Evaluating Identity in Pakistani Art Today
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Social upheaval raises questions of personal identity, of belonging and departure. In other words, where from and where to? Who are we deep inside? Which ideals do we safeguard, or who safeguards them for us? Which of our inner contradictions are unavoidable and which social questions can be resolved? The issues around 'identity' appear today to be bigger than ever before. Not only has this become an issue in the Postcolonial and Third World countries but is an increasing concern within the growing European Union where the collective feeling struggles to keep pace with growth.

A complex and multiple "European Identity" is rather strange. Imagine being a Bavarian, German, and European, or a Sicilian, Italian, and European at the same time! Meanwhile, the European Union tries hard to promulgate self-esteem amongst its members through 'culture', as evidenced recently in a conference dedicated to European cultural politics held in Berlin (Nov. 2004).

The construction of a Super-State of Europe similar to that of the United States of America remains unplanned and impossible considering the different formation of the two 'States'.The USA, constituted as the 'New World', was regarded as a non-historical space. Europe, however, is burdened with a long and rich history, which it neither can nor wants to cast off within the Union. According to Europe's political dimensions, national as well as regional cultural diversities are supported in order to avoid an ugly crucible of differences. 'Subsidiarity' remains the motto for cultural politics as it jostles within the Union for an open identity with no space for antagonism. But when questions of identity arise surely some disorder is inevitable for "identities are constructed through, not outside, difference."

Talk about "globalisation" silently preempts the increase of globalisation in all fields. However, if we attempt to get a more accurate view of this situation, we discover a great difference between the world of economics and the world of culture. Economic entities tend toward larger and more global structures whilst cultural entities are becoming more finely divided, seeking "identity" in smaller units.

Without forcing a comparison between the founding of Pakistan and the creation and enlargement of the European Union it might be argued that the concept of identity-building and culture has proceeded similarly. More generally, the establishing factors for any "identity" include, amongst others, the following notions: People, Nation, Community, Class, Territory and Language. Questioning these totalities awakens the "concept of Otherness" which had been played out successfully, in the movement for Pakistan prior to Partition, against a background of competing political and religious identities. With the emergence of independent Pakistan, Nationalism was far from being triumphant over ethnic and communal identities. Welding diverse peoples together into a sense of nationhood on both sides of the newly created border was thus a task that had to be

fulfilled. The result being that any nationalist project was merely in its infant stage for both India and Pakistan, as Dr. Ambedkar the Untouchable leader acknowledged on the eve of his drafting of India's 1950 constitution: "In believing that we are a nation, we are chasing a great delusion", he declared. "we can only attempt to become a nation in the making."!

The issue of identity in Pakistani art signs of place and belonging - has been an issue for artists from Partition onwards. We might consider this reasonably obsessive as artists constantly need to define their specificity, and justify their image vis-a-vis their neighbour India and other powerful foreign models. The notion of a "Pakistani culture" was necessarily superficial at first, so artificially was nationhood imposed over people thrown together on a land where any shared history, ancestry and language had yet to be established. A fact clearer today than ever before: the only real alliance between the people of Pakistan was, and has always been, that of "Islam". Urdu cinema has proved a useful tool to promote Pakistani culture especially with its base in Lahore giving rise to the notion of "Lollywood". Films like "Shaheed" or "Farangi" which deal with the anti-colonial struggle or "Anarkali" (referring to the Mughal era) are clearly made to enhance the feelings of a cultural identity. Moreover the medium was used by politicians as a tool for propaganda, mostly under the early martial law regime of Ayub Khan (1958-1969). Documentaries were produced to popularise the regime. The most famous project, Nai Kiran (A New Ray of Light) was made in the five major languages of Urdu, Punjabi, Pushtu, Sindhi and Bengali. Ayub Khan himself is presented in the documentary as the "hero" who eradicates corrupt politicians and saves the nation. Nai Kiran had to be shown in every cinema for a week without charge.

The importance of a cultural identity in a hybrid nation-in-the-making such as Pakistan was crucial but hard to achieve. In the immediate post-independence era, Pakistan's survival was uncertain. Politicians soon interpreted Mohammad Ali Jinnah's very ideals about the freedom of faith and his belief in a nation where Muslims and Hindus would cease to exist in a political sense; in favour of zealotry. Under Pakistan's second period of martial law in 1977, Zia-ul-Haq plunged the country into Islamisation. In attempting to establish a national identity, however, Zia's religious policies failed in the same way as did Bhutto's 'populism' and Ayub's 'modernisation'. Moreover, the Islamisation process resulted in sectarian divisions followed by a violence from which the country still suffers today. Zia failed to recognise the cultural pluralism inherent in the rich heritage of South Asian Islam that made up Pakistan.

