

Beauty out of Chaos: A Parallel Study of Pakistan's Trauma Art and Literature

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ABSTRACT: *Employing Tobin Siebers's notion of "trauma art" from his "The Return to Ritual: Violence and Art in the Media Age", this paper aims at a parallel examination of the co-presence of beauty and violence in selective works from renowned Pakistani artists like Imran Qureishi and Rashid Rana, and a contemporary Pakistani novel, Bilal Tanweer's The Scatter Here Is Too Great (2013). Art and writing in Pakistan took a new creative turn as an aftermath of a sequence of events that included 9/11 and widespread terrorism. The contemporary creative realm in Pakistan does not only aspire to discover new arenas with respect to aesthetics, but also delves into issues, which shape and are shaped by questions of culture, nationalism, and self. This paper attempts to investigate violence and its aestheticization in contemporary Pakistani art and fiction and to explore the extent to which it has succeeded in capturing our contemporary cultural scenario. Furthermore, it examines how artists and writers simultaneously challenge this turmoil through creating a thematic binary of hope and resilience. This paper challenges the notion of considering Pakistani art and fiction only a cultural product of our politically electrified and instable state and establishes that it is, simultaneously, a resultant of our richly creative and persevering spirits. Consequently, this study aspires to intrigue researchers interested in similar domains and calls attention to contemporary Pakistani art and literature, encouraging interdisciplinary research.*

Keywords: Trauma Art, Aestheticization of Violence, Contemporary Pakistani art and fiction

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Introduction

Art and fiction produced within Pakistan for the past decade has been occupied with themes of violence and even in the present day conditions, which are better than what they have been in the past, violence and the fear have had an overpowering bearing in the contemporary Pakistani picture. This paper deals with analyzing images of violence in a comparatively recent novel, *The Scatter Here Is Too Great* (2013) by Bilal Tanweer, placing it parallel to the diverse forms of art and installations produced within the country. However, this study also comments on the ability of Pakistani art and literature to evoke sentiments of aesthetic value, like those of artistic satisfaction, beauty, and hope, besides imparting a sense of violence and paranoia within the observers. It also discusses the role of this ‘trauma art’ to act as a cultural signifier for the Pakistani society, a reality which unifies the community, both nationally and globally.

There have been debates in the past regarding imitation of the West and how this practice makes us distant and indifferent to our own cultural values. As a reaction, attempts were made to re-explore our identity and cultural roots. Artists and writers began to centralize their narratives mostly around issues which were culturally and socially significant in the context of Pakistan. An important issue in this regard is of what makes up culture. According to Siebers’s essay, a culture is born out of collective representations which in turn are an amalgam of consciousness of individuals. At the same time, representation of violence in a community serves as the index of culture formation. This study also delves into discovering if rehabilitation of traumatized societies is possible through art and fiction of this sort, whether it can generate a cathartic effect and act as a detoxifying agent for a nation’s wounds.

Before delving into the above-mentioned arena, it is important to consider if we are a traumatized nation at all, because apparently we are considered more of a desensitized nation than a traumatized one. In an article “In Pakistan, a National Literature Struggles to be Born”, Nolen presents an interview with Mohammed Hanif, who she says disagrees with Karachi’s leading psychiatrist’s claim that the entire city is suffering from a mild case of post-traumatic stress disorder; Hanif said “You can only have post-traumatic stress disorder when you know it’s behind you. Anyone in Karachi will tell you, regardless of their position in life; the worst is yet to come.” This certainly was said in a satiric tone, characteristic of Hanif’s style. But what the statement in fact conveys is

that we, as a nation are traumatized with something more, a state in which we cannot surely tell if we will live to see another day. Contrasted with this slightly pessimistic approach in the same article, is Daniyal Mueenuddin's, who says, "Living on the lip of a volcano focuses the mind in peculiar ways, makes a man fatalistic and pessimistic. It also I think makes me somewhat carefree – what do I have to lose, my country is going to the dogs, all the trends are down and down – might as well play, for tomorrow everything I cherish may be blown to kingdom come". A reader might read his statement as even more pessimistic than Hanif's but for me it confirms in our people a presence of resilience, a quality of not giving up in the face of calamity.

Bilal Tanweer adopts a similar stance in his debut novel which is primarily about a bomb blast in the city of Karachi. Tanweer unfolds the narrative through different voices, travelling back and forth in time and unraveling the effects of the incident on the lives of characters. He begins his novel with a quote from Van den Berg as a prelude, which reads: "We are continually living a solution to problems that reflection cannot hope to resolve" (np).

This statement is at once pessimistic and optimistic. Living in a world where reflection and rationale cannot be depended upon to offer solution to issues is problematic, because after all, that is one of the few things mankind thought it could depend upon for his salvation. But at the same time, the very act of 'living' in a world where pessimism, a sense of purposelessness and lethargy makes one's getting out of bed a huge task, determines that there is still a beacon of light waiting to welcome us at the end of every exhaustive day. Similarly, Tanweer ends his acknowledgements with these Urdu verses which stay with a reader after a first reading of the text; "Yaqeen jo gham se kareem-tar hai/ Sahar jo shab se azeem-tar hai" (203). Roughly translated as "Faith, more generous than agony / Dawn, mightier than the dusk", these verses fill the reader with sufficient hope after having read an account of utmost brutality.

