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## **WOMEN, ART & POLITICS IN PAKISTAN: RETHINKING FEMINISM THROUGH FEMINIST ART**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper looks into the contemporary art practice in Pakistan and tries to cognize feminist art and feminist aesthetics in local context with a belief that feminist aesthetics ultimately answers the issues of feminism itself.*

*In its broader scope the study looks at the works of selected women artists, most of them actively involved with the Women Action Forum (WAF), in order to theorize feminist aesthetics which must re-define feminism and feminist's concerns in the present day Pakistan where like elsewhere women affairs have become a pertinent issue. The paper negates the popular notion that feminist art must address the controversial issues of 'social morality' and/or it is all about agendas of the leftists against any established cultural norms. Feminist art in Pakistan exhibits a flavor of its own which is somewhat different than the Western notions.*

### **Keywords**

Feminist Art, Art under Martial Law, Islamization, Feminism in Pakistan

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### **1. Introduction**

Women artists in Pakistan hesitate to be coined as 'feminist artists'. It is because of the fact that in Pakistani society feminism has always been looked at from Western perspective and therefore is considered to be a borrowed attitude or merely a Western propaganda. The 'Me too' movement globally or the 'Aurat march' or Women walk/protest in Pakistan where women from all strands of life came out bearing bold slogans, have not only created hype in social and

electronic media but invites attention of all and sundry to comment or understand the phenomenon.

In the most common understanding 'Feminism' is a social system that rejects patriarchy as a detriment of women's interest, their social status and their right to equal communal opportunities. Pakistani society is essentially patriarchal and strongly exhibits these characteristics. Feminist bend of mind, finds patriarchy illegitimate mainly because it habitually provides a dominant position to men. Usually this dominance is justified in two ways 1. Biological nature 2. Divine Plan.

## **2. Islam and the Idea of Feminism**

Islam appears to support patriarchy. Following the Quran (4:34), men are charged with a special responsibility vis-a-vis women and are invested with the power of supervision and control over them. This guardianship rests on a dual basis: the divine preference of men over women and the socio-economic role assigned to men. Consequently, feminism as a proxy of women right and their individual identity is considered to be a 'Western construct' contrary to Islamic interests (Seedat, 25) and buys a negative connotation. Whether Islam, its misconstrued teachings or the social practices and customs are responsible for the oppression of Pakistani women is not the main question of inquiry. The fact that Islam granted women far greater rights than other Western monotheistic even 'secular' states, the right to own property to name one, indicates that it is not Islam that is to blame for the oppression of women, but rather peripheral social practices and customs (Schneider). What is relevant is the artistic expression and the role of women artists in the brief history of Pakistan which generally determines the state of art in the overall society and strangely shapes up the role and status of women in art, elevating her position from being a mere 'object of his gaze' to the torchbearer of women rights.

## **3. Women and Art in Pakistan**

Unlike the Western art history which has previously shown patriarchal trends in wrongly associating several artworks with male artists, the history of Pakistani art has generously acknowledged the women artists. The very few books that are written on art in Pakistan always appreciate women as the pioneer of art in the country. As a matter of fact, in Pakistani society, Fine Arts was considered to be the occupation of the delicate, more sensitive sex i.e. women and was not much socially approved for the macho men who due to their manly physical powers could do more laborious and tougher tasks. This mindset is most apparent at one of the most

prestigious educational institute– the Fine Arts Dept. at Punjab University, Lahore, which admitted only female student's upto 1958.

It is true that Pakistani art world is heavily impregnated with the presence of women artists. These women have not only practiced art but have made their names and contribution in the field. Women artists, be it Anna Molka Ahmed, Zubaida Agha or Salima Hashmi are acknowledged and celebrated at every level i.e. as artists, academicians, educationists and activists. They are the conscientious group of enlightened women who could stand up and protest against the Martial Laws. They had an understanding of basic human and women rights. They challenged the prevalent ideological dominance of time and some of them even initiated the Women Action Forum (WAF) as early as 1981. It is to be noted that their concerns, in Art, were not 'feminine' but 'feminist' where 'feminine aesthetic' caters to the art created by women while 'feminist aesthetic' is relevant to the art done with a woman's perspective of the world, "around her and her experience of the world" (Hein, 286).

It is a reality that women who practiced art in Pakistan, especially in the early years, mostly belonged to the elite class where there was an already established position for the women in the family. These women were considered the 'living' entities unlike their fellow countrywomen who were not more than an asset possessed by their male counterparts. They held strong political associations and were opinionated with a privilege to be heard. These women artists gave birth to new kinds of art. In doing so they were not only recognized and supported by the art circle rather they were followed by the male associates who were also struggling against the military supported efforts of *Islamization* under a military general Zia-ul-Haq's Martial Law. General Zia-ul-Haq imposed martial law in 1977 till 1985. However he remained in power after amending the law until his death in 1988. The state policy during his time in office discouraged figural representation of all kind considering it against the teachings of Islam. Moreover the limitation of literature against the brutal suspension of freedom of expression enabled Fine Artists to challenge the state ideology which in the hide of Islam further scrutinized the status and role of women within the society restricting them within the *chader and char dewari*. *Chader* is a long unstitched cloth worn by women to drape the body from head to toe. *Char dewari* means 'four walls'. Together they are used as a metaphor for household. Under Zia's martial law the women were advised to stay covered and restrained within the household away from the mainstream societal life.

