

# Decolonization and Contemporary Art of Pakistan

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**ABSTRACT:** *Decolonization as a topic of scholarly investigation and as a conceptual framework is of top priority for focused research and meaningful scholarship in the global-modern world. This study while establishing art as a medium of investigation and a manifestation of socio-political and cultural convictions of a decolonizing Pakistani society aims at exploring the contemporary visual culture and matters of image production to develop an understanding of the processes entangled with issues of sovereignty, self-determination and territory. The creative legacies, state and status of art institutions, academic and commercial, and the role of artists who helped art maintain its relevant countenance in Pakistan are also probed. This contextual, theoretical analysis of visual arts finds 'multiple modernities' of the 'global world' as the most important integer of a 'decolonizing' Pakistan. The diversifying effects of global-modern; transformative, differentiated, individualizing, worldwide, and increasingly market-oriented character of Pakistani art is traced through contemporary examples that are well received in the global art market. The main discussion revolves around the often-contested narratives about art in contemporary Pakistan which are illustrative of an ever-evolving society. The periphery of investigation ultimately expands to the subject of decolonization; to claim sovereignty of mind, thoughts and attitude in order to apprehend the colonial past to make sense of present and to explicit the future as per the inclinations of contemporary times. With an acknowledgement that Pakistan has earned a very respectable place in the global art world and our artists have created a niche in the most powerful and effective industry that administer the world, the paper presents the case of contemporary art in Pakistan as it effects and gets affected by the society. Along with established approaches to historiography – collecting, documenting, digitizing and analyzing the information, research methods are borrowed from sister fields of social sciences only to be tested against the established theoretical frameworks being adopted as part of global discourse on art.*

**Keywords:** Postcolonial, Globalization, Identity and indigeneity, Art activism, Art as history, Empowering Artist, Text as visual

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## **Introduction**

In the General Assembly's *Special Political and Decolonization Committee* meeting 2009, Decolonization was acknowledged as "United Nations success story – with some 750 million people, over the century, having been given the opportunity to exercise their legitimate rights to self-govern their countries"<sup>vi</sup>. It took more time for the realization that any independence gained politically does not fully live up to the notion of decolonization as it does not promise sovereignty of mind, thoughts and attitude. Decolonization, in this spirit, as a topic of scholarly investigation and as a conceptual framework has earned the rightful status (Na'puti 156). Non-inclusive critiques are considered "attacks against both the pre-colonial identity of indigenous people and of their contemporary efforts at achieving sovereignty" (Sharma & Wright 122). Similarly, if decolonization entails an effort to critically reflect on colonialism and its impact upon colonized people and environments it involves, it will be meaningless without the active and conscientious participation of the primary subjects. Hence, it becomes essential to document, analyze and share all the voluntary and involuntary procedures and actions that address the colonial regimes and its aftermath in Pakistan, once the part of India; a British colony for over a century. Art has long earned its authenticity in documenting and critiquing the lives, attitudes and mindset of its people. Among the literary, performing and visual arts, it is the third one that's most useful for the purpose as it's beyond the barrier of linguistic and political fragmentation. Art unifies the communities for a common cultural and ethical look and can be considered as an accumulative expression of its people.

## **Art and Decolonization**

The process of decolonization is experiential and so is art (Dewey 11). Aesthetic experience is a basic and necessary element for the politics and ethics of liberation from coloniality (Vallega 128). Similarly, Decolonial Aesthetics is giving voice to understandings, subjectivities and emergent bodily practices excluded within the hegemony of the modern/colonial aesthetic (Baker 22). Thus, it is appropriate to analyze art and think of augmenting its scope in socio-political scenarios to accelerate the process of decolonization. Art and aesthetics demand investigations at multiple levels. Comparative studies and theoretical approaches (post-modern, post-colonial, avant-garde, popular, environmental, feminist, ethical etc.) provide a comprehensive understanding of the conception, production and reception of art explaining its meaning and usefulness. These approaches may differ from one culture to another. They get evolved and perceived differently in specific times and places. In such a context

and as a result of post-coloniality, globalization, technological advancement and other political conflicts, 21<sup>st</sup> century has changed the outlook of various artistic, literary and cultural factors in Pakistan.

