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A HISTORY OF VISUAL ART IN PAKISTAN: STUDYING THE RESISTANCE AGAINST ZIA-UL-HAQ'S MILITARY REGIME

Abstract

The art produced under the military regime of General Muhammad Zia-ul Haq documents a powerful use of political themes and symbolism. This paper suggests that this unprecedented expression in Pakistani arts was a creative flowering, which was an indirect result of the politics of oppression practiced by the military regime. The study describes the nature of Islamization that the military regime used as a policy to sustain its power and explains it as an attempt to reassign an identity to Pakistani people, which was far removed from the original human identity. This attempt, although was an assault on freedom of expression, it nevertheless produced the very result it intended to avoid. The study shows that the sensitive artist community, through the use of meaningful symbols, produced art works with a clear focus and communication. The artist community, particularly, the female artist proclaimed their identity through their works and highlighted the scope of injustice that the military regime inflicted.¹

Introduction

The relationship between the oppressor and oppressed is characterized by a profound dynamic; it stems from a negation and then gives rise to a negation of negation. It reflects the law of qualitative change in nature; we not only get more seeds but qualitatively superior seeds, as Friedrich Engels famously stated.² Initially, the oppressor negates the identity of the oppressed by assigning it roles that do not belong to it. The oppressed assumes a false identity, sometimes, for a considerable stretch of time until it reaches a crisis, and then, as we repeatedly observe in history, the oppressed challenges the authority and reclaims its identity; it negates the negation. The act of oppression therefore remains inherently unstable but still it manages to take its course. Unless a voice is raised and a force is organized, it continues to snub individuality and its freedom. Although from a human standpoint, oppression is injustice and is not desirable, however, its consequences may not be so. We observe that the most creative periods of human history follow the most damaging incidents of oppression. Consider the example

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of European Renaissance, we find a surge of creativity, a flowering of intellect and discovery of various modes and means of progress. Alongside, we find finest examples of art that raised human aesthetic sensibility to new heights. Spearheaded by notable intellectuals, artists and poets, the European society negated the false identity that it assumed in the Dark Ages. Oppression, therefore, can be seen as a non-intentional source and catalyst of human creativity. Regardless of the vested interest of the oppressor, it engages deeper human sensitivities of the oppressed and as a result we witness a revolution in human expression reclaiming the original identity on a higher plane. The following study explores a similar course of the events of oppression and subsequent human expression. It focuses on the politics of oppression as practiced by the military regime of General Muhammad Zia-ul Haq and then discusses the artistic expression of the oppressed, particularly in paintings with political themes.

The Politics of Oppression

Although, on the surface, there exists a strong opposition to military rule in Pakistan but on a deeper note and with ample evidence, it can be stated that military regimes provided much needed political stability to the country. This position gains strength from the fact that the democratic governments failed to produce desired results. In most cases civilian administrations crumbled due to a lack of clear direction, miscalculation and misuse of limited resources, and a culture of corruption. As a matter of fact, since Partition, the history of Pakistan has been punctuated with a series of crises, which emerged and developed in consequence of wars and various external conspiring factors. The civilian governments that took the charge occasionally could not control the inordinate culture of corruption coupled with incompetence. This atmosphere paved the way for the military to intervene and save Pakistan from disaster. The military had the skill to address such issues.³

It would not be farfetched to state that military regimes were relatively successful in ensuring political stability was the command structure and the capability of individuals to follow certain standard operating procedures. The former played a key role in establishing a hierarchy of organization that dealt with the flow of a certain command and the latter minimized instances trial and error. However, the same machinery also provided military regimes to practice politics of oppression, which in some cases, became an assault on human identity. The politics of oppression became acutely visible in the military regime of General Muhammad Zia-ul Haq.

The military regime of General Muhammad Zia-ul Haq was the most oppressive of all military regimes. From 1977 to 1988, the eleven years of Pakistani history, have been the most demoralizing for freedom of expression. This affected politics, economics, culture and arts in multiple ways. He withdrew Martial Law in 1985 but continued to practice his dictatorial influence until his death in 1988. As a matter of fact, the art produced in this period, as we shall see, was genuinely creative and expressive. It was by no means the art of the oppressed; it had the seeds of a revolution. Before discussing the art produced under this regime, let us examine the character of this administration.