#### **4. Role of Artists under Martial Law**

Under the dictatorship of General Zia-ul Haq, in 1983, a law was introduced in Pakistan according to which women legal evidence was valued half as compared to the men's testimony. The women demonstrated against it and were snubbed and repressed brutally. This remonstrance was the first time that women artists had overtly identified their work with the political struggle for female emancipation. Fifteen women artists in Lahore got together and signed a manifesto, interestingly drafted by a man, I.A. Rehman, a human right activist. The manifesto was never made public due to the prevailing Martial law but it "simply empowered the women to become more outspoken in their art against misogyny".

The manifesto while realizing the declining status and condition of women in the country noted the "anti-reason and anti-arts environment" in the homeland and believed in the basic rights of not just the women but "all men, women and children". It specifically condemned "the attitude which minimizes woman's constructive role in society and attempts to restrict her rightful participation in society". The manifesto condemned "the attitude which distorts the original and age-old role of woman as the giver and sustainer of life, love and affection and vulgarizes it into an image of obscenity". It also called upon all women artists to take their place in the vanguard of Pakistani women's struggle "to retain their pristine image and their rightful place in society so that we may replace in the lives of our people despair with hope, brutality with compassion, darkness with light, and anarchy with culture and leave the world a happier, more beautiful and more peaceful a place than we found it".

The artists who signed the manifesto included Zubaida Javed, Abbasi Abidi, Salima Hashmi, Lala Rukh, Talat Ahmed, Shehrzade Alam, Rabia Zuberi Jalees Nagi, Birjees Iqbal, Riffat Alvi, Nahid Raza, Mehr Afroz, Qudsia Nisar, Mamoona Bashir, Veeda Ahmed. An overview of the work of these women artists reveals that despite differences of opinion among women artists in embracing feminism as their main concern, the works are unified in terms of form, content and iconographic details. However, it is interesting to note that their art does not essentially conform the ideals of feminism, especially in terms of typical feminist aesthetics as propagated in the West pointing towards a particular theoretical posture which maintains that women art differs in importance, value, technique, subject matter or audience, nor do they ever wowed to be the feminists as an opposing force to masculinism.

Zubaida Javed painted rural and urban landscape which "are mysterious, exciting and atmospheric; enriched with a colour palette that evokes a strong response" and are considered to be "conceptual landscape" (Hussain, 2015). Abbasi Abidi was drawn towards painting still life

in a very conforming academic style which hardly matched her steadfast, trailblazer personality. Rabia Zuberi through her drawings, paintings and sculpture commented on the ideals of love, peace and harmony within the society. Though Salima Hashmi painted some nude female figures but they don't appear naked or erotic. These human bodies are usually wrapped in an air of encountering the surroundings if not of sovereignty. Lala Rukh is also best known for her abstract painting. Interestingly ideas of abstraction have always been embraced in Islamic societies. Talat Ahmed opted for three-dimensional figural representations. It was indeed a less favoured rather strongly condemned medium in a politically charged context of newly 're-Islamicized' society. Islamic Ideology Council under Zia-ul Haq's leadership banned making human depiction in 3D form. The same restrictions were proposed in the curriculum of Fine Arts across the country demeaning the status of sculptors as well as their art practice. In such scenario, Talat Ahmed managed to delight the audience with her unique style of presenting man, and not only woman, swathed in spiritual thinking. Shehrzade Alam also took up clay as her medium of expression though she modeled more agreeable forms instead i.e. pots. Mehr Afroz through her paintings studied the human behavioral patterns and the responsibility of humans to one another. Nahid Raza was preoccupied with the plight of abused women. While the women in her paintings appear scarred and tormented due to semi-abstract forms, quick brush strokes and emotive palette, sun and moon often appear alongside these female figures as symbol of hope and desire for survival. It is this will to excel, optimism and belief in self that motivated the artist and her audience alike. Riffat Alvi paid homage to her motherland, using not only earthen coloured pigments rather *mitti* (dust) from the historical site.

It can be said that these women were romantically involved with the very idea of creating art. In doing so most of the time they simply acted as responsible and resilient members of society guarding the basic human rights of all the fellow countrymen or voicing for the down trodden. At other times they made small personal statements based upon their experience and perception of society. However, as 'personal becomes the political' here and the 'political' demanded to stand side by side with the male members of fraternity against the joint antagonist that used patriarchy to suppress at least half of the state's subject i.e. the women body. This is why these feminists' aesthetic concerns were acknowledged by the male artists too.