## **Art In Pakistan**

### **Significance and Historical Context**

The significance of art remains pertinent in contemporary discourse, casual or academic, due to the specificity of time and space in which the inquiry is put up. In decolonizing cultures, like that of Pakistan, ascribed to the political and religious factors the meaning of art is ever-evolving. Since independence, successive governments, to best suit their visions of the State, have defined art in Pakistan. Not long ago, to the common Pakistani, art was the concern of the elite. It was something to do with finer sensibilities or entertainment which is a luxury afforded by very few in the society. Even today, art refers to painting mostly; landscape or calligraphy perhaps. The word still, at times triggers the ideas of *halal* and *haram* in the mind of the faithful. The sinful figurative, representational art or luring music, to many Pakistanis is religiously barred while calligraphy or qawwali is permissible. In the state approved official history narratives art in the region starts with the advent of Islam in 711 CE when Muhammad Bin Qasim conquered Sind and built the first mosque in the area. The ambiguity got enhanced with the popular usage of the term *Islamic Art* in the Western discourse as if art has to be categorized on the basis of religion or needed to be baptized for authenticity.

### **Evolution of Art in Contemporary Pakistan**

In such a scenario, artists and art educationists have played an immense role in rationalizing art as an agent of stability and change within the politicized and *Islamicized* Pakistan. The dedication and resilience of this group of handful people has resulted in the production of art that is celebrated nationally and internationally (Kamran, “Contesting Conventions” 19). As a matter of fact, 21<sup>st</sup> century brought a significant change in the prevailing mindset and the definition of art has already been revised. One observes an improvement towards the understanding of art as a social necessity, an agent of change, a medium of instruction, a document of history and a tool for social activism. 21<sup>st</sup> century is also the time that introduced division and uncertainty worldwide. Pakistan unknowingly became the center of world’s attention. While on political paradigms we got criticized and condemned for our ‘wrong doings’ for being biased and having a softer corner for Taliban in War against Terrorism<sup>ii</sup> on humanitarian and civil grounds the world got interested in our cultural and social arenas mainly in pursuit to understand the phenomenon that is Pakistan. In such

investigations the world got convinced of the strengths of the individuals who would lead the country to harmony and stability. Stephen P. Cohen while predicting the future and explaining *The Idea of Pakistan* observes:

With its declining social indicators, crumbling infrastructure, and the military's misplaced priorities, Pakistan is a deeply troubled state and, were it not for the large number of talented Pakistanis, one would be tempted to judge it to be in terminal decline. This is an important point: the Pakistani state is en-feeble, but Pakistani society is as vigorous as ever, manifest particularly in its provincial cultures and talented elite. (7)

It appears as a strange phenomenon that while as a state Pakistan is experiencing a nose dive with its deteriorating economy, failing administrative and justice system, rising moral and political corruption, directionless education system which is seen as a profitable industry, hence decline in ethical social values, its artists, scientists, engineers, doctors, sportspersons, athletes are making mark on the international horizons. Aspiring artists highlight, investigate and analyze this perplex situation through the medium of art. Art is a medium which has no boundaries and barriers. It has one 'visual' language which is understood around the world and it is hard to repress or censor. It would be safe to say that such geo-politics, social constructs and a surge in global art market has pretty much fashioned art in contemporary Pakistan.

## **Exploring Contemporary Pakistani Art**

### **Colonial Legacy, Indigenous Values and Contemporary Trends**

On a more critical note, two attitudes are prevalent in the discourse on contemporary art of Pakistan. One has been inherited from the previous century and implies that art is a concern of the elite. It is a product displayed in galleries and museums for the consumptions of the *blessed ones* who have time, taste and money to enjoy it. This attitude is probably motivated by the fact that today's art is the off-spring of colonial art and a medium that has not cut its ties with European Academy art. The British, during their rule over India had planted the rift between high art and low art. During British Raj, the indigenous tradition of artmaking was misunderstood and ridiculed (Kamran, "Contesting Conventions" 22). Indian art was considered craft-oriented and thus didn't appease the aesthetics of the masters. Additionally, as discussed earlier, the popular history narratives in Pakistan, politicized and *Islamicized*, conveniently disowned the ancient artistic legacies of Buddhist or Hindu Art because they were of no match to the complexion of the Islamic state that was being propagated. All this made art foreign to the masses who knew of art in shape of oil painting and sculpture as introduced and practiced by the British. The people of Pakistan remained

ignorant of the fact that art had a different meaning in indigenous tradition. It's been more of a life style than an object of beauty. It had always been an integral part of everyday communal life and had religious connotations in Indian cultures. It was also an instrument and a channel towards metaphysical investigations, a function that was sustained by major religions of India be it Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam.

