

You've come a long way, babe''!

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In 2002 the international story about Pakistan, was of a village woman Mukhtar Mai, who was sentenced to gang rape by the village ruling family in retribution for an indiscretion committed by her brother, who had dared to elope with a daughter of the chief of the feudal clan . Her parents had begged the village elders and neighbours to intervene as the sentence was being carried out after which she was compelled to walk home naked through the village streets. Belatedly, the State intervened, the Supreme Court of Pakistan admonished the police. The ministers of Social Welfare and Women's Development visited the village, and the rapists were subsequently brought to book. Unfortunately, similar incidents have continued in other parts of the country - the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan compiles such violations with depressing regularity.

Not much has altered since 1986, when the Women's Commission Report observed: "The average woman of Pakistan is born in near slavery, leads a life of drudgery and dies invariably in oblivion" Five years later in 1991, Ayesha Lalal, the political historian stated "The relationship between women and the State of Pakistan has been both compelling and paradoxical. After nearly a decade (referring to Zia's years) of state sponsored attempts at stifling women's voices in public arenas and pushing back the borders of their social visibility, Pakistan became the first State in the Muslim World to have a woman Prime Minister" The paradox of women's visibility and invisibility cozily co-existing continues today. Statistics show that the growing number of females who are entering higher education overtaking their male colleagues by an embarrassing margin. Bankers, architects, social scientists, journalists, entrepreneurs, engineers and doctors, are women, but the glass ceiling stands firm. It is also true that these women emerge out of an inverted pyramid of opportunity. It is in this context that one looks at the evolving imagery of the art of Pakistani women.

After independence in 1947, which resulted in a mass exodus of populations in both directions across India and Pakistan, hundreds of thousands died in communal rioting. There were abductions and rapes, women and children separated, some never to be retrieved by their families. Women in public life, although highly visible as social leaders, came from a few privileged families whose males were already established political figures. Their major task was the resettlement of refugees, tracing abducted women and children and putting the social order back into place.

Looking at the art of women who began their careers against this backdrop of social upheaval, it is apparent that they became emblems of social change and signifiers of new avenues of activity. Among them were pioneers like Anna Molka Ahmed, Abbasi Abidi, Jamila Zaidi and Naseem Qazi, who set up art institutions and validated painting as an activity. This was often in the face of grave opposition from patriarchal families. It, therefore, followed that the female artist gravitated to the

role of art educator rather than studio practitioner. During this period women widened the discipline of art education but remained in the periphery of professional practice.

Outside the classroom, the practitioners were predominantly male. The modernists Shakir Ali, Shemza, Ahmed Pervez and Sadequain, unconventional in their life styles, strengthened the popular belief that artistic production was linked to a bohemian life style. For serious female aspirants to the profession, this presented some problems. There were notable exceptions like Zubaida Agha, an early abstractionist and a vehemently independent spirit who ran Pakistan's first private contemporary art gallery in Rawalpindi in the 1960's. A recluse in her last years she was a role model for women who saw her as a dedicated studio practitioner immune to popular trends and current critiques.

But, for the most part, for the first two and a half decades after Pakistan's independence, the work of women artists was a cautious echo of the Euro - centric model prevalent in the region. Their own art education and what they in turn imparted in the classroom was limited to such genres as still life, landscape, portrait, and figure composition, inherited from the South Kensington art school tradition. Women artists grew in number, held exhibitions and demonstrated their painterly skills. They gained social status but their work continued to be predictable and compliant with what was already in vogue.

By the time the military coup of General Zia-ul Haq took place in 1977, women headed all major art educational institutions in Pakistan. The teaching of art had provided a valuable niche, but it was the targeting of women by the military regime that irrevocably altered the form and content of women's art. Several parallel developments occurred. Government policies regarding the visual and performing arts attempted to put into place a vaguely defined Islamic "ideological" content. In effect this meant a ban on certain kinds of performance e.g. dance, and discouraging art forms such as sculpture alongside promoting certain ideologically "correct" forms such as calligraphy. Unaware of the international feminist debates of the 70's, Pakistani women artists intuitively disengaged themselves from the prevalent ideology of the Military Regime, perceiving themselves as being one of its primary targets.

Ideological dominance of the State had to be challenged at a number of levels to initiate alternative artistic responses. There was also the need for exploration in formal terms of medium and scale more appropriate to the nascent women's movement. Women artists struggled to analyze and challenge formal hierarchies and hegemonies - the most important of them being the "oil on canvas" regimen, the genres of official portraiture, landscape and calligraphy. As women artists looked into issues of form there was a corresponding expansion of an audience looking for something other than 'acceptable' State-sanctioned art.

As the regime sought to curtail civil liberties and to control civil society - the woman and her body became central to demonstrating that control. Government injunctions emanated regarding the

donning of the "veil", the banning of the sari for wives of government personnel, and a dress code for women who worked for the Government. Women artists consciously took up the issue of the chaadar as a signifier of available options. Responding to the flaunting of this official symbol of "protection", women artists, poets and writers focused on this piece of fabric, as a symbol of their disenfranchisement. The chaadar's physical, religious, spiritual and mystical aspects stimulated a range of visual and literary responses. Zehra Nigah, in the poem 'Samjhote ki Chaadar' spoke of the 'Chaadar of Compromises' in which each woman envelopes herself, smothering her own voice, silencing her needs.

Naazish Ataullah, painter and printmaker, was a student at the National College of Arts, Lahore and also a member of the Womens Action Forum in the 1980's. Trying to find metaphors to convey the growing limitations on women's personal liberty Ataullah used the chaadar as an image with multiple meanings. Shrouded forms peered out of architectural apertures, silent, restrained and ominous. In other places the chaadar became a conch shell, a strangely comforting mysterious image.

