

Celebrating Change

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The famous classical qawwal Munshi Raziuddin died almost two years ago. He was in his eighties. He must have been in his 20s when Pakistan came into being. His training would have been in the old ethos of classical arts. Nusrat Fateh Ali, the more widely known qawwal, made famous when he dared to collaborate with the rock musician, Peter Gabriel, died prematurely in 1997, the fiftieth anniversary year of Pakistan. He was in his 40s and born a Pakistani. Capable of fine classical renditions of the qawwali, he chose to experiment with his tradition, locating himself in his own times, addressing a new generation of music audiences.

The miniature painter, Imran Qureshi following in the steps of pioneer of neo-miniature, Shahzia Sikander, pulled miniature painting even further out of its tenuous links with old practices when he collaged scraps of Urdu newspapers and scrawled a Ghauri missile on it with the mere hint of a *hashia*. Shahzia herself has turned to interpreting miniature painting with electronic media.

Blending of traditions in art is not new. Most post-colonial artists found themselves struggling to contextualize their work culturally, Shakir Ali, Ismail Gulgee, Sadequain, Shemza - in fact one can say all artists other than those working strictly in the tradition canon, where art became a craft. The difference today is that the younger generation of Pakistani artists celebrate this floating world and refuse to feel a sense of cultural loss, to feel the weight of society's "official" needs. The "old" Pakistan faced the moral duty of a double ideological distancing - from colonizers as well as their Indian past - and made hopeless efforts at artificially inventing a "Pakistani" culture. In the 70s it was attempted by celebrating folk cultures, and in later years with Islamic values. Yet, ordinary people continued to over-value foreign products and watch Indian movies, regardless.

Pakistani pop music blares from ever car boom booming at traffic lights, newspeak with a string of English words held together by Urdu grammar beams from new FM radio stations and TV channels, and is the chosen lingua franca of the young, SMS and chat rooms communicate in roman Urdu, shop signs have English words written in Urdu script. A Maulana sits with his veiled wife and family in McDonalds eating burgers, a Cybercafe on a hand cart plugs into a local shop for business. Cable TV allows you to switch from QTV (a religious channel) to MTV in midsentence, from PTV (Official channel) to Fox news via Star World and Sony TV.

Yet it doesn't strike as being Western influence exactly. Nothing like this exists in the West. The elite that spoke "King's English" and wore tweed jackets is dying out, to be replaced by a new

generation of the economically powerful, oblivious to that culture. Neither is it simply the erasure of histories, although that may be its most significant impact.

Cultural diffusion is as old as the human presence on earth. The region of Pakistan in particular has seen the absorption or passage of many influences.

Today, a young Pakistani in his or her 20s is born of parents who themselves have no direct experience of the "old" culture. As with many societies born out of trauma, their grandparents remained quiet about their experiences and values, permitting their sons and daughters to establish their own system. Literature, music, cinema all eventually fell silent about the past. Museums the natural repositories of that past, are designed more for archaeologists and scholars than for the public or the young. Even if we wanted to find our past, we wouldn't know where to look for it. With the emergence of the third generation Pakistanis, there is a growing realization that Pakistan itself can claim a history. The Mohatta Palace Museum in Karachi, whose selection and renovation is itself an indication of this, has opened the doors on the past, with varied exhibitions - of superb furniture and clothing belonging to the old Talpur family of Sindh, old areas, Gandhara Art, lavish retrospectives of Sadequain and Naqsh and the most recent "The Jewel in the Crown" minutely researched exhibition of Karachi's history.

