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PAKISTANI ART WITH FOCUS ON THE PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERSTANDING OF KHUDI: A NEED FOR REVITALIZATION IN THE PRESENT AGE

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Abstract

The purpose of art is to communicate and connect with the viewers. It provides a platform for expressiveness to the artists beyond any barrier of religion, culture or society. This medium of expression encompasses multiple stories that deals with human existence, growth, socio-political environment, religious beliefs, in short, it contributed in all the domains of life. In the contemporary age, art is also observed as a medium of expressing realities. Artists are employing this medium with freedom for expressing their inner reflections and with these concerns they are responding back to the society. They are addressing multiple queries and analyzing the socio-political scenario. Pakistani artists are also promisingly participating in raising their voice for recording their personal experiences while highlighting contemporary issues and their outcome in the society. After analyzing the present-day conditions of Pakistan as an outcome of extremism following 9/11, and the incline towards westernization in society, it is proposed that Pakistani art with focus on the philosophical understanding of khudi is much needed for revitalization in the present age. Following this thought-provoking proposal, the visual expression of my artworks highlighted the need to integrate the comprehension of self/khudi in order to nurture this fruit of contemplation among the Muslim community in terms of providing a solution of the prevailing chaos presently observed in Pakistan. Negation of self-integrity has affected the face of Pakistan and in this scenario the key to unlock the actual visage, it is integral to have belief in self, individuality, and the teachings of the Holy Quran. Iqbal in twentieth century, looking at the conditions of the Muslims in the sub-continent asked them to elevate their self-esteem by comprehending the means of khudi, which is a gift of God for His mankind.

Keywords

Art, Pakistani artists, khudi, literature, Muslim community.

1. Introduction

It is believed, that the conception of Art is as old as the creation of mankind. When man was unable to express his feelings to others, he used to create images as a means of communication and the study of these images provided references for the documented history of mankind. It has always been said that art is the personal language of the artist but this language was meant to have a dialogue with others, in order to convey the hidden and the evident features of the world, this mode was extensively utilized by the artists and this practice continued till to date. The study of art history provided multiple stories that facilitated man to know the history of this existing world in relation to the stages of modifications it has seen. The influential language of art beyond any barricade facilitate mankind to connect with it. Without any doubt, art is the only medium that offers expressiveness at open forum. It addresses issues relating to life and the practices around it. It also documents the challenges faced by mankind in relation to past, and present and also provides references for the future as well. While Summarizing, it is appropriate to quote that art is a uniting feature that ties people whether from whatever races and walks of life they are associated. The global language of art in this manner, serves as a bridge for global communication.

It is observed, after looking at the strong association of art with the society in general that artists used to communicate through art for addressing the viewers about their personal feelings and experiences as being part of the socio-political environment. Looking at the historical account of mankind, it has been noticed that besides the documentation of nature for the idea of beautification, art has also been used as a medium for addressing harsh realities. It not only meant to highlight problems but to provide keys for solving the predominant issues as well. Provocatively, in the contemporary age artists are articulating their inward sensations based on multiple experiences and are reflecting back to their societies globally. They are employing freedom of expression in order to demonstrate what they

personally observe and perceive. They are also clear about what they propose and what the masses will conceive from their message. The duty of an artist is to behave like an activist, who can foresee and provide cautions for the future. Presently, artists from all parts of the world are playing their constructive role. In Pakistan, artists are likewise contributing in documenting their power of speech through visual arts to communicate their familiarities and the challenges of the present-day world they have come across. They are presenting their voice at national and international level art activities as well.

As a member of this comprehensive visual grid that revolves around the sharing of knowledge and ideas ranging from personal to political panoramas, the visual expression of my artworks aims to address the central underlying urge of uplifting the cultural and moral standards of Pakistani nation in order to remind them of their actual face for living a better life in the contemporary time. Their failure is the outcome of their detachment from their religious, moral and cultural roots, which needs to be revived. The language of my visual practice for this very means, is rooted with the philosophical concept of *Khudi* (presented by the eminent poet of the Sub-continent, Allama Muhammad Iqbal in the first half of the 20th century). Iqbal, after thorough study behind the failures of Muslims in the sub-continent came on the scene with the philosophical interpretation of *khudi*. He was of the view that Muslims needs to revitalize their inner spark that is one of the attributes of their God and they must consider that they were born as the superior creation among all the other creations of God. They must realize this aspect to uplift their self-integrity and this was how a man with a strong vision for tomorrow became the reason behind the awakening of Muslims that ended up with independence. My practice, following this concept of realization also aims to connect with the viewers for providing them a key for solving the prevailing chaos that has been witnessed in Pakistan after 9/11. 9/11 and the extremist attacks as a chain of its offshoots affected the self-integrity of the Pakistani nation and in additional to these incidents, distance from religious teachings and the

