



## Macho Icons Going Places

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**Abstract.** This paper is an exploration of the increasing trend of popular macho representations on the back of three-wheeled auto rickshaws in the Punjab, Pakistan. Through an ethnographic field research it was observed that the painted visuals of popular icons in clichéd heroic poses are rampant on rickshaws, representing a mobile exhibition of urban folk art. These visuals are mostly taken from the local Punjabi film industry, which has eclipsed over the past two decades. This study further explored the reasons for the increase of male figures displayed on rickshaws (and other) popular art and the almost total extinction of female figures because of increased religious assertion in Pakistan over this two-decade period. Our analysis shows that the relationship between rickshaw drivers and a common male audience with these powerful visuals is so strong that it reinforces the ‘impulse to image’. The power of macho visuals satisfies the taste of cinemagoers who love to travel by rickshaws loaded with such visuals. We argue that these macho ideal representations have a strong impact on the beholders and they influence society through the power they convey. Finally, this study concludes that the popular macho visuals effectively communicate real emotions and please the mood of vast audiences in particular segments of society.

**Keywords:** *ethnographic research; macho representations; male culture; popular culture; rickshaws.*

### 1 Introduction

This research study explored the increasing trend of macho representations of popular icons on the backs of auto-rickshaws particularly in Punjab, Pakistan. These three-wheel vehicles are a common and cheap conveyance in cities and towns throughout Pakistan used mainly by middle class people. Normally they carry two to three passengers. Moving through the city, the back of the rickshaw presents a mobile exhibition of *urban folk art* [1]. Apart from commercial advertisements, including ads for religious functions and other religious subjects, some have now also started carrying interesting memorabilia of popular old Punjabi films, portraits of popular army generals and other social themes. This trend of icon depiction is connected to the prevailing male

dominated society. The decorative pictures displayed on this popular form of public transport are a major component of folk art in the region. The fact is that the visual representations of male images on public vehicles have become increasingly noticeable in Pakistani popular culture [2,3]. It is interesting to note that ‘macho’ culture in other cosmopolitan societies, apart from presenting heroic male figures, also shows female forms in appealing and sensual interpretations. However, in veil-oriented societies, this male idealization takes another form, which is a moralistic rejection of exhibiting female images or if a female figure is shown it is presented performing some religious act like praying or reading the Holy Book. For instance, in the popular Islamic poster art of Pakistan and India, female figures are often shown praying before a shrine of a Sufi saint or reading the Quran, otherwise only the face may be depicted in an idealized and poetic form.

Several traditional societies have adopted the custom of the veil; however, in conservative Islamic societies it is considered a compulsory religious tenet and given great importance. Since this custom hinders women from playing a full role in society it is observed more strongly in some regions, sectors and tiers of society and less or not at all in others. Naturally, the male idealization idiom in popular art is greater in those where the veil is considered more important. Further, the common interpretation of Islamic values gives the male authority over women and relegates them to the confinement within the four walls of the home. Religious assertion overall is increasing in Pakistan. A few decades ago, representations of female icons, singers, actresses, and leading female politicians were quite common, particularly on trucks. However, over time such representations have been replaced by manly figures [4].

## 2 Methodology and Questions

We conducted an ethnographic field research to gain insight into the popular macho culture currently prevailing in rickshaw art. The research incorporated a broad-spectrum survey based on personal interviews, supported by photographs, of a sample taken from ethnic individuals from different districts, urban and rural, of the subject region. A fixed questionnaire was not used; only a loose list of the various aspects of the study was given to the research assistants. The purpose of the research was to study subjective and social aspects of how popular art (one might call it *kitsch*) is used to decorate public transportation vehicles and its meaning for and how it reflects the aesthetic taste of common people. The research was conducted during the years 2016-2017.

The research gave us insight into the various subjects and objects of popular art and decorated media as well as the social and subjective significance these have for the interviewees. The rickshaw falls in the category of public space. During

this survey we have observed changes and trends in masculine representation on the back of rickshaws.

For analysis of the visuals, their content and their relationship with the beholders we followed Freedberg's study *The Power of Images* in framing ideas [5]. His entire work reflects on the depiction of desired objects, the psychology of looking as well as the beholder's response to the experience of interacting with all kind of visuals.

