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Exploring Female Identity in and Through Art in Pakistan: Experiencing De-Colonial Feminism

By Sadia Pasha Kamran¹

Abstract

This study looks into the identity of brown female artists living in the post-colonial society of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan today. It examines the role, status, and ideals of a handful of women artists and educators from the '80s, mostly members of the Women Action Forum, who have helped define the current identity of Pakistani women by initiating feminist debates. The concept of feminism in post-colonial society is multidimensional and needs to be explored to combat the misconstrued and imposed identity of Pakistani women as miserable, second-grade citizens of the third world. Dominant religions and cultural practices in this region designate woman to a distinct status in society. In Islam, women are seen as the followers of Fatima—the leader of all Muslim women in paradise—and are ranked amongst the greatest humans (Qutbuddin, 2006, 249) while Hinduism considers them as *devis*—divine beings (Pintchman, 2011). With this socio-cultural mind set and confirming the persuasive relationship between feminist aesthetics and feminist theory as proposed by Hilde Hein (1999), we analyse works of selected female artists and aim to understand the current wave of feminism here. The investigation adopts ethnographic methods of research along with established approaches to historiography that involve discussing, collecting, documenting, digitizing and analysing the information.

Keywords: Identity politics, Post-colonial narratives, Art activists, Women in art, Decolonial Feminism, Feminism in the global South

Introduction

The answer to the most significant identity question 'Who am I?' is pre-conditioned today. Several political, social, or economic factors determine the response to this question. One is born into a family, a cast, a creed, and a race with a specific gender and in a particular region. Identity construction involves a set of fundamentally interactive processes that are regulated and can be refurbished. Hence, the notion of identity has been indispensable in contemporary intellectual discourse. It has also been severely politicized and has even become scandalous as “it is something that needs to be explained and at the same time it has the explanatory powers” (Fearson, 2013) (i.e., it can be both illusive and illustrative). Ideas like ‘identity politics’, ‘identity crisis’, and ‘identity issues’ were criticized for going against the ethical pursuits of equality, diversity, and

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other related ideals of peace and tolerance that politicians, intellectuals, and activists have eagerly been seeking.

Broadly, 'identity' describes the characteristics of an individual. The concepts of individualism and humanism regarding the social history of mankind are not new. In recent years, such concepts have become much more complex. Identity is not stagnant; it varies depending on one's social context. The physiological, experiential (personal and social), economic, and political connotations of the word 'identity' are no longer neutral. They are informative, with the power to influence one's understanding of the other.

In post-colonial societies, the quest for identity becomes intensified with the feeling of being desolate or being rootless or even, at times, being independent. These feelings are common in an increasingly globalized world with technological advancements, shortened geographical distances, escalated political differences, and expanded economic disparities. In the post-partition Indian region, several political, economic, and cultural incidents changed the notions of identity of its people and how it was perceived. Less than a hundred years ago, the thinker and poet Muhammad Iqbal boasted about the Muslim nation having 'unique constituents'. He said:

Compare not your nation with that of the West
The nation of the Rasool of [Banu] Hashim is special in its components. (1927)

While Iqbal boasts of the unique components of this nation, others do not hold similarly positive beliefs regarding the Muslim nation and its identity, which recently finds itself in a predicament. Many factors can contribute to this Muslim identity crisis: historical, political or cultural (e.g., the two-nation theory or *Islamization*, the defying democracies or the deteriorating economies, or simply as a defence mechanism in a post 9/11 political scenario). Not only are these regional concerns, but the recent popular social movements in the West such as 'Me Too' or 'Black Lives Matter', while aiming to diminish gender and racial differences, have unintentionally widened the negative scope of these identity traits. The conformation of the dissimilarities and variance between genders and races rapidly spread across the globe, affecting the mind-set of all, while pre-defining the meta-analytical methods to identify each other as the humans of this world. As a result, living in a third world country, being a woman, and practicing art and activism—and thus leading upfront in political, social, and intellectual arenas—appears to be a fictional or surreal identity. Nafisa Rizvi confronts such apprehensions and claims that:

Women artists in Pakistan occupy a position of strength and valour and it is a source of indignation for them when the western art world shows surprise when confronted by the extent of their dialects and sensitive engagement with the issues of their country. They are no wilting wallflowers and the suggestion that extremists may have in any way diminished their spirit or constrained them is completely without merit. Each day another artist comes into her own with a new idea and a new oeuvre. (2015, 102)

Such a 'feminine construct' of women being a *sinfe-nazuk*; fragile beings or weaker sex, that Rizvi condemns, was passed onto the Indian women as a colonial souvenir and was happily embraced and practiced even after the colonizers left. The idea that the men are providers and women are the home-makers who must be confined within the four walls of the house hold is perceived and promoted in contemporary popular culture only (Asian Development Bank, 2011).

It must be considered a more recent, urban or modern construct. Not long ago, women were also expected to be the active, equal partners in all the socio-political and economic arenas of social life especially in rural culture of Pakistan (Sind and Punjab) where they still work in the fields, helping sowing, harvesting the crops or breeding the cattle etc. This idea of women empowerment is discussed and theorized in a previous article by the author and sets the premise for the present discussion (2019, 712-9).

The socio-political history of Pakistan and the resulting religious authoritarianism generally determined the state of art and related cultural activities in this society. It has also, strangely, shaped the role and status of women in art elevating their position from mere object of the male gaze to the torchbearer of human rights. In Pakistan, feminism didn't seek equal rights for women, but it created political, social and intellectual awareness for all. The small group of women artists in the 1980s set the tone of feminism by reclaiming their basic right of free expression, their identity as individuals and their role as useful members of the society which is aligned with the true spirit of Islam. Finally, the voice of a few feminist artists helped Pakistani women claim this loftier status that the religion denotes to them. They helped give Muslim women more concrete responsibilities when it comes to nation-building and empowered them. As a result, we witness Benazir Bhutto to become youngest female elected Prime Minister ever (1988). Shermeen Ubaid seized the Academy award (2012) and Malala Usafzai won the noble prize at the age of seventeen (2014). These success stories validate the legacy of powerful Muslim women of the region. The thirteenth-century ruler of Delhi Razia Sultana or Mughal Empress Noor Jahan antagonize several self-acclaimed civilized societies where women had to fight long battles to earn the right to vote even in the twentieth century. These stories also, at some point, reject the Western feminism that discursively colonizes "the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world" (Mohanty, 1988, 62) and produces a single or a simple construct of third-world women.

The Women Action Forum (WAF), established in 1983 as a reaction to the oppressive laws against women, defined the role and status of women in Pakistan and also introduced the genre of art activism or art as politics. This political intervention can be examined on several levels. Its contribution to devising the 'female identity' in and through art is significant here. The social and political awareness that WAF brought about relaunched the ideals of individualism or essentialism in society concerning femininity, Feminism, and Feminist art and aesthetics. The augmented belief that Feminism should not be constrained by a single essence of just 'being' a woman rather having a particular world view of a woman- a distinctive, idiosyncratic view supplemented through the religious (Quran 4:19) and cultural norms that assert women as a significant being. Iqbal would declare that:

The picture that this world presents, from woman, gets its tints and scents:
She is the lyre that can impart pathos and warmth to human heart. (1936)

Art in Pakistan promotes this very identity of women being the epitome of life, of being considerate and compassionate in their worldly affairs. This approach highlighted and strengthened the relationship between art and the social world.

A casual aesthetic review would suggest that the objectivity of the female figure is not 'exploited' in the brief history of art in Pakistan. The three figurative painters Saeed Akhtar, Iqbal Hussain, and Collin David exemplify this. The three contemporaries from the National College of Arts had a diverse approach towards the figural representation. Saeed Akhtar is known for painting

