

Popular Culture and Political Cynicism in Pakistan

Sadia Pasha Kamran

Introduction

In 'popular perception', national and international politics appear as the only stimulus for the contemporary social discourses in Pakistan. For example, contemporary Pakistani art has often been described as "the global political conversation" or merely as an "attempt to locate the answers to Pakistan's present-day socio-political predicaments at the intersection of international politics".¹ Such 'popular perceptions', rather misconceptions, deplete the Pakistani art from the intellectual discourses it has been propagating as well as devoid the same from the historical facts and many intense social points of interests that we hold as a nation. However, the abundant occurrence of political statements in contemporary discourses cannot be ignored. In an effort to find a reason for this repeated visual and literary agitation the study probes into the prevailing socio-political scenario that encourages pessimism, cynicism, mockery and satire as the popular culture² of Pakistan. This culture of cynicism appears in all forms of expression and in all genre of intellect, be it literature, fine art, television or newspaper. However, contemporary art of Pakistan leads from up front as it projects such ideas to international proportions.³

This study is divided in three parts. The first part briefly discusses the 'popular'⁴ political history of Pakistan, the ideologies, the dogmas and the doctrines that have shaped up the general mindset of Pakistani people. Second part examines the recent world order that places Pakistan in the limelight of global politics.⁵ The questions of a distinct identity and ideology for Pakistan and its people as an aftermath of such demands and their impact on the society are also taken into consideration. The third and the final part, while analyzing the role and involvement of the artists in responding to the above mentioned calls, explores the archival nature and satirical character of our popular cultural expressions that are loaded with political cynicism.

Political History of Pakistan and the Culture of Humiliation

The history of Muslim rule in the Indian Sub-continent is as old as the 8th century. It is the time when Mohammad Bin Qasim first came to India and established a Muslim empire in the South Western part of it. With brief hiccups and short intervals, Muslims remained the rulers of the Indian Sub-continent till 1857 when it became a British colony. Muslims, who were once the sovereign rulers of the Indian Sub-continent, became third grade citizens in their own homeland. Ruled by the British and dominated by the Hindus, Muslims of India without higher education, jobs and social status were left behind in all socio-political, cultural and economic milieus of life. Soon this socio-economic inequality resulted in political instability and turmoil. The Indians gathered against their foreign rulers, forcing them to free India in 1947.

Independence changed the face of the issues though the social anarchy and the chaos remained the same and in certain cases it worsened.⁶ With the death of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the political and nationalistic verve also perished that could have otherwise led Pakistan as a country and as a nation through the chaos of independence and towards an ideal state where 'the Muslims of India could live a peaceful life according to the *Shariah* of Islam'⁷. This dream of the founders of Pakistan was never materialized. Latter leaders lacked the political vision of Jinnah and were merely self-centered. Thus corruption, injustice and lawlessness prevailed, leaving the Islamic Republic of Pakistan with no choice but military dictatorship. These Martial Laws suspended the basic human rights and for time and again the people of Pakistan were deprived of 'the freedom of speech, right to criticize and to the freedom of written language and culture' which was promised in the States' law⁸. These restrictions tattered the socio-cultural fabric of the society. The table below shows the regular intervals between military and civilian rule in Pakistan.

Year	Type of Rule	Important Milestones
1947---1958	Civilian Rule	Pakistan gets its first constitution, turning the country from an autonomous dominion into an "Islamic Republic".
1958---1971	1 st Military Rule	The second constitution outlines a presidential form of government.
1971---1977	Civilian Rule	Constitution is enacted declaring Pakistan a Parliamentary Democracy.
1977---1988	2 nd Military Rule	Zia ul Haq's Martial Law
1988--1999	Civilian Rule	Four General Elections in ten years and a Nuclear test
1999--2008	3 rd Military Rule	Pervaiz Musharraf's Martial Law
2008---2013	Civilian Rule	1 st time in the democratic history of Pakistan the parliament completes its term of 5 years
2013-present	Civilian Rule	Most of the political parties declared the election as 'unfair' and refused to accept the results

