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DEPICTION OF WOMEN IN THE PAINTINGS OF PAKISTANI ARTIST, IQBAL HUSSAIN

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Abstract

From 1970's onwards, works of many Pakistani artists have focused on the themes associated with the general masses including traditions, displacement, gender, ideology (Hashmi & Ata-Ullah, 2009, p. 68), social issues and lately, terrorism. Following this trend, paintings of artist Iqbal Hussain remain significant in advocating the realities of the marginalized class of society. This paper analyses Hussain's depiction of prostitute women and their hardships, who are considered as a symbol of disgrace in a Muslim country like Pakistan, which is moving towards religious extremism. The research shows that being a son of a courtesan, Hussain through his paintings represents the image and problems of dancing girls and courtesans of Shahi Mohalla, Lahore. These women were considered as the custodians of artistic traditions in the Mughal era (Ghauri, 2003). However, over the time they lost their status in Pakistan. In this context, Hussain's work attempt to regain the respect for these women in the society by advocating their everyday struggles among the national and international audience. This study is a secondary research. It draws upon the examination of diverse writings on art literature, newspaper archives, books and interpretation of a variety of Hussain's paintings. The research on Hussain's work explores further research avenues related to the role of women and impact of Islamization in Pakistan, historical analysis of different political governments towards the prostitutes in Pakistan and the idea of 'shame' and 'honour' in the South Asian arts, literature and cinema.

Keywords

Prostitutes, Lahore, Women

1. Aims and Objectives

This research intends to understand the representation of women in the paintings of artist, Iqbal Hussain. The main objectives of this research paper are discussed below:

- To create an understanding of the background and context of Pakistani painter, Iqbal Hussain's work.
- The paper attempts to identify how Hussain associates with the subject of his paintings i.e. prostitutes and dancing girls of *Heera Mandi*, Lahore.
- The paper explores the ways in which Hussain's works voices the issues and hardships of his subjects and portray their alternative image to the society.

The study is a secondary research. To attain the research objectives, the study has relied on multiple sources. This mainly includes the analysis of art literature, newspaper archives, books and examination of Hussain's interviews and paintings. Based on the similarity of the theme, this paper discusses parallel examples from the works of the French painter, Henri de Toulouse Lautrec (1864–1901) and his perspectives.

2. Introduction

In the context of Pakistan, art history traces its roots from the Muslim traditions, Indus Valley civilization, Buddhists sculpture, culture of the Indian subcontinent (Shāhid & Yusuf, 1989) and the British influence. Arts in Pakistan consist of a variety of contemporary and historical visual and decorative arts and crafts including textiles, stone carving, embroidery, block printing, jewelry making, beadwork, woodwork, ceramics, glass-making and contemporary colourful practice of truck art (colourful paintings and depiction of art and poetry on trucks). Following 1970's, themes associated with general public like traditions, displacement, gender, and ideology remained the focus of different Pakistani artists (Hashmi & Ata-Ullah, 2009, p. 68). Today, many artists particularly, miniature painters produce works that attract the attention of international collectors and curators. In the recent years, Pakistani art has attained popularity in the internal market owing to Pakistan's role in the dynamics of 9/11 event. Thus, today terror has become a favorite theme for many Pakistani artists where images of violence and destruction like missiles, weapons, and war are frequently portrayed in the paintings (Ibid.,68.). Zahoor-ul-Akhlaq, Nazia Khan, Ali Raza, Ayaz Jakhio, Asma Mundrawalla and Amin Gulgee are prominent contemporary artists in Pakistan today.

Besides these artists, works of artist Iqbal Hussain remain significant for depicting the realities of the marginalized class of society in his work.

Iqbal Hussain is one of the prominent painters of Pakistan who was born in 1950 in Shahi Mohalla Lahore, Pakistan. Hussain studied at a Cathedral school in Lahore and received his university education from Pakistan's well-known National College of Arts (NCA), Lahore (Ghauri, 2003). He is one of the prominent residents of Shahi Mohalla and runs a restaurant named 'Cuckoo's Den' on the ground floor of his house (Brown, 2006, p. 5). He is the son of a courtesan who grew up among the dancing girls in Lahore's famous red-light district, known as the *Heera Mandi* (diamond market). *Heera Mandi* is today known for the prostitution, however, it is also famous for its dancing girls and classical music traditions. Many Pakistan's top singers, dancers, musicians and film actors emerged from this area (Ghauri, 2003). Historically, during the Mughal rule from the 16th to 18th century, *Heera Mandi* was considered as the cultural center of the city where traditional performances with graceful musicians and dancers used to take place. At that time, these dancers were considered as respectful artists, not *gandi kanjri* (dirty prostitutes, a name given to the female dancers and prostitutes of Shahi Mohalla) (Brown, 2006, p. 5). This place has now turned into a symbol of disgrace and marginalization due to the increasing religious elements in Pakistan (Lavinia Filippi, n.d.). This view is also attributed to the Islamization efforts that took place in the regime of Pakistan's sixth president, Zia-ul-Haq who attempted cracking down dancing and prostitution in this area. This forced artists of *Heera Mandi* into the severe economic depression where some of them opted for prostitution as a means of living. In contrast, famous author Fouzia Saeed in her researched book 'Taboo' identified General Ayub Khan as one who placed severe restrictions on the activities in the Shahi Mohalla (Jalil, 2017).