The other viewpoint about art, in Pakistan, implies that art has been fused into innovative hybrids with so many other artistic expressions and using the technological advanced mediums it has transformed itself and has transcended its former limitations. Its possibilities of expression and its diversity seem limitless. Its audience and its consumers have been changed, so does its practitioners, scope and trajectories. This attitude is supported by few but the relevant circles mostly the practitioners. It is due to their understanding and effort that art has sustained the rightful status in contemporary Pakistan. The number of art institutions from two<sup>iii</sup> has soared and the students opting for art as a career are increasing tremendously. As technology favors the exposure, the industry is providing more and more opportunities for the practitioners on national and international level. Art institutions which have been fighting the battle of survival before, while admitting the importance of the subject are interested in embracing art as a tool for the advancement of knowledge and the betterment of society.

### **Inigorating Art and Empowering Artists**

To the casual observer, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Pakistan, if nothing else, the image of the artist has changed. From the archetypal; sensitive, insightful but apparently carefree also known as *charsi bhangī*<sup>iv</sup> souls who would try to make both ends meet or the ones whose fame will bring riches after they were gone, the artists now lead from upfront. They go to places, have a style of social divas. They have become the fashion icons and most important of all they are making millions of dollars. The *sinfe-nazuk*<sup>v</sup> are no more practicing the *fanoon-e latifa*<sup>vi</sup> from the make shift kitchen and dining room studios rather they navigate the fields of arts, training rigorously, negotiating commercial deals, handling the agents and the critics. Many art galleries are owned and run by women e.g. Canvas Gallery Karachi, Como Museum Lahore, Tanzara or Satrang Gallery in Islamabad. Women themselves are the curators, collectors and dealers. Their work gets to be displayed in the museums amid the masters. Shahzia Sikandar (b. 1968, Lahore)<sup>vii</sup>, Aisha Khalid (b.1972, Lahore)<sup>viii</sup>, Risham Syed (b. 1970, Lahore)<sup>ix</sup> and many young women artists have made their way to the international museums. Realizing the strength and importance of these women Pakistan has started owning its 'forgotten daughters' (Iftikhar, 2013). Pakistan's most successful artist Shahzia Sikandar was barely known in her own country until she bagged the *Inaugural Medal of Art* by U.S. secretary of State in 2012. The

change is also evident as the contemporary artists are creating nude figurative art and are openly exhibiting it without the fear of being attacked and assaulted by the self-acclaimed moral militia as was witnessed in 1980's Pakistan. *Reflection* painted by R.M.Naeem in 2018 and displayed at Sanat Gallery Karachi was a bold step after the self-imposed censorship by the artists towards nude human figure after the attack on Colin David's exhibition in 1990 (For detail see Sarwar, 1990). In 1984 too, Iqbal Hussain had faced similar constraint for exhibiting his works as he painted 'prostitutes' of *Heera Mandi*, Lahore where he belonged and lived. The not nude paintings of women did not match the *moral* standard of state owned and run Alhamra Art Gallery (Mirza 22).