Table 1

The year and type of political governance in Pakistan since 1947

This hide and seek between Martial Law and democracies appears to be a cat and dog chase and emerge as ugly marks on the history of Pakistan. Unfortunately, even the democratic governments were unable to deliver the promised peace and prosperity to the subjects. For a conscientious Pakistani, this scenario is quite embarrassing. Borrowing Dominique Moisi's terminology from *Geopolitics of Emotion*, this ambiguous political situation is promoting a culture of humiliation. He defines humiliation as "an emotion that stems above all from the feeling that you are no longer in control of your life either collectively, as a people, a nation, or a religious community or individually, as a single person" (56).

The New World Order, Pakistan and the Culture of Fear

The beginning of 21st century witnessed a change in the world order. The bipolar world which was turned into the unipolar world during the last quarter of the 20th century allowed America, as an only super power, to control the fate of the rest of the world.⁹ The division of the East and the West and the Orient and the Occident changed its

appellation into the division of the Islamic and the non- Islamic or 'Arab Lands, Turkey, Middle East and South Asia'¹⁰ versus the rest of the Western world. The tragic incident of 9/11 (September 11, 2001 attacks on World Trade Centre, New York, USA) brought more problems for Pakistan and it had to pay a price for being a neighbor of Afghanistan as well as for being an ally to America now and in the past, particularly during the cold war of the 1980s. This alliance costs Pakistan a severe communal unrest as well as an international distrust and disgrace.

With all American promises and efforts to stabilize the government institutions and to improve a social structure in Pakistan, the drone attacks which claim the lives of civilians and children, have increased the anxiety of the common man about his survival and the future of his children. Today, people of Pakistan fear about their mere existence. Is Pakistan the next target of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces? Will Pakistan become an American Colony? Will India take over? Will Pakistan simply break into smaller independent units? Without electricity, education or health facilities, corruption in every institution, injustice, lawlessness and inflation, the nation is insecure about its future. It is cultivating the 'culture of fear'. Together, the culture of humiliation and the culture of fear are prompting cynicism, mockery and satire, which have become the popular culture in Pakistan.

Culture of Humiliation + Culture of Fear = Culture of Cynicism

(a product of political history) (a product of new world order)
(prevailing popular culture)

Political Cynicism as the Popular Culture of Pakistan and its Social Discourses

Political and social cynicism results from excessively high expectations concerning society, institutions and authorities. It has been defined as "mistrust generalized from particular leaders or political groups to the political process as a whole – a process perceived to corrupt the persons who participate in it and that draws corrupt persons as participants". Unfulfilled expectations lead to disappointment,

which releases feelings of disillusionment and betrayal. As expected, people choose to doubt, disbelieve or discredit, even when there is no logical reason to do so. It is to be noted that oppression also leads to cynicism and this irony and cynicism are understood to be defense mechanisms of a “deeply insecure Pakistani nation” as it is called by the West.¹¹

It is this political cynicism that we witness in the success and high ratings of the TV shows like *Hasb-e hal*, *Khabarnak*, *Hum sub umeed se hai* or *BNN*. Similar cynic tone is apparent in the writings of Ayyaz Amir, Ali Moin, Anwar Maqsood, Mushtaq Ahmed Yousafi and many others who have left their established style of writing to opt for satirical and sarcastic dual statements on and about the politics and its practitioners that would bring laugh and tears at the same time. These shows are considered the only entertainment of the audience who are tired of viewing the serious and horrendous news of suicide bombers, drone attacks, ransom kidnappings, theft, murders, poverty, moral and financial corruption and accidents. Cynicism has been known, in its historical development, to be a form of denial with the purpose to minimize the importance of the object. Sarcasm, in Pakistani society, is not a defense but a form of aggressive discharge. Interestingly, the tolerance towards the bold criticism and satire displayed in contemporary artistic and general expression is due to the ‘refined’ democracy, which is also new to Pakistan. As before this day, there is a history of showing intolerance towards such criticism from the inhabitants of the corridors of power. Banning newspapers, burning paintings or merely putting the artists and poets behind bars has been their ritual.