A similar kind of involvement with violence is observed in the works of Pakistani artists. Their motive is to not just offer a journalistic account of Pakistani socio-cultural scenario, but to create art which possesses the capability to evoke sentiment and generate a response from the audience, significantly adding to their understanding of the world. In a report of the exhibition "Hanging Fire", Daisy Yiyou Wang reported how Rashid Rana, to a question regarding artists failing to address the most significant 'social issues', responded saying "reportage was a job

for journalists, not artists”. Although artists like fiction writers try to avoid carrying the burden of representation, they have been successful in creating what Khuram Hussain in his article “Art and Free Expression in Pakistan” refers to as a “new humanist sensibility within art” which ensured that art as a Pakistani cultural product contained equal meaning and understanding for the rest of the world too, thus creating what Siebers calls “transubstantiation” within art (22).

This paper focuses on three main concerns serving as a nucleus to other issues addressed through this research; the first is the depiction and aestheticization of violence in contemporary works and if this depiction serves as a cultural signifier and lends meaning, the second concern remains the function of such art to enable a collective understanding, response and global connection and its ability to stir complacent spirits, the third is the artists/writers attempt to give hope through their works even in the face of splintered, fractured surroundings.

Wassily Kandinsky, a renowned painter, gave his insight on art saying “Every work of art is the child of its age and, in many cases, the mother of our emotions” (Railing 1). This is particularly true with respect to contemporary art and fiction in which the meaning of ‘aesthetic’ is very differently perceived. Artists and writers these days strive to portray reality as it exists, fictionalizing it in a way that the boundaries between the real and virtual are blurred. The inspiration for this paper is contemporary Pakistani art and fiction and the aestheticization of widespread violence through it. This paper’s main concern thus remains the question of whether violence in Pakistan is trivialized through its aestheticization or if it is established as a cultural signifier.

Tobin Siebers, an author of books on disability aesthetics and an English professor, in his article “The Return to Ritual: Violence and Art in the Media Age” has given the notion of “trauma art”. Tobin argues that trauma art or contemporary art centered on themes of violence and disability is a signifier for American culture. Alluding to Hal Foster’s book *The Return of the Real: Art and Theory at the End of the Century*, and the film *American Beauty*, he starts off his argument and says that new art forms are emerging in the contemporary cultural scenario which are not hesitant in the display of “wounded bodies and traumatized flesh”; this Siebers suggests is “trauma art” (11).

Siebers furthers his stance saying that such pieces are not mere artworks or depictions of social violence alone, but provide a plane

where violence and culture somehow intersect, lending meaning to each other. Thus establishing that violence is indispensable to the formation of cultural reality and it is through portrayal of violence that we can get a clearer picture of a particular culture; in Siebers's own words: "Violence serves as an index of culture" (13). However, this picture is not a definite and final one because this cultural portrayal is projected from a "specimen" and does not encapsulate depiction of a society in entirety (14). Subsequently, Siebers suggests that trauma art is helping us pin down what culture would mean in the following years, while simultaneously recording the change cultural aesthetics are undergoing in the present years.

Art these days is no longer relied upon to provide solace; neither is violence garbed in an aesthetically pleasing frame appreciated; onlookers hope for representations which are closest to the real. The irony of our postmodern times however is that a dozen television channels ambushing insights and targeting our consciousness cannot lend satisfaction to our reality-craving souls. This hunger for accessibility to the real (which is next to impossible) is almost inescapable and this is part of why trauma art is so readily accepted. It invites the reader/onlooker to an image of violence, and she deems it absolutely beautiful – beautiful here can be nearly equated to real – but is simultaneously repelled by this encounter with what she conceives to be the truth.

According to Siebers, trauma art elicits a kind of "transubstantiation" where particular images no longer require a particular language to communicate meaning but rather become such powerful symbols that they evoke a collective understanding and a collective response (15). This brings to my mind objects of surveillance and spying gadgets implored in Pakistani fiction like that of Mohammed Hanif's or installations and paintings by Pakistani artists like drone images in works of Mahwish Chishti and Abdullah Syed. Siebers contests that it is through an amalgamation of individuals' consciousness that collective representations are born; quoting Durkheim, he says: "it is only by expressing their feelings, by translating them into signs, by symbolizing them externally, that the individual consciousnesses, which are, by nature, closed to each other, can feel that they are communicating and are in unison" (16).

The title of his article "Return to Ritual" is derived from the above mentioned phenomena. Considering ritual an area where "meaning is invested, crystallized, or displayed", trauma art facilitates such a stage,

rather becomes a canvas where cultural meaning is formed and understood via symbolism of objects at display, without depending upon language to communicate meaning (16). Thus trauma art from a particular community becomes an external entity rather than internal; a cup of wine accessible to all men of understanding, wherefrom they can not only drink, but pour more (ideas) into it for future generations. It has, according to Siebers, an element of “virtual community” at its core and involves “a projection, to a transcendental location, of the image of community desired by a particular community” (18). This is another reason why aestheticization of violence in art is considered commendable, and rather beautiful.