## **Diverse Approaches Of Contemporary Pakistani Art**

### **Art as Social Commentary**

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the subject of the most art is a socio-political commentary. During the 1980's under the military dictatorship, artists had been using art as a medium of expression raising voice on behalf of the writers, journalists who were shunned down by the authorities. Through their paintings artists had highlighted the atrocities of the times, drew attention to the injustice and addressed maltreatment in the society that followed the military autocracy in Pakistan. Visual vocabulary was hard to censor but intense in communicating the aggression. More recently, artists have opted for satirical comments in art. It is the outcome of the previous Martial Laws that the state institutions are compromised promoting frustration amongst the masses. This disappointment has an expression in contemporary art. Today's art can be categorized as a visual manifestation of political and social cynicism which is undoubtedly a popular expression across the literary circles, journalism as well as entertainment industry (Kamran, 2014). The pun of Imran Qureshi's (b. 1972, Hyderabad) *Moderate Enlightenment*<sup>c</sup>, Bani Abidi's (b. 1971, Karachi) *Ghost of Muhammad Bin Qasim roaming in Karachi* (Fig 1), guns for the safety and security of the straight path in Ali Azmat's (b. 1973, Multan) *Sirat-e Mustaqeem* (Fig 2) or comical characters in Saira Waseem's (b. 1975, Lahore) *Divine Comedies* are some of the examples.

### **Art and Activism**

Some artists are more socially driven. They are community workers, are deeply rooted in public sectors and are surely more empathetic towards the socially and financially marginalized. It is but natural that their art highlights the *incorrectness* of the status quo. They do not want to depend on visual metaphors or underlined statements to question the authorities or the wrongdoings of society and want to be less manipulative rather direct. Examples are street art of Asim

Butt (b. 1978) (Fig 3), often remembered as the Banksy of Pakistan or Naiza Khan's (b. 1968) (Fig 4) or Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's (b. 1989) community-based projects which aim to create social awareness amongst masses related to ideas like environment, pollution, sustainability, marine life and water scarcity.

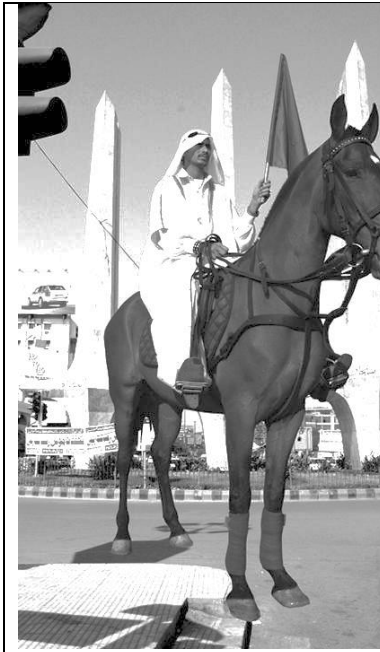


Fig 1 *Ghost of Muhammad Bin Qasim*,

Bani Abidi, 2006, 1/9 inkjet prints, 18 x14 inches approx, Solomon R. Guggenheim

Museum, New York Guggenheim

UBS MAP Purchase Fund, 2012.



Fig 2 *Sirate- Mustaqeem Series*, Ali Azmat, Acrylic on canvas, 15 x9 inches, 2008



Fig 3 *Eject*, Asim Butt, *People's Resistance movement*, 2007



Fig 4 *Restore the boundaries* (The Manora Project), Naiza Khan, Site-specific installation, 2008

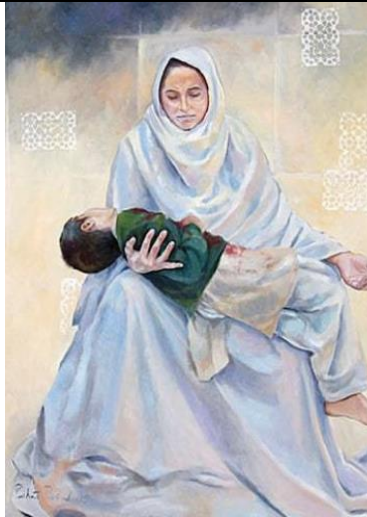


Fig 5 *Strange Fruit*, Rahat Naveed, Oil on canvas, 2015



Fig 6 *Strategies of Selves I, II & III*, Nusra Latif Qureshi, Digital Print on paper, 2013



### **Art as a Document of History**

Artworks are also appearing as documents of history as the artists respond to particular significant events. Some would record it using the straight forward expressions as in Ijaz ul Hassan's (b. 1940, Lahore) work or like Rahat Naveed Masud's (b. 1956) (Fig 5) who would use metaphors for a more profound visual construct, defined by conventions and rules of good taste and tradition. Masud's work shows the pathos, grief and tragedy of Army Public School massacre, 2014. It also represents the country itself. Pakistan, represented in the green and the white of the child's clothes, bleeds in the lap of the mother nature. On the aesthetic front, the visual borrows its authenticity from the conventional mother and child simile from the European Western Art.