These aesthetic concerns of the practicing women artists of Pakistan during Zia's regime are penned down by Salima Hashmi, an active member of WAF. She believes that art during the time under discussion was "challenged at number of levels: in the retrieval of meaning, the construction of alternative imagery, the exploration of medium and scale and in sensitizing their audience" (Hashmi, 9). Thus one can say that the visual references that emerged from the

political scenario as the aftermath of forced and misconstrued Islamization were inheriting found feminist in nature. For example the representation of female body in art confronted several wars at the same time. 1. The aesthetic question of female body as an object of male gaze, 2. The social status of woman detained within the four walls and 3. The political question of rendering human figure as a sin. In such a battle the women artists through their work exposed the hypocrisy of the prevailing politics, highlighted the plight of women, challenged the social norms, recognized their potent, celebrated womanhood and entered a mainstream art market.

## **5. Feminism Redefined in Pakistani Context**

If the central task of feminism is to reveal the fact of injustice towards women, the goal was achieved by uncovering and analyzing social practices, institutions and pattern of thought as sponsored by political and religious patriarchy. Consequently, these have also been some of the main concerns of feminist art in the West. Thus, unconsciously or unknowingly, Pakistani women produced art, which was essentially feminist in nature and is found congruent to the general or universal understanding of feminism as defined above. Once again proving the point that in Pakistani context, women in art have always been more politically charged and socially aware. Thus there are 'feminist' streaks more prominent in their work as compared to just the 'feminine' concerns in terms of being opinionated and activist of women rights in first case and of ladylike and about being frail in the later which essentially reinforce the ideas of male supremacy. Moreover, as determined above, the art in Pakistan blurs boundaries between art and criticism, between art and politics and between theory and practice, it perfectly befits the ideals of feminist art as proposed by Hein (287). Not only Hein but Battersby too while reflecting upon Feminism in Western societies confirms that feminist aesthetics and feminism both share the experiential instigation as a point of departure and that feminism by its nature depends upon an aesthetics of experience because feminist theory must revert to experience for its formation. Thus the social injustice, the political anarchy, the religious bigot that the Pakistani women experienced during the period under discussion, along with the political and historical baggage of a colonial past, partition or of politicized religion prompted them towards aesthetic expressions. This is where the local ideas of feminism are in harmony with that in the West.

On the other hand it is to be noted that though the visual vocabulary stayed totally different here, in Pakistani context, than the Western diction and one finds symbolic representations in the works of not only this core group, who signed the manifesto but in the generation that they taught and trained. This second generation including Nazish Atallah, to

name one while the list can go on, used emblems like *chader* and stains as compared to the rebellious stance in west e.g. Cindy Sherman's images of exposed, uncovered women. The symbolic representation encouraged women artists in Pakistan turn towards the traditional art that favours abstraction. This is another point of conflict with that of Western feminism that rejected traditional art because of its gender bias e.g. *Olympia* and *Odalisque* by Dominique Ingres where female representation is just the 'object of male gaze'. Here, traditional art due to its qualities of abstraction, stylization and symbolism supplied the rudiments over which the ideals of modernity could be established.

## **6. Conclusion**

To conclude, it is established that without consciously embracing feminism as 'a borrowed Western construct' or a product of various political 'waves' of nationalism, secularism, liberalism and anti-religious or intellectual streams of post-colonial, post-9/11 etc., feminist art was practiced and feminist aesthetics prevailed in Pakistan (Also see Zia, 2018). Or simply as Margot Badran would say that feminism has spread in different ways to different societies and emerged in hues and forms as varied as the nation-states that give it shape (1135), in Pakistan feminism didn't just ask for equal rights for women but it created political, social and intellectual awareness for all. The small group of women artists somewhere in 1980's set the tone of feminism by reclaiming their basic right of free expression, their identity of an individual and their role as a useful member of the society which infact conforms with the true spirit of Islam. The ultimate achievement of these artists, in the field of aesthetics is to connect Pakistani art with it's tradition while rejecting the so called modern aesthetics that was imposed onto us during the British Raj. Whether they wanted to do it or not is subject to separate inquiry but it just happened. Finally, the voice of few feminists artists help 'Pakistani woman' claim the loftier status that the religion denotes to her. It bestows her with a more concrete responsibility of nation building. It empowers a young lady, Benazir Bhutto, to be the leader of the state in 1988 and allows another, Malala Yousafzai, to contest for the noble prize in 2014. It also at some point rejects the Western feminism that discursively colonizes "the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world" (Mohanty, 62) and produces a single or a simple construct of third-world women. If women are vulnerable in here, where they are not is a question.

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