influence of the western culture also affected the practice of indigenous ideology and the culture of present-day Pakistan. Only those nations prosper who have the awareness of their own strengths and ideologies. Pakistan was formed as an Islamic Republican Country. But the question here, is it the same Pakistan which was achieved after a long struggle and which has seen the bloodshed of its people for the means of gaining freedom. This thought-provoking statement of interest should be of prime interest when considering the history of independence. A nation is formed by its people and the awakening of self-integrity of its people strengthens its roots. The need is to be aware of the root cause behind the present conditions of Pakistan. Keeping in mind all these references, it is proposed to elevate, nurture and spark the seed of *khudi* among the Muslim community for making them aware of their spiritual strength that is a part of Divine light. In Surah al-Sajdah, verse number 9, it has been mentioned that Allah created man with his own spirit.

*“Then He fashioned him and breathed into him of His spirit”.*¹

This status of man needs to be revisited by the Muslims of Pakistan in order to find answer to the prevailing chaos in Pakistan. Elevation of the self-integrity by all the members of the society as a whole could be possible after the philosophical understanding of *khudi*. The best way to serve this purpose is through the medium of art based on its outreach. So, in this manner the philosophical understanding of *khudi* in art is considered as the necessity of this hour.

2. Materials and Methods:

Qualitative Research methodology has been used in this research paper with focus on APA style. Data has been collected from multiple literary and visual references which was used according to the requirement of the paper. Discussion with some visual artists also

facilitated the researcher in the course of her visual research. The visual discourse of art is not limited, it offers enormous space to the artist for experimentation with different materials and methods. The visual content of exploration helps the artist to select his material on the bases of the required dimensions for creating a dialogue with the viewer.

3. Results:

The field of visual arts is not calculative and it does not offer final results but it expresses and highlights multiple queries with focus on the underlying messages and it also propose solutions in influential ways. In this visual research, the author has incorporated some examples from the history and has highlighted the visual references of those artists who have raised questions on the socio-political environment for the means of addressing the viewers in general. After analyzing the contemporary chaotic environment, the researcher through her visual practice has proposed relevant answers keeping in mind the philosophical concept of *Khudi* and has stressed that this understanding of selfhood needs to be addressed in the Pakistani art scene for elevating the spiritual strength of the Pakistani nation.

4. Discussion:

The historic account of art practice shares references of artists who have documented the socio-political scenario in their work. Their works not only provides response to the surroundings but also serves as the documentation of their times. Nineteenth century with the focus on age of enlightenment opened doors for the artists of modern era to reflect back to the society with their distinctive style of representation. Notable among them were Gericault for his painting “*Raft of Medusa*”, Delacroix for his painting “*Liberty Leading the People*”, Francisco Goya for his painting “*The Shootings of Third of May 1808*”, Daumier for his painting “*Third Class Carriage*”, Gauguin for his painting “*Where Do We Come From, What Are We, Where Are We Going*” and Picasso for his painting “*Guernica*”. All these paintings embrace the subject of human existence and the challenges

¹. Al-Islam. org, “Chapter:22, Man and the Holy Quran” (accessed October 15th, 2018) <https://www.al-islam.org/man-and-universe-ayatullah-murtadha-mutahhari/chapter-22-man-and-holy-quran>

brought by socio-political backdrop. They also presented the critical analysis of the artists in response to their time which was represented in a direct yet symbolic way. No doubt, in the uprising of societies and nations, art has played a vital role. Artists strived to express their innermost realities while looking at their contemporary circumstances. They documented their struggle to highlight the issues ranging from personal to socio-political vistas and this chain of representation and artist's reflection towards their surroundings kept on which could be witnessed even in the contemporary art scene. The art of painting was always rooted with deeper meanings and it was used as a weapon and defensive shield as well. According to Pablo Picasso:

"Painting is not meant to decorate apartments, it is an instrument of war for attack and defense against the enemy".²

Pakistani artists looking at the historical account of art, analyzed the same socio-political upheaval after independence, and this was how they also started to record their response towards it by following their personal expression. They raised their voice and incorporated in their art what they observed in their surroundings. In addition to this, the period of Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship in Pakistan also influenced the art practice in the 1970's which left strong marks in shaping the contemporary visual vocabulary of Pakistani art. It has always been observed in history that art and literature goes hand in hand. The history of Pakistan also shares the same observation, both these tools of expressions were employed to address the socio-political ills and their after affects in the society. Art and literature from the time period of Zia-ul-Haq provide references of rebellious approach and the response of the artists and writers towards the socio-political background. It has always been observed that, literature being the backbone of the society also addressed critical issues and it offers solutions as well. Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Habib Jalib and Munir Niazi were among those

protagonists who recorded their individual criticism towards the problems of their society and they also provided hope for the better tomorrow. Faiz Ahmed Faiz after analyzing the struggle behind independence and the misfortunes of his own age addressed the readers in the beginning and concluding verses of 'Dawn of Freedom' while saying:

This blemished light-this dawn devoured by night

Surely this wasn't what we have all been aching for

.....

The heavy darkness of night hasn't yet lessened.

The moment of salvation hasn't yet come for our hearts or eyes.

So, let's keep going-for that destination (manzil) has yet to come.³

Seeking for the right direction towards the final destination has always been given immense importance in stimulating references to address the society. Pakistani artists, in the same way also expressed their thoughts and reflections in visual form to connect with the audience. Among the initiators of making a difference between a usual art piece (that is meant for pleasure seeking) and an artwork that embraces socio-political documentary (represented as a tool for addressing critical issues) was A. R Nagori (fig. 1). Nagori focused on the socio-political tribulations of Pakistan in his unique expressive way. Following the influential style of Guernica by Picasso, Nagori also documented the after effects of socio-political turbulence in Pakistan and highlighted the loss of a common man in the so-called war of terror. A mother holding the dead body of her child depicts her suffering as a result of the drone attack in the darkness of the night. The gloomy

². Fred S. Kleiner, Gardner's Art Through the Ages: The Western Perspective, (Boston, USA: Wadsworth, 2010), 716.

³. Rajat Singh, *Why We Need Revolutionary Poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz More than Ever* (accessed October 15th, 2018)

<https://lithub.com/why-we-need-revolutionary-poet-faiz-ahmed-faiz-more-than-ever/>

atmosphere with emphases on her scream made this artwork exceptional in terms of expressiveness. This image also highlights the most sensitive issues faced by Pakistan after 9/11. Nagori used direct way of representation and was never afraid of the response by the Government. He expressed whatever he felt was necessary to address in his age. According to Amber Romasa Nagori:

“Nagori was perhaps the only one who was able to execute socio-political art and bring it into limelight without impairing aesthetics. His paintings are not just posters or placards of protest, but they are stark messages that are aesthetically strong”.⁴

Looking at the heart wrenching image by A.R Nagori, it could be said that his works to some extent reflect Tolstoy’s perception of art for addressing concepts of morality in a society. According to whom:

*“Art cannot be defined as an activity which produces beauty. Art is a means of communication, and is an important means of expression of any experience, or of any aspect of the human condition”*⁵.