Furthermore, in order to analyze the male figures on popular transportation vehicles and more broadly what meaning and value these representations have for the owners and viewers, this paper explores how masculine figures, usually depicted in clichéd heroic poses, have replaced female figures, which were once popular, especially those of movies stars from both the Lollywood<sup>1</sup> and the Bollywood<sup>2</sup> film industry. To discuss this question it is necessary to first explain some of the deeper aspects of the popular visual culture of Pakistan, which our previous research has shown. Moreover, the analysis under the abovementioned theoretical framework enabled us to understand how these concepts of the 'macho' Punjabi heroes appeal to the common people of the Punjab. It is also pertinent to question what effect these manly figures have on the socio-cultural environment in the Punjab and vice versa.

Further, we wanted to see to what extent we can evaluate, either functionally or aesthetically, these visual representations as a popular art form. Moreover, this study investigated the role and significance of male representation in an Islamic society where figurative representations (even of male figures) are banned by some sects and not approved of according to the generally accepted religious code. Thus it was interesting to investigate why these icons on public transport are becoming a regular feature, readily being accepted by the public, particularly in the Punjab.

### **3 Results and Discussion**

#### **3.1 Trends, Dynamics and Macho Icons on Auto-Rickshaws**

Commercialism has become widespread throughout Pakistan and also in the Punjab. Thus the primary trend in decorations on auto rickshaws, which are an urban means of public transport, are advertisements. Usually ads for smaller establishments like tuition centers, hire/purchase shops, matrimonial ads, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> Refers to the Pakistani film industry.

<sup>2</sup> Refers to the Indian (Hindi) film industry.

feature on the backs of rickshaws. However, the vast majority of ads are for religious functions, such as *milads*, where religious songs are sung by performers who have become quite famous in this field, *urs* (death anniversaries), public festivals commemorating saints, religious conferences, or just advertise some religious personalities, etc. Rickshaws often continue to display these ads long after the occasion is over and the owner of the rickshaw no longer gets paid, probably out of a sense of religiosity or merely leaving it on while waiting for another ad. These vehicles are also used for advertising political candidates during elections, ads which also often continue to be featured after the polling is over.

Religious announcement posters are often brought home after the event date is over for the purpose of blessing and benediction. In this context Freedberg notes that the religious picture functions as a souvenir and provides solace. The possibilities of motivation when it comes to images we take home with us are boundless. Freedberg further stresses that such images exercise control over a popular audience by reproducing cult images once used in pilgrimage shrines, by describing the role images played in important gatherings from the past [5].

The trend for rickshaws to feature figures of male heroes is very much less pronounced than the above, however it is increasing day by day. In the first place this is because this ‘macho’ trend is not commercial. Mostly, this trend harkens back to the heydays of the Punjabi films of Lollywood. These films epitomized the archetypical Punjabi heroes, one film in particular more than any other: ‘*Maula Jatt*’ (1979). This film caught the imagination of the people, particularly the hero *Maula Jatt*, played by Sultan Rahi, and the villain *Noori Nath*, played by Mustafa Qureshi. Thereafter, all Punjabi films were practically copies of this film, usually also starring Sultan Rahi.<sup>3</sup> He epitomized the Punjabi macho ideal: tough, belligerent, independent minded, defending the honor of women and his family from evil, tyrannical landlords, humble to his mother and religious values, including venerating revered well-loved saints;<sup>4</sup> he has no regard for the police who do not understand the problems of poor farmers and do not protect their honor and he is willing to take on any adversary. He established himself as a man of the people.

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<sup>3</sup> To give an idea of Sultan Rahi’s reign over the Punjabi film industry during the 1980s and 1990s, he acted in practically every Punjabi film, usually with the also extremely popular actress Anjuman. He established himself as a one-man industry; acted in over seven hundred films during his career and at any given time he was said to be involved in thirty-five films simultaneously.

<sup>4</sup> In a famous scene in *Maula Jatt*, when the police lead him to prison he insists on being allowed to pay homage to the revered saint Hazrat Data Ganj Buksh. Then, in chains he crawls up the steps of the shrine on his stomach abasing himself excruciatingly.

Later, another semi-omniscient hero cropped up called Shaan, until the Lollywood film industry total collapsed in the latter part of the 1990s. The class hierarchies operate as a mechanism for visibility using cinematic representations and family photos of hegemonic masculinity. According to Khan & Ahmad:

*“...there is something of an irony about the fact that cinema has come to signal ethnic, social and political differences in Pakistan, a country whose officials have always been obsessed with homogeneity”* [6].

