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The Aesthetic of Retaliation and its Contribution to Society

Abstract

There is an ample literature on the political changes that took place under the military government of General Muhammad Zia-ul Haq and a few studies that explore the status of art under the censorship policies imposed, however, there are still many areas that need to be explored from the perspectives of art history and criticism. One such area is the focus of this study, wherein, art works are analyzed in terms of their main aesthetic content. The study maintains that various artists who were resilient against oppressive censorship collectively produced an aesthetic of retaliation which promoted freedom and insight in multiple ways. Although each of the artists discussed in the study require separate and detailed inquiry but still looking their notable works at one place helps in defining some common features.

Introduction

The development of art as a historical process is not contestable. There exists ample literature particularly after the emergence of modern art, wherein, art historians have linked development in arts to either the material conditions of a particular period or the emerging intellectual framework. For instance, Marxist art historians and critics understand art as a product of cultural evolution and progress, whereby, art integrated with culture through the determining economic conditions. They also maintain that visual arts cannot be explained unless the essential connection between artistic and social practices is not considered. Since social reality is a revolutionary development according to Marxists therefore art reflects such change in a comprehensive manner as the artists are inclined to serve the society.¹ The other camp observes art as a product of intellectual framework of the time period in which an artist exists. According to this perspective art reflects what is called *Weltanschauung*, which means a worldview of an individual or group, and therefore provides a window into thought, feeling and will practiced in a certain period. In this context, art is an expression of intellectual conceptions and experiential forms of a society.²

Both the above perspectives deem essential that in order to understand art, an art work should be seen as a product of its time in which both the social and psychological conditions have played significant roles. The social conditions mean the economic, cultural and political aspects of a social reality and the psychological conditions are the intellectual and emotional frameworks that respond to social conditions. The relationship between the social conditions and the psychological frameworks is inevitable since nothing happens in vacuum. But there are varieties of this relationship when we come to understand expression in art. There are art works that are in line with the social conditions, which means that the artist as a psychological contributor has accepted the social conditions. But there exists another scenario, which is less frequent than the former and that is when the psychological perspectives retaliate to certain social conditions. Such a confrontation becomes more obvious in cases when governments due to their political agendas impose certain censorship policies curbing fundamental rights. The artists, who are supporters of freedom of expression, do not accept such political agendas and therefore retaliate. Through their art works, they bring to light the atrocities of a political power and an alternative worldview in order to serve the society. This gives rise to a new aesthetic, which can be called aesthetic of retaliation characterized by an emotional and intellectual communication propagating freedom and insight. This study examines such a time period in the history of Pakistani art, when there emerged an aesthetic of retaliation under the strict censorship policies of dictatorship in the 1980s. It discusses individual art works in order to show how freedom and insight were advocated by the artists in an unprecedented and highly novel manner.

The Nature of Censorship

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¹ W. Eugene Kleinbauer and Medieval Academy of America, *Modern Perspectives in Western Art History: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Writings on the Visual Arts* (University of Toronto Press, 1989), 26.

² Sidney J. Blatt and Ethel S. Blatt, *Continuity and Change in Art: The Development of Modes of Representation* (Routledge, 2014), 4.

Censorship and dictatorship are integrally connected due to the very fact that the former contributes to the survival of the latter. Dictatorships are not elected governments and therefore there always exists a threat of revolt by the people. Censorship is practiced in order to reduce the possibility of a contrarian point of view amongst the public or to suppress voices that may question the legitimacy of the dictatorship. In case of elected governments or democracies, there exists censorship policy but it allows a reasonable critique of the government. In dictatorships, this has never been the case, instead the imprisonment and even killings of individuals who challenge authority are a norm. The dictatorial administration of General Muhammad Zia-ul Haq that was declared through Martial Law in 1977 can be seen as the darkest period for exercising freedom of expression. Commenting on the 11 years under Ziaul Haq, S. Akbar Zaidi wrote, “Of the numerous Pakistani rulers, the one person who single-handedly changed Pakistan, perhaps forever, but certainly for some decades, was the military dictator, General Mohammad Ziaul Haq”.³