Siebers keeps returning to the ability of contemporary art to carry surplus meaning i.e. it not only represents widespread violence as it is but also conveys that this violence is being subjected somewhere, that humans like ourselves are the victims of brutality and suffering. It not only paints realities like death, disability, or injustice on to the canvas, but literally shakes people out of complacency, looking them in the eye, and telling them what their reality is. Where it establishes a cultural identity, it also suggests “exhaustion of culture” (15). Another question that this paper aims to answer is then whether contemporary artists employ violence in their works as a manifesto, exposing it to bring about a change or as a protest against the brutalities prevalent in the world around them, whether it serves as a mere documentation of what it is like to live a paranoid, panic-stricken life or as an account of resilience and perseverance in the face of an endangered living.

Trauma art is considered ‘art’ in its finest form because it is perhaps easier to depict a situation which suggests brutality, like the sixteenth century Titian’s *Tarquin and Lucretia*, but it is quite a difficult task to make an art or fictional piece “shoulder the burden of meaning” in a culture, i.e. to not only make it accessible to be read as an account of human suffering but to call forth realization that this is not fictional but real, that this is not individual, but collective, that it not only invokes pity but dread and horror (19). It is then that through its cultural and collective significance does chaotic violence stir complacent sentiments and transforms into something utterly beautiful.

Although Siebers has theorized aestheticization of violence in contemporary times and has been accredited with coining the term ‘trauma art’, other aestheticians before him have also observed and theorized the co-occurrence of beauty with qualities of opposed nature. David Hume in his essay “Of the Standard of Taste” says that Beauty is

merely an idea in the mind of the beholder and is “no quality in things themselves” (394). He says that looking for real beauty or real deformity can be understood in relation to deeming something “real sweet” or “real bitter”; he says that “the same object may be both sweet and bitter” (394). Similarly, art and fiction can be beautiful and violent, serene and chaotic at once.

This paper employs the idea of trauma art as a cultural signifier and as a simultaneous carrier of violence and beauty to explore the art works of Imran Kureishi and Rashid Rana and draws parallels with Bilal Tanveer's *The Scatter Here Is Too Great*. Images that act as symbols in both the novel and artworks will be paid special attention to and cross references to Pakistani artists and writers other than the ones mentioned will be made for a holistic analysis. The aim is to draw attention to this comparatively less-attended field in Pakistan and suggest its importance as not just a shaper of our individual consciousness and collective truth but also as a marker of our cultural reality globally. Through this paper I hope to take charge of allotting meaning to a Pakistani cultural product which is otherwise either done by the West or by Pakistani scholars with years of experience.

Bilal Tanveer's novel, usually reviewed as having a structure resembling that of a short story collection, can be traced out as a journey; it consists of three sections, the first is titled “The Scatter Here Is Too Great”, and consists of an image of a bullet-hole in a car's windscreen, the second titled “Your Wounds Are Your Eyes”, and compares the same bullet-hole image to a wound, in both cases a point through which a sharper vision/focus develops, the third is titled “Maps of a New City”, in which the protagonist has found a way to recovery from trauma, where the bullet hole now represents “a new territory... new paths, new boundaries” for him (161). Following the pattern of the novel it discusses, this paper is also divided into three sections, each discussing the journey from devastation to recovery, alongside focusing on the thematic parallels with contemporary Pakistani art.

Going back in history and tracing events that outlined Pakistan's independence in the 1940s, her birth was not as glorious a business as is normally presented; it was a division, a partition, it had to be born out of violence. Before we could establish a strong foothold in the newly-acquired homeland, a series of wars and political turmoil followed, making us a nation vulnerable to be victimized. Throughout these years artists and writers have acted as revolutionaries, simultaneously informing and shaking the nation out of their slumber. In the past decade

or so, artists, as discussed earlier, have been occupied with both portraying the motherland as being a subject to transgression and brutality and simultaneously awakening a hope for a better future.

Bilal Tanweer in *The Scatter Here Is Too Great* provides a vivid, graphic description of the ubiquitous violence looming as a threat in the city of Karachi by narrating an incident of a bomb blast through several narrators, each of them having a close or remote connection to the affected. According to Chambers, he explores “Karachi’s terrible beauty, while always remaining alert to the teeming narratives of the city’s inhabitants”. He starts off with an image of a smashed windscreen which according to Tanweer is a metaphor for Karachi, at the same time “broken” and “beautiful” (1). For Tanweer and for his readers, this site of destruction is not devoid of purpose, nor is trauma the only meaning it imparts; rather, it becomes a contemplative stage, where the “crystal design”, the “sharp clean web” holds the affairs of the city within itself. Nadeem Aslam in an appraisal, remarks on the aesthetic quality of such an image saying “certain things are more beautiful and valuable for having been broken” (1).

