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GLOBALIZATION AND TRENDS IN VISUAL ARTS: THE CASE OF 21ST CENTURY PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Be it the post-colonial ordeals, events like 9/11, the notions of globalization or the technological advancements, 21st century presents a marked difference in our approach towards various cultural factors. In this socio-political and economic context, the case of contemporary art of Pakistan is presented here. The study imparts an up-to-date overview of how artists have coped with the developing visual culture and issues of image production in a critical way as an aftermath of globalization. While rethinking *Globalization*, the identity issues in the contemporary times are considered to be the most important integer for art making in today's Pakistan. The diversifying effects of globalization; transformative, differentiated, individualizing, worldwide, and increasingly market-oriented character of Pakistani art is traced through the works of selected artists. In its broader scope the study aims to probe a) the relationship between individual artistic expression and political stance b) the impact of identity management strategies on creative spirits of artists c) expectations, distribution and emancipation of arts as a product of 'global world' politics d) aesthetic preferences and identity alignments.

Along with the established historiographical methodologies, literature reviews and interviews, a brief contextual analysis of artworks is provided to support the discussion.

Keywords

Global/Local, Global modern, Identity management, Visual culture, Contemporary Art.



1. Introduction

21st century brought division and uncertainty worldwide. In the post-9/11 world, 'life' is defined more by the fault lines within societies than by the territorial boundaries between them. Similarly, the defining quality of world politics of this time, from terrorism to global disease or environmental degradation, the challenges have become transnational rather than international. It is also true that after the said incident, Pakistan unknowingly got involved in 'war on terrorism' and unnecessarily became the center of world's attention (Henne). While on political paradigms we got criticized and condemned for our 'wrong doings' on humanitarian and civil grounds the world got interested in our cultural and social arenas mainly in pursuit to understand the phenomenon that was Pakistan and what it stands for. What Pakistan 'stands for' has been very enthusiastically defined by various agencies – political, social or academic, over the period of time since its independence in 1947. Today, it is an established fact that the state machinery has fabricated the history in an effort to justify the 'imagined identity' and 'projected realities' of the country and its citizen. However, these engineered narratives were encountered by thinkers, historians and academics like K.K. Aziz, Mubarak Ali and M.N. Qureshi to name a few. Interestingly, this trend to define Pakistan was not only on national level rather it has got international now. For instance, Stephen P. Cohen, a political scientist and senior fellow at Foreign Policy at Brookings Institution in Washington, while determining the Future of Pakistan, approaches the existential dilemma of Pakistan, identifying

problems and proposing solutions that could bring about a kind of Pakistan that would be in the interest of a stable world order. The prevailing ambiguity regarding the various identities of Pakistan that are projected as an effect of globalization are controversial and are being questioned by all and sundry now.

2. Linking Globalization, Identity and Art

Globalization promotes international interconnectedness. It is an "increasing cross-border flows of goods, services, money, people, information, and culture" (Held et al). The very question of 'identity' has been considered a salient feature of globalization. Two phenomenon, globalization and identity appear conflicting yet they draw attention to affinities (Halikiopoulou and Vasilppoulo). The preferred homogenization highlighted the concept of diversity hence the ideas of glocal got. The linkages and interdependence towards a consolidated world society is also interpreted as localization. Globalization as an undeniable reality. Globalization of culture considers arts as a facilitating tool. One profound and inevitable consequence of cultural globalization is identity construction - social as well as individual.

2.1 Globalization and Identity

Twentieth century technological advancement shortened distances between places. It also widened ideological voids between humans authenticating mutual differences and ethnographic approaches in identifying peoples and cultures. The world that was envisioned and propagated as a global village, in reality highlighted the salience local and regional levels. One had to pin oneself somewhere on the world map to ground oneself. In such glocal

management systems – ‘thinking globally but acting locally’ critics and theorists identified art as aboriginal, indigenous, original or folk in comparison to foreign, modern (Caves 2004). The art markets became manipulative agencies in promoting such labels defining empirical realities for artists and rewarding them with diasporic identities.

2.2 Identity and Creativity

Creative identities are considered representational projects emerging in the interaction between self (the creator), multiple others (different audiences), and notions of creativity informed by societal discourses. Since “there is creativity in identity construction just as there is identity construction in the most mundane forms of creative expression. Pakistani artists while utilizing the inherent creative skills appeared to have casted a peculiar identity for themselves and for the nation. They have coped with the developing visual culture and issues of image production in a critical way and have focused on various social, economic and cultural factors.