The above was the case since the censorship policy of the dictatorship was an instrument of oppression. The censorship policy was twofold. One aspect came from the very logic of political stability and focused upon curbing freedom of expression. The other aspect was driven from the highly orthodox version of Islam that General Zia-ul Haq was inclined to impose. The censorship policy therefore acted on two fronts. One was to silence contrary opinions. I. A. Rehman commented that Zia-ul Haq “killed over a dozen newspapers with a single stroke of his pen”.⁴ The other front was to maintain a strict moral and ethical code in the name of Islam. The latter obviously supported the former. Robert W. Stern noted that “General Zia commanded a self-proclaimed ‘army of Islam’. That was how he legitimized its coup of 1977”.⁵ Both these aspects of the censorship policy were used to defame politically aware artists and vandalize their works. Quddus Mirza noted that artists such as Ijazul Hassan, A. R. Nagori and Salima Hashmi had to bear dictatorial suppression due to their works being critical of the dictatorship and showed the oppressive nature of the government. They were banned from displaying their works in state sponsored exhibitions. Artists like Iqbal Hussain and Colin David were banned in the name of morality, they were not allowed to publicly display their work due to the depiction of nudes and prostitutes.⁶

The above mentioned artists and their likes continued to express their worldviews through art even under harshest of circumstances. Some of them were imprisoned by the government and some were threatened by the hyperactive clergy of the time but such acts of violence could not stop them from expressing what they thought right. Ayesha Jalal rightly stated that “Zia may have ruled Pakistan with an iron fist, but he failed to capture the hearts and minds of Pakistan’s resilient intelligentsia and dynamic artistic community”.⁷ But what the hearts and minds of the dynamic artistic community expressed? What was the content of controversial art works? How they embodied a powerful message that was disturbing for the military authority? Let us examine.

Analysis of Art Works

Although there was quite a number of painters who were active during the Marshal Law but there were only a handful whose works were banned for public display. The rest of the painters either expressed apolitical ideas or conformed to state patronized genres of Calligraphy and Landscape painting. Amongst the artists who faced oppression by the military administration were Ijaz-ul Hassan, A. R. Nagori, Salima Hashmi, Iqbal Hussain, Colin David, Jamal Shah, Akram Dost and some of the feminist painters such as Rabia Zuberi, and Lala Rukh. Ijaz-ul Hassan was treated worst as he was kept in solitary confinement and was threatened to be executed.⁸ Salima Hashmi was instrumental in drafting the Manifesto for Women Artists of Pakistan, which was signed by 15 female artists. Apart from these artists, Sadequain, in the last decade of his career, produced works that did not challenge the government but still they provided seeds for a greater awareness.

All the above mentioned artists produced art works that provided an insight into the oppressive political climate and exemplified freedom of expression. Ijaz-ul Hassan used subtle and powerful symbolism of *Gulshan/Chaman* (garden) and *Bahar* (Spring) that were frequently used as a metaphor for an ideal state by revolutionary poets like Faiz Ahmad Faiz. The following painting by Ijaz-ul Hassan provides a view of a garden

³ The Media Group | Publishing Partner, “Special Report: Darkness Descends 1977-1988,” DAWN.COM, October 17, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1364410>.

⁴ “Ziaul Haq -- History’s Verdict | Special Report | Thenews.Com.Pk,” accessed June 7, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/556880-ziaul-haq-historys-verdict>.

⁵ Robert W. Stern, *Democracy and Dictatorship in South Asia: Dominant Classes and Political Outcomes in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001), 138.

⁶ Quddus Mirza, “Self-Censorship in Post-Zia Pakistan,” South Asia Citizens Web, June 4, 2020, <http://www.sacw.net/article1145.html>.

⁷ Ayesha Jalal, *The Struggle for Pakistan* (Harvard University Press, 2014), 247.

⁸ “Ijaz Ul Hassan: Pakistan’s Protest Artist | The Independent,” accessed June 6, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/ijaz-ul-hassan-pakistans-protest-artist-758809.html>.

seen from behind the bars. The dominant green colour that fills the whole painting is overtaken by a few leaves of red color that seem to swirl around a tree, which is the central subject. The red colour is a colour that remained a powerful symbol for Marxist and socialist revolutionary spirit. Ijazul Hassan, who was a furious critic of the military rule produced this work during the military rule of Zia-ul Haq expressing the idea of a revolution in the making. He worked in trade unions in the times of Ayub Khan and was inspired by ideas of socialist revolution.⁹ It should be kept in view that the state machinery was fully active to suppress any opposing trend but at the same time landscape painting was a preferred genre by the state. Ijaz-ul Hassan used the preferred genre, avoided figural representation, but still managed to put across a hope, an insight and the need for human freedom through a subtle metaphor. The composition of the painting is such that the red leaves immediately become the focus of attention. The expression of an opposing political idea in unfavorable circumstances through such a metaphor was indeed an ingenious move. The title of the painting ‘Glass Cage’ is again a powerful metaphor. It implies that one can watch what is happening around while being imprisoned. Moreover, glass can be broken, which means that the oppression can be dealt with.