The novel is a eulogy for a city having been bled dry, emanating a sense of perpetual loss, a city which was previously referred to as the city of lights is now overshadowed by hues of grey, black, and red. It is as if Tanweer is mourning on behalf of Karachi, disappointed by its citizens who promised to be caretakers, men who are now indulgent only in keeping their valuables under constant surveillance, lest someone might steal them. The city on the other hand is like the selfless, devoted mother who forgives their recklessness and would gladly give up her last drop of blood, just so her kids find comfort and solace. Recording the mayhem and turbulence in the “ruinously mad city”, Tanweer has presented images of bloodshed, filth, and rotteness (175). Whether he talks about the littered, stinking seaside, or men urinating in the streets, whether he gives an account of “heap(s) of burned garbage, excreting a rancid smell” (28) or “roasted bodies, skulls pierced with bits of shrapnel—soft and musty with blood” (62), he soon after injects a shot of positivity within his readers.

Tanweer has written about Karachi with much love and familiarity, a narrative which Mohammed Hanif refers to as “a blood-soaked love letter to Karachi”. Pakistani artists like Imran Qureshi and Rashid Rana handle the themes of violence in a similar manner. Qureshi is a world-acclaimed Pakistani artist whose representation of violence is at once breathtakingly beautiful and advocates much hope and resilience.

Trained as a miniature artist, Qureshi experiments with form and content, lending a contemporary touch to his works. He is famously known for his installations on rooftops and is fascinated by introducing dualities in his works; in an interview with Aisha Farooq, he says “the idea is about death and life, or violence and beauty, and violence and hope”. His forte is what looks like abstract blotches of spilled blood from a distance but upon closer inspection they unfold as a beautiful pattern of foliage and painted in miniature. Although themes of violence in his work emerged as a reaction to bombings in Lahore, they do not exhibit utter devastation and he refers to them as “shoots of hope”, recommending the possibility of regeneration and rehabilitation.



Fig.1. “And How Many Rains Must Fall Before the Stains are Washed Clean.”, Qureshi, Imran. *Islamic Arts Magazine*. Accessed 5 Mar. 2018.

He is similar to Tanweer in that his work is inspired from a sense of loss, of what his city used to be and to what has it come down. Another similarity is their preoccupation with the deteriorating landscape. While Tanweer portrays a Karachi where the “unforgiving spectacle” of the bomb blast (37) has made everything look “scratched and seared”, where “buildings (look) like live charcoals” and all that can be seen is “tar and scrapes of fire” (61), Qureshi takes up the challenge of depicting bleeding trees through a union of abstract and miniature art forms.



Fig.2. “Where the Shadows are so Deep.” Digital image. Fewings, Tristan. Getty Images. Accessed 5 Mar. 2018.

Tanweer’s depiction of an apocalyptic scenario in Karachi where the “city is dying”, figures resembling Gog and Magog are seen roaming the streets and where “soon we will only have crows and rats left” (156), can be read parallel to Qureshi’s depiction of trees in the painting above where the usual green is falling, referring to deterioration in natural landscape, while the one that stands erect is the color of blood itself. This work at the Barbican Curve depicts his sensibility to feel for the degradation of natural environment and addresses his ecological concerns.



Fig.3. Red Carpet. Rana, Rashid. Modernedition.com. Web. Accessed 5 Mar. 2018.



Fig.3. Red Carpet. (Zoomed in View) Rana, Rashid. Digital image. Modernedition.com. Web. Accessed 5 Mar. 2018.

Another contemporary Pakistani artist who shares an interest in depicting scenes of violence with mixed feelings of glee and resentment is Rashid Rana who had been trained as an artist but now invests his time in the

use of mixed mediums of photography, sculpture, digital printmaking etc. Ashley Lee commented on the 'dual' nature of his work saying "All of Rana's works are about dualities; though many address the clichés of sex and violence, his newer works are more conceptually challenging, exploring the validity of history, social constructs of beauty and the ubiquitous digital mediation of everyday life" (Art Asia Pacific). His forte, as observed from his artworks is photomontages in which he acquires photographs of a particular kind, either pornographic, of dung heaps and trash, or violent images of blood, rearranging, manipulating and superimposing the tiny pixels in a manner as to deliver a larger mosaic depicting something beautiful.

Rana's inspiration also comes from his surroundings; describing where he gains his motivation from, he says "My work is often a three-way negotiation between myself, my immediate physical surroundings and what I receive – whether through the Internet, books, history or collective knowledge". His art of juxtaposing and remixing can be observed in his *Veil Series* (2004), *Carpet Series* (2007) and another project titled *The World is Not Enough*. For his *Red Carpet Series*, Rana was inspired from the ritual of sacrificing animals in Pakistan the sight of which was "uncomfortable" for him as a child. Thus he decided to visit several slaughterhouses, taking pictures of the 'mechanical' ritual and in an interview he commented on how the camera (the middle medium) made it bearable for him to photograph blood. Combining and rearranging hundreds of images, he gave it a form of the Persian rug which is a common decoration item used in almost all Pakistani homes. Thus he successfully used an item which is a cultural signifier already, altering its meaning for spectators, transliterating these images to carry "surplus meaning" (Siebers) in order to initiate a silent dialogue on the socio-political turmoil in the country.