In the heydays of the Punjabi film industry, rickshaw drivers would take cinemagoers home after the late night show, thus these drivers felt a sort of association with the films. They would often decorate their rickshaws with posters of the prominent film heroes, usually featuring the inimitable Sultan Rahi, with popular stills from his movies and also other Lollywood and Bollywood actors and actresses (Figure 1).



**Figure 1** The inimitable Sultan Rahi in one of his popular poses, depicted on an auto-rickshaw. (Source: Author's archive).

Many interviewees said that they love to go cinema with a rickshaw that is furnished with their favorite actor's pictures. The love and relationship of rickshaw drivers and film lovers with the lead actor is so strong that they decorate their private spaces with their images in the form of 'cut outs'. The making of images and then seeing them according to Freedberg "reinforces the ever-present impulse to image". For many scholars of visual art and anthropology and also for Freedberg the impulse to decorate is an innate to human nature. He stresses that:

*"...we cannot refrain from filling the blank wall and from enclosing a figure in the empty frame" [5].*

Of course the desire to live in a beautiful environment is a natural urge of humanity and like nature; man also likes to show off the wonderful things he creates. This is the broader aspect that influences the individual's desire to own beautiful objects and display this ownership and this desire is the basis for interior decoration [3].

In spite of the collapse of the Lollywood film industry, the trend of decorating private spaces with actor's pictures is still alive. Another factor was that new rickshaws were introduced and the drivers did not want to spoil the new look of their vehicles, which had a window at the back.

Then the custom of carrying ads began. Religious assertion seemed to alter the taste of these visual representations, but now the trend for depicting male film icons has suddenly returned; strongly in some urban cities, such as Faisalabad, Peshawar (Khyber Pakhtonkhwa Province) and Multan and to a lesser degree in Lahore and Rawalpindi. An exception is Peshawar, where rickshaws are decorated with pictures of local film stars, both male and female.

In the Punjab more specifically, they are mainly pictures of Sultan Rahi in his characteristically belligerent pose holding a distaff or automatic weapon and less frequently there are pictures of another Punjabi hero, Shaan. We argue that these representations are not commercial and reflect the fact that the trend of depicting these macho icons is too strong to remain obscure. They appeal to feelings of masculine idealization among many male members of the lower and middle classes, who identify themselves with the tough, independent and commanding qualities these heroes depict, apart from awakening fond associations of the films that portrayed these characters (Figure 2). Thus, the owners of these rickshaws find satisfaction and pleasure in expressing and identifying themselves with their masculine ideals and displaying these images, while also pleasing like-minded passer-by in a similar manner.



**Figure 2** Sultan Rahi in his characteristically belligerent pose holding a distaff or automatic weapon. (Source: Author's archive)

Seeing these beautiful paintings, particularly specific beloved images, pleases the eye of the beholder and this generates, as argued by Freedberg, “the symptoms of the relationship between image and beholder”. He further stresses that:

*“...active, outwardly markable responses of the beholder as well as the beliefs ... that motivate them to specific action and behavior.” [5]*

Currently, with Lollywood beginning to become active again with a better quality of films – which we suppose precludes Punjabi films – some ads for films are also placed on the back of rickshaws again. However, as mentioned previously, a trend has started in several cities to carry visual depictions of Lollywood film stars from the heyday of the cinema industry. And this is done not for any commercial benefit; they don't even increase clientele. In fact, often the rickshaw driver/owner may have a well-executed icon painted on his vehicle that is considerably more expensive than a normal poster. Primarily, also as mentioned before, these are images of the Punjabi action hero Sultan Rahi

(1938-1996); the actor Shaan also features to a lesser degree as well as the villain Mustafa Qureshi (b. 1940). Thus the rickshaw owner has done this only to express his idealization of these macho characters. Of course all these icons represent ideals of manliness. Some of these visuals are so fine that they indeed reflect an aesthetic taste. Kirkpatrick, in her study of Bangladeshi rickshaw art refers to such decorations and visual depictions, as “theatrical in their expressions” [1]. These more expensive and finer visuals are the rickshaw owner’s way of paying greater tribute to his macho ideal. We argue that these select macho ideal representations have a stronger emotional impact on the beholders and obviously have an aesthetic value that influences society through the powerful message they convey.