The classic response of intelligentsia in any post-colonial society is to re-visit the history of their nation, restore or explore cultural memory. This is not so simple in Pakistan. The dilemma here becomes "which history?" "which past?" When Pakistan was created the emigre/s from Northern India were identified with the culture of the Mughal Empire carrying echoes of their own regional cultures like Pashtoon, Sindhi, Saraiki, Bengali, Baluch as well as their various sub-cultures. The language and literature of each region was different, as was the colonial influence depending on its distance from the centre of the Empire, and whether it was predominantly urban or rural. Very soon the dominant political force mostly from the Punjab, the most populous and rich province, marginalized the "old" classical Indian emigre classical cultures. Nevertheless, this has been an uneasy dominance, and to bypass confrontation, a decision was taken to identify with Western Asia and then Islam. Islam seemed the logical answer. After all, Pakistan was created for the Muslims of India. However, as Dubai and other UAE countries opened their doors for employment, Pakistani Muslims realized they had little in common with Arab Islam, unless they also Arabised themselves - to say Allah Hafiz instead of the Persian Khuda Hafiz, wear Kaffaya instead of traditional turbans, wear Hijab instead of dupattas.

Today, the urban/rural proportion of population has become 50/50 instead of 30/70. Fifty percent of the population of urban centres is below 18 years of age. Urban culture increasingly defines the

aspirations of all Pakistan. Rural life is rapidly dying out even in areas that have the appearance of a village.

Increasingly young people are managing electronic media, business, art education, music, theatre, in many cases even policy making. They have a language of their own generated by new technology, that completely frees them of the control of the older generation - a generation that stopped in its tracks that lives in fear arising from suppression and can merely offer bittersweet nostalgia and acceptance of injustice.

These are not deliberate erasures of histories but an adventurous journey on an intercity bus travelling from metropolis to metropolis via a string of villages. It has led to the generation of ingenious playful works, full of knowing: from Afghani rugs with Russian tanks, helicopters and klashnikovs woven into traditional patterns, to irreverent romantic greeting cards barely disguised as Eid cards, Punjabi bhangra rap, underground comic versions of classic Indian movies, etc. The new art has been quick to pick up this energy: the idiocy of celebrating Ghauri missiles, puns on curtains and purdah, teddy bear weapons, outrageously decorated steel installations, American "heroes" constructed with tiny images of Iraqi dead, or the should-be-mute veiled woman with dangerous weapon wielding multiple arms. This generation also feeds on passion for the visually intense: embroidery, mehendi, the miniature, jewelry.

Coomaraswamy, with his usual insight, refers to the traditions of marg (highway) and desi (folk), or, in the unnecessarily judgemental international terms, "high" and "low" art. Popular art was a convenient starting point for the radicalization of art. It is an interesting thermometer of contemporary attitudes - a colorful woven rope anchored strongly to our past, guiding us across a chasm of quick time possibilities and choices.

Many younger artists began their journey looking at popular urban art, cinema posters, truck art, stickers, shrines and the paraphernalia of images sold cheaply in backstreet markets, as well as international conceptual works and installations thereby offending, a whole generation of mainstream artists, art critics and galleries. Since the early 90s when this trend began, not only has mainstream come around, but a more comfortable language has evolved that seamlessly incorporates the street and gallery.

What makes the work of the new wave of artists more worthy of attention is that unlike many significant non-western artists, who have chosen to live and work in the West, the majority of contemporary Pakistani artists are working from Pakistan despite little encouragement from local galleries or buyers.

There have always been two kinds of art: those that use aesthetics as an end and those that use aesthetics as a means.

At different times in history, one or the other takes precedence. For years Pakistani art lost the ability to navigate. Much of the art seen in galleries followed a formula with some exceptional works such as the earlier work of Sadequain, Shemza, Iqbal Geoffrey, Bashir Mirza - to just name a few. However, no art movement as such emerged. Today we see strong art movements developing: the neo-miniaturists of Lahore, and the popular art inspired works of Karachi - reflecting interestingly both the character of the two cities: : Lahore, self-conscious of its Mughal heritage, and Karachi irreverant and eclectic. At last Pakistani art is reflecting Pakistani society rather than its ideology.

The new art is not marginal, even when it places itself out on a limb, it is at home with the almost humourous clash of temporal and geographical contrasts, it does not live "in the cracks", nor is it really avant garde. It is celebratory of the "in your face" cacaphony of images, emotions and technology in a society that still has camel-drawn carts serenely negotiating inner city traffic jams. Pakistani art is going through its most interesting phases, no longer reflective, but active, poised to become "a useful interlocuter in engaging with the concept of geography and its signifying practices..."

- Durriya Kazi

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