

Mera Jism, Meri Marzi.
Claiming the Body Where ‘Body’ Is an Obscene Word

Abstract: The ‘Aurat March’ (Women’s March) has been held in the major cities of Pakistan since 2018. This public event, and the related activities promoted during the year, has emerged as a catalyst for liberal feminists in the country by creating a public space for expression. The Aurat March appearing as a threat to the status quo has made it subject to the disapproval and anger of many. The anger against the marchers, frequently expressed through social media networks, has as a common denominator the accusation of vulgarity. Of the many slogans that appear at the March, one has become the focus of this hatred, thus turning it into the unofficial slogan of the March: ‘*mera jism, meri marzi*’ (‘my body, my choice’). To the haters the scandal that this statement produces lies in the ability of the word *jism*, a neutral word for ‘body’ in Urdu, to evoke women's sexuality and thus to drive men to sinful thoughts. This essay suggests that the March has developed a public space for contestation of the ‘moral regulation’ that nationalist and Islamist policies have used to determine women’s place in Pakistani society. Furthermore, it investigates how ‘activism’ participates in the formation of this new space for contestation. For this reason, it proposes an analysis of works produced by selected visual artists and investigates how contemporary feminist art challenges the conservative view of women’s place in society and reimagines it through representations of women, especially female bodies, in the context of a society where they are both objectified and under constant threat.

Keywords: *Pakistani women’s movement, Pakistani feminism, Aurat March, moral regulation, negative solidarities, body politics*

1. Introduction

Appearing for the first time in 2018 and now established as an annual appointment, the ‘Aurat March’ (Women’s March) has emerged as a catalyst for liberal feminists in Pakistan by creating a public space for expressing women’s ideas, visions and demands. At the same time, it has promoted the resurgence of anti-feminist discourse among the conservative sections of society. The event, which attracts many young women, and that enjoys considerable attention, especially through the sharing of contents on social media by both the supporters and the detractors of the March, seems to have initiated a new phase in the history of women’s movements in Pakistan.¹ Most of the discourse around the Aurat March, as developed by both feminists and anti-feminists, promotes a conversation on issues of sexuality and body politics, with its supporters stating women to be the sole owners and managers of their bodies, and with the detractors accusing women of promoting improper and vulgar behaviours which pose a threat to society and the national culture. Highlighting that women’s rights movements are not new in the country and suggesting that the Aurat March constitutes a turning point in the history of women’s movements in Pakistan, this essay proposes to read it as having developed a public space for contestation of the ‘moral regulation’ that nationalist and Islamist policies have used to determine women’s place within Pakistani society. The study maintains that the ‘negative solidarity’ that unites those who condemn the feminist stance can be understood as born from a widely shared fear that liberal feminists may undermine the Pakistani nationalist narrative. Furthermore, as a way of investigating the relationship between the emergence of this new feminist contestation and its cultural

¹ Shama Dossa, “The Aurat March. Women’s Movements and New Feminisms in Pakistan”, in Leela Fernandes, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Gender in South Asia*, Second Edition, (London and New York: Routledge, 2021).

expressions, the paper looks at the way visual arts deal with the discourse developed around the Aurat March. It points out that a generation of artists is emerging that deals with issues of body politics and sexuality in ways that openly challenge conservative views on the matter. The article considers works produced by visual artists Shehzil Malik, Hiba Schahbaz and Misha Japanwala and examines how contemporary feminist art represents female bodies in the context of a society where they are both objectified and under constant threat.

2. The Aurat March: A Controversial Annual Appointment

On 8 March 2018, a group of women’s rights activists organised marches which took place at the same time in some of the main cities of Pakistan with the purpose of drawing attention to the ways women are generally seen and treated within Pakistani society. The Aurat March takes place every year on International Women’s Day and since its inception it has grown, involving more people and more cities. Every year the event focuses on one main topic, yet the principal reason why people march is to raise awareness of issues of gender inequality, highlighting how civil society tends to deny women basic rights like the right to take decisions regarding one’s own life and body, which makes both public and private spaces unsafe for women. Honour killings, rapes, forced conversions, forced marriages, health rights, the various forms of harassment women are victims of, the limits that many families impose on women’s freedom of choice, and the violence against and marginalisation of transgender people are some of the issues pointed out by the marchers.

