

Post 9/11: Exquisite Violence and the Absent Body in the Work of Contemporary Pakistani Art

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of 9/11 and the events that followed, miniature painting in Pakistan underwent a revivalist transformation, merging with contemporary art practices that catapulted a range of Pakistani artists onto the global art market. These artists responded to the bloodshed, violence and chaos that the country witnessed in the wake of America's War on Terror. While they appeared to comment on their immediate present, Pakistani artists were drawing on a vast repertoire of violence, sectarian strife and instability that had besieged the country for decades. Aesthetically, their work resonates with seductive historical illustrations of violence depicted in miniature painting.

Shunning bodily depictions of carnage, Pakistani artists began to employ specific visual tropes, emphasising beauty, finesse and a certain aestheticisation in their depiction of bloodshed. Bodies were absent, but their presence was ritualised by way of visual references to blood. This paper examines the works of Rashid Rana, Imran Qureshi and Ramzan Jafri to interrogate this intersection of politics and aesthetics.

Introduction

The metanarrative that was constructed by Western media after the unprecedented events of 9/11 provided a simplistic understanding of the tragedy, adopting a rhetoric that pitted "Good against Evil" and that threatened the American "way of life" as espoused by the administration of American President George W Bush.^[1] The events and media coverage that followed 9/11 were coopted and "constructed" by certain conservative political factions that painted the United States as the sole victim of this catastrophic event. In doing so, they failed to consider how the global War on Terror, initiated by the United States in response to 9/11, would impact its allies. The collective trauma that Americans claim to have experienced, relived each year on the anniversary of the event, paints a myopic understanding that only acknowledges a singular hegemonic narrative established by the imperialist agenda of American policy: that the only aggrieved party is the United States itself.

However, the recollection of events each year fails to acknowledge other "essentials" that should constitute its

collective memory and define the national identity of Americans, i.e. the impact of this trauma on the lives of its allies/other countries that committed themselves and their civilian populations to the War on Terror. There is no reckoning with or understanding of the lived experiences and collective memories of the victims in countries that are on the margins of this amphitheatre of war, which was drummed up by American policymakers over two decades ago. Pakistan felt the impact from such American policies and being an ally in the War on Terror. Even though Pakistan received American support to fight against “evil”, the country suffered brutally and became a victim, with suicide bombings by terrorists shaking the foundations of the nation, causing mayhem and rupture. The staggering rise in the cases of such bombings affected all people of Pakistan, including contemporary Pakistani artists. This paper examines the works of contemporary Pakistani painters that were produced in the wake of 9/11 to reveal and acknowledge the existence of the trauma of war and its imprint on the collective memory of a generation of Pakistanis.

Pakistan, War of Terror and The Media: Post 9/11

After Pakistan became a key ally of the US in its War on Terror in 2001, a string of suicide bombings and attacks followed. As the nation continued to reel from violence, in subsequent years it was alleged that former military ruler General Pervez Musharraf had handed over as many as 4,000 Pakistani citizens to foreign countries, specifically the United States.^[2] Missing persons and enforced disappearances became a hallmark of those years.

A year earlier, in 2000, the Pakistani government had privatised the news and media industry, with TV channels beginning to air their own style of reporting and current affairs content.^[3] This meant that in the wake of the violence that engulfed the country from 2003 onwards, a blitzkrieg of information, images, red tickers, and live coverage of the aftermath of suicide bombings became a common feature on news channels and in online articles. Such was the frequency of suicide bombings that a standard format was established, with coverage consisting of showing images of piles of bloodied clothes, shoes, and victims’ belongings (Figs. 1 2). Graphic images of dismembered body parts would often be censored or edited out, while journalists would walk through blood splattered walls and debris.



Figure 1: Pakistani police inspecting the site of a suicide bombing that killed at least 48 people at a mosque in northwest Pakistan^[4]; and police caps and other items scattered on the ground after a suicide bombing in Charsadda, Pakistan.^[5]