### **Traditional Genres and Contemporary Approach**

Talking of the tradition, we realize that some artists would very fondly stick to more customary genres of art making, landscapes in this case and are equally successful in sustaining their art practice. They are able to create a unique combination of Eastern or Chinese trends in landscape painting that pre-date the more famous sixteenth century Western Landscape as they evolve under the European painters. For example, Mughees Riaz (b. 1971, Lahore) would often add or select the visual elements in his typical looking landscapes, mostly of River Ravi and of Punjab that would add layers to the meaning of the artwork turning it into what has been termed as the *Conceptual Landscapes*<sup>vi</sup>.

### **Trends in Abstract Art -Visual and Textual**

On more technical grounds the legacy of abstract art is very much alive in contemporary practice. Both types of abstraction, analytical and synthetic or rational and irrational survive here. In Imran Mir's or Muhammad Ali Talpur's (b. 1976, Sind) work amid loud declarations of independence from representational work, the relation to the object is also cut off to achieve a formal autonomy of colour, shape and surface. In a latest phase of abstraction, painting has been reduced to a reality of sheer signs where abstract signifiers are submerged in a free flow of polyphonic relations with the history of art and modernity itself as in Imran Channa's (b. 1981, Lahore) work. Nothing can get more abstract than the language and words themselves which reminds of Ghulam Muhammad (b.1979, Sibi/Baluchistan) who carves out words and recomposes them in a meditative and cathartic way. At the same time Ghulam Muhammad's work poses questions of the nature of visual in a new way. i.e. why visual art be visual only and not textual? Customarily, visual means colour, form and surface and not only text, form & surface which contemporary art aims to discard.

## **Conceptual Frameworks Of Decolonization And Their Manifestation In Contemporary Pakistani Art**

Decolonization entails identity construction, gender studies, involvement of publics as the most important features of its conceptual frameworks. Same features are considered to be the essential integers of contemporary Pakistani art. Following discussion probes into the practices of several contemporary artists as they implore the said facets in their art.

### **Issues of Identity**

Post-coloniality and globalization brought the ideas of materiality, objectification in mainstream academic discourses it also fairly questioned indigeneity and tradition in art or the distinction between arts and crafts. While many artists would respond to these issues, Nusra Latif Qureshi (b. 1973, Lahore & Melbourne) confronts her audience on a history lesson while devising strategies for self (Fig 6). Latif thinks historically while developing her iconography, deconstructing and reconstructing the historical narratives along with the forms and surfaces that she chose to work with. Similarly, Sania Samad (b. 1972, Lahore & NY) engages with the women embroiders of Punjab and KPK. The collaborative embroideries are a serious effort to decolonize the art on several fronts. Firstly, by breaking the Western hegemony of medium and adopting textiles and embroidery. Secondly, as a part of a larger scheme to explore local aesthetic sensibilities and diminishing the rift between high art and craft as instigated by the colonial masters. Risham Hussain also re-introduces the quilts as art pieces. Our women have long been involved in making quilted, layered, patchworked (*rally*, *gindi*) beddings which immensely speak of ideas of upcycling and sustainability. The quilts (Seven Seas series, Abraaj Art Prize 2011) trace the tracks of British trade of cotton and tells the tale of exploitation of local infrastructure and manipulation of history. Through these household items Hussain intends to re-visit popular history as recorded during the British Raj.

### **Gender and Sexism in Art**

Post 9/11, *Identity* crisis propelled gender issues even sexism in art. Farazeh Syed (b. 1971, Lahore) while looking inwards, as she mostly herself models for her paintings, probes the stereotypical gender roles and biases. Amra Khan (b. 1984, Lahore) drew attention to the often-hushed voices. Pakistani society has never been comfortable speaking about feminists' issues while being a voice for the transgenders still remain a taboo. When 'me too' movement stormed the world art scene not only female but our male artists also grabbed the opportunity to speak of personal as well as communal level and highlighted the plight of the

situation. Art provided a venue and a medium of catharsis for many to speak about and rationalize the personal traumas and histories.