Gillian Rose in his chapter "Visual Methodologies" quotes Stuart Hall's idea of "Codes" or "wider systems of meaning", describing which he says that they refer to "more profound knowledges" or systems of "making meaning that are specific to" a culture (74-75). It is important to notice that images of animal killing or bird burning for instance are disturbing for many cultures but particularly in the Pakistani context where violence and blood is widespread, depictions of this sort are especially intriguing because animal sacrifice is something Muslims hold in much respect and reverence. Thus when an observer reads the palmist/painter in Tanweer's novel claiming: "I cannot see animals suffer. It's terrible" (156), or Imran Qureshi's blood-splattered walls and

floors in a beautiful foliage pattern, or Rashid Rana's images of slaughterhouses camouflaged as a beautiful Persian rug, it has a greater impact because of a) being situated in a culture which has such ideas at the core of its foundation and b) being distanced from the implied i.e. human massacre and bloodshed.

Contemporary artworks and Tanweer's narrative is also similar in terms of structure and technique. Both Qureshi and Rana have adopted a technique whereby they have doubly distanced the audience from the real; what we observe as spectators is the manifestation of an idea conceived in the mind of an artist who was inspired from real surroundings, and on top of that they have given it a form which distances them from direct perception unless they choose to look closely. Similar is the structuring of Tanweer's fragmented narrative which is like scattered shards of glass that only begin to make sense if the reader closely 'listen(s)', a practice repeatedly stressed and requested by the author. It is upon paying close attention that understanding is initiated and images of violence transform into things of beauty.

The Wound is the Place Where Light Enters You

Reading the title to Bilal Tanweer's second section "Your wounds are your eyes", I was reminded of Rumi's quote "The wound is the place where light enters you" which also serves as an appropriate title for the second section of this paper. Having discussed Pakistani art and writings' inclination towards depicting violence as a cultural signifier, I come to the simultaneous illustrations of hope and perseverance, also characteristic of these works. Tanweer, as a description of his statement, mentions "That's how it is—our wounds become our eyes. Seeing outside becomes seeing inside" (65). Thus, having reached a stage where one has become familiar with the widespread violence and brutality, one starts to look within, the contemplation becomes more internal and a transcendental flight is underway. Sufi philosophers have repeatedly dealt with a similar idea where starvation, tattered belongings, or fractured relationships don't matter anymore because the meaning of the universe has transcended beyond the merely visible – they begin seeing beauty in ugliness, mercy in adversary.

Artists and writers are individuals who are sensitive to social issues and try adopting a format which creates an impact; an online article published in *Dawn* titled "Art Exhibition on 'Peace Versus Intolerance'" refers to artists' sensitivity to capture reality and present it as something better: "A surge of peaceful endeavors aimed at developing

sensitivity towards socio-political issues can be the balm that heals the blistered fabric of our collective psyche. Artists in particular tend to take on this positive role as they have their finger on the pulse of the times and can communicate effectively, yet subtly and even beautifully, the bitter predicaments that need to be addressed". This is exactly what Bilal Tanweer in his novel and other contemporary artists have strived to achieve.

It has been discussed in the first section how Tanweer represents the gruesome reality of Karachi as a repercussion to the violence prevalent in the city but it is important to notice how he simultaneously addresses the city as one of the few in the world to have a sea (11). He reveals the Pakistani spirit where people do not require palaces and gems to make them happy, but rather it is the joy in the tiniest events of everyday life which uplifts their spirits. The protagonist's Baba (father) teaches him to look at the world with rose-colored glasses, to imagine positivity, closing his eyes and treating the darkness therein as a blackboard to draw happy things on in times of distress, thus making him a Dumbledore-like figure who would recommend "Happiness can be found, even in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light" (Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban). The protagonist resembles artists and writers who imagine the extremes and paint pictures that are palpable for their audience. He draws a "white horse with wings, lots of green hills... and shining gold, red, ruby red colors surrounding them", imagining the practically impossible, yet creatively possible in his mind (12).

Similarly, as the aftermath of the bomb blast when Sukhanaz's grandson takes his girlfriend to the seaside, they spot splatters of blood because an unknown human's body part hit the car. He has seen what it was that hit the car and wants the terrible image to be out of his mind; he says "I fought with my memory and tried to imagine it to be something else" (41). This could both refer to repression and selective amnesia and to the only survival strategy these people have, but what is noticeable is that it does not deprive him of observing the phenomenal beauty of the seaside; he observes "a pink moon over the sky, looking like a faint dabble in broad sunlight. The migratory birds crisscrossed and flapped like a film reel in the air" and for the first time in all his years, he "felt the sea in a new way. It did not seem like the end of the city", rather, felt like a new beginning (40).

