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"Artistic Evolution: A Feminine Perspective on Contemporary Art in Pakistan"

BY

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Abstract

This study delves into the rich tapestry of contemporary Pakistani art through the multifaceted expressions of Adeela Suleman, Huma Mulji, and Aisha Khalid. These artists, rooted in diverse experiences and perspectives, contribute significantly to the evolving discourse within the Pakistani art scene. The research examines the socio-political, cultural, and gender dimensions embedded in the works of Suleman, known for her intricate sculptures; Mulji, recognized for her thought-provoking installations; and Khalid, celebrated for her fusion of traditional miniatures with contemporary themes. Employing a critical lens, the study unravels the narratives woven into their creations, shedding light on the artist's engagement with societal complexities and their unique contributions to the broader conversation on contemporary Pakistani art.

Keywords: Contemporary Pakistani Art, Adeela Suleman, Huma Mulji, Aisha Khalid, Socio-Political Art, Gender Dynamics,

Introduction

The genesis of Pakistan in 1947 marked the birth of a nation facing numerous challenges, among them the daunting task of building a new government system and fostering development. In the midst of these challenges, education emerged as a key concern. This research paper delves into the history of Pakistan, emphasizing the post-partition struggles and, more specifically, the challenges and triumphs in the realm of art education. The narrative unfolds to spotlight the significant contributions of four female artists in the contemporary art scene of Pakistan.

Art Education in the Aftermath of Partition:

Post-1947, Pakistan grappled with establishing a robust education system, and the arts were no exception. The journey of this nation in fostering creativity and artistic expression faced hurdles, yet it bore witness to the emergence of remarkable talents. The evolution of art education in this context becomes a testament to resilience and creative innovation.

The Changing Landscape of Pakistani Art:

Traditionally dominated by men, the field of art has undergone a paradigm shift, reflecting a more inclusive representation. This paper sheds light on the transformative role played by female

artists who have not only entered the art scene but have also garnered global recognition. The artistic vision of Pakistan is evolving, and the voices of female artists are becoming increasingly integral to this narrative.

Central Questions:

- Were female artists superior to male artists? This question serves as a lens to examine the dynamics of artistic prowess, challenging historical gender norms and fostering a nuanced understanding of artistic excellence.
- Did the female artists have plans for the next generation? Exploring the mentorship and visionary plans of female artists becomes essential in understanding their commitment to shaping the future of the arts in Pakistan.
- Were women artists contributing to the arts sector from 2001-2010? A critical analysis of the contributions made by women artists during this period illuminates their impact on the arts sector, providing insights into the evolving landscape of Pakistani art.

Method of Research

This research is analytical (analytical and descriptive) and collects information from reliable websites, articles, and books.



Literature Review

Within this current focus on Pakistani art in the global art arena, which is helping to rectify the overlooked area of this country's modern art, there is definitely a lacuna in the history of Pakistani art developed during the early years of the country's formation. In order to appreciate contemporary trends in Pakistani art, one must study the art produced during the formative years of its establishment.

To develop some initiative of dialogue about conceptual understanding in contemporary Pakistani art, it is pertinent to know the socio-religious and political situation of the country after partition in 1947 (Sheikh, 2017).

In Pakistan first twenty-five years after partition was a time when women lead the way and broadened the way to approach art education and creative activities. In recently established state of Pakistan, art education was barely notable from crafts, and the standing of painting in public sphere was not determined. In University of the Punjab, focus of vice chancellor was just to articulate the subtle statement on the goal of fine art in the field of teaching, and in 1940 when the Department was reserved exclusively for women, aim was just to train women to be artistic not artists. (Hashmi, 2002)

Educational and artistic trends are changing rapidly and its strong feelings are being realized. During the 19th century, art education was more than a polite pursuit for women (Soucy, 1989).