3. Iqbal Hussain's Work

Iqbal Hussain is called the 'painter of prostitutes and dancing girls'. His paintings depict the insights and tragedies of the life of the muses from *Heera Mandi* who are exploited by the clients, police, abandoned children, politicians and the corrupt environment. Being a son, grandson and brother of these dancing girls, Hussain has a close affinity with his subjects and their environment. As Brown mentions, 'He is an authority on the subject because he lives and breathes it: it's in his blood' (Brown, 2006, p. 5). Therefore, some of his paintings are the self-portrait of Hussain himself along with the models from *Heera Mandi*. Such paintings reflect the position of painter as an insider in the environment (Lavinia

Filippi, n.d.). Likewise, he has also used the mirror in some of his paintings that show symbolism of painter who is alike mirror recording lives of his subjects being a conscious member of society ("Herald exclusive: Body language", 2011).

Hussain present two extremes in his work. Sometimes he draws young and beautiful women but more often, they are pictured fat and natural. Many of his paintings capture women in everyday activities of life as combing, resting or getting dressed. He shows some women alone while others talking and some women nude or badly dressed while others fully covered and adorned. These two extremes in his paintings represent the reality of two extreme worlds that is the world of globalization where things are uncovered and fake and the world of Islamic fundamentalism where things are covered and conservative (Lavinia Filippi, n.d.). Correspondingly, Hussain's few works represent the growth of Taliban movement taking place in the Pakistan that considers painting and dancing as un-Islamic acts. Apart from it, Hussain's few paintings portray scenes of city landscapes, river Ravi, hospital scenes and *haveli* (private mansion) images ("The artist of imprisoned souls", 2015). Besides this, one of the significant contributions of Hussain is that through his paintings, he has actually made possible for the people to admire the dancers and prostitutes who have never been accepted as a part of society by the elite class and nobility ("Herald exclusive: Body language", 2011). This demonstrates the paradox of society who on one hand do not accept these dancers and prostitutes as a part of society while on the other hand, their pictures made by Hussain are decorated in the homes of these rich and influential people. In addition to this, it is also considerable to note that Cuckoo's Den where Hussain's many collections of artefacts, memorabilia, paintings, and photographs are exhibited, serves as a representation of two extremes. This restaurant has a wonderful view of the Badshahi Mosque on one hand and *Heera Mandi* on the other hand. In Pakistani context, the idea of 'scared' can be associated with the Mosque while the idea of 'profane' can be linked to the red light area of *Heera Mandi* which is the epicenter of dance and prostitution. Accordingly, the restaurant itself represents as a connector between both these ideas.

Hussain in his paintings creates dark and dramatic scenes, whereas he often paints lighter images representing the humanity of his subjects as a child, mother and a friend besides being a dancer and prostitute. Thus, once the professional mask is removed, one can recognize the vulnerability of these people who are born in such an inescapable system ("Poignantworks: The world of Iqbal Hussain", 2011). This serves as an attempt to advocate the humanistic side of these dancers and prostitutes in the society. Here, Hussain's painting

'Birth of a Prostitute' challenges the conventional views regarding life of prostitutes in Pakistan. This painting depicts that birth of a girl as a potential wage-earner is celebrated as a sign of good luck in Shahi Mohalla with music. However, there is a quieter religious thanksgiving attached to this celebration where a woman in corner with covered head is reading the Holy Book. This portrayal demonstrates that despite prostitutes are regarded as sinful, they have their own ceremonies and God. Conventional morality remains tongue-tied to this fact. The painting also implies that motherhood and spiritual validation is beyond the standards of morality (Naqvi, 1998, pp. 591-592) set out by dominating religious and social interpretations.

Iqbal Hussain is considered as a controversial artist in Pakistan owing to his paintings of sex workers and because of his portrayal of Pakistan as an increasingly religious and intolerant society. Moreover, his work has often been criticized, being the son of a prostitute (Leiby, 2012). Due to these sensitivities, Hussain's paintings were removed from a public display in Allhamra Hall, Lahore in 1984 (Rumi, 2007). Nevertheless, Hussain exhibited his paintings on the footpath. Despite all these difficulties, the artist has remained successful in acquiring the international recognition and fame on various occasions. His paintings were requested by Jordanian Princess, Wijdan Ali for Jordanian Gallery of Fine Arts. Besides this, his paintings were nominated for UNESCO Headquarters Prize in 1995 in Paris. Additionally, his painting was also auctioned at the Sotheby's Auction House, London (Rumi, 2007).