portraits. When he painted women, they were mostly commissioned works, hence resemblance and character study of the model was the focus which became his signature style. Iqbal Hussain used the female figure in his paintings to highlight the plight of outcasted women based on vocation; he painted dancers, musicians, and prostitutes. However, his models do not agree to the current anticipated role associated with women of this profession. They are not the epitome of captivating beauty despatching lustful ideas of male desire. Nor do they represent the refined and cultured women, obtainable without matrimony, that existed as a symbol of high culture in nineteenth century India (Aslam, 2017). Figures in Hussain's paintings appear to be the 'real' women who could be mothers, daughters or sisters to someone. He "champions the women [exhibiting the pathos within] living on the fringes and peripheries of our society, without idealizing their bodies" (Ikramullah, 2015). Collin David had painted women but his nude models are not naked. The women, he painted appear engrossed in deep thoughts diverting the viewer's attention towards metaphysical domains while complimenting the surface design of his canvasses. The female figure here is just another form whose size, posture, glance and tactile quality can be played around with, not her sexuality, to create an aesthetically pleasing picture. These pictures are not erotic or suggestive. The nude figures do not entice the viewer; the viewer is hopelessly discouraged as the figure, in most cases, turns her back towards him. How these works were categorised as obscene and worthy of being attacked and destroyed can only be attributed to the mounting influence of prevailing ideals of *Islamization* during the '80s and '90s. The portrayal of Pakistani women in art challenged the exotic stereotypical portrayal of Eastern or Oriental women.

Art in Pakistan lent an exclusive identity to its women. The male artists rejected the ideals of sexuality or male gaze associated with female figure. The women artists embraced the identity of enlightened, empowered and responsible civil society members. WAF played a tremendous role in creating awareness amongst women and constructing such an identity. It provided a platform to women artists, poets, lawyers, and social workers to carve a niche for middle-class women in Pakistan who sought to be identified as equal, beneficial, and conscientious members of society. One of the many prominent figures of WAF is Salima Hashmi, the daughter of the progressive poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz. She and her contemporaries started using coded indirect messages, concealing aesthetic techniques to make political statements (Fig. 1) and avoided censorship or repression as was the case of their above-mentioned male colleagues. This disenfranchisement from open confrontation with prevailing socio-political norms gave their art a space to be indirectly political and ultimately more impactful.



Fig 1. To Zainab, Salima Hashmi, 1994, mixed media, Image Courtesy: artist

Hashmi is a gifted artist, a conscious activist, a perceptive educator, a discerning curator, and a mindful writer. She is also a successful home-maker and an esteemed mentor to a whole generation of artists, an exemplary feminist of a decolonising society.

Twenty-first century political, intellectual and scholarly stirrings revitalised the pursuit of identity in all areas of life. Pakistani art showed invested interest in ideas of decolonisation, with debates on tradition and modernity, innovation and experimentation, and diaspora. However, the tradition of provoking the state, politics, religion and other favoured norms of society sponsored by these agencies, in and through women's art in the last decades of the previous century was also strengthened. Only this time, they had the mentors (the WAF members) to back them and an audience who was prepared to be engaged politically as well as aesthetically. Naiza Khan, Adeela Suleman, Aisha Khalid and Farida Batool made direct references to the female body and/or identity. They defied the typical ways in which women were represented in art and devised new forms, mediums, themes and the visual vocabulary for their portrayal. In doing so, not only they contested the established aesthetic sensibilities but also challenged the stereotypical role of women in society of being subservient, conforming and cautious. Through rejecting conventional mediums (i.e., painting) and instead adopting sculpture, installation, digital art, and photography they also confronted post-colonial expectations of 'romancing' with the traditional genres of art making. However, some traditionalists like Rahat Naveed kept this spirit of romance alive and painted herself and other women reimagining their existence in the middle of prevailing mayhem. Her female figures engrossed in deep thoughts are often surrounded by emblems of life, prosperity, hope and despair as well (Fig 2).



Fig 2. O! The Land of my Country, Rahat Naveed, Oil on canvass, 2019, Image Courtesy: artist

The more pronounced narratives of de-coloniality are found in Risham Hussain, Nusra Latif Qureshi, and Masooma Syed's works. Hussain's critique on the exploitation of indigenous resources by colonizers, e.g. cotton and her use of fabric, quilting, embroidery, and patchwork, proved instrumental in setting up the new standards for feminist art and aesthetics. Qureshi played a vital role in deconstructing the colonial narratives, metaphorically as well as physically, when she used the pictorial references of the British Raj in India and amused the viewer by judiciously re-organizing the elements onto the picture plane. Syed constructs small wearable jewellery pieces. Similarly, more recent works of Hamra Abbas employ pietra dura in creating large slabs of marble bearing abstract patterns. Though the works appear to be reminiscent of magnificent Mughal building crafts, a keener eye will identify the contemporary aesthetic concerns, "addressing notions of cultural history, sexuality, violence, ornamentation, devotion and faith" that she depicts. The textile, jewellery and book art were considered craft according to colonial sensibilities. The revival of these mediums as mainstream artistic expressions is another step towards the exploration of distinct indigeneity.