Figure 1. Mian Ijaz ul Hassan, *Glass Cage*, Oil on canvas, 1979.

A R. Nagori used more direct symbolism. His 1982 Exhibition which was anti-military was banned by the government. He continued as a staunch critic of military rule and violence and in 1986, he managed to exhibit his work at Indus Art Gallery.¹⁰ In *Z for Zindabad*, he showed the General sitting on a pile of missiles. Commenting on his work, Mark Fineman wrote in Los Angeles Times, “perhaps nowhere were those troubles placed in sharper focus than in the indus gallery in karachi where an exhibit by artist a. R. Nagori sought to document zia’s legacy in series of angry paintings”.¹¹ He also used indirect symbolism where he would show wolves in military uniform.¹² The symbol of wolf certainly referred to the violent military government. In one of

⁹ “A Man of Many Talents, All of Them Laudable | Pakistan Today,” accessed June 6, 2020, <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2014/02/22/a-man-of-many-talents-all-of-them-laudable/>.

¹⁰ “The Art of Protest,” *Newsline* (blog), accessed June 7, 2020, <https://newlinemagazine.com/magazine/the-art-of-protest-2/>.

¹¹ “A R Nagori: A Retrospective | Artnow,” accessed June 7, 2020, <http://www.artnowpakistan.com/a-r-nagori-a-retrospective/>.

¹² Vigilante violence in Pakistan isn’t new Remember the attack on Colin David’s house? | Tea Break, on August 8, and 2011 at 6:48 Pm Said, “Vigilante Violence in Pakistan Isn’t New. Remember the Attack on Colin David’s House?,”

his paintings, a wolf howling at the periphery of a city. The color scheme is dark and symbolizes the political climate.



Figure 2. Abdul Rahim Nagori, *Z for Zindabad*, Oil on Canvas, 1985.



Figure 3. Abdul Rahim Nagori, *Untitled*, Oil on Canvas, 1980s.

Salima Hashmi, the daughter of great revolutionary poet, Faiz Ahmad Faiz meant the crux of what her father stood for in the painting entitled ‘Zones of Dreams’. The plight of the visionary poet is expressed in his poem *Subh-e Azaadi* that starts with the couplet:

Yeh daagh daagh ujaalaa, yeh shab gazidaa seher

Woh intezaar tha jiska, yeh woh seher to nahin

Translation: This light, smeared and spotted, this night-bitten dawn, This isn’t surely the dawn we waited for so eagerly.¹³

The painting shows a tarnished map of the post-Partition Subcontinent with dark clouds hovering above. The color scheme used and the markings on the canvas all refer to an undesirable state of affairs. Salima Hashmi did not paint an event or a realistic scene, she instead has taken a bird’s eye view to express the idea that the loss of a

Journeys to Democracy (blog), August 8, 2011, <https://beenasarwar.com/2011/08/08/vigilante-violence-in-pakistan-isnt-new-remember-the-attack-on-colin-davids-house/>.

¹³ “Subh-e-Azadi, An Anguished Evocation of the Pain of Partition,” *The Penguin Digest* (blog), August 14, 2017, <https://penguin.co.in/the-penguindigest/subh-e-azadi-an-anguished-evocation-of-the-pain-of-partition/>.

dream means the loss of a nation, of a country. The title of the painting 'Zones of Dreams' obviously refers to the Partition scenario when two distinct points of view separated a region into two nations. The emergence of Pakistan was a result of a choice of gaining independence and freedom. If we contextualize this work in the 1980s, it clearly conveys the idea that the existing political vision is far removed from the dream of freedom. The oppressive military regime was the never the future of the land we were promised in 1947. With this painting, she enables the viewer to rethink, compare and contrast between the original and modified ideals of the country. The artist invites a rethinking and therefore provides an insight through the mere selection of a map and its treatment through rusted colors.



Figure 4. Salima Hashmi, *Zones of Dreams*, Oil on canvas, 1980s.