Jean Baudrillard argues that the attacks in 2011 were acts of symbolic violence in that “neither politically nor economically did the abolition of the Twin Towers put the global system in check. Something else is at issue here: the stunning impact of the attack, the insolence of its success and, as a result, the loss of credibility, the

collapse of image.”^[6] In Pakistan too, suicide bombers were precise in their intention and their attacks were often symbolic in nature: shrines, schools, security checkpoints, offices of intelligence agencies, police training academies, in short, institutions that embody the components of modern, civic society or belief systems that are antithetical to the terrorists’ twisted ideology were targeted. Pakistan was on the cusp of being painted as a failed state, unsafe and prone to internal turmoil. Furthermore, the incessant flood and repetition of media reports that detailed the suicide attacks, discussions of human casualties and conspiracy theories that have “done something inherently violent to the real” and represent the “virulence” of the empty sign or image, as Jonathan Beever analyses when dissecting Baudrillard and his seminal discussion on “The Violence of the Image”.^[7] After a certain point, the media blitz that recorded violence following 9/11 began to leave one unaffected, its images no longer signifying the real. Perhaps that is why contemporary Pakistani artists began to use the same empty signs to depict the grotesque and beautiful, spawned by the virulence of images as a means of countering the empty signifiers of electronically transmitted information.

A common denominator in most of the works of all three artists discussed here, Imran Qureshi (b. 1972), Rashid Rana (b. 1968) and Ramzan Jafri, is the absence of the depiction of an actual, physical human body, or at least one that forms the focal point of the narrative, which in Western art history has defined most genres of art. Instead of bodies, objects such as clothes, leaves or simply blood spatters are used overtly as a referent for the missing or spectral body that was lost to bomb attacks. Qureshi, Rana and Jafri all graduated from the National College of Arts (NCA), Lahore, a contemporary art school under Government oversight that admits students from all over the country. Qureshi and Jafri majored in miniature painting, while Rashid Rana graduated with a major in painting.

Miniatures, Aesthetics and Violence

Once relegated to the realm of craft and representative of a court tradition dating back to the sixteenth century, when the Mughal dynasty rose to power, Mughal miniature painting was revitalised and reinvented in the 2000s at the Miniature Painting Department at NCA as it embraced contemporary artistic developments. Historically, the ateliers of Mughal emperors consisted of painters who had arrived from all over India to work in service of the court.^[8] This was not something new, in fact the establishment of Mughal miniature painting as a genre and its courtly schools is rooted in migration and transcultural histories. The second Mughal Emperor Humayun was offered exile in the Persian Safavid court in Qazwin, Iran, in the mid-1500s. It was there that Humayun discovered the painters Mir Sayyed Ali and Abd-al-Samad who he subsequently brought back to India. It was these two Persian court painters who initiated the first courtly style, which eventually reached its zenith in the form of Mughal miniature painting under the Emperors Jahangir and Shahjahan in the seventeenth century.^[9]

Talented painters were encouraged to join Mughal *karkhanas*, or ateliers, regardless of their caste, place of birth or faith. This diversity manifested itself particularly during the reign of Mughal Emperor Akbar, who reigned from 1556 until 1605, and who not only commissioned the production of illustrated manuscripts from other faiths but the diverse background of the painters in the *karkhanas* resulted in composite approaches and influences that drew from Persian, Mughal and regional styles.^[10] The tradition seems to have continued as the work of neo-miniature painters draws from contemporary art as well as various schools of miniature painting, such as the Persian School, the Pahari School, etc.^[11]



Figure 5: Painters and Calligraphers Working, illustration from the Akhlaq-i-Nasiri of Nasir-ud-Din-Tusi, 1590 95[12]

The images below (Figs. 6 9) were taken from various schools of miniature painting produced in the past attest to a tradition of aesthetically depicting violence, almost as a common design or component of a narrative rather than an individual, artistic strategy. Then and now students of miniature painting are generally taught to refer to old manuscripts; they spend hours poring over and copying from books and images for reference. Although the subjectivities that inform contemporary art practices today are absent in these examples, and each painting was produced by an atelier, it is the delicate rendering of detail and the trajectories and flows of blood in these examples that fascinate Qureshi.



Figures 6 and 6a: Fragment Shahnama of Mohammad Juki, Gustaham, having slain Farshidvard, dispatches Lahak, 1440s, 184 x 128 mm[13]



Figure 7: Fragment Shahnama of Muhammad Juki, "Rustam Slays the White Div", 1440s, 163 x 127 mm[14]; Figure 8: Fragment Shahnama of Muhammad Juki, "Buzhan Slays Human", 1440s, 115 x 128 mm.[15]



Figures 9 and 9a: Fragments of "The Death of Khan Jahan Lodhi", 1631, from Padshahnama.[16]

And How Many Rains Must Fall Before the Stains are Clean does not display any human body, but viewers' expectations are likely that the presence of red splatters signify blood. In addition, they are implicated in the spectacle when they gingerly walk through this symbolic re-enactment of a violent gesture. As a result, the body of the viewer becomes the stand-in for the presence of what is absent, but are they then the victim or the perpetrator of this violence? Historically, Mughal miniature paintings depicted paradisaical gardens that contained the kind of foliage Qureshi paints, but instead of representing flora and fauna, his work embodies a kind of violence that emerges from the realm of South Asian aesthetics.