Fig 3. Pak Khwateen Painting Club at the site-Mangla Dem, Image Courtesy: Saba Khan, 2019

In this discourse of identity, a relevant fact is that some women artists in Pakistan hesitate to be coined as 'Feminist artist' while others embrace it openly. Saba Khan exhibit the peculiarity of being a woman in Pakistan. She aims to be the voice of women who are against physical, emotional, and mental harassment. Following her teachers and mentors, active members of WAF, she opts for art activism and embraces the role of a trend setter. In 2019, Khan formed an all women painting group which she refers to be "stereotyped as a benign, bourgeoisie group of patriotic conformists" (Fig 3). This group of like-minded women artists collaborated for a joint project. Donned in a uniform inspired by Pierre Cardin's 60s design for Pakistan International airline's air hostesses they 'mean business' and want to be taken seriously in an environment that is heavily imbued with the male presence.

Pak Khawateen's Painting Club in its conception, vision, mission, and execution, defines the new parameters of feminist aesthetics in contemporary Pakistan. It aims to explore the saga of the river Indus as a provider of life since antiquity. The modern dams and barrages constructed onto the river help sustain its reputation of being the benefactor to humans and the environment alike. Khan aspires to invade the male-dominated territory that is laden with heavy machinery and lofty structures to challenge the prevailing masculinist attitude in and around the idea of constructing dams—promising life, providing food, generating revenue and shaping future. She opts to be identified as an air hostess or girl guide, as suggested by the uniform, highlighting the idealised role of woman in society as a caregiver in 'peace' or 'disaster'. The reception of the project is encouraging and caters to the aesthetic sensibilities at several levels. It introduces a new dimension to contemporary art practice and implies innovative use of digital media in documentation and exhibition. It also encourages the application of art as a tool for information and education of the masses. It helps formulate the identity of the artist as useful, supportive, knowledge seeker member of society and condemns the previously established, anti-social archetypal image. More importantly, it defines the identity of the Pakistani woman who is determined to challenge the colonial and or post-colonial constructs.

While women artists of Pakistan are liberating, enlightening and shaping a new authoritative identity for the fellow women at the international level the diaspora artists also are earning name and fame for Pakistan. Male artists Anwar Jalal, Rasheed Arayen, and Jamil Naqsh have been recognised abroad but more recently, it is women artists that are leading, creating a space for themselves and the country both. Shazia Sikandar's fascination with the layering process that she learnt in miniature painting initiated her journey to fame. Today, she is identified as the most successful artist of colour in the States. Following in her footsteps are Rubi Chisti, Ambreen Butt, Humaira Abid, Tazeen Qayyum, and Sania Samad. The indigenous association of these artists resurfaces in terms of idealising the artistic expressions of what is known as the 'global south'. Their artistic concerns may vary in terms of individual or national experiences but they can introduce Pakistani art and culture to the world's stage. Selection of medium in their creative practices - textile, wood, calligraphy or assemblage, once again, is of utmost importance and so is the visual vocabulary that spans between local and universal. The employed techniques, e.g. hand embroidery in Samad's work (Fig 4), wood carving adopted by Abid, or calligraphic exercises in the case of Qayyum, are all therapeutic in practice. The calculated repeated gestures of hand and rhythmic patterns on the surface provide solace to the practitioners and the viewers alike.