3. Globalization and Trends in Pakistani Art

It would be safe to say that geo-politics, social constructs and a surge in global art market has fashioned contemporary art in Pakistan. But then, politics and economy have always been the defining factors for art and culture. That is why the dummy democracies, the defying economies, the freedom of expression, the social connectivity, the global networking, the awareness of self, the individuality, the universality are some of the phenomena that have attracted the creative industries while instigated the instincts of artists providing them the

subjects for making art. As a matter of fact, through the commotion that these notions seemed to have caused, new voices and new artistic talent emerge.

3.1 Identity Construction in Pakistan

We shall start by looking at various constructs which have fashioned the identity of Pakistanis or are considered to have been initiating the identity discourses in Pakistan moving onto evaluating the impacts of such identity on art and how it was encountered by the artists.

3.2 Politicized Islamic Identity

Islam as a religion has served as an important feature in casting identity of the people of Pakistan. The religious segregation between Hindus and the Muslims of India appeal more to the masses and the historians of ‘the popular’ as the main reason for the demand of partition of twentieth century India. The economic and political exploitation by the British colonizers or post WW-II changing world order as more relevant concerns require fair-minded deliberations. After independence in 1947, Pakistan while justifying its role in Afghan, USSR war underwent the military supervised adjustments of the state policies to best suit the complexion of an ideal Islamic state (Shah, 2012). These ideals - *Islamization* and *Pakistaniat* engrained the seeds of religion based identity crisis which over the period of time grew into a monstrous issue. *Pakistaniat* – ideology and principles of Pakistan, is “a symbol of our strength and integrity” and “a reflection on the multiple elements of national identity”. In a post 9/11 political scenario religion was once again used as a politically stipulated shield or a defense mechanism against the increasing Islam phobia around the world. These misconstrued religious

connotations of politicized Islam also condemned art in general and figurative art in particular labelling it as an anti-Islamic activity. Thus, to the masses who considered art as an act that may invite Allah's wrath on the Day of Judgment, the artists community lost the credibility. Their identity was doomed as anti-Islam. Due to the invested power of expression in art, its ability to reason, its potential for activism and social engagement, artists became a threat for the rulers and were identified as anti-State. With such a tinted identity art became a commodity approved only amongst the political, social and economic elite of the country, limiting its scope as a luxury rather a necessity. It also depleted art of the power to induce harmony in individual and communal life.

3.3 Colonial & Post-Colonial Identity

The issues of colonial identities have been most comprehensively rationalized in the division of Oriental and Oxidant, East and West and Europeans and others. Such distinction inflicted inferiority complex within the colonized who to the colonizers were in desperate need to be civilized. The exquisite Eastern identity with pre-historic urban civilizations and medieval centers of knowledge production was negated. In such post-colonial societies, Pakistan being the one, the quest for identity becomes intensified with the feeling of being desolate or being rootless or even, at times, being independent (Kamran, 2021). These feelings are common in an increasingly globalized world where "the third world bear their past within them as scars of humiliating wounds". In art, these constraints instituted the tussle of tradition and modernity where *tradition* is synonymous to indignity and

modern is essentially considered foreign that was imposed or embraced during the colonial time period (Kamran, 2020). At the dawn of twenty first century when the ideas of decolonization got widespread these differences started appearing as major aesthetic concerns in Pakistan.

3.4 Racial, Ethnic & Gender Identity

The colonial incursions in the region entrenched the distinction between fair skinned British vs. native browns. The British officials (*gora sahib*) exploited all the civil and human rights of their brown subjects. Similar issues of white supremacy have ignited around the globe in recent times. Popular social justice movements in the West such as 'Me Too' or 'Black Lives Matter' while aiming to diminish the gender and racial differences have unintentionally widened the negative scope of these identity traits. Moreover, other socio-political upheavals on local level e.g. disliking of immigrants of Indian partition (*muhajir*) based on ethnic and linguistic associations, sectarian intolerance towards diverse religious groups or rising of parochial feminists in response to the insolent patriarchal practices have further classified the people of Pakistan. These identities often transpire to be the urging force behind artistic endeavours be it just aesthetic and expressive at times or demonstrative at other.

4. New Direction in Art and New Identity for the Artists

To the casual observer, in the 21st century Pakistan, the archetypal image of the artist has changed. From a sensitive, insightful but apparently carefree soul who would try to make both ends meet or the one whose fame will bring riches after he was gone,

from the anti-religion and anti-state person, the artist now “lead from upfront” (Hashmi, 2002). They go to places and have a style of social divas. They have become the fashion icons and most important of all they are making name and money. The women artists are no more practicing art from the make shift kitchen and dining room studios rather they navigate the fields of arts, training rigorously, negotiating commercial deals, handling the agents and the critics. Realizing the strength and importance of these women, Pakistan has started owning its ‘forgotten daughters’ Last but not the least is a fact that contemporary Pakistani artists are painting nudes and are exhibiting them without the fear of being attacked and assaulted by the self-acclaimed moral militia as was the case some thirty years ago (Sarwar, 2011).