Figure 10: Folio from a Gita Govinda series, Manaku, 1730, Pahari School.^[18]

Qureshi aesthetically relocates the grim situation of his country to a city where the first symbolic act of violence unfolded New York. After 9/11, the landscape of the city was transformed literally and metaphorically, extending to a global level as the United States coerced countries like Pakistan into becoming allies in the War on Terror.^[22] It was an event that, as Qureshi states, transformed certain places into a “bloody mass of landscape.”^[23] Unlike Manaku though, Qureshi attempts to oscillate between beauty and violence. He affirms this by stating that his “work is all about something beautiful emerging out of something that looks very violent and aggressive.”^[24]



Figure 11: Imran Qureshi, And How Many Rains Must Fall Before the Stains Are Washed Clean, 2013. Installed at The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Roof Garden, New York, 2013. Acrylic, 743 square metres^[25]; Figure 12: Detail of And How Many Rains Must Fall Before the Stains Are Washed Clean, 2013.^[26]



Figure 13: Rashid Rana, *Red Carpet*, 2007, Chromogenic print and Diasec mounted, 183 x 152 cm, no. 3 from an edition of 5[27]; Figure 14: Detail of *Red Carpet*. [28]

Like Qureshi's installation at the Met, Rana also invokes both violence and beauty as signifiers in his work. Hiding and revealing illusory realities defines Rana's *Red Carpet* too; human presence appears to be missing, but on close scrutiny we can identify perhaps an arm or a figure turned away from the viewer in some of the photographs that make up his carpet. The figures, where shown, are passive and impervious to the gaze of the camera, while the animals that typify representations of a paradisal garden are all dead here. The "frozen moment" documents the extent of the violence inflicted on the paradisal space but also references the documentary function of photography.

In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) Susan Sontag narrates how the moving image and photographs defined the world view of people living in the West, when images of wars fought both at home and outside their countries were mediated through print media and eventually television. Such modes of mediation began to manipulate and desensitise people to violence.^[29] Rana questions the efficacy of graphic images that leave the spectator numb because of their ubiquity: they can be manipulated too, and if one is exposed to his deluge of violent images, would one be able to identify the human perpetrators of violence here? Unlike paintings of epic battle scenes and history painting in which the human figure is glorified, in Rana's work it is gore that is presented or rather "documented" in the photographic medium in the most dispassionate way.

Originally from Quetta in the province of Baluchistan, Ramzan Jafri worked as a volunteer for the ambulance service in Quetta during the years following 9/11, prior to joining NCA. He was often tasked with bringing the injured and dead to hospitals after bomb attacks in Quetta, which were frequent; sometimes Jafri also had to prepare their bodies for burial. During this time, Jafri tragically lost two cousins and a neighbour to suicide bomb attacks in the city.



Figure 15: Ramzan Jafri, *Gull Gu Qaba*, 2013, mixed media on wasli, 46 x 66 cm, courtesy the artist.

Bandages, shirts, personal belongings are a common motif in his work. Interestingly, in *Gul Gu Qaba* (2013), the image of a shirt, cropped and shown upside down, is built up of parts and layers, not just with paint but also gauze bandages, the inclusion of which probably comes from his experience working with the ambulance service. The image is stark; one cannot situate this abandoned piece of clothing in time or space, but it has certainly been ravaged by the passage of time. The viewer is drawn to the fact that human presence is implied, with the shirt barely holding itself together. Scenes of abandoned objects, piles of clothing, books and shoes in the aftermath of bomb blasts were commonly shown in the media, but Jafri says he witnessed these scenes firsthand.



Figure 16: Ramzan Jafri, *Untitled*, 2014, gouache on wasli, 38 x 51 cm, courtesy the artist.

In his second untitled image, Jafri hints at the violence and trauma of a bomb attack by showing an amputated, abandoned and bloodied arm that, more than anything, partially resembles a shell or cast of it. One cannot decide whether it is the gauze bandages that hold it together or if it is the fabric of the shirt that is glued to the

skin. Images of amputated body parts are generally not shown in the media, and through this play with invisibility and visibility Jafri also reveals an ethnic geometric pattern specific to Balochi handicraft. Woven and fraying on the inside of the shirt sleeve cuff, he hints at the structural violence inflicted upon the Hazara community by the State, as it fails to provide adequate security and the right to freely practise their faith without fear.