The politics of oppression that was practiced by the military regime of General Muhammad Zia-ul Haq was a by-product of the intellectual and emotional orientation of the General. Zia-ul Haq was fundamentally a power seeker, it was his most manifest emotional agenda. Coupled with that was his personal interpretation of Islam, which was well-suited to that emotional agenda. And then, there was his political method to fulfill the agenda through a manipulation of Islamic principles and use of force. It was the method that can be seen as an operational factor in his politics of oppression. The change in society that he was envisioning was a re-characterization of people according to his personal interpretation of Islam and this was not to be done by altering the understanding of people about life but through a circumcision of mind without consent and by brutal force. This amounted to a negation of the original human identity of Pakistani people, a majority of whom assumed a false identity, unknowingly. It was a few of the individuals, who did not comply with the onslaught and responded with both insight and strength. The artist community had a majority of such people, who could sense the implications of various measures that the military government took to ensure its vision. Let us examine the salient features of such measures. This examination will help in understanding how various routes were taken to negate the human identity and impose a false one.

By default, the military regime of Zia-ul Haq had an aggressive and imposing character. It came into power with the use of power. It found the justification by identifying the crisis that Pakistan faced under civilian government. Its aggressive character can be assessed simply by the fact that on its very start, the popular leader Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was hanged through a trial that was biased in favor of General Zia-ul Haq. This act certified the aggressive character of the military regime and the implication was that the power of the military regime was registered not only amongst intelligentsia but more effectively in the common people. This was the first clear and loud opening of a biased political and cultural narrative that was to follow.

The main ingredient of this narrative was a personalized version of Islam, which was carefully built around the sacred and spiritual aspects of individual and social life. It was a domain which seldom encouraged freedom of thought and serious questioning. Historically, an individual is conditioned to accept religion and its methods as matters of faith, which must be obeyed even if not understood. This historical conditioning paved the way for manipulating people in the name of religion. The ideology asserted that anything modern was a conspiracy of Western Imperialism.⁴

Immediately after assuming power, the inaugural address of the general clearly demarcated his stance and was enough to capture the religious foundation of identity. Zia-ul Haq relied on the emotional appeal of the message when he said that Islam is a fundamental system and precursor for Pakistani society and that it will be the sole reason for Pakistan's existence.⁵ He reportedly said that 'take out Judaism from Israel and it will collapse like a house of cards. Take out Islam from Pakistan and make it a secular state; it would collapse'.⁶ This was quite a different stance from what Muhammad Ali Jinnah fostered. The idea and sensitivity that Pakistan attained its freedom for the sake of propagating and applying Islamic ideology gained much popularity under the military regime. The momentum was

such that on the birthday of the founder of Pakistan, newspapers could not print the secular ideas in his speeches.

The pro-Islamic stance of Zia-ul Haq would have created an environment of peace and harmony if it had rendered Islam in its true spirit. But Zia-ul Haq adhered to a particular sect, which logically nurtured a sectarian divide.⁷ Moreover, the sect that Zia-ul Haq followed was already conservative and with its distinct coloring by the General, it invited a strong opposition from the liberal factions of society. The sectarian violence that ensued from this is a tragic story in its own right, however, it contributed to the concretization of a false identity in which the common man, who had greater affinity towards assuming a religious identity, gradually became more and more pronounced. At least, one sect in the episodes of sectarian violence was state sponsored.

General Zia-ul Haq's greed for power becomes obvious when we look at the question that he asked in the Presidential referendum of 1984. The question clearly shows that the dictator wanted to continue his supremacy through clever tactics. The question that was asked in the referendum was:

Whether the people of Pakistan endorse the process initiated by General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, the President of Pakistan, for bringing laws of Pakistan into conformity with the injunction of Islam as laid down in the Holy Quran and Sunnah of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) and for the preservation of the ideology of Pakistan, for the continuation and consolidation of that process and for the smooth and orderly transfer of power to the elected representatives of the people?⁸

The question was crafted in a way that the loyalty to state became coupled with faithfulness to religion and both supported the rule of the military regime. In an attempt to sustain power, Zia-ul Haq ruled out parliamentary democracy as un-Islamic. This was again a move which negated the basic human rights and hence identity. Without democracy, the people could not influence the selection of political leadership, they could not choose out of freedom. Gaining an easy support from religious clergy, Zia-ul Haq furnished the legitimacy of Presidential form of government giving sole power to himself.

