



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Cultural Discourse on the Portrayal of Courtesans in Iqbal Hussain's Realist Art: Conventions and Implications**

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**ABSTRACT**

Iqbal Hussain is considered as one of the most renowned painters of Pakistan. He is known for his stark realism in portraying the courtesans of the Red Light district of Lahore. This paper focuses on various artistic conventions that Iqbal Hussain used to express a controversial subject matter. These conventions include the use of gaze, posture, symbol and captured moment. It is argued that since he represented a social reality that was hidden from ordinary observer, the otherwise commonly used conventions implicate psychological, moral and metaphysical domains of art interpretation. These domains are engaged as the viewer is focused, questioned and is compelled to re-evaluate the prevailing cultural discourse.

**Introduction**

The engagement of an artist to a certain subject matter for a long stretch of time is not unusual but rare. It speaks of what has consistently appealed to the sensitivities of the artist, or what, in his opinion, remained significant to be expressed before the world. In some cases, the engagement becomes so profound that a certain subject matter becomes an essential aspect of an artist's recognition. Iqbal Hussain, a renowned Pakistani painter, is invariably known through his depiction of the women from the Red Light area of Lahore. The controversial nature of the subject matter made him into a controversial painter in times of political censorship. Even though, the period of political oppression ended three decades ago, the social and cultural connotations of both his work and his identity as an artist echo the controversy till date.

The liberal factions of Pakistani society, the international and local artist communities, recognize his contribution to art as exemplary. He is seen as an artist, who portrayed the life of the down-trodden and an excluded community of women in their non-glamorous actual reality. In this respect, he should be considered a social realist, or a social commentator, who brought to attention, aspects of life that never became a part of open discussion or comfortable political and cultural discourse. He does not portray a courtesan as objects of sexual desire but as ordinary human beings struggling with their life and identity on many fronts. If we as society become oblivious of the profession of prostitution, what we look at in his paintings are simple and ordinary women. However, given the controversial existence of courtesans on moral and ethical grounds and in the cultural narrative that we are so familiar with, the same depiction assumes many dimensions.

The realistic depiction of courtesans as ordinary women is richer in terms of connotation as compared to a glamorous one. It provides more room to reflect upon and raises many questions that need to be rigorously explored and ultimately answered. A non-sensual representation of an object of desire appeals to various parameters of rational thinking. A bulky woman, in an ordinary dress and a non-inviting posture with a flat face expression and an inexplicable gaze targeting the viewer is a visual setting that is a product of the genius of the artist, who simultaneously questions the morality of the society and the identity of women. On closer observation, many of such works give rise to a variety of implications. The social implications are most obvious but perhaps the metaphysical and psychological unfolding of interpretations are more profound. This becomes clearer, if we realize the fact that Iqbal Hussain uses certain artistic conventions such as postures, symbols, and a setting or a captured moment to express his viewpoint. This paper examines a few examples from Iqbal Hussain's portrayal of courtesans in order to elucidate their metaphysical, moral and psychological implications. The paper is divided into two parts. The first part analyzes a few paintings from Iqbal Hussain with reference to a salient feature or artistic convention that he uses. The second part discusses the features in terms of metaphysical, moral and psychological implications.

### **Part I: The Artistic Conventions**

There are quite a few standardized ways of analyzing an art work such as formal and contextual analyses. One such way is to focus upon certain conventions that an artist uses to express his or her viewpoint. For instance, chiaroscuro is a technique that artists use to draw attention to a central theme or an aspect of a composition. Similarly, the use of symbols is another convention that we may notice in certain art works. These conventions vary with respect to an art movement or particular style of an artist. In case of Iqbal Hussain, there are certain conventions that can be noticed in his portrayal of courtesans. The most obvious are the use of gaze, symbol, setting, posture, and irony.

## The Gaze

The gaze is one of the features that has been used in the genre of portrait painting. It is a convention that gives rise to a possibility of a multilayered interpretation due to the fact that it establishes a unique relationship between the subject of the painting and the viewer. The viewer who is looking at the subject in painting, at the same time, also becomes a subject being viewed by the subject in painting. This situation gives rise to a moment of self-reflection on one hand and on the other the viewer is compelled to infer the inner state or psychological realm of the subject. This fact is endorsed by scientific studies on the mental response of viewers while looking at a painting with direct or averted gaze (Kesner et al, 2018).

Iqbal Hussain uses both direct and averted gaze in his portrayal of courtesans. For instance, in the following painting (figure 1), a young courtesan is shown in half profile. Her gaze is not direct but slightly averted. At the same time, the expression of the eyes is depicting sadness. The slightly averted gaze does not furnish an eye contact with the viewer. It seems as if the young woman is either in a moment of intense observation or self-reflection. Her body posture in contrast to her gaze is relaxed, and therefore, the eye of the viewer immediately notices the compelling gaze.