Islamic expression in Pakistan was anything but monochromatic. While "sufism had always been an integral component of regional cultural identity," the Shia minority questioned the Sunni interpretation of Islamic laws. The impact of Islamisation consequently resulted in a backlash on the rights for women and non- Muslims in the wider context and freedom of art General Zia ul Haq's intention to form a national Islamic identity accords with Stuart Hall's definition of those strategies around constructing identities that "emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus

are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity - an 'identity' in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation)." The "Proclamation of identities as "unities" is in fact an over-determined process of "closure" Interestingly; Islamisation was llShered into Pakistan around the time of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Both countries experienced a 'closure' culturally, politically, economically, and socially. Zia's policies attempted to build up a national identity using Islam. Because identities are "constituted within" and "not outside representation" the art scene of the country underwent dramatic transformation accompanied by censorship. In order to follow a pan Islamic trend where the entire world and followers of Islam were made to believe in a better Islam, calligraphy became the foremost state-sponsored visual art form.

So how can we determine the cultural identity of an artist today? With the mobility today most artists have left their country of origin at least once, either to visit another country or more often than not for a post-graduate study, a scholarship, residency or the like. Some have even extended their sojourn. Shahzia Sikander, for example, was born in Lahore and since 1993 has lived and worked in the United States. This impact on "identity" Many non-Western artists now live in New York, Paris, London and Berlin Should they be identified with the culture of their native country?

Should they be associated with the place where they live? Or should they be seen as part of a Diaspora? Many people nowadays are affiliated to a number of result make use of more than one culture. There is thus little meaning in asking whether or not an artist authentically embodies the culture of his or her native country. Surely more important is to ask what sort of new identity the artist is attempting to establish, or how much significance there is in his or her new form of expression or artistic experiment?

Such new forms of identity make up for an exciting new art that can be appreciated not only in the global artistic metropolis, in particular amongst transnational artists, but also, and especially, cities. It addresses various experiences of travel, exile, alienation and integration, feelings of longing and belonging, memories of places and people, alternate political understandings of the world, and cultural practices that both divide and unite us. It draws on and speaks to multiple cultural traditions and attitudes, in some cases in ambivalent, hybrid, or universalist forms, and in other cases giving voice to the specific concerns of local communities or pointing to existing cultural antagonisms. Through this art, the artists address the vexing problem of pursuing our mutual interests as human beings while respecting the differences that divide us, even as they point to the practical difficulties of this ideal and engage overtly with the history and politics of their country.

Bani Abidi's videos engage in an ironic way with the problematic situation of the two neighbouring countries, India and Pakistan. In most of her work the artist herself is the protagonist; on two adjoining monitors the figures resemble one another far more than they differ. Abidi wittily points out the similarities rather than the differences that exist on both sides of the borders between India

and Pakistan. In some works like "Mango", Abidi's figures have been stripped of all signs of nationality, race, religion, ethnicity, or gender. In "News", the artist emphasizes differences of language, religion, and nationality encouraging the viewer to think about human conflict. While this may encourage us to forget, for a moment, the particularities that divide us and focus instead on our common humanity, it, at the same time, reminds us that the cause for conflict lies in the politics of nationalism and national identity.

Rashid Rana's digital print "All Eyes Skywards during the Annual Parade" questions, like Mahbub Shah's painting with nine Pakistani flags, the symbols of nationalism. From a distance "All Eyes Skywards during the Annual Parade" represents an image of people sitting on chairs during a national day parade. Their eyes are collectively pointed towards the sky where presumably they glimpse the national flag. Upon close inspection the work reveals myriad tiny pictures, scenes from Indian movies. Positioned in a corner where one side of the image becomes the mirror image, Rana confronts us with the reality of identities that are constructed through difference and reminds us at the same time, like Bani Abidi, of the sameness in difference. Mahbub Shah's flag painting questions one of the very symbols which are, according to Hobsbawm, "historically novel and largely invented".

Many attempts have been made to impose a unitary vision of Pakistan based on religion. The colour of Pakistan's flag, green, was one. Although there is no proof of this, it is said that the colour green is the colour of Islam, the colour of the Prophet. Mahbub Shah's flag changes green in every section, just like the French revolutionary tricolour that evolved between 1790-4. The different shadings of green mockingly question the validity of the "colour" green as the colour of Islam. Paradoxically the portion that in its essence is supposed to represent a variety of faiths (of minority) is uniformly white.

Like Jasper Johns' flag-paintings from the mid-1950s ~1ahbub Shah's intention seems to draw the viewer toward the unmasking of the lowest common denominator of his culture. Iqbal Geoffrey's mixed media work raises questions of the artifacts of local origin reproduced on a massive scale, items that originally represented a particular local identity and tradition. Geoffrey's works on paper are composed of well-recognised items like wrappings, portraits of celebrities, pin-ups and comic-strips, as well as calligraphy. Though his interest, like that of the American pop-artists of the 1960s, has always been directed towards a specific interest in the items represented, he always regards an image - analogous , with Duchamps' Ready-mades -like a giwen, located object. More important than the rendering of items by using colour, is the inspection of the visual grammar of such humdrum picture production.

Many Pakistani artists today express compromise, adaptation, and modification in which ideals of a unitary nation comprise both reworkings of, universal and indigenous meanings and practices. Recent works show increasingly threatening scenarios. This may have to do with societal tensions

and discontinuities noticeable on a global scale. However, artists are becoming internationally recognised as "Pakistani" artists. This recognition is proof of a growing self-consciousness amongst the artists of the country - concerns about the loss of individual independency in the context of globalisation can successfully be denied when viewing these works.

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