Alongside the powerful visual language of Nagori’s art, some other artists were busy in reflecting to the problems of their time. The works of Salima Hashmi, Ijaz-ul-Hassan and Qudus Mirza also provide references of their reaction to the political disorder of their time. Ijaz-ul-Hassan is observed promising among these in terms of his documentation of socio-political ills in both direct and indirect manner of representation. Besides these pioneering figure in the Pakistani art circle, some contemporary artists have also highlighted issues of socio-political concern, among these are Imran Qureshi, David Alesworth, Naiza Khan, Faiza Butt, Ali Azmat, Waseem Ahmed, Saira Waseem, Sana Arjumand, Sophia Khawaja, Sobia Ahmed, Imran Mudassar etc. They all have also documented their response towards the surroundings. Imran Qureshi

directly comments on the critical situation Pakistan has been through since the last decade (fig. 2). Presently his signature style shows stains of bloodshed which reflects the incidents of terrorist attacks in Pakistan. One can easily observe painted patels that are evolving within the bloodshed, these are representing hope for the future of Pakistan. This message of optimism is of high concern which was repetitively addressed by the artist at multiple art forums nationally and internationally.

No doubt, artists are the global ambassadors and for this means they expressed what they analyze in their unique way as it has been observed earlier. Looking at the present account of Pakistan, the vocabulary of my work also identifies the gaps and suggests solutions for bringing positive change in the socio-political backdrop. With reference to the articulation of my work, decoding one’s own image in the present age is not easy looking at the overtones of complexities we are living with. The increasing distance from the indigenous philosophies, religious practices and culture have left strong marks on the Pakistani scene today. Though nations are prospered under the umbrella of their own indigenous culture but Pakistan needs resurgence of national roots. This distance from the cultural and religious roots has affected the face of Pakistan nationally and internationally. This aspect was personally observed by the researcher during her short-term visit to the United States of America in the month of November 2013. Muslims are blessed to be gifted with a religious guide by Allah, that provides them with the right direction. It is unto them to understand and respect their self-integrity in order to gain wisdom and elevate the moral standards of their society. In Surah al-Maidah, verse number 105, it has been stated:

“O you who have believed, upon you is (responsibility for) yourselves. Those who have gone astray will not harm you when you have been guided. To Allah is your return all

⁴. *In Memoriam: A Daring Expressionist* (accessed October 15th, 2018) <https://www.dawn.com/news/691631>

⁵. *Tolstoy’s What is Art* (accessed October 15th, 2018) <http://www.angelfire.com/md2/timewarp/tolstoy.html>

together; then He will inform you of what you used to do”.⁶

These references provoked stimulation in my thought process and as a result of which in my visual practice I emphasized the philosophical concept of *khudi* which was highlighted through metaphorical visual vocabulary. After analyzing the effects of colonial age, it is observed that the notion of *khudi* lost its direction. Among the intellectuals of 20th century, Allama Iqbal was the one who started to unveil the underlying philosophies relating the foremost purpose of life. After analyzing the tough conditions faced by the Muslims of Sub-continent, he stressed on raising the self-esteem of individuals through the comprehension of *khudi*. Through his thought-provoking poetry, he tried to drive the attention of his nation towards the quest of finding the true means of being. In one of his poetic versions, he said:

خودی کو کر بلند اتنا کہ ہر تیرے پہلے
خدا بندے سے خود نوچھے بات تیری ضمایا ہے

7

“Raise thyself to such heights that before writing your fortune,

God Asks Himself- thy wish to write thy fate?”⁸

In the present time, remembrance of the historic past of Sub-continent is essential to learn from the past experiences. Being an independent nation, it is important to learn from the past mistakes through raising questions of self-realization and cultivation of morality in the society. The quintessence of realization is again missing in the contemporary scenario, people have become direction less and they are divided

into different sects and mind sets. They have lost the concept of unification as a nation, and this isolation has severely affected the cultural and religious narrative of Pakistan. Along with this directionless state of being, terrorism has also affected the image of Pakistan in a radical way. Pakistan was born on the name of Islam and Islam is a messenger of peace. Allah also stressed on knowing the true purpose of being with the stress on know Thyself. Allah has blessed all of us with an intellect. He has stressed in His divine message to use the intellect for living a better life and to understand the underlying mystery of life. According to the tradition of Imam Ali (a.s):

“The ultimate knowledge of a man is to know himself”

It is integral to one’s belief and is among the duties of mankind to search for their reality that embraces the attributes of God. It is appropriate to quote the saying of Farid-ud-din Attar here, who said:

“When you fail to find yourself, to know yourself here, how will

you be able to understand the secret of your existence when you die?”