The event is a controversial one in Pakistan where many claim the marchers work on a Western agenda, and even believe they get funding from the West, with the purpose of promoting Western values, and thus vulgarity, in the country.² As a consequence, this protest is also accused of promoting ideas and behaviours that are against the Islamic values of the nation, thus suggesting that the marchers are westernised women participating in a conspiracy against Islam and Islamic values. Another way in which detractors deal with this protest is through stating that the issues raised and the demands posed by the Aurat March are not grounded in the national reality where women are granted rights and safety. Furthermore, while it is true that most of the organisers and the participants belong to the upper and upper-middle classes and mostly come from liberal environments, the social origin of most of the marchers is frequently used to dismiss their messages. Critics state that such women are detached from the ground reality as they are both not aware of the real needs and struggles of the average Pakistani woman and are not truly affected by the limits imposed on most women by the local patriarchal society as the environment they live in allows them freedoms that are unknown to the majority of women.³

The March, its organisers and participants are publicly criticised and condemned on the streets, both by people involved in counter-marches⁴ and by some journalists who are openly aggressive towards the participants while covering the event. The aggression also appears on newspapers, televisions and social media networks. It is on social media platforms, however, that most of the material and opinions in favour of or against the March are shared, and, for this reason, they retain a central role in the development of narratives and counter-narratives about the March and feminists in the country. The strongest voices against the March are those of the conservatives that deem the slogans and the behaviours of the marchers as inappropriate and vulgar. Because of this view, conservative parties have also asked to ban the rally. For instance, in February 2022, the Minister for Religious and Minority Affairs wrote a letter to the Prime Minister stating the Aurat March offends

² “Lal Masjid Moves Court Seeking Ban on Aurat March”, *Dawn* (2021), www.dawn.com.

³ Azeemah Saleem, “Aurat March’: A Groundbreaking Rally against Patriarchy in Pakistan”, *South Asia Monitor* (2020), www.southasiamonitor.org.

⁴ “Women Rally in Pakistan Despite Attempts to Shut down the Protest”, *AFP* (2022), factcheck.afp.com.

Islamic values, so asked the government to ban it.⁵ Furthermore, it is not rare for the condemnation of this public feminist event to move beyond the limits of fair expressions of dissent. The organisers, for example, have received personal threats while more general threats to the participants have come from the Taliban.⁶ It has frequently happened that photographs from the March have been modified in order to change the messages on the placards held by the participants to make them sound shocking or offensive to the common morality.⁷

Indeed, placards have emerged as one of the most interesting aspects of the Aurat March as it is through them that the participants share their messages using phrases that try to catch people’s attention during the rally and much of the discussions around the event focus on what is stated and represented on the placards. The participants’ aim of getting their signs noticed is also sought by using irony, with placards reading, ‘I just got back from work can you pass me a glass of water?’ or ‘Saying *mashAllah* does not make your harassment *halal*’. In addition, they may use words, expressions and images that are commonly regarded as sensitive and thus not openly used in public conversations, such as statements like, ‘If only they were as disgusted by oppression as they are by periods’ accompanied by a red-stained tampon, or ‘Grow a pair’ under the image of a pair of ovaries. While some placards refer to specific issues like the rights of women from minority groups or name some of the female victims of male violence whose cases have received attention from the media, others contain responses to the accusations against the marchers. For example, the allegation of promoting un-Islamic values – ‘Protection of women against violence is not un-Islamic’ – and the claim that the messages shared on the placards offend the majority of Pakistanis – ‘My outrage can’t even fit on this sign’.

Of the many slogans used at the March, one has become the main focus of its opponents’ attention and so has, as a consequence, turned it into the unofficial slogan of the march: ‘*mera jism, meri marzi*’ (‘my body, my choice’). This statement is powerful because it encompasses the fundamental claim of women’s right to exercise agency over their bodies. Its relevance is annually proved by the number of known cases of violence against women. To those who condemn the use of this slogan, however, the statement is scandalous and the outrage it produces lies in the ability of the word *jism*, a neutral word for ‘body’ in Urdu, to evoke women’s sexuality and thus to drive men to sinful thoughts. At the same time, women’s claim to exercise agency over their bodies is understood as their attempt to push for a sexual liberation that would undermine the rules and values Pakistani society is based on. Thus, the slogan is accused of encapsulating all the threats feminists pose both to pious men and to the family system. According to this view, in fact, a woman stating her right to exercise agency over her body is promoting a sexual freedom that is against the religious and cultural values the nation is built on and that will eventually disrupt the family system Pakistani society is based on by undermining the woman’s role in it, that of mother and of devout and sexually restrained wife.