In the same vein, Sukhanaz's son who had just experienced a bomb blast very close to his house and is in a state of shock, fearful for

his life, reminisces of his newborn's birth and it fills him up with a strange awe, an uncanny fulfillment. In a moment when he fears doom so much that he is choking out of breath, he is able to conceive the image of his son's birth and all of a sudden he feels as if he is "looking at Life itself, a presence of something divinely new, as if you had just begun a life outside yourself, and nothing, not even death, could damage all your dying rotting parts that you felt each day" (46). This consciousness of wounds and being able to see across them is also observable when the protagonist wants to find escape and is on a bunk with his friend Sadeq; he describes the bus as having "floral patterns flowing along the window panels turned into spirals and whorls and peacock feathers and feminine eyes" (69), confirming the possibility of creativity and imagination even in a terror-stricken zone. The novel also serves as a bildungsroman for the unnamed protagonist who is a sub-editor at a newspaper and has seen a lot of violence and devastation. In the last section of the novel he tells how a cup of tea is enough to serve as his "daily salvation" and bring about a "glorious emptiness" to his life; the two words juxtaposed together to convey the feeling of being cleansed and contended (165).

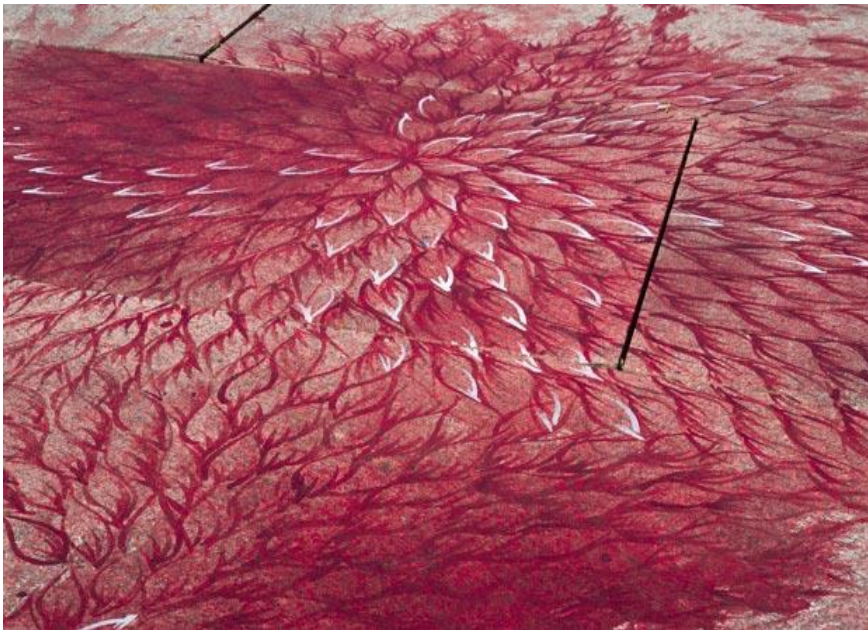


Fig.4. And How Many Rains Must Fall Before the Stains Are Washed Clean, Qureshi, Imran. Islamic Arts Magazine. Accessed 5 Mar. 2018.



Fig.5. "Blessings upon the Land of My Love." Qureshi, Imran. Digital image. Artbook. Accessed 5 Mar. 2018.

So when Imran Qureshi camouflages beautiful foliage patterns in blood splashes or refers to a work smeared with blood imagery as "Land of My Love", he is not just telling or showing, but challenging, contesting through the idea that life and survival is possible under adverse conditions too. One must bear in mind that blood images do not suggest death and devastation alone. Blood is the most significant component in one's body, and the same fluid which causes both life and death. Perhaps because of this reason Qureshi has employed miniature techniques to depict the beauty and intricacy of the entire business. Simultaneously, he uses hues of blue and green along with the red which again registers his approach towards the life-giving nature of water. Qureshi, in an online exhibition overview for *The Roof Garden Commission*, states of his use of red in depicting trees that "they are mingled with the color of blood,

but, at the same time, this is where a dialogue with life, with new beginnings and fresh hope starts".

Similarly, Rana's artworks are not a call suggesting doom and death, but rather are invitations of a negotiation with our present and our reality. As his interview with Lisson Gallery suggests, his "unpacked abstraction" infused with minute details challenges the notions of ideal beauty and consequently presents disturbing images of the real, igniting a spark of acknowledgement and realization within the observers.



Fig.6. "Infiltration/Inflow." Qayyum, Tazeen. Digital image. Art Asia Pacific. Accessed 5 Mar. 2018.