After 1977, women artists rose in numbers and what subject matters female artists are painting was major concern. Female artists did not choose to change their original vision like many of their male colleagues. They kept intuitively disengaged themselves from prevailing ideology of time and challenged at many levels retrieval meanings. They also challenged suppositions being proposed regarding national art, traditional art, and art identity. This energy and resistance is prominently expressed by Nahid Raza, Qudsia Nisar, and Meher Afroz in their artworks. (Hashmi, 2002). There was a significant contribution of two female contemporary painters of Pakistan. The internationally recognized two women artists, Meher Afroz and Nahid Raza expressed the social history of their era through color, texture, and metaphors on the canvas and paper. They did a lot in the Art field and earned a name in the whole world. In addition to the above, it was examined that, the political Art scene was growing and it was completely changed aftermath of 9/11. The trend of art education got tremendous changes in the Pakistani Art scenario, some of the artists used their creative energy within the set parameters and rules of the government, while others, violated (Ali, 2012).

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. (Hashmi, 2015).

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 main 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. (Kamran, 2021).

The history of Pakistani art is a tapestry woven with diverse influences, traditions, and voices. In recent decades, a notable shift has occurred, with female artists emerging as trailblazers, challenging conventions, and reshaping the contours of artistic expression. This paper seeks to unravel the threads of this artistic evolution, focusing on three remarkable artists whose works transcend the boundaries of tradition and contemporaneity.

Adeela Suleman, Huma Mulji, and Aisha Khalid represent a cohort of visionary women whose artistic endeavors have become pivotal in navigating the complex socio-cultural landscape of Pakistan. As we delve into their works, we navigate the intersections of tradition and innovation, the personal and political, and the feminine gaze redefining artistic narratives. The journey begins with an exploration of each artist's unique contributions, unraveling the layers of their chosen mediums and the socio-political contexts that have shaped their creative trajectories.

This research is not merely an academic endeavor; it is a visual odyssey into the hearts and minds of artists who have challenged stereotypes, confronted socio-political realities, and opened new vistas in the realm of Pakistani art. As we embark on this exploration, we aim to unravel the intricate tapestry of their creations, decode the symbolism embedded in their works, and understand the transformative power of art in shaping cultural identities.

In the following sections, we will delve into the unique artistic journeys of Adeela Suleman, Huma Mulji, and Aisha Khalid, analyzing the themes, mediums, and socio-political commentaries that distinguish their works. Through this exploration, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the feminine perspective in contemporary Pakistani art and its profound impact on the global artistic discourse.

"Adeela Suleman: Unveiling Dichotomies in Art"

Adeela Suleman's artistic journey is a profound exploration of dichotomies, revealing the fragile and transient nature of life. Through her sculptures, she navigates the precarious human condition, juxtaposing intricate pastoral scenes with the formidable qualities of stainless steel. The exhibition showcases a diverse range of artworks, including film projections, metal repoussé, ceramic plates, detailed appliqué, and installations. Suleman draws inspiration from traditional crafts like appliqué, employing hand

embroidery, beads, and sequins to infuse layers of memory, pain, and loss into her creations.

Engagement with Socioeconomic, Gender, and Political Issues:

Adeela Suleman's body of work consistently reflects a profound engagement with socioeconomic, gender, and political issues. This inclination was evident even during her college years. While her recent sculptures exhibit a flatter silhouette, her earlier works incorporated found domestic objects made of metal, crafting sculptures and body armors that simultaneously embody and confine the feminine figure.

Exploration of Ordinary and Found Objects:

Suleman's artistic exploration extends to ordinary materials like automobile mufflers and gear changes, revealing their significance in evoking memories and stimulating imaginations. Additionally, she incorporates discovered objects such as metal strainers used in bathroom drainage. The process of decontextualization, redefining objects outside their routine categorization, serves as a central strategy in her art.

Everyday Activities as Artistic Inspiration:

A distinctive aspect of Adeela Suleman's work is its authentic connection to her everyday activities and the tools she employs. Table 1 illustrates the profound connection between her art and the utilitarian objects she transforms. This novel approach adds a layer of fascination, inviting viewers to reconsider the mundane and find art in the ordinary.

Huma Mulji: Taxidermy and Satirical Reflections on Identity"

Huma Mulji's artistic journey takes a distinctive turn with her exploration of taxidermy, a medium she discovered accidentally while sketching camels at the Lahore Zoo. Rather than seeing taxidermy as a mere attention-getter, Mulji considers it a natural progression in her use of sculptural materials. This article delves into her work, particularly a piece that examines the complex relationship between Pakistan and the Gulf States, shedding light on the manipulation of the Pakistani government and the gradual "Arabization" of the country.