During the eleven years of Zia's regime, artists were preoccupied with camouflage, claustrophobia, ambiguity and rebellion. The formal image became loaded with intensely felt emotions and statements about physical denial. Samina Mansuri worked around the physicality of the body; building images of fecundity, entanglements and snares. Trained as a designer Mansuri turned to painting as the conduit for her experience. Layers of pigment, sand, wax, acrylics and oils came together with a compelling sensuousness.

As General Zia quite literally exploded into oblivion (by act of God or man) the veil or the burqa remained, a potent presence in works in progress as well as in works yet-to-be. The battle for the control of the body continued; the uncovering of its longings, and the challenge to the duplicity of those that would deny its needs. The male gaze was confronted; ownership and labels questioned. Man, always the context for the female body, was being defied with irony, as the woman artist watched him watching her!

Summaya Durrani's "Faceless Nude" series were tongue-in-cheek statements about women's bodies being served up to the male consumer as delectable morsels. An artist who culled her images and material references from a myriad sources, Durrani's investigations were defined by her study of art history, print making techniques and an allegiance to mysticism. Two decades later, the burqa has evolved into a metaphor encompassing other aspects of women's social and legal states. It hints at personal connotations and emotional encounters. Younger women artists reframe its context and widen its affinities. Aisha Khalid and Tazeen Qayyum were contemporaries in the traditional miniature department at the National College of Arts in the 1980's. For Aisha Khalid the burqa was a physical reality in the small town of shikarpur where she grew up. Her sister wore it from an early age while Khalid went to school enveloped in a chaadar. Khalid's diminutive works are dense

surfaces filled with curtains, patterns and heavily veiled women. Virginia Wiles observed 3: "They stand invisible yet resolute in their burqas resistant behind their veils of roses and lotus blossoms. The exquisite ornamentation in Khalid's work distills a dual sense of oppression and subversion." It is subversion and sarcasm that also infuses Tazeen Qayyum's work who grew up in Karachi with an educationist mother. In Qayyum's work the burqa is smothering, silencing length of fabric. Social stereotyping which equates invisibility with morality is challenged, as are revered social positions.

The biting comment is predictably sweetened by a playfulness and reference to "women's craft". Among the social concerns addressed by women are conventions and institutions sanctioned by tradition and faith. The woman and her body reside in the space appointed by society. Marriage and motherhood are desirable attainments for all women. It is well understood that marriage as a "gateway" promises a passage to independence/enslavement. Asma Mundrawala approaches the paradox with flamboyant theatricality. Asma states of:

"I am looking at the woman who is constrained by her circumstance. She is a wallflower but there is a space between her and the wall. She manages to project herself gracefully with all the resources she can get."

As women artists' explorations veered towards a wider vocabulary, established canons were found wanting. Art curriculums came under fire. Young artists questioned notions of authenticity, beliefs, the art market and commercial production. Huma Mulji scrutinizes the urban 'situation' in Karachi. The material desires of the multitudes and their naivety and inventiveness in matching these dreams to their resources engages her. Authenticity is granted when materials achieve a state of grace becoming the preferred choice of the populace; an embodiment of their dreams. Plastics, vinyl, metalwork, live together in harmony in Mulji's images and objects. Masooma Syed uses human nails and hair together with plastics and metal to fashion objects, which lie between the body's adornments and its torments. Syed's study of the history of jewelry does not prelude distaste for canons that profess only to "beautify" the body.

Karachi sculptor Adeela Suleman found that same body at risk, almost expendable, in the turmoil of Karachi's traffic. The woman pillion rider perched sidesaddle holding on to children, baskets, bags and chaadar is the unsung street heroine. Suleman's installation "Salma Sitara and Sisters Motorcycle Workshop" provided protective motorcycle gear and was an ode to womens'valour.

In the Diaspora, women artists from Pakistan gained eminence while tackling issues of dislocation and cultural juxtaposition. Shahzia Sikandar, Talha Rathore, Faiza Butt, Ambreen Butt followed earlier artists Sylvat Aziz, Lubna Agha and Mansoor Hasan. These women traversed many divides, personal and professional. Curiously, they shared a similarity in their concerns, even as they probed and manipulated very diverse idioms.

Back home, the yearning to jump the confines of the gallery space embodied the aspiration to be understood by the uninitiated public.

Sculptor Ruby Chishti elected to return to early memories of doll making and playing with scraps of fabric. Harking to every household's habit of hoarding cloth for generations, Chishti sifted her own memories and surrendered them to fabric. Objects, human figures, crows, buffaloes; cast, stuffed and sewn, render narratives, which are humorous, poignant and dignified. Chishti's work may stem from deep emotional suffering but it reaches out with a sanguine gentleness. Audiences' response to her work has been remarkable; people on the street walked into the gallery to comment and admire her works.

Talking to the community at large, grows into a preoccupation with many artists. Naiza Khan penetrates connections between the body and its signifiers, the lineage of symbol and the legitimacy of tradition. Constantly "worrying" the complacency of the image, Khan aspires to bring the message out in the open. In "Henna Hands" the female figure is constructed by stenciled hands rendered in henna paste mapped onto city walls. Once realized, they are left to their fate to survive, or not, as the community wills. Khan herself moves on to other burdens but the female body remains central to her work.

The aggressive, almost bitter fury of the 1980's, and its imagery, which reflected the repression of the times, has been transformed today into a more considered response. At times lyrical, on occasion brimming with black humor and sarcasm, women artists negotiate the realities of the here and now. Time warps are a luxury they cannot afford. The imagery locates itself firmly in their context, confident that it grows out of their long shared path and past.

One has to echo Virginia Slims -"You've come a long way, babe"!

Jalal Ayesha, "The Convenience of Subservience:

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