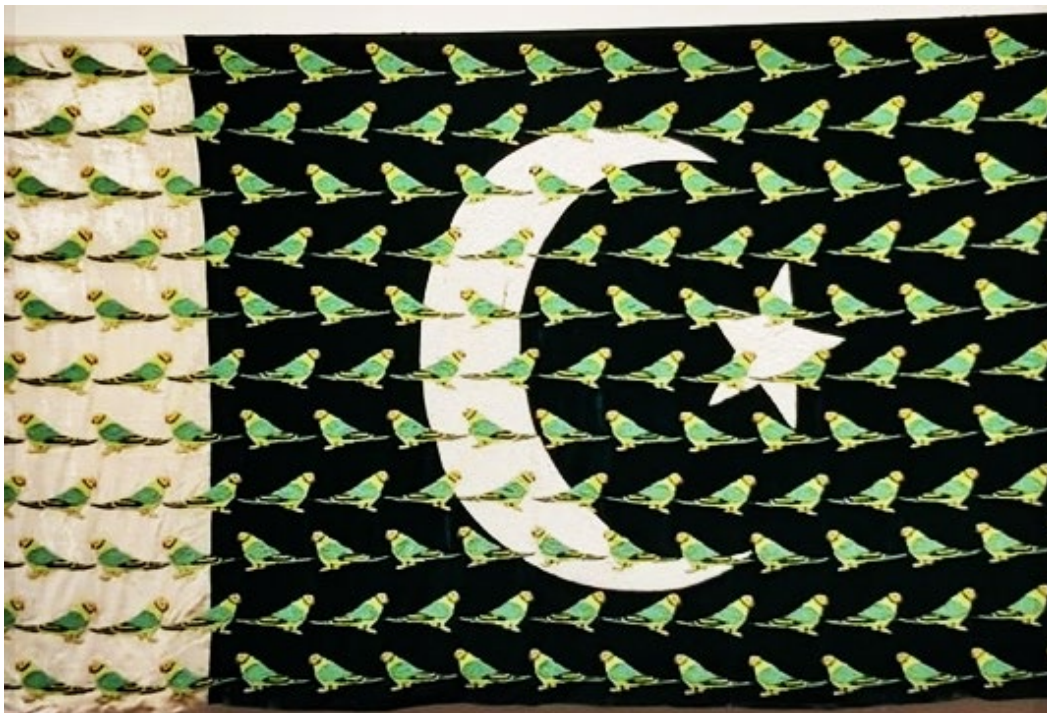


Fig 4. I Belong to No land, Sania Samad, 2019, Bead work on velvet, Image Courtesy: artist

The approach and interests of these women living in foreign lands towards art are diverse, yet the peculiarity of being a Pakistani woman is shared. However, Salima Hashmi claims that "Discussions on Pakistani identity as a post-1947 construct or a more ancient Islamic one can be neatly sidestepped by unwrapping the work and allowing it to define itself" (2015, 133). Quddus Mirza has somewhat similar sentiments regarding the identity politics of diasporic artists. He observes that "... aesthetic expression can be more about the essence of art rather than a connection to one place or the other", but then the first response to an artwork may not always be 'pure' aesthetic, especially for the general audience or masses. Such responses, especially in the wake of

globalization, are preconditioned. They are experiential in nature and mostly intervene with the appeal of identity be it biological sex or analytic (political, social or economic). The politics of identity itself involves individual or collective experiences and perceptions. Similarly, Feminism by its nature depends upon an aesthetics of experience because feminist theory must revert to experience for its formation (Hein, 1990). Thus, Feminist aesthetics essentially and inherently embody gender identity first, before addressing existentialists. Adhering to the view that aesthetic expressions in Pakistan are saturated with issues of identity, identity likewise is being augmented through the aesthetic expressions. Inherent pluralism and inseparability from experience link the notions of identity, Feminism, Feminist aesthetics and decolonisation in a single chain of ideologies. Identity of women (in the case of Pakistani, Muslim, women artists), Feminist art or the experience of Feminism itself speaks of independent, conscientious, constructive members of society and not of the marginalised and oppressed souls that need to be rescued or pitied. This observation relates that notions of gender (female), religion (Islam), nationality (Pakistani) historic period of time and state of political affairs (Postcoloniality) often but not always concern and depict female oppression. Hence, the colonial singular monolithic construct of our women as women of the third world desperate to be empowered or to be rescued from pervasive social and political norms is questioned and strongly rejected.

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