The Medium of Taxidermy:

Mulji's encounter with the local taxidermist in Lahore led her to recognize the potential of taxidermy in conveying a tale that is both depressing and absurd. Through this medium, she explores the unnatural and forced transformation of Pakistan's identity from "South Asian" to "Muslim," driven by government policies aligned with Gulf States. Despite the inherent discomfort in this transformation, Mulji approaches the subject with humor, revealing the absurd results of this situation in daily life and interactions.

Satirical Reflections on Identity:

Mulji's work goes beyond the surface, delving into the ethical dimensions of art creation. She raises concerns about artists portraying one-dimensional tales of unstable locations, risking the trap of becoming native correspondents. She questions what constitutes a legitimate subject, the authority to discuss and transform lives into art, and the ethical responsibility inherent in such representation. This contemplation has shaped Mulji's

evolving approach, leading to art that is calm and commonplace, inviting viewers to engage with deeper, nuanced meanings.

Challenges and Transformations:

Table 2 illustrates the transformation in Mulji's method, emphasizing artworks that are not just visually stunning but also carry underlying meaning-trajectories. Her installations provide access to a range of otherness, offering a unique perspective that goes beyond the physicality of sculptural items. Mulji's work challenges preconceived notions, encouraging viewers to discover and attribute meaning to the interactive and thought-provoking narratives woven into her creations.

"Aisha Khalid: Navigating Dualities through Miniatures and Multiplicities

Aisha Khalid, a Pakistani artist with a three-decade-long career, seamlessly blends botanical research and geometric patterning in her paintings, creating enigmatic parallels with ghostly subjects. This article delves into Khalid's multifaceted artistic journey, exploring the intersections of her personal experiences, gender dynamics, aesthetics, and the power dynamics between the East and West that shape her captivating work.

Early Life and Traditional Miniatures:

Raised in a humble home in Shikarpur, Sindh, Khalid's ambivalent emotions about domesticity serve as a poignant backdrop to her art. Specializing in traditional miniatures, Khalid's style involves imitating historical works from manuscripts, integrating handmade materials and techniques passed down for centuries in the Indian subcontinent. The delicately painted boundaries of her early works contain female figures adorned in flowing garments like the burqa and chadar, embodying cultural and religious values, while lotuses symbolize simplicity and regrowth.

Evolution of Artistic Language:

Khalid's artistic language has evolved over the years, expanding beyond traditional miniatures to encompass a diverse range of disciplines and mediums. Her repertoire now includes painting, new media, textiles, film, and installations, all while retaining her affinity for miniatures. The curator of her first-ever retrospective, "I AM AND I AM NOT," successfully navigates the plurality of Khalid's work, emphasizing landmark pieces and crucial moments in her career.

Sociopolitical Criticism and Cultural Histories:

At the core of Khalid's art is a complex sociopolitical criticism, a response to later-in-life experiences and exposures. Her visual language is deeply rooted in personal and cultural histories, drawing from her childhood in Shikarpur. The symbolism of female figures in traditional garments and lotuses takes on profound meanings, reflecting the nuances of cultural values and regrowth.

Spiritual and Intellectual Undertones:

Khalid's art is characterized by a profoundly spiritual and intellectual undertone, propelling the narrative forward. The interplay of dualities and multiplicities in her work requires a nuanced exploration across conceptual, academic, and methodological realms. Her journey from traditional miniatures to

diverse mediums is a testament to her ability to adapt while maintaining a unifying thread in her artistic expression.

Table 1. work by Adeela Suleman






serial	Artwork	Title	year	detail
1		Adeela Suleman, Salma, Sitara, and Sister–Motor Cycle Workshop	2002	Made out of kitchen utensils and everyday mundane utility items.
2		Adeela Suleman, Feroza (Turquoise)	2005	Cooking utensil, spoons, jar, powder coating & enamel paint; inside padded with foam & cloth H. 18 x W. 10 x D. 10 in. (48.3 x 25.4 x 25.4 cm)
3		Adeela Suleman, Open confinement	2006	Steel drain covers, nuts and bolts 167.6 x 66 x 40.6 cm. (66 x 26 x 16 in.)
4		Adeela Suleman, White Helmet with Green Wings	2008	Multi- media Signed and dated in Urdu on base of helmet 18 x 14 x 13 in. (45.7 x 35.5 x 33 cm.)
5		Adeela Suleman, Untitled	2009	Steel sieves, steel nuts and bolts 147 x 76 x 68 cm. (57.9 x 29.9 x 26.8 in.)