Figure 1. Iqbal Hussain, Oil on canvas

The direct gaze can be observed in the following painting (figure 2). A woman is sitting on the floor in a casual posture and is painted in a way as if she is

viewed by a man standing in front of her. The eye contact is established with the viewer and nothing seems to be emphasized on the canvas except from the gaze. The face expression does not reveal much, but it seems as if there is a question lurking in the mind of the subject. The viewer is likely to be compelled to think why she is looking at, what interests her or what she is up to.



Figure 2. Iqbal Hussain, Oil on canvas

In another painting, again we observe a direct gaze from a middle aged, bulky woman. She is sitting on a chair holding two kids, probably twins, on her lap. Unlike the previous examples, which involve a rather sensual outlook, this painting does not offer anything glamorous. The gaze is direct with a flat face. There is neither a question nor an answer, the viewer is not intimidated. The fact that it is the gaze of a middle aged prostitute gives rise to a horde of interpretations. It can be thought that the gaze is reflective of the state of mind realizing aging. In the world of prostitutes, aging is a predicament.



Figure 3. Iqbal Hussain, Oil on canvas

In another painting (figure 4), there are two girls sitting on a bed. The gaze is direct and piercing establishing a full eye contact with the viewer. The face expression and gaze of the girl in the full profile are painted in a way that there seems to be a lack of life; a kind of emptiness associated permanently, however, the girl sitting behind has a gaze with shades of fear. It seems that one girl is expecting something while the other is just observing, invariably, both seem to be targets of oppression and of crisis-ridden identity. The viewer is caught between the two gazes.





Figure 4. Iqbal Hussain, Oil on canvas

### **The Posture**

Since Iqbal Hussain painted courtesans in their everyday life, he has also used posture as a noticeable convention to express the ordinary and the intense situations of their lives. Body posture is an important feature of non-verbal communication and can indicate self-confidence, aggressiveness, fear, guilt, or anxiety (Sheth, 2017). and Iqbal Hussain seems to be abundantly aware of the fact. Consider the following example (figure 5), where a casual moment is captured. Two middle aged women are shown from an ordinary instance of everyday life. There is nothing glamorous in the impressionistic rendition of a realistic situation. The ordinary is expressed through body postures. One woman is lying sideways while the other is sitting in a relaxed casual posture. Given the glamorous world of courtesans, these postures are highly unlikely and therefore provide a contrast. The viewer can easily see that behind the pretentious world of courtesans they are ordinary women.



Figure 5. Iqbal Hussain, Oil on canvas

In another painting (figure 6), the posture is suggestive of sensuality. A young woman is seated holding her arms behind her head with a worried face. With her posture in focus, it seems as if she has lost an opportunity.



Figure 6. Iqbal Hussain, Oil on canvas

A rather intense posture is clearly observable in the following painting (figure 7). A young girl with her quenched hands against her face is sitting on ground. It is obvious that she is in pain and is crying. The posture depicts grief and again there is nothing visible except the girl sitting in a dark place.



Figure 7. Iqbal Hussain, Oil on canvas

The posture of the body is all the more suggest able in the following painting (figure 8), where two girls are shown. One girl in the foreground is standing while holding a window and leaning against a wall, while the other is sitting in the background. Both postures are associated with moments of deep thinking in almost all cultures. However, there is an observable hopelessness depicted through the face expressions. Why a courtesan would indulge in deep thinking? is a question that immediately arises in the mind of the viewer. Is it about the future or is it about a painful past remains subject to interpretation.





Figure 8. Iqbal Hussain, Oil on canvas

### The Symbol

The use of symbols in literature and arts has been a potent device of communication. The principal reason is that a symbol is not a representation by imitation but association. As Ross Murfin points out that symbol is 'something that, although it is of interest in its own right, stands for or suggests something larger and more complex - often an idea or a range of interrelated ideas, attitudes, and practices' (Murfin and Ray, 2009). Iqbal Hussain has used symbols in some of his works to suggest a deeper meaning. In the following painting (figure 9), a courtesan is standing with stranded arms held through rope by two other women. The stranded woman has her eyes closed in a leaning posture. In the distant background, we observe the symbol of Cross, which opens up a way for multiple interpretations in increasing order of complexity. The stranded human being and the cross symbolize the crucifixion of Jesus, which suggests that probably the artist is implying that a prostitute is not the sinner as people label her. The Cross can be symbol for warding off evil, which may refer to the women sitting behind the main subject of the painting as their body postures and face expressions suggest. The presence of Cross immediately compels the viewer to think about the notions of sin and purity and also the role of the masses against the sinner. The presence of the

artist himself shown in the distant background along with his canvas is also symbolic of the fact that the artist, too, belong to the same world he is portraying.