Here we wish to mention that before the film *Moula Jatt* came out there have been other popular Punjabi film heroes like Ijaz, Ilyas Kashmiri, Alaudin, etc. Although they did not stress masculinity and honor (both attributes of the Punjabi male dominated culture) as thoroughly as the late Rahi, their action was manly – full of fighting and shooting. Also, there was more romance and plot in those films. However, none of these actors caught the public’s imagination so much as Sultan Rahi.

It is important to add that Anjuman, a popular Punjabi film actress, active during 1973-2000, dominated Punjabi films as a popular actress, almost to the same degree as Rahi. She too had a huge fan following. But her roles always evinced subservience to the hero and glorified his action. Further, there has been no revival of her visuals anywhere. We argue that the main reasons for this are increased religious assertion and the greater importance of men in Punjabi society. Probably with people emigrating abroad, making money and hence gaining importance in society; living in foreign countries they feel a greater need not only to assert their identity but also to preserve it. Thus they take their values more seriously and felt the need to assert their religious identity as well. This tendency also caught on in Pakistan, further fueled by various intrusive actions by superpowers.

As mentioned above, Punjabi cinema had two main male actors who enjoyed a major fan following: Sultan Rahi and Mustafa Qureshi. Similarly, Punjabi films from neighboring India the actors Guggu Gill and Yograj Singh dominated the cinematic screen in their depictions of rural Jat farmers [7]. Indian Punjabi films were largely plagiarized and borrow heavily from the esthetics and style of Lollywood. Further, since Punjab is the largest province of Pakistan, housing the majority of the population, Punjabi films were an important component of the Lollywood film industry, thus its films and actors gained wide renown; whereas in India the Punjab is one of many provinces, so the standing of the genre of Punjabi films there was of less importance. Macho representations of



the late Sultan Rahi with an expression of anger, as shown in Figure 3, capture the image that the actor projected in a famous film.



**Figure 3** Auto-rickshaw showcasing the late Sultan Rahi with an expression of anger. (Source: Author's archive).

The artist has accentuated the effect by an over-painting technique. The actor's representation embodies a masculine assertion of the downtrodden Pakistani peasantry or landowning Jatt caste [8]. Gill's analysis of the popular representation of masculinity in Punjabi films from India perfectly fits that of the Pakistani Punjabi movies. He states that:

*“The heroes of Punjabi films often belong to the land-owning ‘Jat’ caste. The performance of their masculinity is typified by their ability to move between different rural, urban and transnational spaces. This ability to successfully navigate the unfamiliar terrains of the world outside their villages serves as a rite of passage to becoming a man, a testament to their masculine affirmation.”* [7]

The Punjabi films produced during the decades of the 1980s to the year 2000 were largely set in the rural areas of the Punjab and contained lots of violence

revolving around the theme of a proud, aggressive villager with a high sense of honor, fighting landlords, protecting womenfolk and his family. In the latter part of this period the financiers were the Gujjar brothers, who were milk tycoons instead of the traditional film producers [9]. The Gujjar brothers stuck to cheap, safe, clichéd productions. The style of masculinity of Sultan Rahi as the hero and Mustafa Qureshi as the villain was widely copied. According to one interviewee, violence like that shown in Punjabi films in any form should not be portrayed on rickshaws.

Similar representations on auto-rickshaws are also popular in Peshawar (KPK) and represent the local Pashto<sup>5</sup> macho culture. However, recently, in an antithesis to this macho trend, the traffic police of Peshawar has started a campaign to deface paintings on rickshaws that glamorize drugs, guns, and immorality. According to them pictures that show alcohol in someone's hands or a Kalashnikov provide a bad example to the younger generation of students and women who are travelling in rickshaws or in cars, especially in KPK. According to the local traffic police, a few days previously a young boy shot himself while playing with a gun at home because he was inspired by such images. The child's father appealed to the government to put a ban on all such paintings. The police took notice of this and asked the traffic wardens to remove them. The traffic police removed or defaced such images from hundreds of rickshaws (Figure 4).



**Figure 4** Peshawar (KPK) police defacing macho icons from the local film industry that glamorize drugs, guns and immorality [10].