Table 2. Work by Huma Mulji

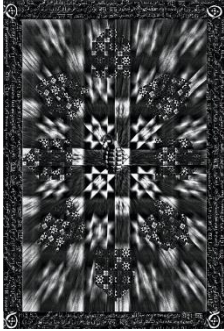


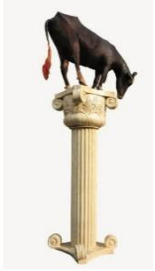





serial	Artwork	Title	year	detail
1		Huma Mulji, part of Aar Paar	2002	Poster
2		Huma Mulji, Sirf Tum (Only You)	2004	Photography, inkjet print on Heiner Muller Photo rag
3		Huma Mulji, Arabian Delight	2008	Taxidermy camel, suitcase and mixed media
4		Huma Mulji, High Rise: Lake City Drive	2009	Taxidermic buffalo, sheet metal, fiberglass, henna, and Duco paint H. 137 7/8 x W. 82 7/8 x D. 26 7/8 in
5		Huma Mulji, Twisted Logic	2010	Mirror, glass, fiber board and adhesive 198 x 79 x 107 cm

Table 3 Aisha Khalid

serial	Artwork	Title	year	detail
1		Aisha Khalid, Form x Pattern	2000	Gouache on wasli paper
2		Aisha Khalid, "Birth of Venus"	2001	Poster-piece for this exhibition.
3		Aisha Khalid, Gul-e-lalah	2004	Gul-e-lalah' ('Tulip-flower'), opaque watercolor on paper
4		Aisha Khalid, Barbed	2006	opaque watercolors on wasli 9 X 6½IN. (22.9 X 16.5CM.)
5		Aisha Khalid, Name, Class, Subject	2009	Gouache on wasli paper, 8x10.5 inches, 280 pages bound in book form

Conclusion

In conclusion, "Artistic Evolution: A Feminine Perspective on Contemporary Art in Pakistan" meticulously explores the diverse and transformative contributions of Adeela Suleman, Huma Mulji, and Aisha Khalid in the realm of contemporary Pakistani art, encompass the rich tapestry of their artistic endeavors.

The artists, through their distinctive mediums and perspectives, challenge prevailing norms and become torchbearers of a feminine

perspective in Pakistan's contemporary art landscape. Beyond aesthetics, their works delve into the complexities of gender dynamics, societal narratives, and political commentary. Suleman's intricate sculptures, Mulji's thought-provoking use of taxidermy, and Khalid's seamless blend of traditional miniature painting with contemporary themes contribute to the evolving narrative of Pakistani art.

As we reflect on this artistic evolution, it becomes evident that these women are not only creators but also storytellers. Their art

serves as a mirror reflecting the multifaceted layers of Pakistani society, provoking thoughtful engagement with socio-political issues. Their significance extends beyond national boundaries, resonating with global audiences and challenging preconceived notions about Pakistani art.

Addressing additional questions enhances our understanding of the dynamics involved:

- Were female artists superior to male artists? This question serves as a lens to examine the dynamics of artistic prowess, challenging historical gender norms and fostering a nuanced understanding of artistic excellence. The conclusion emphasizes that artistic merit transcends gender and should be appreciated without biases.
- Did the female artists have plans for the next generation? Exploring the mentorship and visionary plans of female artists becomes essential in understanding their commitment to shaping the future of the arts in Pakistan. These artists not only contribute through their work but also play a pivotal role in nurturing the next generation of artistic talents.
- Were women artists contributing to the arts sector from 2001-2010? A critical analysis of the contributions made by women artists during this period illuminates their impact on the arts sector, providing insights into the evolving landscape of Pakistani art. The conclusion acknowledges the substantial contributions of female artists during this timeframe, shaping and influencing the trajectory of Pakistani art.

In essence, "Artistic Evolution" is a testament to the enduring power of art to shape narratives, provoke discourse, and transcend boundaries. The female artists discussed in this exploration emerge as pioneers, catalysts, and interpreters of a rapidly changing societal landscape, leaving an indelible mark on the trajectory of Pakistani art.

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