The Russian-Afghan war played a crucial role in strengthening the ideology of Zia-ul Haq and in gaining support from people. It was on the surface, an acute and clear manifestation of loyalty to Islam. The government attracted great support from various Islamic scholars and politicians and army officials with similar intellectual tendencies. The courage was associated to Zia-ul Haq, who would regularly offer prayers and remained apparently a down to earth man. However, under the table, the Afghan-Russian war was a means for military aid and support from the USA. The support was subsequently challenged by the intelligentsia and strikes ensued in 1979.⁹ The ideology of extremism and fundamentalism in the name of Jihad gained popularity and it fed the false identity of Pakistani people. The *Klashinakov* culture and drug abuse born out of this.¹⁰

The inculcation of such extremist beliefs could not have long lasting impact unless a bottom up approach was used. For this, there were considerable changes that were induced in the education system. The reforms in the education system were

also in line with propagating the suitable and preferred interpretation of Islam.¹¹ The subject of *Dinyat* (Study of Religions) was replaced with *Islamiyat* (Study of Islam). It was mandatory that every child must learn by heart particular Quranic verses, Islam as a source of superior identity and then Pakistan's ideology, which was reformulated as Islamic ideology. The teachers who were available to teach this material mostly came from conservative religious background and obviously from the sect that the government granted legitimacy. As a result, the narrative of education in school also transformed since the interpretation of verses and whatever was written in the name of Islam had to be interpreted by teachers who did not have any training in science or philosophy. The medium of instruction was changed to Urdu, which resulted into a greater alienation of the younger generation to both the knowledge fund and respective culture of English language.

This was also the time when hundreds of new madrassahs were opened in which science existed only as a peripheral subject. The whole curriculum was centered around promoting Islamic ideology and themes which were conducive to the new political and cultural environment. Changing the mindset from the grass root level for personal purposes, was a serious offence to human identity. It was sugar coated and therefore not visible as such. Moreover, its consequences were to manifest after some time when the madrassah going children would become men and assume significant social positions. As a matter of fact, the students who came out of these madrassahs could not fit in the social fabric due to their lopsided view of reality.¹²

The art institutions also had to face the repercussions of the educational and cultural transformation of identity. Dr. Rahat Naveed Masud recalls that in Punjab University, a new culture ensued in which students who had ties with religious factions would object the subject matter of drawing classes. Their objection centered on the appearance of the male model who, for them, had to be fully dressed up before females.¹³ There were various such events when artists were harassed by religio-political activists creating an environment of fear and vulnerability. The politically backed up students would parade the University with arms and had completely high-jacked the University administration and physically damaged various art works with offensive content.¹⁴

General Zia-ul Haq's oppressive influence also targeted art propagating institutions. The art councils were taken under strict censorship, the figurative art was banned from exhibitions and so was the art carrying any anti-government slogans. Quddus Mirza wrote that 'art with political connotation became a criminal offence'.¹⁵

The women, who represent almost half of the society and had to play a creative role in the upbringing of a nation were also strictly confined. Under various legal amendments such as the *Hudood* Ordinance, their rights were fundamentally compromised. The women were in a way forced to veil themselves and restrict their activities to home. They were pushed back in the social realm and were discouraged in their professional lives.¹⁶

The Creative Consequence

The above mentioned changes were a direct result of the politics of oppression, wherein, a dictator, pursued his personal agenda of power, imposed a lopsided ideology and through the use of force and other tactics attempted to reassign an identity. The response of the people who were directly or indirectly influenced by this political, cultural and ultimately individual manipulation varied across communities and professions. Ranging from mild to furious, the artists responded in a profound way.

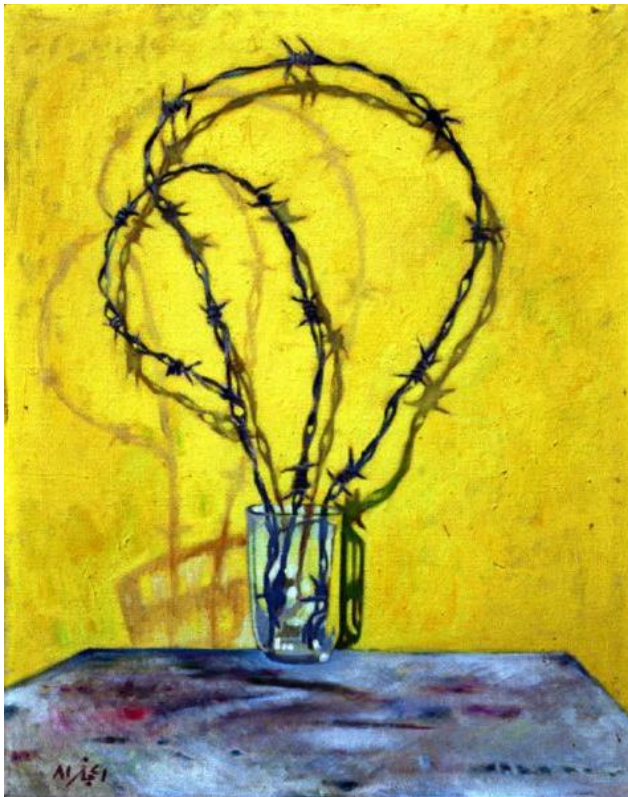
It must be kept in view that an art work embodies the expression of an artist's mind. It reflects the intellectual paradigms, the emotional preferences and the cultural temperament of its creator. Since an artist does not work as an isolated individual but as a member of a society, his or her personal dynamic receives a continuous input from the social fabric. The artists therefore felt the whole change, perceived the impact that it had on identity and then in their own distinct ways expressed their take on the issue. Some of the artists used their creative energy within the set parameters and rules of the government, while others, violated.