Salima Hashmi's stance became more pronounced in the Manifesto for the Women Artists of Pakistan that looked for the noblest ideals of a free, rational and civilized existence.¹⁴ The Manifesto declared the right of freedom to express on behalf of women and hence was a powerful opposition to the Islamization drive promulgated by Zia's administration particularly against the *Haddood* Ordinance and *Zina* Ordinance.¹⁵ This stance was advocated by feminist artists in multiple ways. For instance, the depiction of a woman covered in *Chadar* by Laila Shahzada carried a powerful message for authorities. The face of the woman sitting sideways enfolded by a *Chadar* is lit by illuminating light. The message was clear and on spot that no matter how restricted a woman is she is an embodiment of wisdom and courage. The title of the painting clearly expresses the policy of the government which was to restrict woman and confine her to the vicinity of home. Rabia Zuberi who was a sculptor and painter during the Martial Law, expressed her position through a painting in which a deformed woman is shown holding a pigeon, a symbol for peace. The title *Quest for Peace* is self-explanatory. The mantra of *Chadar* and *Chardivari* actually backfired as "more women than ever took to the prohibited arts during the Zia period".¹⁶

¹⁴ Salima Hashmi, *Unveiling the Visible: Lives and Works of Women Artists of Pakistan* (ActionAid Pakistan, 2002), 91.

¹⁵ "ArtAsiaPacific: Paradise Found Lost Salima Hashmi," accessed June 6, 2020, <http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/57/ParadiseFoundLostSalimaHashmi>.

¹⁶ "Ziaul Haq -- History's Verdict | Special Report | Thenews.Com.Pk."



Figure 5. Laila Shahzada, *Chadar aur Chardiwari*, Oil on canvas, 1980s.

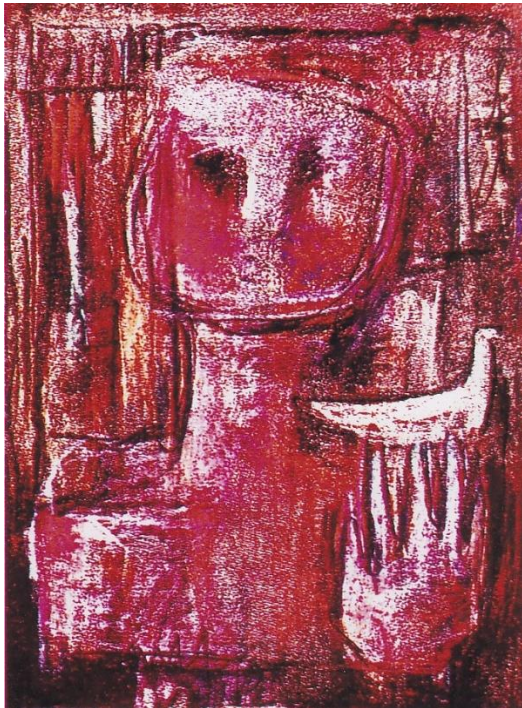


Figure 6. Rabia Zuberi, *Quest for Peace*, Mixed medias, 1980s.

Colin David and Iqbal Hussain had to face censorship in the name of morality if not politics. Colin David was a virtuoso in painting nudes and Iqbal Hussain religiously followed a single theme and that was the portrayal of women from Red Light Area of Lahore. Both these artists were banned from exhibitions. Colin David continued unaffected and exhibited at home even under the threat of being vandalized. The consistency of the artist to work on objectionable themes was in itself an act of defiance and revolt inviting the public to think that artistic representation of nudes is not a vulgar act but a sensibility that is neutral on moral grounds.

Iqbal Hussain in a brave attempt, exhibited on the Mall in front of Alhamra Art Gallery. Ajaz Anwar remembers:

When he displayed his work along the footpaths and stairs of the newly built Arts Council building, a big crowd gathered. They were starved of any entertaining event those days. Iqbal Hussain had provided them one. They were all ogling at the depicted beauties which, like Manto's characters, were not promiscuous.¹⁷

It is interesting to note that Iqbal Hussain never focused on the glammers of a courtesan's life, he showed them as they actually lived their dark lives. In his painting, *Eid Namaz*, through a Juxtapositioning of courtesans against a backdrop of mosque where men are offering prayer, he shows the double standards. This was a social commentary, and an insight that affected clergy in the same way Saadat Hassan Manto did. By merely exposing the stark reality of a social life, he questioned culture, humanity, and politics all at once.