Worthy of mention here is another contemporary artist, Tazeen Qayyum's work called *Infiltration* which features countless cockroach-like red insects which according to the artist once represented the countless who died in the war on Terror. Now, however, she has restructured these cutouts in a circular, building-up manner to represent union and resilience in the face of war and adversary. Thus is reshaping and repurposing of objects that look like disease-carrying insects to something mesmerizing, is similar to Tanweer's portrayal of crows lunging together to pick bits of food from the seaside in Karachi, manifesting a free spirit despite the fact that they had to eat from waste; Tanweer says "In some sense, the crows embodied the spirit of the city itself. To me, they looked like litter with wings" (86). This analogy of the crows and city being "litter with wings" is especially significant with

respect to people of the city being high-spirited despite being located in and rising from litter. It reminds us of a phoenix rising from ashes or flies depending on garbage and dung for their growth. It tells how the same elements, like blood, can be life-giving and nurturing, while simultaneously be deadly and lethal, it is just the way we suppose them to be. The narrator tells how his father repeatedly stressed on the idea of a city being “all about how you look at it”, he said, “We must learn to see it in many ways, so that when one of the ways of looking hurts us, we can take refuge in another way of looking. You must always love the city” (Tanweer 87). Loving the “land of your (my) love” (Qureshi), and always opening the third eye to observe the otherwise insubstantial things of beauty is a must at all times.

At the end of the second span in his novel, Tanweer through Akbar’s brother conveys the strategy for living in a world like that of Karachi’s. After having encountered life in its most brutal form, he decides to live it fully because the end is sure to come. He has an approach like that of Mueenuddin’s, who having resigned himself from taking troubles of a life which he knows is temporary, feels “liberated” instead of despairing. Thus, submitting oneself to making every moment worthwhile, one is able to “see things with a clear eye” and live a fuller life (158).

Maps of a New City: Conversations, Collective Consciousness, and Global Connection

In the third section of the novel titled “Maps of a New City”, Tanweer extends the metaphor of the bullet hole, this time calling it a “new territory” which recommends leaving behind the chaos and discovering new perceptions, new arenas. This newness facilitates new meanings to be formed and new realizations and resolutions to be conceived. The meanings and realizations formed as a result of atrocities in a society and moving beyond them, however, are both individual and collective. Siebers in his article informs that trauma art usually has an element of virtual community at its center which means that notions conceived through virtual art inform not just the consciousness of an individual but helps shaping a community’s collective truth. This in turn might challenge and negotiate with global perception of a particular culture, thus forming a global connection through trauma art.

Tanweer in his novel gives much room to the idea of collective understanding and response and gets it across through repeated mention of conversations and voices that need to be communicated. The famous

notion of an idea being just an idea in one's mind till it is shared with the world is important for Tanweer in this respect; he wants his readers to pay attention, to listen, and to form a connection with their surroundings as well as the text. While the novel serves as a platform for social commentary, it also serves as a pathway to question stationary lifestyles, encouraging motion and activity within the Pakistani society as well as internationally.

For Tanweer, storytelling is a way of reimagining the violence-stricken world, simultaneously creating an invisible connection where readers might have differing yet similar responses; quoting the narrator in *The Scatter Here Is Too Great*, "Once you tell somebody a story, you all are in the same world and you can all speak to each other about the same things and understand the same things" (194). Similarly, describing his father's take on storytelling (something he initially disagrees with but finally comes to terms with), he says "My father imagined the world and each object as part of continuous stories... Things had reasons and they all connected" (185). This connection in a world characterized by alienation and mistrust is what writers and artists strive to establish.

Gillian Rose in her chapter on "Visual Methodologies" stresses upon the importance of "social effects of meaning" formed by the reception of an image by a particular audience (76). These social effects might be positive or negative but they are not generated through the reception by an individual, but via the conversational nature of the written word or a visual object. Tanweer regards such conversations as the foundation of human connection because they perform the function of unifying dissimilar ideas. Artists and writers like Tanweer initiate conversations through their works because they "want to be seen by others the way (they) see (themselves)" (32) and also because "we construct ourselves in our conversations" with others (85).

Through their works, artists are not only reshaping the global perception regarding Pakistan but also forming a bridge between the east and west. Violent images that carry a great deal of "surplus meaning" and positive attributes like beauty and hope, and are especially exhibited at museums and galleries around the world (not just within Pakistan), act as subversive tools which force the audience to walk in the shoes of a common Pakistani, something that Clements refers to as a need for "foreign eyes (to) turn local". Both Rashid Rana and Imran Qureshi as artists recognize this need to transcend the geophysical boundaries in order to address the global audience and this remains a basic concern for them. Aziz Sohail in his article "Blood and Beauty" comments on

Qureshi's installation where visitors were made to walk on what seemed like splattered blood: "The audience walked squeamishly onto what seemed to be pools of blood and absorbed Qureshi's intuitive understanding of the collective ethos of the Pakistani public, weary after years of unspeakable violence, destruction and chaos", thus giving them an idea that even if their country is not as much a target as Pakistan is, they are still bound by human connection to feel another's pain.