The first kind of the artists resorted to landscape painting and Calligraphy. Calligraphy as Islamic identity and landscape as portrayal of land's glory were the most famous genres. Calligraphy was a legitimate art in Islam as it was about beautifying Qur'anic verses. Many of the artists, who were great exponents of figurative art turned towards Calligraphy as in dictator's version of Islam, figurative art was prohibited. Zia-ul Haq himself patronized the art of Calligraphy. Sadequain and many other artists were commissioned by the state to produce works of Calligraphy. This political decision had its cultural impact. The people who adorned their drawing rooms with paintings started putting Calligraphy instead. However, since Calligraphy was not only being done by scribes, it also became a forte of painters, who used colour in magnificent schemes taking the art to new heights.¹⁷ On similar accounts, landscape art and architecture gained prominence and achieved new heights. The landscape painting in particular became a highly specialized and respected endeavor. Calligraphy and landscape painting flourished due to their strong identification with national pride.

The second kind of artists who had anti-government ideologies or sentiments were arrested, punished and imprisoned. These artists produced probably the most powerful symbolic work in the history of Pakistan. The personalized distinguished use of symbols became their forte. This was quite an intelligent move on part of the artists since the Subcontinental mindset had this history of emotionally responding to symbols. Moreover, symbols were not direct and were loaded with meanings. The artists skillfully used and juxtaposed them to communicate new meanings often expressing their critical response to the oppressive government. These artists, through their works highlighted the atrocities and enabled their viewer to focus and rediscover his or her actual identity. The movement was shared by various artists in different degrees, however, two artists, Abdul Rahim Nagori and Ijaz-ul Hassan responded in a symbolic language with strong political undertones.

For instance, In *New Year Bouquet*, Ijaz-ul Hassan composed a satire on political situation through a strong use of symbolism. Ijaz-ul Hassan was a political activist and had a clear awareness about the fundamental rights and human identity. Due

to his ideas and political activism, he was arrested in the first year of Martial Law and was detained in Lahore Fort for interrogation.¹⁸ This work was produced a few years after his imprisonment but clearly depicts the actual mode and nature of events that took place after the Martial Law imposition. The painting portrays a bouquet in which flowers are replaced with barbed wire. Ijaz-ul Hassan uses irony as a device of communication. The barbed wire bouquet symbolizes that what is being presented to the people of Pakistan as promise of opulence is a fraudulent act. In actual, the mode of government is comparable to barbed wire, which is a symbol of restriction by force. With this painting, Ijaz-ul Hassan exposes the hypocrisy of the military regime that manipulated Islam and the people of Pakistan for its agenda of attaining and then sustaining power.



Ijazul Hassan, New Year Bouquet, Oil on canvas, 1981.