### **Public Art, Biennials and Art Fairs**

Public art is another emerging trend in contemporary Pakistan. Under the banner of biennials, artists have a chance to reach out to the publics and exhibit outside the so-called *white cube spaces* named as galleries and museums. This also provide a chance to engage and collaborate directly with multiple professions and creative industries. This inclusivity and communication with the larger society make them more than just the artists. They are now the cultural practitioners, social scientists or social workers as they conquer more conceptual spaces. *Numaish Karachi 2015* a collaborative project of Habib University Karachi, *Jumma Hafta Art Bazar*, 2016, LBF-1 2018, LBF-2 2022, KB-17, KB-19 and KB-22 while achieving great landmarks in the global art world have created memorable experiences for its audiences. Such experiences have changed the meaning of art in contemporary Pakistan. The impact of which is vast, overwhelming and far-reaching. The said projects implicated community or public engagement. The artist community and intelligentsia while bridging the gap between the elite class who has always been considered as the major producers as well as the consumers of arts have started playing the role of mediators of social discourses bringing awareness of all kinds among the masses.

### **Conclusion –Towards Decolonization**

A careful analysis of contemporary Pakistani art establishes that art had broken its ties with the colonial legacy around 1990's when its didactic, ethical, educational and political tendencies were acknowledged and were put into action. It took another decade and so when with the mindset and efforts of artists and educationists, Pakistani art became increasingly mature in its identity, scope and interventions. It would be safe to declare that art in contemporary Pakistan is being considered as an act rather a fact. It can be looked upon as a model and as a symptom. The very idea of pictorial is being reconsidered. In doing so the whole act of art making becomes a theoretical operation. Chaos is structured as non-chaos. Thus, contemporary art in Pakistan is set somewhere in between the ideas of mediated realities, posing the questions of nature of visual and the visuality in context where art itself, meeting the demands of changing times and society has created visual sites and visual media. This diversity of medium and approach along with the complexity of ideas remain the most unique features of contemporary art in Pakistan. It is also realized that the study of contemporary art can't be reduced to the study of objects. The artworks must be studied contextually. They must be examined in relation to the ways in which they are experienced, the ways in which they correlate to other institutions of the society

and impact various social, political and economic structures. This process in one word can be coined as decolonization. Hence, art becomes a most potent medium that can decolonize the mind in the most effective and persuasive way to meet the contemporary challenges and to prepare for the future.

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<sup>i</sup> Details available on Special Committee on Decolonization or the C-24  
[//www.un.org/dppa/decolonization/en/about](http://www.un.org/dppa/decolonization/en/about)

<sup>ii</sup> Refers to the geo-political situation in which Pakistan shares the border with Afghanistan, the home of Talibans and for allowing stay to Osama Bin Laden who is considered to be the master mind behind 9/11 attacks at the World Trade Center. Detail report titled *Pakistan: Friend or Foe in the Fight Against Terrorism?* presented at the Joint Hearing Before The Subcommittee On Terrorism, Nonproliferation, And Trade And The Subcommittee On Asia And The Pacific Of The Committee On Foreign Affairs House Of Representatives One Hundred Fourteenth Congress Second Session July 12, 2016 Serial No. 114-173 Available via the World Wide Web:

<http://www.foreignaffairs.house.gov/> or <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/>.

<sup>iii</sup> At the time of independence, in 1947 Mayo School of Art, Lahore and Fine Arts Dept. at Punjab University were the only two places offering art education.

<sup>iv</sup> Refers to poor and lost-archetypal image of an artist.

<sup>v</sup> Refers to women as fragile or weaker sex.

<sup>vi</sup> Urdu translation of Fine Arts, refers to skills that inculcate finer aesthetic feelings like music or painting.

<sup>vii</sup> See *Extraordinary Realities* in RISD Museum, New York, 2021.

<sup>viii</sup> See *Your way starts from the Other side*, Ayesha Khalid, 2015, Agha Khan Museum, Ontario.

<sup>ix</sup> See *History as Past* (Installation), Risham Hussain, in Manchester Art Gallery.

<sup>x</sup> See <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/500492>. Some of the works from the series are available on Google Art & Culture, AAN Collection.

<sup>xi</sup> A term often used to explain landscape painting that takes up contemporary socio-political issues and not just appreciating the beauty of nature.