Among all the insecurities and atrocities of the current times which are discussed above, the artists and painters of Pakistan are playing their historic role of speaking about the nastiness of the era the country is passing through. Pakistani art is no more just ‘a thing of beauty’ inculcating joy and pleasure in its audience. It has become intense and thought provoking, and cynic and skeptic. It will not be an exaggeration to say that today’s artist is doing a great job of representing the general approach of Pakistani community “while keeping the aesthetic concern as a priority”¹².

Currently, Pakistani artists “projecting the politics of a localized ideological conflict onto a screen of international proportions” (Whiles 2). These ideological conflicts arose as a result of many attempts that were made by the progressive, secular intellectuals and the conservative, Islamic scholars in order to define and design a cultural policy to best suit the image of an Islamic state of Pakistan since its birth in 1947.¹³ One of these policies was crafted by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Apparently, his was a liberal approach but even he did not fully endorse the progressive ideas of Faiz Ahmed Faiz. Faiz is known in the avant-garde socio-political history of Pakistan as an intellectual champion of the progressives. Faiz was imprisoned several times for preaching his political beliefs as a Marxist which was not bearable to the government. It was the time when art was considered a tool “like a Trojan horse in the hands of the progressives to infiltrate Pakistan’s Islamic complexion”¹⁴ and thus was considered harmful for an Islamic state by the fundamentalist scholars of Islam such as Abu Ala Muduadi. Bhutto, as a matter of fact fused Faiz’s ‘pluralism-friendly and secularist thesis with those of the Islamic scholars’¹⁵. After Bhutto, General Zia ul Haq’s Martial Law banned any kind of freedom of speech and the art and literature was under great scrutiny.

In early 1990s, when Zia’s military rule was over, the socio-cultural milieu of Pakistan could feel its aftershocks with new threats in the form of the conservative concepts of Islamisation and Pakistaniat¹⁶ being declared the driving force behind the cultural policies as introduced by the conservatives. What the result of this so called Islamic and Pakistani ideology was is not relevant here. What is significant is the way the artist community reacted and responded to it¹⁷.

As a result of the resentment towards government policies of Pakistaniat and Islamization with its undue rendering of art being against the Islamic spirits, the painters started camouflaging the content by using symbolism, implicit iconography, and oblique text with dual meaning. While the suspension of the right of free speech, during Marshal law doubled the responsibility of the artist community who could conceal the criticism from the eyes of the ones in authority and would divulge into the concerns of the progressive intellectuals in their artwork¹⁸.

Historically, mockery is not new to art. The Greeks were fully aware of its use in art and literature when the classical virtues were being

defined. Though they considered it as a mark of distinction between archaic and classical, yet the vivacity and exuberance of archaic was a pre-requisite for the seriousness and perfection of the classical. Later, when taken up by the bourgeoisie this lightheartedness in art became a synonym for urban freedom especially in the works of Chaucer, Boccaccio, Rabelais and Don Quixote. Similarly, not new is the pessimism and cynicism in art that inspired the Dada movement. Mainly the atrocities of World War 1 were responsible for the pessimism, disgust and the humiliation of the humanity brought by the war that surfaced in art. Although horror and disgust about the war initially prompted Dada, an undercurrent of humor and whimsy - sometimes sardonic or irrelevant - runs through much of art. The situation as well as the intention and message of Pakistani artists is similar to Dadaists. Be it Imran Qureshi's series of miniature painting *Moderate Enlightenment*¹⁹ (Figure 1), the Karkhana project (Figure 2), the acerbic critique of Saira Wasim in the *New World Order* (Figure 3), Ali Raza's *Throne* and *Krishna* in trousers (Figures 4) or Manet's lady in *Dejeuner sur l'Herbe* clad in *burqa* (veil) by Wasim Ahmed, *Get Out of My Dreams* by Faiza Butt (Figure 5) or Huma Mulji's sculpture, there is a sense of absurdity and irony in all of these artworks. Similar psyche is at work when Hamra Abbas recalls the Mughal period by merely re-enacting the battle scenes from *Akbarnama* (Figure 6). It appears as if she is not only being sarcastic about her present but she also wants to re-live her past. Nusra Latif Qureshi's art practices deal critically with the politics of representation and fragmentation of dominant historical narratives (Figure 7). Borrowed images are re-appropriated and transformed, obscuring or refusing their original meaning. Ali Azmat's paintings seem to question the sanctity of Quran and Pakistan (Figure 8). The ideas of romanticism and patriotism seem to be injured when he paints bandaged and darned national flags. It is this cynic approach which compels Saira Wasim to paint children playing with missiles while she pays homage to the national celebrities in *Tomorrow* (Figure 9). Or for that matter, when Bani Abidi visualizes *The Ghost of Mohammad Bin Qasim* roaming around the streets of Karachi where he laid the foundation of an Islamic culture centuries ago (Figure 10).