Considering the style of Hussain's paintings, he uses warm and reddish colours. His paintings employ ambiances and multifaceted inner emotions in sketches that give the picture an incomplete look. His brushstrokes appear to be random nonetheless it focuses on small details on the face or body parts of the subject. He uses a variety of mediums in his portraits including oil and watercolors, pencil and pastels. Hussain's artistic style can be categorized as expressionist that rejects the traditional views of beauty ("Iqbal Hussain's courtesans of Heera Mandi come to Karachi", 2015) and presents the world from a subjective perspective of artists' emotions. In this style, compositions are simpler and direct, however, artists sometimes use symbolism (corresponding to Hussain's symbol of the mirror in his paintings).

The subject of Iqbal Hussain's paintings resonant of past's great figures such as Henri de Toulouse Lautrec (1864–1901). Lautrec established himself as a leading poster artist of Paris. His career corresponded to the late 19th century's two major developments in Paris including the emergence of nightlife culture and beginning of modern printmaking. Thus,

alike Hussain, prostitutes and dancehall performers remain one of the significant themes of Lautrec's paintings where he demonstrates a real sympathy for these women. Women in Lautrec paintings are shown both distressful and attractive who live in the difficult circumstances. He painted everyday scenes like prostitutes awaiting clients, undergoing medical examinations, on beds and embracing. In his famous painting called 'in salon, sofa', a prostitutes group is shown in a mansion waiting for the clients (Michael, 2010). It is interesting that Hussain and Lautrec both demonstrate sympathy and fascination for the marginal group in the society. Hussain, being part of the marginalized environment of *Heera Mandi* holds sympathy for his subjects, whereas Lautrec's depiction of marginalization is likely due to his own physical disability. Furthermore, Lautrec's art, on one hand, reveals the fascination of women while simultaneously, he presents dark and miserable nightlife comprising dancing girls, prostitutes, forgotten children and plain environments. This echoes the work of Hussain where on one hand he presents women as a prostitute while on the other hand she is presented as a mother, child, and a friend too. Apart from it, Lautrec's paintings often comprise of *en plein air* (open air) scenes. He often drew people sitting in the Montmartre Garden in his neighborhood (The Metropolitan Museum of Art Guide, 2012, p. 71). Similarly, Hussain admires to paint *en plein air* by the river Ravi portraying the life of the river (Lavinia Filippi, n.d.). Moreover, mirror remains a central feature in the work of both the artists. One of the famous depiction of Lautrec is called 'woman before a mirror' which is a series of prints illustrating Miss Loïe Fuller looking into a glass and analyzing her body attributes. Likewise, Hussain's paintings like 'Mirror-1' and 'Mirror-2' use the mirror for communicating symbolism of self-reflection. It is also considerable that women in Hussain's and Lautrec's pictures are not always attractive rather often bulky and fleshy who is equally capable of joy or grief like everyone else (Michael, 2010).

4. Conclusion

The overall analysis suggests that Iqbal Hussain's work by showing two extremes of the lives of prostitutes and dancing girls serves as a representation of an unacceptable segment of the society in a Muslim country like Pakistan which is moving towards religious extremism. In this context, works of Hussain can be categorized as 'art for a purpose' where he demands to embrace the presence of dancing girls and courtesans of *Heera Mandi* as a respectable part of the society. Thus, through his paintings, Hussain is voicing this message to local, national and the international audience.

The study on Hussain's work explores further research avenues related to the role of women and impact of Islamization in Pakistan. Likewise, a chronological inquiry of different political rules can be undertaken to comprehend the stance of different political governments towards the prostitutes in Pakistan. Not only this, Hussain's work can be analyzed in parallel with the works of other contemporary painters from the countries where prostitution acts as a taboo. This will facilitate us to see how the artists from different contexts present a similar theme in light of their respective socio-political and cultural settings. In the context of our study, it will also be interesting to explore the ideas of 'shame' and 'honour' in the context of South-Asian arts, literature, and cinema. A similar study was conducted by Sharma, 2017 that highlights the cinematic representation related to partition of India with an emphasis on representation of women as an object of honour, vulnerability, and exploitation (Sharma, 2017). Additionally, stereotyping of prostitute women remain a predominant theme in this research. Accordingly, it will be useful to explore stereotyping towards women in diverse professional arenas in Pakistan like corporate sector, academia, service industry and media etc (Mirza, 2016, pp. 19-37).

Like other studies, this research has some limitations. This research presents a secondary account of Iqbal Hussain's work while it does not incorporate painters' personal views and interpretations of his own work. Thus, it will be useful to study the topic by interviewing the painter himself. Similarly, a rich amount of data can be generated on the topic by interviewing Hussain's subject i.e. prostitutes and dancing girls of *Heera Mandi*, Lahore. This will facilitate us to get firsthand account of the day-to-day context of their lives, families, struggles, profession and socio-economic structures. Apart from it, this research primarily focuses on the depiction of women in Iqbal's Hussain paintings, however, it does not take into account other themes presented in Hussain's work like landscapes and scenes of Lahore, Ravi and, hospital etc.

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