Photographs and videos of the marchers with their placards are shared in newspapers and on televisions, but the main vehicle for the circulation of these images is social media platforms, where not just journalists and pundits express their views on the placards, but anyone willing to join in the debate can share their ideas in favour of or against the feminist messages. Thus, it is on social media that hate campaigns are built and find their supporters. For example, a campaign called ‘Mard March’ (Men’s March) was launched on social networks as a sort of counter-march promoting anti-feminist slogans that were mostly developed by modifying the feminist ones, like ‘My eyes, my choice’ and ‘First you cook the food, then I will warm it up’, as a reply to the placards saying ‘Heat up your food’.⁸ Using devoted hashtags and pages not just the condemnation of the feminist rally but hatred against feminists in general is promoted on social media. Such campaigns do not only depict the

⁵ Sadaf Khan, “Marching to a Tune of Hatred”, *The News on Sunday* (2022), www.thenews.com.pk.

⁶ Umar Farooq, “Pakistani Taliban Threatens Organizers of Women’s Day March”, *Reuters* (2021), www.reuters.com.

⁷ Wasi Anjum Mirza, “Doctored Images Circulate after International Women’s Day Marches in Pakistan”, *AFP* (2022), factcheck.afp.com.

⁸ Daanika R. Kamal, “Networked Struggles: Placards at Pakistan’s Aurat March”, *Feminist Legal Studies*, 30 (2021), 219-33.

marchers as non-representative of the typical Pakistani, Muslim woman, but they go so far as to encourage violence against them. Manipulated images from the rallies accompanied by sexual innuendos and slurs about the women in the photographs circulate as widely as invitations to sexual violence do.

One chilling example of the power the negative campaigns on social media can have occurred in 2021. A video whose audio had been edited so that the marchers seemed to be chanting slogans offensive to religious sensibility was shared on social media platforms with hashtags defining the content of the video as blasphemous and accusing the organisers of blasphemy. The video went viral and sparked outrage, causing many to invoke mob violence against the organisers of the March who, meantime, had shared the original video to prove that it had been morphed. While many were calling for violence against the women involved, hard-line religious parties held demonstrations against the Aurat March. Meanwhile, in a country where the accusation of blasphemy can lead to a death sentence, the Peshawar High Court initiated legal proceedings against the organisers. Later the case was dropped as the investigation could not prove that the viral video was not fake. However, the authors of the edited video achieved their goal of negatively affecting many people’s opinions about the marchers by circulating it widely.

If it is true that hatred and misinformation campaigns are nurtured through social media, it is equally true that before and after the live event that takes place on the International Women’s Day, the organisers of the protest and their supporters use the same digital means to spread their messages, to raise awareness about the issues the marches focus on and organise the rallies. Many of the leaders belong to groups like Women Democratic Front, Women’s Action Forum (WAF) and *Hum Auratein* (We the Women). The use of social media allows them to amplify the message by reaching an audience greater than that of the people who can actually participate in the March and its connected activities. As online communication relies strongly on images, it is not just the photographs and videos from the events that are shared but also pieces of visual art that in some cases are specifically created to promote the March. The most prominent artist whose works are directly related to the March is Shehzil Malik,⁹ the first to create posters for the event. Her works can be found on the streets in the days leading up to the March, but they mostly circulate online, attracting supporters as well as haters who personally attack the artist.

Thus, the Aurat March struggle takes place mainly in two spaces: the streets, where the physical event takes place as an annual appointment, and the social media platforms where contents are shared throughout the year. This makes the struggle ongoing and diffused as it takes place through a network of online and offline modes. In both cases, the spreading of messages relies on visuals – the placards, the images from the event, their doctored versions, the posters, the images of women holding messages against the March – which both the activists and their haters appear to recognise as a fundamental means of communication. As Daanika R. Kamal highlights in her study,¹⁰ the attention that anti-feminists, and as a consequence feminists, pay to the slogans that appear at the event and the circulation of the originals and doctored versions on mainstream and social media has turned the placards themselves into a site where the feminist struggle takes place. Feminists use them to express social criticism while opponents see them as a breach of social property. The consequence is that the placards have become not only a site for women to speak up on key issues, such as body politics, but also constitute a public space where ideas are expressed and contested, promoting debate on issues that have been silenced until recently.