Figure 1 (L)

Moderate Enlightenment,
Imran Qureshi, 2005,
Gouache on Wasli

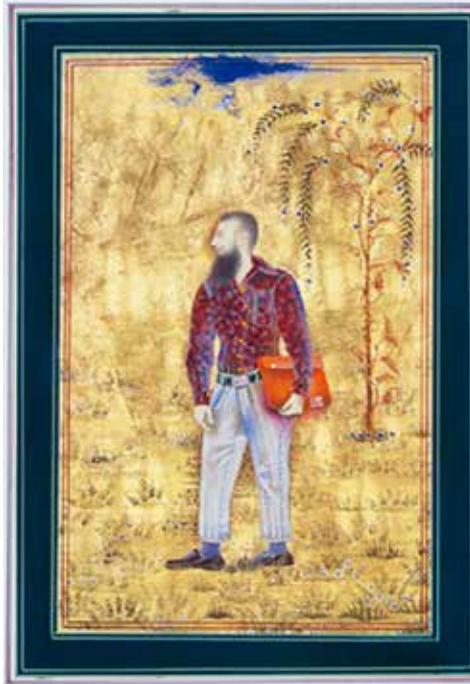


Figure 2 (R)

Karkhana Project,
2002-2005



Figure 3 (L)

New World Order,
Saira Wasim, 2006,
Gouache on Wasli



Figure 4 (R)

Throne, Ali Raza,
2006, Ash and paint
on paper

Image courtesy,
www.apglobal.org



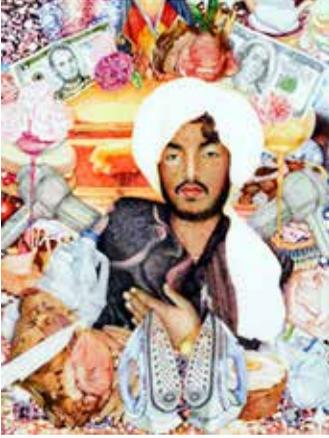


Figure 5 (L)

Get out of my Dreams I, Faiza But, 2008, Ink pen on paper
Image courtesy, sites.asiasociety.org

Figure 6 (R)

Mughal Battle Scene Re-enacted, Hamra Abbas, 2006

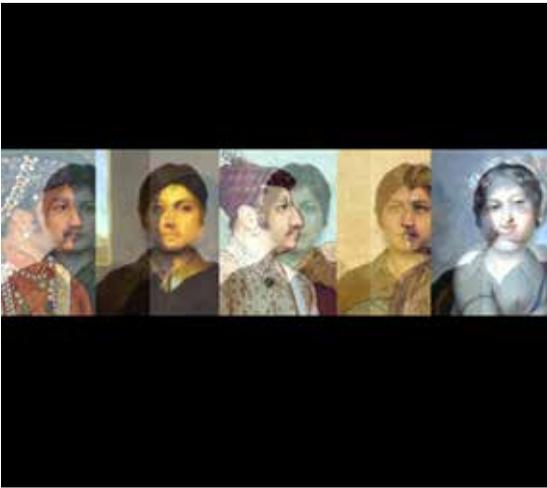


Figure 7 (L)