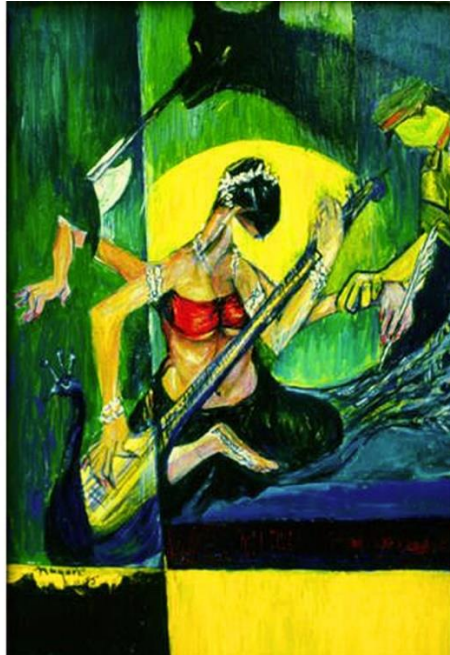
Ijaz-ul Hassan's imprisonment was not the detention of a person per se. It was an attempt to snub freedom of expression or any attempt to reclaim identity. Zia-ul Haq, who presented himself as a representative of most distinguished doctrines of Islam was actually a self-centered monarch. Abdul Rahim Nagori exposed this reality in the following painting. *The King of Clubs*, shows Zia-ul Haq on a playing card as a king. This imagery was in sharp contrast to the popular interpretation of the leader, which through various means of political propaganda

assumed the title of *Mujahid of Islam*. Nagori, through this painting, puts the leader in perspective and hence compels the viewer to see the actual reality.



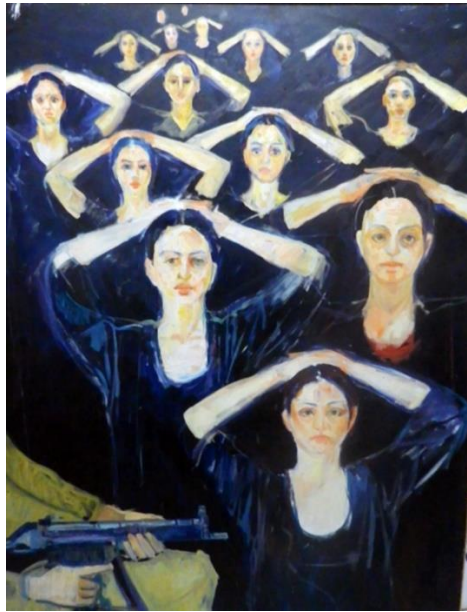
Abdul Rahim Nagori, King of Clubs, Oil on canvas, 1984

Nagori not only portrayed the actual character of the dictator, he also brought to light the suffering of human soul at the hands of military regime. In *Saraswati under Stress*, he used Saraswati, who is the goddess of beauty and aesthetic sense in Hindu mythology, as the main subject of his painting.



Abdul Rahim Nagori, Saraswati under stress, Oil on canvas, 1985

Saraswati is shown playing a musical instrument but the composition is such that instead of an environment of serenity, we witness utter chaos. One of her arms is being held by a soldier, the other is cut into half and in the backdrop a wolf is shown with an axe. She, nevertheless continues to play music. One may interpret Saraswati as a symbol of Pakistani women who faced restrictions because of the amendments in law and the mounted cultural pressure. The misery of the women was more directly put on canvas by Iqbal Hussain, who is known for depicting women from Red Light Area. In this painting, he has shown how women have been forced to veil themselves and have been put to a subordinate position by force. The women are holding their hands over their heads in a remarkable portrayal of injustice. The face expression tells a long story of oppression and abuse; it is rendered indifferent. The title of the painting *Hands Up* quite effectively presents what the politics of oppression was all about.



Iqbal Hussain, Hands-up, Oil on canvas, 1980s.

The injustice faced by the women was a stark negation of identity. This was negation was negated by the rise of Feminism in Pakistan. Artists and activists Salima Hashmi and Lala Rukh have played a major role in this opposition; they did not change their creative vision even under extreme circumstances.¹⁹ The manifesto signed by 15 Pakistani female artist pointedly depicts the awareness of sensitive woman. It stated the grievance of women highlighting the character of socio-political environment as irrational and anti-art. The manifesto supported the role of female artists and spelled out the significance of their contribution towards promoting a rational and civilized society through practicing art and also teaching it to students in various institutions. It laid down its principles focused on the cultural development of the people of Pakistan.²⁰

The manifesto clearly expresses the determination of female artists which certainly came into being under strict censorship. This reflects the natural order of things, a natural inclination was unnaturally snubbed and a natural reaction was a logical consequence. The censorship imposed by the government resulted into a greater thrust for breaking the prison.



Salima Hashmi, Freedom, Oil on canvas, 1985.