⁹ Haiya Bokhari, “Artist in Focus: Shehzil Malik”, *The News on Sunday* (2020), www.thenews.com.pk.

¹⁰ Daanika R. Kamal, “Networked Struggles”.

3. Negative Solidarity: The Aurat March as a Threat to the Nation

The attention the Aurat March receives from those who condemn it, whose opinions and unfair ways of expressing dissent through social media promote hatred and violence, can be understood as a form of what Hannah Arendt calls ‘negative solidarity’.¹¹ Arendt conceives of negative solidarity as a form of solidarity that unites individuals who recognise that they share an experience of suffering or injustice. However, in contrast to positive solidarity that draws people towards working together for a common good, negative solidarity does not unite individuals with the shared aim of taking action against the cause of their suffering or oppression. Rather, negative solidarity is merely a sense of commonality that bids people who recognise that they are victims of the same situation that causes suffering but this does not imply that they take action in the pursuit of the common good. In recent times, Pankaj Mishra has pointed out that a trait the contemporary globalised society shares is anger. All over the world, notwithstanding specific local economic, social and cultural characteristics it is possible to individuate what he calls, citing Nietzsche, ‘men of resentment’, individuals bound together by a negative solidarity produced by the failure of economic and democratic ideals. The resentment, hatred and desire for revenge against whatever appears to be the cause of the individual and collective failure to realise ideals of economic and social contentment, take various forms and are frequently expressed online where angry individuals can unleash their repressed anger while staying anonymous. Mishra also highlights that most of such dissatisfied and angry individuals live “within poorly imagined social and political communities and/or states with weakening sovereignty” frequently affected by “the decline or loss of postcolonial-nation-building ideologies”.¹² Scholars¹³ agree that Pakistan is an example of a postcolonial nation where the process of constructing a national identity has failed and, since the country was built as a Muslim majority state, political and religious actors have encouraged a representation of Pakistani identity that understands the national and religious identities to coincide. Thus, mainstream representations of Pakistani identity promote the idea that the individual and collective identity lies in the observance of an orthodox interpretation of Islam.

Feminist studies¹⁴ have pointed out that the attribution of different social roles to the different genders is a fundamental issue used to develop the nationalist narratives. Thus, it seems possible to read the angry reactions against the Aurat March and against liberal feminism in Pakistan as a form of negative solidarity that unites individuals against the menace represented by women who question the role the patriarchal system and nationalism have given them. Indeed, in order to build an imagined community, nationalist narratives adopt the patriarchal differentiation of roles between men and women as well as discourse about the regulation of sexuality, the family as society’s fundamental institution, and the passing on of traditions as a way of protecting the integrity of the national identity. At the same time, nationalist narratives give women’s bodies a symbolic meaning as they are conceived of as representing the nation itself and this justifies men’s role as protectors and controllers of women’s bodies. In Pakistan, where a nation had to be imagined when a new state was created in 1947, national identity is built around ideas that draw from both tradition and a certain interpretation of religion to determine the characteristics and behaviours that men and women must display to be regarded as proper Pakistanis, and thus to be accepted as members of the society. In this context, anti-feminism is a sentiment that unites people from all social classes, with more or less conservative

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland and New York: World Publishing Company, 1962), 315.

¹² Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger. A History of the Present* (London: Penguin, 2017).

¹³ Stephen Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2004); Christophe Jafferlot, ed., *Pakistan. Nationalism without a Nation?* (London & New York: Zed Books, 2002); Ayesha Jalal, “Conjuring Pakistan: History as Official Imagining”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 27 (1995), 73-89.

¹⁴ Partha Chatterjee, “Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonized Women: The Contest in India”, *American Ethnologist*, 16.4 (1989), 622-33.

views, against what is perceived as a common threat to the patriarchal society and to the Islamic nation.

4. Women’s Rights in Pakistan’s History

In order to understand the reactions to what appears to be a new phase in the women’s rights movement in Pakistan, as well as the emphasis that its opponents put on condemning the references to women’s bodies, it is useful to look at Pakistan’s history and at the history of its women’s rights movement. Although mainstream narratives tend to obliterate it, women’s organisations in Pakistan are as old as the country and women have played a role within the anti-colonial and nationalist movements that led to the creation of the two separate states of Pakistan and India, thus proving that women’s participation in public and political life is many decades old. However, it was in the 1980s that Pakistani society witnessed the appearance of a movement specifically advocating women’s rights which emerged in response to the Islamisation policies pursued by Zia-ul-Haq’s regime. The policies of the military regime, supported and acclaimed by the most traditionalist groups in society, drew from both local traditions and an extremist interpretation of Islamic teachings to limit women’s freedom, to reduce their power and value in society to less than that of men, and to promote their objectification. These laws came after a period of relatively positive changes for women supported by Zulfikhar Bhutto’s progressive policies which promoted the active participation of women in social life, thus supporting the idea that women’s lives should not be limited to traditional roles and that they should leave the home to get an education and have a job.