Detail from Did you come here to find history?, Nusra Latif, 2009, Digital print on transparent film
Image courtesy, artist

Figure 8 (R)

Sirate- Mustaqeem Series, Ali Azmat, 2008, Oil on canvas
Image courtesy, artist

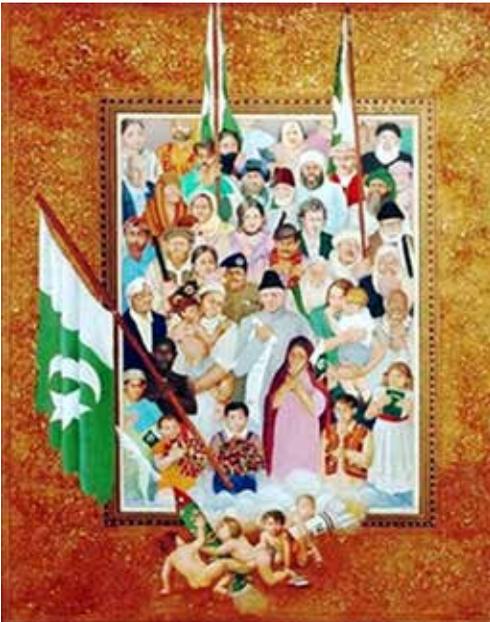


Figure 9 (L)

Tomorrow, Saira Wasim, 2010, Gouache on wasli

Figure 10 (R)

Ghost of Muhammad Bin Qasim (Detail), Bani Abidi, 2006, Digital Print

All of these above mentioned artworks exhibit the irrational and non-sensical impulses stirred by the prevailing political cynicism. These artistic expressions do not just promote parody and mockery rather these works are spontaneous and intuitive as well and have the quality of reproaching the ugly and painful reality present in Pakistani society. Such work exhibits reality with a strong desire for freedom from it. It is this quality of contemporary Pakistani art that makes it genuine. Here, comedy speaks about the tragedy - the tragedy of losing identity, individuality, glorious past, peace and harmony, communal restlessness as well as the fear of an atomic war.

Conclusion

The pessimistic and cynic approach so evident in artistic expressions of Pakistan is purely reflective of the society. It is a product of

1. Prevailing humiliation and fear in the society
2. The reaction of the artists and writers to this humiliation and fear

The political history of Pakistan reflects a past with grandeur and power that eventually degenerates into the graveness of the division of India. This graveness was further intensified due to the detachment of the Eastern wing (now Bangladesh) and ever-increasing political anarchy. To add to this degradation, there is this lurking fear of terrorism imposed by the international politics. This ambiguity and obscurity is imitated in the cynic and pessimistic behavior of the nation. Usually, a cynic is not merely one who learns lessons from the past; he is the one who is prematurely disappointed with future. This disappointment brings sarcasm and satire in artistic discourses. Contemporary art of Pakistan may be considered as an unofficial state archive of the prevailing cynicism in the country as it is commenting and documenting the political affairs and its reaction among the masses. It is also noted that contemporary art of Pakistan shares similarities between the disillusionment of western culture following World War I as it illustrates the disillusionment of the Pakistani people via cultural cynicism. A deeper analysis here, reveals that the individual style of the Pakistani painters as well as the general trend of the society, which sets the demands, overlaps doubling the dose of satire, mockery and cynicism. It is where humor has turned into polemic parody. On one

hand it characterizes the contemporary art and literature and on the other it lays the foundations of popular culture of cynicism.