<sup>5</sup> A native language widely spoken in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province of Pakistan.

Warnings were also given to the drivers not to display such images again, and if they did not pay heed to these warnings the police would start fining these repeat offenders. However, many rickshaw drivers are also in favor of the campaign and find such images objectionable. No doubt the wave of terrorism during the past decade, in which the cities of KPK have suffered the most, has elicited a reaction against violence. Also, in lower middle and the lower classes drug addiction and cheap alcohol are serious problems. Male domination is particularly strong in KPK, where tribal roots are more prevalent. It is doubtful that this reaction to terrorism will alleviate gender discrimination to any significant extent, but it will create awareness to be more considerate [10]. There is a fear of this art in KPK on the one hand and a love for such images in Punjab province on the other. Freedberg has mentioned this phenomenon elsewhere. Moreover, by the increase of macho representations and the change from religious to secular images on rickshaws, the views of the people about art are also being changed. He says about the changing views and fear about art that:

*“We live in times in which art is no longer a matter of manual or representational skill, nor the production of a physical object. Art has come to be defined by the degree to which it satisfies an idea of art, and by its evocation of an ironic esthetic state that is supposedly detached from the physicality or the emotions it arouses.” [11]*

As long as such art satisfies the taste of the people, it will continue to thrive and be accepted by the public. In Punjab province, there are no such complaints against the macho icons. Macho representations are proliferating day by day on auto-rickshaws. There is a splendor embedded in this popular culture, which invites observation. It seems that there is a competition of popular icon representations among the rickshaws owners. The artists are quite good at depicting body language. We argue that this art may be considered to represent a movement of an art form of popular culture in much the same category as the globally famous Pakistani truck art.

It is semiotically interesting to compare Pakistani rickshaw art with that from Bangladesh (a former Pakistani province, which separated in 1971). Similar to Pakistani rickshaw art, the Bangladeshi art on three-wheel paddled-powered rickshaws is mostly based on movies. According to Kirkpatrick:

*“Dhaka has long had a thriving film industry, creating its own stories or re-doing stories based on Bengali and Hindi films in India. These pictures usually include heroines juxtaposed with male leads, one of whom is often the villain. His face used to be painted in shades of green, darkish blue or purple, although the prevalent mode in the late nineties*

*seems to favor depicting all movie star faces in a garish, reddish pink.”*  
[1]

She further states that the themes of popular films (as opposed to art films, not many of which have been made in Bangladesh) usually stress either the eventual union of lovers, or male revenge [1]. An interesting discovery she made about Bangladeshi rickshaw arts was that animal figures became rampant in rickshaw art after the accession to the presidency of Major General Zia Ur Rahman on April 21, 1977. The country was then passing through a period of increasing Islamization, as Zia Ur Rahman excluded secularism from the constitution and even portrayed himself as a pious Muslim in the media. During this period of religious fervor, rickshaw artists, under pressure from radical Muslims, largely stopped depicting human figures and began painting animals in various postures. Sexual desires were channeled through two thematic modes: animal fables and fantastic birds. However, human imagery returned to rickshaw art in full vigor in 1982 [1].

Meanwhile in Pakistani rickshaws arts, the singular popular masculine figure, either of a family photo, an army general or a film star, have gained primary importance. There is a tendency to present the latter two as avatars on popular transportation vehicles. The Pakistani (Lollywood) film industry, particularly Punjabi films, depict authentic Punjabi culture according to the adherence of regional conventions. It is deeply gendered, where very few women take part in cinema-going activities because of bloodshed, violence and revengeful scenes.

In a similar study on the gendered consumption of regional (South Indian) Malayalam cinema, Gill notes that:

*“... the absence of women from the cinematic arena often leads to masculinities being reproduced and defined in belligerent opposition to women, as young men aggressively embody and mimetically perform hyper-masculinity in the space they take as their own and make uncomfortable for young women.”* [7]

According to Gill, in Malayalam and even Bollywood films, where masculinity is frequently realized through the overt subjugation of women (such as whistling at or harassing women in public), masculinity in Punjabi films is not performed in reaction to but often in the absence of the figure of Punjabi women. Hence, in this respect there is no difference between Hindi and Punjabi films. Most of the Indian Punjabi films are plagiarized and borrow heavily from the aesthetics and style of Lollywood. Pakistani Punjabi films (produced largely in Lahore which is a hub of cultural activities) became the sole domain of manly men. According to Sevea:

*“... Punjabi films present a series of actions and qualities as being the sole domain of manly men as well as to the celebration of a particular code of masculinity over others and its presentation as the standard to judge the worth of all men by. For instance, the ability to protect one’s izzat (honor), which is vested in the body and chastity of women (who are under the guardianship of men), openly display arms and ammunition, exact revenge, and rise against the state’s law and order machinery are heralded as markers of masculinity.” [12]*

The real interest of Lollywood Punjabi cinema, however, lies in its wider impact on popular culture across the country, whereas in India the effect of cinema extends well beyond the movie theatre. For instance, the iconography of the Punjabi blockbuster film ‘*Maula Jatt*’ (1979), established as much through advertising billboards as by the film itself, seeped into the nation’s aesthetic consciousness, forming an instantly recognizable visual signifier of a certain kind of rebellious masculinity for generations of hard men in Lahore and northern Punjab. Consciously or not, the film is frequently cited through dress and behavior within certain communities of men, where puffed-out chests and impressive moustaches hark back to Maula’s facial hair and menacing pride [6]. After the film ‘*Maula Jatt*’, Sultan Rahi became a one-man film industry and was almost seen too much in Pakistan, like Amitabh Bachan in Bollywood in India.<sup>6</sup> Mustafa Qureshi’s icon is also rampant on rickshaws. However, it was already a popular icon on trucks [4]. Sometimes these masculine representations are accompanied by the text of a remark made by these characters, which reminds the viewer of scenes he enjoyed in the movie. Both figures are iconic Punjabi male symbols and even today one would find millions who would profess to be their fans, particularly in the Punjab.

The popularity of these actors is with the lower middle and middle class, probably engendered when they were young and really enjoyed macho action as an escape from their daily problems. With the rise of materialism in society, the price of cinema tickets has skyrocketed and the movie theatres now cater to higher classes. Thus the reawakening of these icons on rickshaws represents a need to recall the popular old films and reassert their identification with a simplistic masculine code.

Whether acknowledged by intellectuals or not, Punjabi cinema has had a widespread effect on popular culture across the country, whereas in India this

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<sup>6</sup> For example, see Ranjani Mazumdar’s essay “*A Man Who Was Seen Too Much*” on archive of South Asian popular visual culture under this link. <http://tasveerghar.net/cmsdesk/essay/106/>.

genre only had a limited effect, which however did affect society and extended beyond the movie theatre, especially with regard to the identity of Sikh culture [13]. In Pakistan, for instance the iconography of '*Maula Jatt*' was as popular as the film itself. However, it may be noted that the attitudes and strutting bravado portrayed in the film are visual signifiers of a certain kind of rebellious, lawless masculinity that has great appeal to some people and consequently these traits have affected the mentality of many macho-minded men in Lahore and northern Punjab province and will affect them for generations to come. Consciously or not, the film has influenced the dress and behavior of many people, from the shady segments of society who walk with puffed-out chests and sport big moustaches like Maula's and behave with menacing pride [6]. Human nature being what it is, we have people taking pride in their masculinity and asserting it in society on the one hand, while we have the reality of people suffering an emotional loss like the death of a dear one on the other hand – sad contingencies that are not at all taken account of by this mentality of assertive masculinity. Making an appropriate comparison between different types of Punjabi movies, we have Maula Jatt on the one hand and the tragic romance of Heer Ranjha, another blockbuster hit, on the other.

Besides already being rampant on trucks, a new trend that has become noticeable on rickshaws is the portrayal of the recently retired Pakistan army chief and currently incumbent commander-in-chief of the Islamic Military Alliance (a 39-nation alliance of Muslim countries), General Raheel Shareef. He has caught the people's imagination for his vigorous action against terrorists and efforts to improve the image of the army. He got wide support throughout the nation. He is often called a *mard ka bacha* (son of a brave man). In relation to his masculine representation (by the common people he is often called a lion in uniform), the way he acts and talks against the country's enemies as well as his action against terrorists (particularly the Taliban) made him popular and therefore caught the attention of viewers [4] (Figure 5).