Figure 7. Iqbal Hussain, *Eid Namaz*, Oil on canvas.

The figurative work of Sadequain was also vandalized in the 1980s. Sadequain produced a huge amount of work and as personal preference chose Calligraphy, which coincided with the government's policy. However, his Calligraphy was not without a message. Sadequain was inspired by leftist ideology, which amply reflects in his poetry. However, his view of revolution was more universal instead of merely social and political. He was more concerned with the inner contradictions of the human self and advocated the human potential to evolve even in harshest of circumstances. His symbolism of cactus was a poignant portrayal of a struggling man. Michael Van pays a tribute to this symbolism in the following words, "In resonance with the memory of the famous communist litterateur, I discover, at the far ends of the painting, the human collective. Metamorphosed into cactus forms, their fingers grope for light, for knowledge, for tools – the sickle and the hammer, held against the rising sun".¹⁸

Sadequain's fascination with the potential of human beings also manifests in his Calligraphic work. In his final work which was left incomplete due to his death, he adorned the ceiling of Frere Hall in Karachi. The centre of the ceiling displays the two words 'Ilm' and 'Amal'. This was a message that can be interpreted at length. To be concise, it was a solution to mankind in order to eliminate social injustice, oppression, greed and lust, and above all the misery of life. The message stressed that the solution of mankind lies in acquiring knowledge and understanding and then bringing that to practice. Knowledge without practice and practice without knowledge are certainly recipes for all kinds of evil. Sadequain by stressing this message puts forth his disposition on the state of affairs. Iftikhar Dadi explained his contribution in the following words:

Sadequain never created works that function as instruments of propaganda for Islamization, and, in this sense, it would be misleading to view him as an artist merely working on behalf of the state. Instead,

¹⁷ "Lahore and Arts: A Red Faced Cuckoo | Shehr | Thenews.Com.Pk," accessed June 7, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/573199-a-red-faced-cuckoo>.

¹⁸ "Sadequain's Cacti," Himal Southasian, December 10, 2008, <https://www.himalmag.com/sadequains-cacti/>.

his singular persona continued to serve as a reminder of the personal and Sufistic surplus that could not be contained in Zia's coercive and austere Islamization project.¹⁹



Figure 8. Sadequain, *Oil on Board, Ceiling of Frere Hall, Karachi, 1987.*

Sadequain used Calligraphy, a state patronized genre, but expresses something for mankind, which if rightly understood and applied, can shake the most powerful of oppressive institutions. Above all, whether it's the symbol of cactus or message delivered through Calligraphy at a public space, the emphasis on the ability of human beings to be resilient and retaliate against injustice and oppression, is unquestionable. The above analysis of a few art works is not exhaustive, there are many other artists who in their individual capacity proclaimed the very essence of human existence through their works. The 11 years of the Martial Law, was a time period that made the society realize the value of freedom at least in factions where fundamental human values were honoured. The artists belonged to that faction and therefore there was a similarity in response.

Conclusion

The above study shows that each artist responded to the dictates of censorship in his or her own way. It was not that the sensibilities of the artists emerged exclusively after the censorship was imposed. The censorship restricted the very foundation of art, which is self-expression. As a result, there was a retaliation in politically aware artists, particularly amongst those who have garnered a self-expression in the democratic period that preceded the Martial Law. Artists like Ijaz-ul Hassan, Nagori, Salima Hashmi and to some degree, Sadequain were rooted in leftist ideologies and therefore a military regime with strong censorship policy in the name of an orthodox interpretation of religion was nothing less than a nightmare. Artists like Colin David and Iqbal Hussain were apolitical and remained apolitical but their decision to stick to figurative art was in itself a revolt. Laila Shahzada and Rabia Zuberi had feminist inclinations which further developed and concretized with the Manifesto for Woman Artists of Pakistan. It can be said that each artist developed in a unique way determined by intellectual and emotional orientation on the psychological end and then each artist experienced what came from the social reality of the time. It was the socio-political oppression that furnished a ground for retaliation. The retaliation of an artist was expressed through the art works and promoted ideas that pointed towards freedom. Each individual work was an insight into the socio-political reality and the role of a politically aware and sensitive human being. Freedom and insight became the main ingredients of what can be called an aesthetic of retaliation, which was collective and therefore powerful.

¹⁹ Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2010), 175.