



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Expression of Feminist and Post-Feminist Sensibility in Pakistani Paintings**

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**ABSTRACT**

From the second half of twentieth century, feminism gained momentum as an ideology and movement. As an ideology, it evolved and incorporated new perspectives and as movement it began influencing all walks of life. The impact of feminist thought and sensibility can be seen in the art works produced by both male and female artists of the world. The present study focuses on how the feminist and post-feminist sensibility can be seen in the art works of female artists from Pakistan, especially with subject matter focusing on female identity. The study shows a transition in the Pakistani female mindset that coincides with the changes in feminist ideology in the world. The findings of the study reveal that the depiction of woman in Pakistani painting transformed from a position of weakness to a position of strength.

**Introduction**

Feminism, in most general terms, can be defined as a perspective and movement advocating the equal rights of women in patriarchal societies. However, even this generalized definition remains contested due to the complexity involved. The social, economic, cultural and educational specifics of societies determine how individuals interpret feminism. Still, broadly, it has been an awakening that is in the process of materialization since the beginning of twentieth century. By and large, the gender discrimination in patriarchal societies has made feminism a corrective ideology in both individual and collective expressions.

Feminism as an ideology arose in the West and evolved in terms of eras or waves. The first wave of feminism was essentially a legal struggle in the context of claiming the right to vote. Another equally sought area was equal rights in the work environment. The movement became a generalized struggle for equal rights

by implication. The second wave started in 1960s, and the struggle shifted from legal equality to social equality (Whelehan, 1995). The poor status of life due to gender discrimination became a focus of the collective followed by theorization on causes and remedies. The movement had two main strands; women are an oppressed social group and the need for autonomy. The movement gathered momentum with its cross-cultural appeal. The 1990s saw the rise of third wave, which was more focused on the applications of ideology to change lives of women particularly in third world countries due to unique socio cultural setups (Gillis et al,2007). It differed from second wave in a foundational way. Instead of looking at women of the world as a single group, it recognized cultural differences and opined that each woman has to apply feminist thought according to her own cultural specifics. In other words, feminism became individualized in the third wave.

The waves of feminism and their corresponding schools of thought can be seen in the way feminist artists depicted women in their art work. In Pakistan, the most important period of feminist awareness is the 1980s, when Martial Law was imposed with oppressive censorship policies. The Women artists of Pakistan responded to it by becoming a collective voice under a Manifesto. Both the second wave and third wave feminist expressions can be seen in Pakistani artworks since 1980s. This study analyzes a few examples in this regard to trace how such works express feminist and post-feminist sensibility. Although feminist themes can be observed in the works of both male and female artists of Pakistan, the present study essentially focuses on the work of female artists from Pakistan in order to see how the female herself defended the rights of her gender through visual expression.

### **The Feminist Sensibility**

The feminist writings ranging from philosophical expositions to cultural observations and critiques can be seen as contributions to the enrichment of feminist ideology. A closer view of these writings helps in outlining a few salient features of a developing feminist sensibility as well. Probably, the most pressing concern for the feminists has been equality. **Equality**, in the context of feminism, means equality of women in all walks of life. Equality, when seen in the context of patriarchal society, does not remain a simple demand. It amounts to a revolution since the historical conditioning that nurtures male dominant societies has been something taken for granted since the beginning of civilization. In this respect, equality also means freedom from any kind of oppression, be it political, economic, or cultural. The feminist believes that women have all the fundamental rights of freedom and they must be treated on equal footing.

The demand of equality in a male dominant society logically requires solidarity amongst woman and propagation of the idea and ideals. This amounts to politicization of ideology, which, in other words, means an operative and influential expression of the demand. The objective of solidarity stems from the realization that regardless of cultural specifics of human societies, gender

discrimination and oppression have been practiced throughout history and therefore women from all cultures share the need. Sara Ahmed, a well-known psychologist and feminist writer states that solidarity “involves commitment, and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common ground” (Ahmed,2014). Solidarity is considered an essential feature of feminist sensibility due to the fact that it provides the emotional strength necessary for the feminist struggle. The political becomes inseparable from the personal since the requirement for gender equality in the personal domain requires a collective shift on the social scale.

Another feature of feminist sensibility is **intersectionality**. The concept of intersectionality in feminist theory arose in response to double discrimination of black women ( Crenshaw,1989). They have been discriminated on both racial and gender grounds. The idea featured in third-wave feminism and informed the feminist critiques in a way that racial discrimination and gender discriminations should be dealt as different but related phenomena. In other cultures, racial discrimination may not be the highlight but an equally important caste discrimination is. Intersectionality therefore takes into account various forms of discrimination such as age, ability, sexuality and class that couple with gender discrimination in societies.

Apart from above, **anger and hope**, as psychological requisites also feature in feminist sensibility ( Lawrence ,1987). The anger is justified by considering the history of oppression and discrimination in patriarchal societies and hope emerges with the possibility of a social change in accordance to feminist ideals. The expressions of anger and hope vary in intensity in individual women depending upon individual life histories and opportunities of change. However, there exists a corollary on the collective scale as well. This sensibility can be observed in Pakistani paintings not as a gradual awareness but as a sudden shift.