Moving in the opposite direction, Zia’s policies promoted a strictly patriarchal idea of women’s place in society summarised by the slogan ‘*chadar aur chaar dewari*’ (‘the veil and the four walls of the house’). The most significant act in this process was the passing of the Hudood Ordinances in 1979, a set of laws which established the non-equality of men and women before the laws of the state. The most controversial of these laws was that regarding *zina*, or extra-marital sex, which established that the adulterer could be punished by stoning to death. These laws also punished those who were found guilty of rape, which was recognised as different from fornication and adultery. However, for a rape case to be proved it had to be confirmed by four pious, male eyewitnesses while the testimony of female witnesses did not count. As consequence, a woman reporting she had been raped would be easily accused of fornication if she could not provide four male eyewitnesses. Because this made it impossible for a woman to accuse her rapist, it openly promoted violence against women by making it extremely difficult for men to be punished for their actions.

It was during this period and as a reaction to such laws that the Women’s Action Forum (WAF) was born in 1981. This first movement of feminists in Pakistan demanded to keep religion separate from the state¹⁵ and condemned the use of religion and tradition as ways to justify violence against women. In 1983, when the law of evidence was passed, which stated that the testimony of two women was equivalent to that of one man, the WAF called for a protest against the law and marched in the streets, along with the All Pakistan Women Lawyers Association. The protesters violently clashed with the police because they defied the ban on public assemblies. The accusations brought against the 1983 protesters resemble those heard against the participants of the Aurat March. Furthermore, WAF march was described in the media as un-Islamic, vulgar, and inspired by the West, just like the Aurat March is.

In 2006, under Benazir Bhutto’s government, the Hudood Ordinances were overturned, but this move was not sufficient to bring change in a society that had already been deeply affected by Zia’s successful Islamisation policies and by the twenty-seven years of laws subordinating women to men

¹⁵ Saigol Rubina, *Feminism and the Women’s Movement in Pakistan: Actors, Debates and Strategies* (Islamabad: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2016), 16.

and de facto allowing violence against women. Such laws, enforcing a conception of women’s place in society that had already existed in the local culture, promoted the objectification of women who were supposed to subordinate their will and actions to that of the men in their families and whose bodies were to be protected with a veil and the walls of the house from presumed violence in public spaces. Since the 1980s, Pakistani society has indeed witnessed a growth in cases of harassment, rape and killing of women at the hands of men from outside their families. In turn, this increased perception of public spaces as unsafe for women has validated the idea that women should not, and should not be allowed to, move freely in public.

The accusation against women’s rights activists to be westernised and un-Islamic is, as we have seen, as old as the emergence of the movement for women’s rights in Pakistan. Accusing Pakistani feminists of following a Western agenda serves the purpose of representing them as alien, insignificant and constituting a threat for the society and the country, thus persuading large sections of society to distance themselves from and to criticise or to condemn feminists. The fact that this representation of women’s rights activists is largely accepted is also explained by the fact that it appeals to the widely shared anti-western views that associate the West to both the colonial occupation of the Subcontinent and the tense post-9/11 relationship between the West and Muslims. Furthermore, such a representation also uses a widely accepted image of the West as morally corrupt in contrast to the moral superiority of Islamic countries. The corruption of the West is frequently seen as proven by Western women’s independence and sexual freedom, while the pious Muslim woman who entirely devotes her life to being a good wife and mother is seen as standing for the moral superiority of Pakistan. As Moon Charnaia writes, “the construction of the Pakistani feminist subject as ‘Western’ constitutes the *modus operandi* – a central component of nationalist ideology, symbolizing Western penetration into the region, elitism, and a dangerous force of disintegration to the body politic of the people, primarily through sexuality”.¹⁶

