with the fact that their nation is perceived as a hotbed of fundamentalism. This perception is both formed through and reified by the kind of stories that appear in Western mass media. Mulji addresses this phenomenon in her sculptural piece “*Can you take off your shoes please?*” of 2006, which includes extra-large versions of items that have recently become forbidden on board an airplane: scissors, a nail cutter, and a razor blade. The artist embedded these objects inside a large, constructed suitcase, customized with the title on its cover. It is Mulji’s personal reaction to international travel and her experience going abroad. Mulji states there is humiliation [to] traveling today, something [that] should otherwise be a magical journey of discovery, fantasy, and knowledge. The green passport [of Pakistan] is inevitably looked at skeptically, visas checked and rechecked, questions about previous travel and reasons for having the gall to want to travel to the west scrutinized. While Mulji provides a perspective of someone living in Pakistan, Alia Hasan-Khan, who lives in the United States, addresses the situation of Muslims (and, generally, brown people) traveling in the West after the September 11 attacks(Ali, 2013).

Greetings from... (2006), which includes visuals and text on postcards that exhibition visitors could take and distribute widely, shows sites of transit in Austin, Texas, where she had been living. On the reverse side of the postcards, the artist shared stories from fellow “brown” people—of Pakistani or Indian background—about their difficult experiences after the September 11 attacks. *Greetings from...* thus attempted to capture simple, ordinary events that happen to individuals to reveal how an entire community has been villainized. In the act of making cards available to exhibition visitors, the artist facilitated the distribution of these personal tales beyond the exhibition space. Both Mulji and Hasan-Khan address personal events in the works described above; Mulji’s experience at the airport informed her work on international travel in the post-9/11 age, while Hasan-Khan relayed the tales of people within her social circle (Ali, 2013).

Amongst this group the boldest political commentary is to be seen under the *qalam* of Saira Wasim. There is sharp cutting edge of political satire in her painting, and the artist would be outspoken and extrovert. Her work ‘Bush and Mush’ (2002) for the exhibition *The American Effect* received a huge response and their extraordinary 'special relationship' which diplomacy as bestowed on them as a couple since 9/11. Her interview in the *New York Times* article on the show revealed her persona as one who has learned to master the advantages of appearing naive whilst daring to voice a clear opposition to the Mullahs. (Whiles, 2010)

Artist Ambreen Butt uses paintings to comment on American foreign policy and the effects of 9/11. In her painting series, *I Must Utter What Comes to My Lips* (2003), she depicts a woman—an immigrant, a self-portrait—traversing a treacherous landscape. One work shows her in the middle of a tightrope with her arms out to keep balanced. The scene surrounding her resembles a war-torn place: There are birds feathered with a camouflage pattern, recalling army airplanes. Surrounding the woman is a smoke-filled sky; its hazy atmosphere is based on images of smoke billowing out of the World Trade Center towers in New York after airplanes

hit them. More broadly, the series follows the woman, beset by exploding bombs, explosions, and fantastical trees, to reflect on her specific experiences in the United States as a Pakistani and Muslim. (Ali, 2013)

In the realm of visual art, the presence of the city cannot be denied, as apart from its picturesque representation, the city becomes a site of social, political and economic critique in the works of contemporary artists. Vito Acconci, a celebrated artist of our times certifies that art does not have a boundary, nor can it be contained in the confines of nationalism. The definitions of art, public spaces and commodities are acquiring new identities and descriptions, territories which are debated continuously. In a way, the planned city is also a reflection of someone's vision and aesthetics. If one looks at the excavation of Mohenjo-Daro, the ancient city of Indus Valley Civilization, one is aware of its town planning; or the city being a manifestation of someone's idea and imagination. At the same instance, cities inspire creative individuals and their changing scenarios influence the pictorial practices of an artist.(Mirza, 2015) As an art practitioner who is from Hyderabad and works in Karachi, Munawar Ali Syed, soulfully engages with the city as he turns its walls and structures into his canvases and recreates them to reach a wider audience. He thrives on the communal aspect of working with a team. Syed's addiction of working within and through the public began in 2003 when he performed *Please Clap* at the Arts Council with the people that surrounded him. The performance was a creative attempt of protest against the Gulf War during that time.(Mirza, 2015)