Figure 9. Iqbal Hussain, Oil on canvas

In another painting, a middle aged courtesan is sitting with an averted gaze suggestive of nostalgia (figure 10). In the foreground, a bunch of roses is the center of attention. Rose itself is considered to be a symbol of romance and in the South Asian, it is also associated to death for its usage on graves. The placement of roses in front of a courtesan can be reference to a lost love or a realization of false love offered by a client. Iqbal Hussain deliberately uses this symbol in order to draw attention towards an aspect of courtesan's life that remains eternally suspended. Similarly, in the following painting (figure 11), there is a deliberate use of the glass of water. It is positioned beside the courtesan suggests a deeper meaning. It probably refers to the sexual thirst of men, who use courtesans as objects of desire.



Figure 10. Iqbal Hussain, Oil on canvas



Figure 11. Iqbal Hussain, Oil on canvas



### **The Captured Moment**

One of the most powerful artistic conventions that Iqbal Hussain skillfully deploys is the setting or the scene, wherein, an act is taking place. For instance, the following painting (figure 12) features a scene, where a girl child is beginning her dance class in the presence of a middle aged courtesan who is probably her mother. This setting in itself is subject to several interpretations. It's a beginning of life that we all know; it is a moment of entering into a profession which is a stigma in our society. The captured moment is significant for inviting a reflection on individual and social scales.



Figure 12. Iqbal Hussain, Oil on canvas

In another painting (figure 13), we are presented with a middle aged courtesan sitting on a sofa with her hand covering her face in a moment of despair. A young boy sitting on the floor and looking at the courtesan in a body posture that clearly shows him asking for something. The courtesan who seems to be his mother seems to be unable to fulfil the demand. The moment refers to multiple situations in the poor economic conditions of a courtesan's household. The central theme of the painting is the act, or the event that is communicated through a setting of characters in different suggestive body postures.



Figure 13. Iqbal Hussain, Oil on canvas

The courtesan is an object of desire in the male dominant society and this is clearly portrayed in the following painting (figure 14). It is again through a positioning of characters and elements that we look at a captured moment. A middle aged courtesan is sitting in front of a mirror in which a man can be seen in the act of putting on his clothes. The desire is fulfilled and the courtesan seems lost while looking at herself through the mirror.



Figure 14. Iqbal Hussain, Oil on canvas

## Part II: Implications

The artistic conventions discussed above are not something peculiar to Iqbal Hussain. The gaze, posture, symbol and captured moment are conventions



that are used by artist across the art world. What is peculiar to Iqbal Hussain is the fact that he chose a subject matter, i.e. the courtesan, in a society where there is no tolerance for such profession or individual. The gaze of a courtesan is different from a woman who is not labeled as a courtesan. Similarly, the body postures, when seen in the context of a realistic depiction of courtesan's life, suggest new meanings. The symbolism used becomes loaded with meaning in the context in which it is used and lastly the captured moment opens up a window into the harsh realities of a courtesan's life. All these conventions, multiplied with peculiar subject matter, have implications in multiple domains of interpretation. Amongst these domain, only three are focused in the following discussion, i.e. metaphysical, moral and psychological.

The directed gaze of a courtesan at the viewer is most useful convention for evoking a psychological response. It compels the viewer to draw inferences about psychological domain of self. It encourages questions about the emotional and cognitive aspects of lived experience and goes on to involve the criteria of right and wrong, good and bad, sin and piety, etc. This internal evaluation inevitably involves questioning moral and ethical orientation of the viewer. It becomes an act of self-reflection, self-awareness and self-consciousness and hence contributes towards an afresh look or a rethinking of the held beliefs and positions. A further advance takes the viewer into metaphysical domain, where one questions the reality of life and rethinks about purpose. The direct gaze is a powerful means of communication by the very fact that it amounts to an act of self-realization. Latest research suggests that 'the perception of direct gaze—that is, of another individual's gaze directed at the observer—is known to influence a wide range of cognitive processes and behaviors...[i.e.] the enhancement of self-awareness, memory effects, the activation of pro-social behavior, and positive appraisals of others' (Conty et.al, 2016). The activation of pro-social behavior and positive appraisals for others is strongly connected to our ethics and morality (Staub, 2013). The direct gaze of a courtesan means that the viewer is reflecting upon himself with reference to his ideas about the courtesan. Even the averted gaze has psychological and metaphysical implications. Averted gaze is closely linked to behaviors pertaining to avoidance (Gelfand et al, 2012). In the case of a courtesan's averted gaze, it seems that it is the bitter experience of life that is being avoided. The averted gaze represents her own psychological domain posing metaphysical questions about the purpose of life or existence.