Starting from the Zia era, opposition between feminist and non-feminist women has also been promoted, with the latter embracing the role that patriarchal society prescribes for them and condemning feminists as non-representative of the typical Pakistani woman. Thus, secular women’s rights activists have been represented in opposition not to Islamic feminists, whose views are based on the idea that Islam guarantees equal rights to men and women, but to these women. They are often active in the women’s wings of religious parties and share an interpretation of women’s role in Islamic societies that is commonly regarded by women’s rights activists as misogynistic and oppressive of women’s freedom.¹⁷ The representation of feminists as alien and potentially dangerous to the society should also be understood in light of the politics of the nationalist and Islamist parties that are currently widely supported in the country and that promote, as part of their ideology, the image of the woman-as-nation derived from anti-colonial nationalist narratives. The Pakistani woman that emerges from such narratives is modest in her appearance, sexually restrained and entirely devoted to her role of obedient daughter, wife and mother.¹⁸ If the female body symbolises the nation, then the honour of not just one family but also of the whole nation lies in it, which compels men to make sure that the honour of their daughters, wives and sisters is protected by keeping control over their bodies.

Drawing from Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, Saadia Toor proposes to read the relationship between women, Islam and the Pakistani nation-state through the lens provided by the conceptual framework of what the two scholars define as ‘moral regulation’, that is “a project of normalizing, rendering natural, taken for granted, in a word ‘obvious’, what are in fact ontological and

¹⁶ Moon Charnaia, “Feminism, Sexuality and the Rhetoric of Westernization in Pakistan”, in Leela Fernandes, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Gender in South Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 318.

¹⁷ Amina Jamal, “Gendered Islam and Modernity in the Nation-space. Women’s Modernism in the Jamaat-e-Islami of Pakistan”, *Feminist Review*, 91.1 (2009), 17.

¹⁸ Moon Charnaia, “Feminism”, 323.

epistemological premises of a particular and historical form of social order”.¹⁹ Corrigan and Sayer also point out that state formation is dependent on a relationship between nationalism and sexuality as the nation-state gives itself the power of moral regulation which defines morality and respectability. This particularly affects women as they are seen as the repository of the nation’s culture and traditions and, consequently, also of its moral code, respectability and honour. This explains why establishing a strict control on women’s bodies and sexuality has become part of the process of defining the nation, resulting in laws and social norms which dictate the behaviours and characteristics a woman should have to conform to the ideal set for her by the nation-state. According to Saadia Toor, “what is ultimately at stake in state projects of ‘moral regulation’ as mediated by discourses of nationalism, gender, sexuality, and respectability/propriety is the maintenance of social order and of regimes of property”.²⁰ This is accomplished by establishing regimes of power and hegemony that affect certain social groups, like women and minorities. To understand how nationalists in Pakistan have used discourse around gender and sexuality to establish a moral code aimed at determining a regime of power, Toor proposes considering the relationship between property and propriety as it has developed in Pakistan since Zia’s dictatorship. During this period, laws passed in the name of a program meant to Islamise the nation legally limited women’s freedoms and defined what is and is not proper for women to do. At the same time, such laws objectified them, thus encouraging the idea that they are property in the hands of their families which are expected to govern every aspect of their lives. The Aurat March and the outrage and hatred it generates can be read in the light of the ‘moral regulation’ pursued in Pakistan through nationalist discourse. However, the backlash this new wave of feminists has received seems to have played a role in giving the movement new vigour.²¹

5. Visual Art as Feminist Resistance

In the 1980s, Zia’s regime could not put an end to the resistance by the women’s movement as the activists left the streets and opted for other forms of resistance which were put into practice through activities involving local communities and which found a powerful voice in the verses composed by poets like Fahmida Riaz and Kishwar Nahid. Lala Rukh was the visual artist whose works expressed the ethos of the movement and who helped spread WAF’s messages through her artworks and posters. Artistic expression used as a means of resisting patriarchal dictates is also part of the new wave of Pakistani feminism as several artists interpret and represent an approach to gender issues that defies the traditional moral regime. They give a voice to liberal feminist perspectives through their representations of the body, thus contributing to the public debate by providing another site, that of the visual arts, for its development. The content of the art often reflects the contents that appear on the placards. Visual art is also shared and circulated on social media and, the fact that the artists are frequently insulted and threatened by online haters, reveals that they are perceived as part of the movement and their art as a vehicle for feminist messages. Therefore, this artistic production emerges as a form of ‘artivism’ because art appears to be a means to participate actively in a movement that aims at generating social change.