4.1 Cynicism to Activism in Art

The ideals of art have been revised. Its possibilities of expression and its diversity seem limitless. Its audience and its consumers have been changed. So, does its practitioners, scope and trajectories. Considering this the subject of the most art is a socio-political commentary to the extent of social and political activism. In this pursuit, artists have opted for satirical comments and their work can be categorized as a visual manifestation of political and social cynicism. The pun of ‘Moderate Enlightenment by Imran Qureshi, Ghost of Muhammad bin Qasim roaming in Karachi by Bani Abidi, guns for the safety and security of the faith as Sirate-Mustaqeem by Ali Azmat or the Divine Comedies by Saira Waseem are some of the examples. Some Artists are more socially driven, rooted in public sectors and aspire to highlight the

“incorrectness” of the status quo. They try to be ‘morally correct’ and address a commonly occurring ‘problem’ through their work. Examples are street art of Asim butt (aka Banksy of Pakistan) or Naiza Khan’s community based projects.

4.2 Art as Document of History

Artworks are also appearing as documents of history as the artists respond to particular significant events. Some would record it using the straight forward visuals or peculiar symbolic to incur immediate, emotional response. Others would use metaphors for a more profound visual construct, defined by conventions and rules of good taste and tradition. Some artists like Mughees Riaz would very fondly stick to more customary genres of art making and are equally successful in sustaining their art practice.

4.3 An Attempt towards Decolonization

Post-coloniality and globalization brought in the ideas of materiality, objectification and distinction between art and craft as preferred concerns of many practitioners. Nusra Latif Qureshi confronting her audience on a history lesson or devising strategies to identify ‘the self’ (Fig). Similarly, Risham Hussain’s textile art (The Seven Seas quilts) are a serious effort to decolonize the art on several fronts. Firstly, by breaking the Western hegemony of medium and adopting fabric and embroidery as a part of a larger scheme to explore local aesthetic sensibilities, though her intention of re-visiting history is also note-worthy. Sania Samad revives the age-old concept of working in ateliers and designer guilds. Her work dissolves the barrier between artist and craftsman.

4.4 Gender Issues and Feminist Voices

Contemporary Pakistani art also very fondly takes up the gender issues. More recently, while 'me too' movement stormed the world art scene our men also grabbed the opportunity and in some cases were more open to comment. As female artists present their peculiar world view as feminist art, they shackle the ideas of gender equality and body politics as the only feminist concerns. Male artists too, speak about sexism, harassment and child abuse. This paves way for the transgender or LGBT rights as the main subject of art and provides opportunity to previously hushed voices. Naazish Ata Ullah, Amra Khan and Abdullah Qureshi are to be watched out in this context.

4.5 Ideas of Abstraction

On more technical grounds the legacy of abstract art links Pakistani art to the Indo-Persian or Islamic traditions of art making. Both ways of abstraction, analytical and synthetic or rational and irrational survive here. In Imran Mir's or Muhammad Ali Talpur's work, amid loud declarations of independence from representational work, the relation to the object is also cut off, a formal autonomy of colour, shape and surface is achieved. In a latest phase of abstraction, painting has been reduced to a reality of sheer signs, where abstract signifiers are submerged in a free flow of polyphonic relations with the history of art and modernity itself as in Imran Channa's work.

4.6 Text as Visual

Nothing can get more abstract than the language and words themselves which reminds of Ghulam Muhammad who carves out words and recomposes them in a meditative and cathartic way.

Customarily, visual means colour, form and surface and not text, form and surface which contemporary art aims to discard.

4.7 Public Art and Art Fairs

Public art is another emerging trend, under the banner of Biennials artists are increasingly exhibiting outside the so called 'white cube spaces' named as galleries and museums, engaging directly with a range of audiences and collaborating with multiple professions and creative industries. Artists have joined hands to form collectives and aim to reach out to common publics making art an interactive process. Awami Art Collective and Lahore and Karachi Biennials have involved masses in the process of art making.

5. Conclusion

Contemporary artist's in Pakistan employed artistic sensibilities in creating *harmony within the worlds they live in*. Artists seek to be more inclusive, understandable and communicative and like to be labelled as cultural practitioners, social scientists, activists, social workers or environmentalists while they conquer more conceptual spaces. In doing so they introduced the new genres, new mediums and new directions in art. Art and artists have a new role to play in present day Pakistan. It is of nation builders. Status of art in the society has furthered once its capacity to educate, to inform, to communicate, to entertain and to engage the masses was realized. On the international horizons, these artists created a softer image of the nation and introduced diversity and perspectives to the global art market breaking the Western hegemony.

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