The works produced by the female artists were in fact first person accounts of what they faced being women. In *Freedom*, Salima Hashmi shows three identical women encapsulated in ice cubes with mouths covered with cloth. The ice cube symbolizes the fact that the life of women was put into a situation where no activity was supposed to take place, the mouth covered depicts that they were not allowed to use their mind or speech to proclaim their rights and identity. The three women probably represent three social roles of women of being mother, wife and daughter. The painting shows that all three modes were treated equally. The color scheme of the painting is also symbolic and shows the contrasts, conflicts and tensions associated to the state of women. The red color symbolizing bloodshed and death is the focus of attention. It was precisely this state which was portrayed by Rabia Zuberi in *Blind Justice* insightfully depicting the plight of women. The female artists of Pakistan not only depicted the suffering, they also presented woman as an entity that had an unrelenting power within. This mode of depiction was an assertion of original human identity. One example that can be seen in this regard is Laila Shahzada's painting from her series entitled *Chadar aur Chardiwari*. The title of the series shows how a false identity was imposed and then made culturally popular and acceptable. It shows how a woman was pushed

back from her social self and professional growth. Laila depicted the women in the folds of a *Chadar* with her head rising above. The composition uses lyrical lines providing the viewer a sensation of flow. In this context, one observes a sitting women but there is light radiating from her symbolizing her inner strength and determination.



Rabia Zuberi, Blind Justice, Mixed media, 1980s.



Laila Shahzada, Chadar aur Chardiwari II, Oil on canvas, 1980s.

The above described art works are only a few examples from the repertoire of art that was produced under Zia-ul Haq. These works were produced under strict measures of censorship and with artists putting both their lives and professional careers at stake. The symbolism was used as a means to hide the anti-government message that they wanted to communicate. The politics of oppression actually made the artist learn their transformative role and power in a society that was increasingly becoming deprived of sensitivity towards a beautiful life.

Conclusion

The study has tried to prove the point that amongst the political, economic and cultural currents that influence the artists, the political influence renders a greater impact and this has been and remains so due to its peculiar nature of intervention in both individual and social lives. The people, who understand the whole dynamic, and who possess a somewhat resilient ideological and emotional orientation respond to the changing nature of political process and that had been the case during Zia regime when these individual artists and thinkers responded to authoritative administration of Zia. They challenged Zia's authority, registered the long term negative impact of his decisions and highlighted the atrocities that flow from it. The artist community of Pakistan consisted of a greater number of such individuals since the training of art itself imparts a certain level of emotional awareness and alongside, in the form artistic expression, chisels a mode of communication that had a far reaching impact on the general subjectivity of the masses. Thus, the relationship between the political process of a country and the art produced under its political administration is subject to a meaningful and subtle correspondence.

In fact, the Islamization imposed by the military regime for its own vested interest affected artists before it could affect the art. The freedom was snubbed and challenged. It is from this prevailing darkness that a new identity to Pakistani art was observed. The artists through their art works produced political statements and challenges. The women artists produced a revolution. A more rigorous and intelligent use of symbolism was observed.

The politics of oppression practiced by Zia-ul Haq and perpetuated by his regimes policies could not take into account the fact that in a dream to reassign a false identity to the people of Pakistan, it attempted to change the laws of mother Nature. First and Foremost, it unsuccessfully tried to break the unity between cause and effect, between fact and function. The original human identity is a natural process and therefore subject to laws of evolution. The very nature of human specimen is such that it seeks harmony and avoids conflict. The policies of the government were an assault on freedom and growth. It logically produced a conflict within a sensitive individual and therefore it could not sustain. The natural foundation of human identity lies within the human being, it cannot be shifted to the whims and fancies of a dictator. Even if it happens in an apparent fashion, it remains short lived. Once a crisis is reached within an individual, a reorganization naturally flows from it; another natural law comes into operation. The law has been encapsulated by Albert Einstein in his famous saying, 'no problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it'.²¹ The internal conflict

that was created by Zia-ul Haq's policies was a conflict that every sensitive individual had to experience. For resolving the conflict, it demanded a higher consciousness on part of the sufferer. The politics of oppression instead of oppressing the intellect of sensitive individual actually forced it to rise above and find a solution. It made it to assert itself with more intelligence and creativity. The politics of oppression therefore, as a matter of general principal remains, self-contradictory. It produces the exact result that it tries to snub. It negates human identity and then is negated by a higher realization of identity. This is what exactly happened in the case of arts under Zia-ul Haq's politics of oppression. The artists' consciousness was raised and reclaimed its negated identity with a greater integrity.

Notes & References

¹ This article, to a great extent, is based on the M. Phil thesis submitted in the department of History University of the Punjab in 2017, but it has been expanded and revised in light of new documents and with a new approach.

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