Following that, Syed undertook several performances. *Sadqae Jaaria*, in 2012, commented on the everyday ruthless killing of groups of people in Karachi, through the act of pigeons gathering over to slowly eat chickpeas that were patterned as two silhouetted revolvers on the ground. In 2010, Syed initiated *Rang De Karachi*, an ongoing project, which aims to engage the public sector through art making. It organically emerged as an outcome to a conversation

with Durra Kazi about the larger social responsibility of artists. The impulse of the movement was to bring cheerful, direct and literal imagery outside the confined walls of the art gallery through graffiti, performance and visual art. Sometimes the meaning lies in the act of graffiti itself but often, the conversations that are created around the activity become more rewarding. They create moments of interaction, curiosity and interpretation between the artist, the graffiti walls and the audience. Even confrontation with the police opens the possibilities of creating new knowledge. Syed believes that “it is important for the imagery to be literal and simple for the masses to easily understand”. The injected transference of an idea onto a roadside pathway turns into an agnostic space. Owing to its repetition, one can feel its physicality. (Mirza, 2015)

Expressed overtly are the ever-present security gates and barriers in the works of Bani Abidi few years ago, and the emergence of brick, high walls and barbed wire in my own and a few other works, reflections of the relationship one feels with one’s cityscape. That relationship has often emerged as a form of resistance, as in the henna-coloured female hand impressions that acclaimed artist Naiza Khan created on the walls of Karachi. (Batool, 2015)

The omnipresence of security guards, barricaded gates and open gates outside government institutions and blue containers outside visa offices, reflected the vulnerability of the city, while the advertisement of army recruits next to the wall advertising the sale of precious land, not only pointed to the relationship of the state with its citizens, but also illustrated consumer culture. For me, the act of walking in the city was a performance of another kind, replicating everyday-ness and framing banality through brief encounters. To question the city as art, I would like to mention the art walk that I conducted near Jain Mandir, Old Anarkali, Lahore. Here, the walls had several posters of German health centres pasted over a very large painted flag of Jamaat-ud-Dawa. While walking past this threatening advertisement of a religious militant organization, a cause for much fear in the city and abroad, I

realized that the posters of German health centres, discussing increasing male sexual potency, were the best art work that the city was performing naturally, on its own.(Batool, 2015)

As a part of *Pursukoon Karachi* Munawwar Ali Syed, with his team of artists and designers, created posters that addressed core issues of security, de-weaponisation and ownership of the city and later hired graffiti artists to paste them on the walls of Karachi. Syed's poster was an image representation of Maula Jatt (titled Aman Jatt) holding a Pakistani flag instead of a kalashnikoff. These posters were pasted all over the Railway Cantt Station, Jinnah hospital, Saddar, YMCA Ground, Zainab Market and the Arts Council. During the same time he and Taqi Shaheen were actively part of *Hathyaar Nahi Pyar*, a project initiated by Abdul Jabbar Gul, where children in Karachi were requested to swap their toy weapons and toy guns with ceramic sculptures or other play objects. Later the toy weapons were destroyed, flattened and made 'dysfunctional' by moving a heavy road roller over them. Syed traverses all genres in his practice successfully; as an art activist, a multi-disciplinary practitioner, performance artist and a sculptor, and he continues to 'colour' Karachi; it unites its audience, elicits a dialogue and reaches the soul.(Mirza, 2015)

Salima Hashmi's book on Pakistani art, *The Eye Still Seeks* (published 2015) signifies how art has moved beyond the border of a regional or civic address and can be associated with multiple identities. Much like the way importance of a physical address has declined in present times, because despite the fact that a person is living in Cape Town, Casablanca, Colombo, Cordoba, Copenhagen or Cairo, one prefers and uses the choice address of Hotmail, Gmail or Yahoo: the new cities/sites of our art, life and future!(Batool, 2015)

Conclusion:

Such depictions by artists are the soul of healthy societies. These works do not only depict the mind and world view of the artists but

they also portray the contemporary events which serve as source of history and help in understanding of the contemporary society. It is important for the governments to encourage artists to work freely. There should be dedicated places, areas, workshops etc. for various artists to come together to unleash their creativity and to learn from each other. The art also works as a vent for society. Art unfortunately does not enjoy that much value in Pakistan. There are many stigmas and taboos attached to painting, sculptures and performing arts. However the quality of work is of high value. Many artists have made their name across the globe in their respective fields.

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