If art as a means of active participation in social and political life is not new in Pakistan, it is insightful to place the engagement of Pakistani feminist artists within the larger framework of the

¹⁹ Philip Corrigan and Sayer Derek, *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution* (New York: Blackwell, 1985), 4.

²⁰ Saadia Toor, “The Political Economy of Moral Regulation in Pakistan. Religion, Gender and Class in a Postcolonial Context”, in Leela Fernandes, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Gender in South Asia*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), 140.

²¹ Syeda Mujeeba Batoool and Aisha Anees Malik, “Bringing the Focus Back. Aurat March and the Regeneration of Feminism in Pakistan”, *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, 22.9 (2021), 316-30.

contemporary Muslim world. As recent scholarship has discussed,²² the Arab revolutions have been characterised by the simultaneous emergence of feminist movements accompanied by related artistic production defined by its aim of contesting, reimagining and promoting a debate around the place of women in Middle Eastern societies. As in the case of Pakistani feminist art, this artistic production is strictly related to, and part of, a movement that takes place and is shaped in the streets as well as in virtual spaces. Also feminist art from the Middle East is characterised by a focus on female bodies and on how women experience, conceive and imagine public and private spaces.

The body is seen as “not merely a surface or casement of the individual” but rather “a material space of multiple dimensions that irrupts and interrupts normative orders and activates competing ones through imagination, symbolism and enactment”.²³ Thus, in the contemporary Muslim world the female body has become a fundamental element for feminist activism which aims at undermining patriarchal decrees and promotes the development of a more egalitarian society.

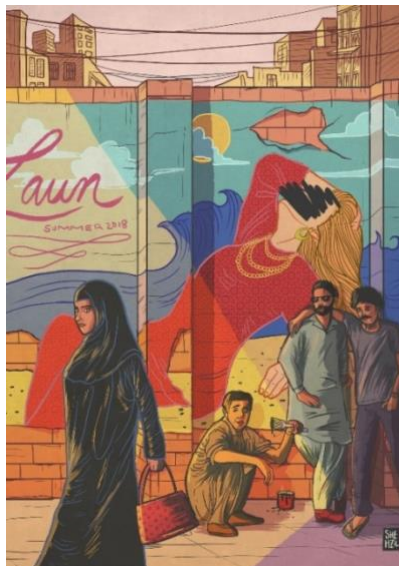


Fig. 1: Shehzil Malik, *The Gaze*, 2018, digital illustration. Courtesy of Shehzil Malik

To understand the messages and power of feminist art in Pakistan we will look at a few examples. Shehzil Malik’s illustrations tell stories of the everyday experiences of women in the country with a particular attention to the common incidents occurring to women when they are in public spaces, from cases of harassment to the raping and killing of women and children.²⁴ One recurring topic is that of the unprovoked attention and various forms of harassment women are subject to when in the streets, which are not related to the ways women are dressed. In one illustration, for example, a woman wearing a black chador attracts the stares of some men standing by the side of the road. She is passing by a wall where the photograph of a woman posing in what seems an attention-seeking manner has been defaced, supposedly by someone who has deemed it as inducing men to sinful thoughts. Thus, the illustrator shifts the accusation of sexualising the female body from the woman to the men, while

²² Sara Borrillo and Mounira Soliman, eds., *Artivism, Culture and Knowledge Production for Egalitarian Citizenship in the Middle East and North Africa post 2011, Special Dossier of Studi Magrebini/North African Studies*, 18. 2 (2020); Frances S. Hasso and Zakia Salime, eds., *Freedom Without Permission: Bodies and Space in the Arab Revolutions*. (USA: Duke University, 2016).

²³ Frances S. Hasso and Zakia Salime, *Freedom*, 4.

²⁴ See Shehzil Malik’s official website, www.shehzil.com.

also exposing the hypocrisy of those men who condemn women who behave in ‘improper’ ways and yet, at the same time, harass women regardless of whether they are dressed in modest ways or not. Among the provocative images Malik has created to draw attention to the state of women in Pakistan is one used to denounce domestic violence representing a woman whose neck is strangled by the hands of a man and whose head is trapped by a house-shaped cage. In another illustration, a *matryoshka* is used to represent the characteristics of the girl suitable for marriage according to the societal stereotypes. The doll is defined as the ‘ultimate woman’ being sponsored in what appears to be an advertisement which reads ‘She cooks. She cleans. MBBS certified. 100% family friendly’ and, to highlight how women are treated like objects in the hands of men when they are choosing a wife or proposing a daughter as a potential wife, ‘Trolley included. Order now!’ In Malik’s representations, bodies are frequently presented as vulnerable, as objectified and suffering at the hands of men. However, the artist is also asking women to react to this state of affairs by proposing images of women protesting and shouting slogans or riding a bike, an act frequently condemned as improper, as an invitation to create space for women’s potentialities.