There is more than a hundred years of scholarly study that links body postures to emotions. It is maintained that body postures encode emotions and by looking at body postures, a viewer decodes emotions (Calvo et al., 2015). The casual and intense postures are a powerful convention used by Iqbal Hussain in communicating the inner struggles of a courtesan's life. It is also a means to achieve realism in his paintings. The casual body postures in the ordinary everyday life of the courtesans can be an eye opener for many viewers who are just familiar with the pretentious and glamorous appearance of a courtesan's life. The postures help in understanding courtesans as ordinary human beings.

Commenting on Iqbal Hussain's work, Noor Ahmad notes that 'the obvious lack of objectification that would normally be present in the portrayal of a similar theme creates a very honest dialogue between an artist and a subject, in turn eliminating the usual distance between the viewer and the subject, creating a moment of emphatic understanding' ("Exhibition: Ways of Seeing Red", 2107).

In fact, Iqbal Hussain creates a meaningful and powerful contrast. Again, the viewer is compelled to evaluate the narratives and discourses that culturally inform his morality. It is likely that a viewer reflects upon his or her approach on life. It is through a familiarization with the opposite that one evaluates what is familiar. The casual posture of a woman is a familiar but of a courtesan is not.

The use of symbols is deeply embedded in the subjectivity of South Asia. Due to a long history of religion and mysticism, we respond to symbols in a profound way. Iqbal Hussain has used symbols in such visual contexts that they assumed new meanings. Whether it is the Cross, the mirror, the rose or a glass of water, associated with courtesan's life, they offer rich interpretations. The association of the Cross as discussed above transports the entire scenario of a courtesan's life to moral and metaphysical domains. We are posed with questions of identity and righteousness in a persuasive way. Iqbal Hussain himself said in an interview, 'Sex workers are more holy because they are more human' (Elliot, 2009). The choice of symbols is remarkable on Iqbal Hussain's part. He seems to be familiar with the extent of meaning they offer and he therefore engages the viewer as a whole into a persistent mode of self-reflection.

The internal dynamic of courtesan's life is all the more profound in captured moments. The subject matter of a painting that demonstrates an act or event has been the hallmark of Baroque painting in the past. The theatricality associated with a captured moment of action revolutionized communication through painting. Iqbal Hussain uses this convention to communicate a slice of experience. The captured moment tells a story, it becomes a narrative and therefore becomes remarkably suggestive. Iqbal Hussain uses the convention to lift the veil from the harsh realities of a courtesan's life. He provides an insider's view and builds a visual counter-narrative to the outsider's view. This realization has long reaching implications on social parameters of morality of a society that considers courtesans as lesser human beings. He himself said:

What I have painted is something I have lived. In that sense, I am both the object and the subject of my work. Over the years, I have observed the women of my community suffer in silence. My most cherished works are usually those in which I could capture moments of longing or inner pain: a sense of desperation, loss and deprivation, the fear of aging, the fear of children born into a world lost of all humanity (Hussain, 2016)."

## Conclusion

The courtesans in Pakistan are given a derogatory status. The cultural discourse embedded in the minds of a majority of people does not allow courtesans to be considered as equal human beings. This was not always the case in the Subcontinent, the courtesans of Lucknow in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were sophisticated and refined in manners and contributed to the high culture of the time (Nicholson, 1985). The nobility would send its younger lot to courtesans for their grooming in terms of manners and antiques. It is in the twentieth century, when due to many political and cultural factors, a discourse evolved that had a strong disdain for courtesans.

Iqbal Hussain who was born into the excluded community of courtesans portrayed their lives as he observed. However, the very act of making the courtesans of Red Light district of Lahore was controversial. It was like putting a giant mirror in front of the whole society. Like the great writer Saadat Hassan Manto, Iqbal Hussain lifted the veil and revealed the human status of the courtesans. His realism made his work into a counter narrative of the prevailing cultural discourse and ideas of morality. Through his work, a viewer is challenged to reconfigure what he holds as right and wrong, beautiful and ugly and piety and sin. The article has highlighted previously unaddressed artistic conventions that Iqbal Hussain used and which assumed a new impact due to his realism and subject matter. To what extent our metaphysical approaches, moral parameters and psychological positions hold true in the light of realist portrayal of courtesans by Iqbal Hussain, is a question worth exploring.

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