All these references with the emphasis on finding the real dimension of life left strong influence on my art practice. They helped me to incorporate metaphorical elements for addressing this critical subject of realization. Deciphering undertones of *khudi* with the amalgamation of its comprehension in visual form was the main task which was initially expressed in the painting “Voyage of Inspirations” (fig. 3). This painting articulated the experience of the artist being in the United States of America during her exchange program “Art for Social Change Exchange Program in 2013”. The identity of an individual moves with her/him when she/he is supposed to represent the cultural and religious identity of the homeland. At that point all the inspirations take a route towards the self-esteem of the individual being the ambassador of the homeland. The image of Minar-e-Pakistan (which is an iconic monument) is used and placed at the highest level of the picture. This

⁶. <http://www.alquranenglish.com/quran-surah-al-maidah-105-qs-5-105-in-arabic-and-english-translation> (accessed October 15th, 2018)

⁷. <https://daily-dunya.blogspot.com/2014/05/khudi-kokar-buland-itna-ki-har-taqdeer.html> (accessed February 13th, 2018)

⁸. Translation by the researcher.

symbolic suggestion shows respect for the national identity. Identity is fundamental aspect of one's being. It never allows an individual to overlook itself; in fact, it fosters an insight to value and defense for the religious and cultural associations. For the purpose of the valuing the national identity, understanding of self-integrity is essential.

The concept of kaumiat/ nation is missing in the present times; my intension is to bring back the cultural and religious identity through the embodiment of visual practice. The crisis of identity is taken as the main feature of investigation through visual embodiment (fig. 4). The composition made of origami is titled as "Talaash-e Khudi II". The focal point of the composition shows an open box with the imagery of a star and crescent over the background of green color. The main idea is to search for the hidden dimension of one's self under the light of khudi. It represents the spirit of one's self that needs to be unveiled under the light of Quranic teachings that have gone into the background. It also suggests for the alarming call to inquire self-image for awakening the society as a whole.

The minimalistic approach of the work with symbolic quintessence advocates this ideology of giving respect to one's self integrity for gaining wisdom and rising like a prosperous Nation. If one is proud of her/his identity nothing can affect the national veracity. United as a nation, strengthens its image globally. The purpose of our lives is to spread goodness in the same way as the rose is meant to spread its

fragrance in its surroundings for making it fresh and lively (fig. 5). It is the way to see the goodness of other human beings as well, in this way all visible things will become beautiful and right. According to Socrates "contentment is achieved through experiencing the kind of life that best serve the nature of soul". He believed that the goodness of soul can only be seen when human beings examined their daily consciousness through reasoning and questioning with other human beings. The truth that could be unveiled through the knowing process has the power to elevate spiritual light in the human soul. I believe that this meaningful visual discourse needs to be realized by the society that has the power to uplift the intellectual content of each and every individual for the betterment of a society in the contemporary age.

5. Conclusion:

With all the provided literary and visual references in this research paper that deals with the insightfulness of the artists who worked as the backbone and strength of a society, it is observed that the medium of art is considered to be the most influential tool of addressing issues and providing solutions. After analyzing the present-day conditions of Pakistan, it is proposed that the philosophical understanding of khudi should be incorporated in Pakistani art that can help in awakening the nation. Realization of their true strength will help them in elevating the social and moral standards and will lead them towards betterment.

6. Figures:



Fig 1. Nagori, A.R. *Guernican Proliferation Perpetuate*, n.d. (Oil on Canvas)

Source: <http://www.thefridaytimes.com/beta3/tft/20120706/large-AR%20Nagori%20-%20Guernican%20Proliferation%20Perpetuate.jpg> (accessed on 23rd February, 2018)

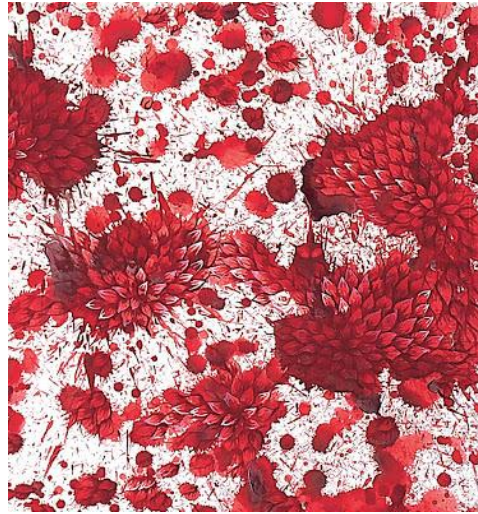


Fig 2. Qureshi, Imran, *You are my love and life's enemy too*, 2010, gouache on wasli.