Fig. 2: Hiba Schahbaz, *Rose Garden*, 2021, watercolour, gouache and tea on paper. Courtesy of Hiba Schahbaz

Hiba Schahbaz paints self-portraits where her naked body is immersed in dream-like and idyllic scenes.²⁵ As she says in her artist statement, Schahbaz uses her training in miniature art as the starting point of her painting technique. She thus appropriates a traditional form of art which has been practised by men for centuries along with its related imagery to develop her pictorial world whose dominant element is a female body. The body is immersed in what appears to be a peaceful realm inspired by the atmosphere of miniature painting. Her subjects occupy most of the space of the painting²⁶ and are frequently surrounded by flowers and plants, but at times are depicted against neutral backgrounds or in environments that reflect realistic contexts but simultaneously appear to be out of a dream. The female protagonist of the painting usually appears to be both confident and relaxed as she exposes her body in ways that seem to emphasise the spontaneity and naturalness of the situation. While the paintings appear as a celebration of the female body, the serenity that is conveyed by the female figure might be explained by the fact that she is caught in private situations. In such

²⁵ See Hiba Schahbaz’s official website, www.hibaschahbaz.com.

²⁶ Bedatri D. Choudhury, “The Boldly Feminine Gaze of Hiba Schahbaz”, *Hyperallergic* (2020), hyperallergic.com.

situations the absence of men may explain why she can enjoy a moment of freedom to relax and present herself in a nakedness that reminds one of a natural or primordial state, before the definition of gendered roles and codes of conduct. However, this appears to be not just a reminder that gender normativity is a product of patriarchal society but also as an unsettling experience since the artist seems to highlight how far reality is from the dreamy world of the paintings where women cannot enjoy the same freedoms as the female subjects.



Fig. 3: Misha Japanwala. This is a portion of a picture that the artist has shared freely on her Instagram account ([instagram.com/mishajapanwala/](https://www.instagram.com/mishajapanwala/)).

Unfortunately, our attempts to contact the artist were unsuccessful at the time of publication.

Wearable nude body castings represent the most significant part of Misha Japanwala’s artistic production.²⁷ Plates moulded over the breasts or other parts of the female body appear as both a symbol of its frailty and as an armour, inviting the viewer to consider how fragile a woman’s body is when it moves within social spaces. While her works seem to invite the viewer to ponder issues like harassment in public places, domestic violence and honour killings,²⁸ they also appear to suggest that Pakistani women should try to make their bodies into armour to survive the environment they live in. By showing parts of real bodies through their castings, Japanwala dares to smash the concept of propriety that wants women’s bodies to be covered without actually exposing a naked body. Doing so could more easily lead to accusations of vulgarity. The artist herself and her models appear dressed in an armour modelled on their own bodies, this however, is enough to cause scandal and raise anger among Pakistanis. Japanwala’s ideal public is Pakistanis, who mostly see her work through her social media pages, but she also speaks to a Western audience, aware of the stereotypes commonly associated with South Asian female bodies, in order to deconstruct the image of the fully covered South Asian woman. As the artist states, this collection of castings, titled ‘Azaadi’ (‘Freedom’), is meant to represent “the reclamation of our bodies in art and how we want to depict them and what we

²⁷ See Misha Japanwala’s official website, www.mishajapanwala.com.

²⁸ “Misha Japanwala”, *Forbes* (2021), www.forbes.com.

want to say about them”.²⁹ Thus, the artist seems to want to create a discourse primarily addressed to women, South Asian women in particular, inviting them to focus on the representations of female bodies since art offers a space where women can reclaim their bodies, free from male dictates.

The ‘improper’ female body that marchers and artists in various ways expose to the public gaze, and which they show in its vulnerability and strength, ceases to be a man’s property and becomes a site of the construction of a feminist narrative. The fact that this appears to some as a threat to national identity seems to reveal the limits of the nationalist and the Islamist narrative.

²⁹ Aamina Khan, “Designer Misha Japanwala Is Never Fully Dressed without a Breastplate”, *Vogue* (2021), www.vogue.com.