Similarly, the theme of red in Qureshi's works which is a direct representation of blood is also archetypal in its quality of being understood by the global audience. At the Barbican Curve, he had his exhibits arranged in such a manner that visitors experienced a shift of colour from brighter hues to darker, blacker ones. Sneha Joshi on her blog writes about the phenomenon; she says "I am taken back to Anish Kapoor, claiming that there is a blackness to red that is greater than black itself, when we close our eyes we see a black red that is the proximity of ourselves to our own body, our own blood, our first memories of being in the womb". Such attributes of Qureshi's work impart a one-on-one quality for the onlooker who feels connected via a strange web to the work, and thus to others viewing the same piece, making him traumatized with the realization that the danger of being victimized could be his own, that the loss could have been personal. Moreover, red stains on the walls and floor of the area gives a feeling of the Barbican Curve itself being a painting, directly implying that one is inside the painting, and is needed to make the image complete, rather than being an intent spectator only, thus demanding complete involvement with the work.

Tanweer also sets out to break the fourth wall in his novel by deliberately and consciously asking the readers to immerse themselves completely in the text. The extensive, repeated use of the word 'your' when the Comrade's son in the chapter "Lying Low" is recalling his past is used particularly as a device to involve the audience within the action occurring in the novel, in order to make them feel they are a part of the narrative action. In an interview, he stated how in the contemporary Pakistani scenario we are more interested in being informed of the how, when, and where of a tragic incident than by the actual tragedy; as in an interview with *Youlin Magazine*, he discloses how he considers his novel an attempt to "draw our attention towards the real tragedy, which is human suffering".

Taking forward and reiterating Madeline Clements's stance, these artworks and fictional writings have brought together the national and international readership to a) think anew the cultural interpretation of

violence within the Pakistani context b) develop a humanist sensibility towards texts and artworks that are culture specific and “reinvest them with personalized meaning” and c) renegotiate cultural meaning of beauty and violence and through it reinvestigate the relationship between the East and West.

Conclusion

Through the discussion above, it has been established that aestheticization of violence in Pakistan through art and fiction does not demonstrate its trivialization but rather validates it as an important cultural signifier, unifying not just the Pakistani community through an invisible bond of cultural consciousness, but also bringing the global audience together. Pakistani artists and fiction writers are not just involved in documenting their experiences with violence but also act as commentators and mediators, bridging the gap between the East and West. Shaking their readers out of complacency, they make them aware of their reality, to which most of us have become accustomed to, in turn making their work a matter of collective concern. Simultaneously, the Pakistani in their art speaks for itself, retaining its individuality despite its universal appeal; Rashid Rana, in an interview said that he was aspiring for a different kind of universality in his art where “visual language can reach people but still retain its own accent... retain its own specificities, yet be transnational”.

Pakistani art and literature in English also acts as a subversive tool to get our resistance recorded against Western notions of Pakistan. As per Foucault's principle of power, it is through the discursive interchange of cultural meaning that resistance is formed and that we are able to make sense of our ‘self’ as a nation. It is through globalizing our art and literature, and thus our culture that our “regime of truth” (Foucault qtd. in Rose) is discovered and we are able to reconstruct our truth by presenting our views and accounts of reality. In such a situation, artists and writers from Pakistan are ‘writing back’, owning their representations through these acquired regimes of truth (mediums) that they use to implore violence as our cultural signifier.

This paper also establishes that artworks and fiction from Pakistan carry both, violence and beauty, that they have an aesthetic appeal and a therapeutic quality which helps readers and observers attain a cathartic release from their current despair and imparts hope for the future. It assures that even in a city like Karachi, where “The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is

drowned” (Yeats 5-6), there is a possibility of imagination and creative potential to be evinced, of reconciliation and rehabilitation, a capacity for love, a space for sentiments to bloom.

There is a dire need to broadcast positive vibes in a world where the media keeps zapping in negativity in the minds of people. Tanweer’s novel establishes that even in a city “full of bottled-up grief” (178) where we are constantly conscious of moving towards annihilation, and doomsday is sure to come, we can still impart ideas to make our present brighter and worth-living. Depiction of the truth is important but most media sources create hyperreality, a more believable real, feeding the wrong wolf within us, keeping us under the illusion that our souls have been gratified. Artists and writers at such a mercurial time strive to portray the real such that our souls are fed and fulfilled, thus assuring the possibility of rehabilitation through art.

Literature and art produced within Pakistan hence acts as discursive sights, shaping people’s consciousness, making them aware of the temporality of their present, urging them to make most of it. This reminds me of the much-quoted dialogue from *Troy* in which Achilles says:

“The gods envy us; they envy us because we are mortal, because any moment might be our last. Everything’s more beautiful because we are doomed. You’ll never be lovelier than you are now. We will never be here again.”

In an age when most men aspired for glory in imitation of the gods, they were aware of transience and impermanence of life, and the beauty which was a byproduct of what the Japanese refer to as ‘mono no aware’. This confirms Dar’s observation that Pakistani artists still have the ability to “communicate effectively, yet subtly and even beautifully, the bitter predicaments that need to be addressed”, forming their own stories, saving their heritage from being lost. Lastly, this paper suggests that through engagement with artistic cultural products, the ‘booming’ Pakistani fiction will find self-sufficiency locally and globally, and it can be an important step towards its canonization.

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