Source: http://cambridgeresearch.blogspotcom/2013_03_01_archive.html (accessed on 1st April, 2015)

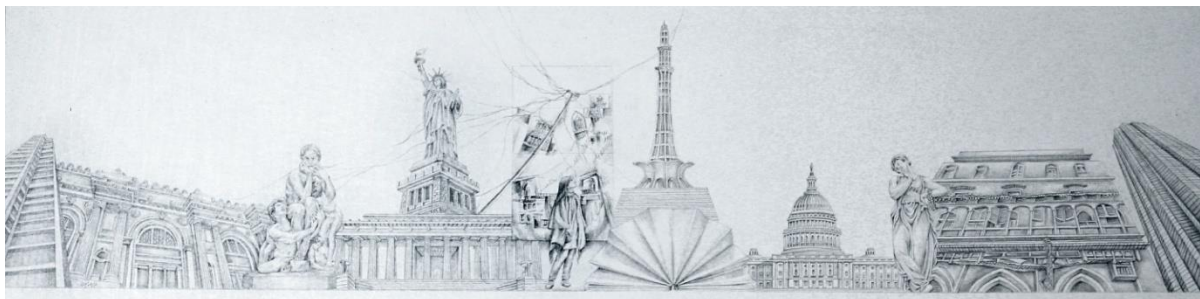


Fig 3. Khan, Farah. *Voyage of Inspirations*, graphite on wasli, 2014. 26.5”x 9.3”.

Source: picture by the researcher

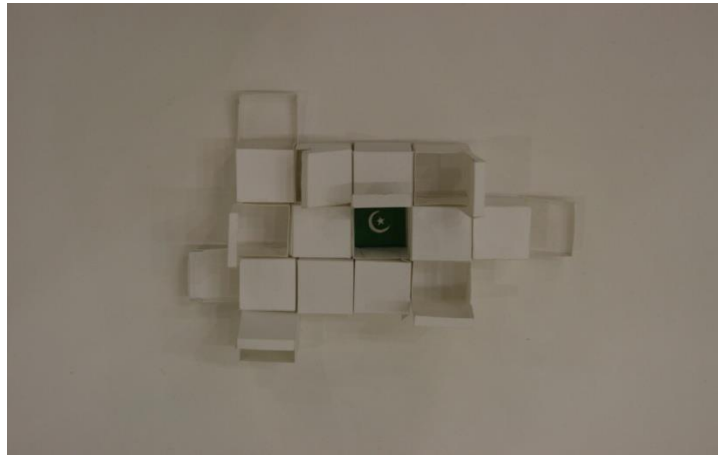


Fig 4. Khan, Farah. *Talaash-e-Khudi-II*, origami boxes and gouache on *wasli*, 2014. 16.5'' x 11.5''.

Source: picture by the researcher

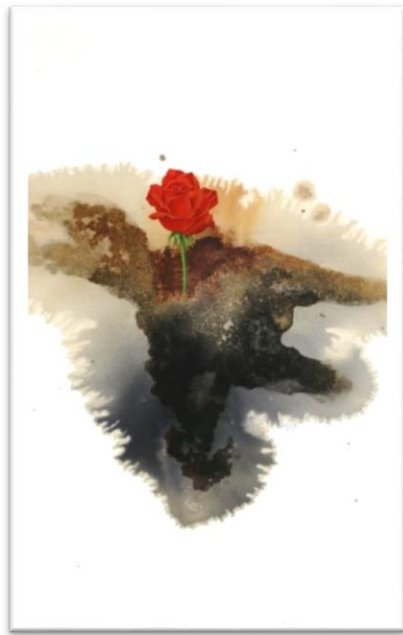


Fig 5. Khan, Farah. *Know Thyself*. Mixed media on *wasli*. 2018. 10.5' x 16.5'

Source: picture by the author

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