Conclusion

The images of art works of the three artists discussed in this paper show elements of grotesque beauty. In short, they oscillate between a grand spectacle in form and content and quiet reflection on the desensitisation to violent images that has prevailed in a region torn by violence post 9/11. In either case, the human figure is not to be found centre-stage, and therefore, unlike the many examples featured in Umberto Eco's *On Ugliness* (2011), which dissects the anatomy of the human figure itself, making it the focus of all debate and emotion, Pakistani artists interpret media-driven, electronically transmitted images of absent bodies to emphasise the apparent triviality of human life in their part of the world and the role that world politics, the media and sectarianism have played in cultivating a spectral presence that denies them corporeal agency. What is more, these Pakistani artists experience the War on Terror at home and actively feel the reverberation of suicide bombings, where 9/11 has become a catalyst moment that is embedded in the memories of Pakistanis, both at home and abroad.

Footnotes

1. On 29 January 2002, President George W. Bush addressed Congress and spoke about America being at war. In his speech, he thanked Pakistan and President Parvez Musharraf in fighting against evil and joining the War on Terror.
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3. Umer Farooq, "Pakistan's Private TV News Revolution Under General Musharraf", Newslandry, 2018, <http://www.newslandry.com/2018/12/26/pakistans-private-tv-news-revolution-under-general-musharraf>.
4. Getty Images, derived from <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/22/world/asia/22pakistan.html> (accessed 2022-10-07).
5. Image Reuters, available at <https://jp.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-31078020071221> (accessed 2022-10-07).
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10. Okada, Amina. *Indian Miniatures of The Mughal Court*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams. 1992. pp. 11–15.
11. Goswamy, B.N. *The Spirit off Indian Painting: Close Encounters With 101 Great Works 1100–1900*. London: Penguin. 2014. pp. 107–08.
12. Derived from Okada, *Indian Miniatures of the Mughal Court*, p. 2.

13. Derived from Brend, Barbara. *Muhammad Juki's Shahnama of Firdausi*. London: Royal Asiatic Society. 2010. p. 92.
14. Derived from Brend, *Muhammad Juki's Shahnama of Firdausi*, p. 60.
15. Derived from Brend, *Muhammad Juki's Shahnama of Firdausi*, p. 91.
16. Derived from Cleveland, Milo and Koch, Ebba. *King of the World: The Padhanama*. Translated by Wheeler Thackston. London: Thames and Hudson. 1997.
17. Faiz Ahmed Faiz was a prolific poet and author of Urdu language. He was the editor of *The Pakistan Times* and a member of the Communist Party. In 1951 Faiz was arrested for being a leftist and allegedly wanting to overthrow Liaquat Ali Khan's government. He spent four years in prison and under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's regime, self-exiled himself to Beirut. Being part of the Progressive Writers' Movement, Faiz wanted to empower the masses through his award-winning activist writings,
18. Derived from Goswamy, *The Spirit of Indian Painting*, p. 32.
19. Goswamy, *The Spirit off Indian Painting*, pp. 19–22.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid, p. 20.
22. Goldenberg, Suzanne. "Bush Threatened to Bomb Pakistan, Says Musharraf". *The Guardian*. 22 September 2006. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/sep/22/pakistan.usa> (accessed 2022-10-06).
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24. Punj, Rajesh "A History of Violence". *Art Dependence Magazine*. 6th October 2015. Available at <https://www.artdependence.com/articles/a-history-of-violence> (accessed 22-10-06).
25. Image The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Hyla Skopitz. Derived from Sabel, Claire. "Imran Qureshi The Roof Garden Commission". *Art Asia Pacific*. Issue 85. October–November 2013. Available at <http://li367-91.members.linode.com/Magazine/85/ImranQureshi> (accessed 2022-10-07).
26. Image Chang W. Lee/The New York Times. Derived from Johnson, Ken. "Savagery, Mulled in Airy Precincts". *The New York Times*. 16 May 2013. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/17/arts/design/the-roof-garden-commission-imran-qureshi-at-the-met.html> (accessed 2022-10-07).
27. Derived from *Artnet*, available at <http://www.artnet.com/artists/rashid-rana/> (accessed 2022-10-07).
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