In the context of this prevalence of male portraiture, in our opinion we have to accept the art for what it is. After all, we are not regarding it as a social issue. It is an expression of a certain taste; good, bad or indifferent for better circles but this is what this section of people respond to and appreciate. Apart from which, if we step away from the standards of composition, sophisticated use of color, developed taste that has evolved from aesthetics in developed societies – that indeed do produce stupendous works of art – then we may be able to see the unvarnished effort of creating something beautiful in this rickshaw art.

In closing this section about how Punjabi films have influenced the growing trend of masculine idealization that reflects a male dominated society in popular transport art, we wish to argue that '*Maula Jatt*' and '*Noori Nath*' are folk tale

characters as is the legendary romance of Heer Ranjha. Though viewers may enjoy the fighting and dancing in copies of films like *'Maula Jatt'* (1979) and even *'Heer Ranjha'* (1970), the real magic that differentiated these two films from lesser imitations and what actually made them appeal to the people was how the production kept an element of folk narrative in them. Similarly it is this ethnic folk appeal in all popular art that is its real value.



**Figure 5** Popular macho icon of retired Pakistan army chief and current incumbent commander-in-chief of the Islamic Military Alliance, General Raheel Sharif. (Source: Author's archive).

Finally it is important to mention the people who are behind this macho culture. They are the artists, who are barely able to make ends meet in this day and age, because of getting less orders and facing increasing cost of living. The most intriguing aspect of these painters is that none of them has ever received any formal training. They have never attended art school, or for that matter often they have never been to school at all. They have learnt painting either as assistant to a billboard painter or it is the profession of their family and their father has taught them. Their talent is an uninhibited, untutored expression of a natural flair.

Previously the portraits at the back of trucks were painted either by the truck decorators themselves or painters hired or trained by them; some truck decorators even hired billboard painters for this purpose. With the eclipse of the film industry, these billboard painters turned to truck art and also to rickshaw visual representations. They have brought a new trend in this popular art medium. Their portraits, within their characteristic genre, are of a superior quality compared to those of their predecessors. With slight strokes of tonal changes they may give a degree of shading or depth to the portraits.

The concepts reflect the layman's understanding and ideas about the socio-political condition, atmosphere, fashions of the period and the different facets of Pakistani and particularly Punjabi culture, though this psyche of the painter seems somewhat biased towards the attitudes and perceptions that Punjabi films convey. Their artistry insists on achieving a visual likeness of the persons to be represented. To make portraits of popular film stars, the owners or drivers of the vehicles will supply them stills of their favorite actors in scenes they particularly liked, or the artist may have his own selection of photographs of popular stars in various poses for their client to choose from. Sometimes an artist will make the painting by directly copying and imitating the tonal range and aesthetic effect of the photographs.

#### **4 Conclusion**

Freedberg [5] affirms that different classes respond to visuals differently in their social and cultural context and he did not refute that images are encoded in such a way as to communicate specific things to specific cultures or groups. In the context of Freedberg's assertion we may conclude that these popular visuals effectively communicate real emotions and please the mood of vast audiences in particular segments of society.

There is a trend in rickshaw decoration that increasingly aesthetically expresses the ideals of a certain male segment of the urban middle and lower classes. It reflects a male public culture.<sup>7</sup> This is purely a non-commercial trend, strengthened by middle and lower class' males to display their individuality in a growing materialistic society and build some kind of cultural background for themselves that is connected to their ethnic roots. In a traditionally male dominated society, religious assertion has influenced these decorations,

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<sup>7</sup> Another research paper by the authors of this article, titled "Punjab's Male Public Culture", extracted from the HEC funded project "Identities and Manifestations" is under publication.



banishing female portraiture and displaying a parallel increasing need to assert the male identity by idolizing macho figures.

It may be noticed that these visuals, so far, completely have ignored national figures. Politicians who are idealized by rickshaws driver have featured prominently in the past, but now are much less common. Still portraits of one or another politician can sometimes suddenly become more frequent, but their reigns in this medium are short and the importance of this specific facet of non-commercial portraiture has decreased, although politicians and elections are commercially advertised on this medium often. Similarly singers, poets, etc. are also lacking. Thus, currently, Punjabi film actors are the main source of inspiration because of their macho monopoly (unlike indigenous vibrant truck art). It is yet to be seen if this trend in its present form will continue, but the trend of non-commercial representations will remain and most probably unswervingly be influenced by idealization of male icons.

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