Endnotes

1. Waqas, Naeem. "Meaningful Art: Reflection on Pakistan's Socio-political Predicaments" *Tribune*: June 3, 2013
2. The term "Popular Culture" is used with reference to cultural studies where it is largely concerned about the everyday terrain of people without being sure who the people are, that is, without deciding ahead of time and once and for all who is being referred to by the term 'people'. *Popular Culture: An Introduction*. New York: New York University Press, 1999, 13. The phrase, "the everyday terrain of people" is taken from *Cultural Studies* (Ed.) Lawrence Grossberg et al. New York: Routledge, 1992, 11
3. As visual art has a universal appeal and does not confront any language barrier while literature, newspaper and T.V do.
4. Here and elsewhere I use the term 'popular history' that refers to the state sponsored ideologized history which might be considered synonymous to imagined, tampered or less factual but was accepted without any research and apprehension by the 'everyday terrain of people' - former Pakistani generation. Fortunately, the general public has started questioning this type of history.
5. Forces that Pakistan must declare itself for or against the 'universal tranquility' especially with reference to 'War against Terror'.
6. The biased Radcliffe Award for the establishment of borders and the unjust division of assets between India and Pakistan, at the time of the birth of two countries, left the nascent state of Pakistan in bewilderment.
7. The main cause of the demand of the division of India, which also became the main slogan during the independence movement of Pakistan.
8. Extract from 1973 Constitution of Pakistan.
9. It is the general perception of the people of Pakistan, especially since America waged war in Afghanistan. "Just last year the leading national flavor was anti-Americanism... and the heroic assertion of national sovereignty". See Ayaz, Amir. "Islamabad Diary: A Pipeline to Some Sovereignty" *The News*. Friday, March 15, 2013. Accessible at <<http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-9-165356-A-pipeline-to-some-sovereignty>>
10. The term is borrowed from the new name given to the Islamic Art Gallery in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
11. Mark Mazetti in "Pakistan's Public Enemy". *The New York Times Magazine*. April, 14, 2013 while about the biggest reason so many Pakistanis hate the United States.

- 12 As suggested by A. R. Nagori on his style of painting in an interview quoted by Daudpota in his book.
- 13 The tussle between these groups and gangs, with varied agendas, are already reflected in the political history of Pakistan.
- 14 Nadeem, Paracha. "Smoker's Corner" Dawn.
15 (Paracha)
- 16 The term used for the ideology of Pakistan that focuses on Islam being the only reason for the demand of a separate homeland for the Muslims and the major cause of the partition of India.
- 17 May it be an attack on Collin David's female nudes or Iqbal Hussain's painted prostitutes from the 'red light area', the artists were ready to play their historic role of carping and disparaging the policies that affected the basic structure of the society. Salima Hashmi (Faiz's daughter), Abbassi Abidi, Lala Rukh, Nazish Ataullah, Talat Ahmed, Zahoor ul Akhlaq, Anwar Saeed and others signed the famous women artists' manifesto, which played a role in creating socio-political awareness in the artistic activities (quoted by Hashmi, 36).
18. Their close connections with the leftists, for example, Faiz and the medium of expression, that is, painting made them political activists. A. R. Nagori and his abrasive imagery of military boots crushing human heads and Salima Hashmi's stained and bleeding abstract compositions are the greatest example of the inciting art of the late 1980s. Such a trend paved way for taking up more intense issues such as identity, social stratification, gender and patriarchy, tolerance in and for religions, economy and globalization as popular subjects of the paintings. At the dawn of the 21st century, globalization reduced the intellectual barriers and international politics and happenings became more inspirational than the national issues. Pakistani artists and painters, now well aware of the worth of their endowment in the art world, are actively painting focusing on sensitive socio-political and global issues as their subject matter.
19. The title *Moderate Enlightenment* is also a term former Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf coined in 2003 at a summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to describe the path the Islamic world must take to finally escape the dead-end of fundamentalism and anti-Western sentiment. In its complexity, however, Qureshi's series puts both to the test: the rigidity of religious fundamentalism and the rigidity of western "enlightened" clichés of Islamic culture.