In the newly emerged Pakistan, portraying woman in painting was nothing new albeit rare. Amongst the first generation of Pakistani painters, Abdul Rehman Chughtai did portray woman as an ideal of beauty, the essential beloved of the poets in the eastern and middle eastern contexts. His woman was an idealized depiction of a woman but at the same time it was a convention used in the broader context of legitimizing a national identity rooted in Persian tradition instead of an Indian one. The woman in Chughtai’s paintings is hence a visual device of asserting identity. Ustad Allah Bux also portrayed woman as a symbol of regional identity often inspired by epic love stories of the region. Shakir Ali, while introducing modern art in the country, produced a few paintings in which an abstracted female form was symbolically used. There were a few more examples but none can be seen as a depiction of woman arising out of the real-time social or political reality. The situation radically altered in the late 1970s.

The Martial Law imposed by General Zia-ul Haq in 1977 marks the beginning of an era that revolutionized artistic expression in Pakistan. The diversity of themes and intensity of expression we witness in the 1980s was not a product of state patronage, but a revolt against oppressive policies of the dictatorship. Advocating a conservative interpretation of Islam, a strict censorship policy was imposed to the extent that artists like Ijaz-ul Hassan were imprisoned due to their anti-government narratives. The oppressive policies furthered gender discrimination in Pakistan. The women artists responded in a collective voice, 15 of them signed a manifesto which clearly outlined their position as social entity that cannot be silenced with the use of power. The artists who signed the manifesto included Zubaida Javed, Abbasi Abidi, Salima Hashmi, Lala Rukh, Talat Ahmed, Shehrzade Alam, Rabia Zuberi, Jalees Nagi, Birjees Iqbal, Riffat Alvi, Nahid Raza, Mehr Afroz, Qudsia Nisar, Mamoonah Bashir, Veeda Ahmed. Drafted in 1983, the manifesto declared by women artists stated:

We the women artists of Pakistan, having noted with concern the decline in status and condition of the life of Pakistan women, and having noted the effects of the anti-reason, anti-arts environment on the quality of life in our homeland, and having noted the significant contribution which the pioneering women artists have made to the cause of arts and art education in Pakistan and believing as we do in the basic rights of all men, women and children to a life free from want and enriched by the joys of fruitful labor and cultural self-realization and our commitments as Practitioners and teachers of the arts to the noblest ideals of a free, rational and civilized existence, affirm the following principles to guide us in our struggle for the cultural development of our people to serve as the manifesto of the women artists of Pakistan ( Hashmi 2002).

The art works produced in this period can be clearly seen as expressions of second wave feminist sensibility due to the collective stance. There seems a search for the right of equality in implicit and explicit visual expressions and there are paintings that depict anger and hope. The paintings that expressed such themes became prevalent in the mid-1980s and continued in the 1990s, even though the dictatorial regime ended in 1988. This clearly shows that the movement gained momentum of its own particularly due to the fact that the contradictions sharpened beyond repair by the end of Martial Law (Hashmi, 2002).

Salima Hashmi, who was probably the most active member of the movement of women artists used explicit imagery and symbolism to communicate the feminist disposition. She was born to the revolutionary poet, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and had learnt the value of freedom from home. Like the poetry of Faiz, Salima Hashmi's paintings expressed the sensitive and politically active mind. In both her writings and paintings spearheaded the movement of women artists. She was a staunch critic of patriarchy and was a believer in gender equality. The social injustice and gender discrimination reached new heights under the dictatorship and Salima Hashmi in line with other women artists of the time took the charge. In one of her paintings, she shows a woman with her mouth sealed symbolizing that her right to speak for herself has been taken from her. The three

similar self-portraits in the foreground add emphasis to the same theme. The rusty backdrop of painting with patches of red color depicts violence and shows the extent of gender discrimination under the Martial Law and its policies.



Figure 1. Salima Hashmi, *Freedom*, Oil on canvas, 1993.



Figure 2. Salima Hashmi, *Sisters of the Third World*, Oil on canvas, 1980s.

In another painting titled 'Sisters of the Third World' she has shown three women in hijab without faces. On the left side of the painting women are shown in

pain and agony. The painting carries a dual message. On one hand it cultivates a feeling of unity among women but on the other it is a satire on the oppressive policies of the government confining women to their homes under the banner of 'Chadar and Chardiwari'.

The same theme of Chadar and Chardiwari was explored by another painter Laila Shehzada. In the following painting, she portrays a woman in swirling drapery. The depiction is surreal and mythical instead of realistic, and the use of light radiating from within the drapery contributes to the idea that there lies a tremendous potential in women, there is a spiritual strength that should be considered. Laila depicts a woman from a position of strength rather than weakness and this amounts to a change in perspective from the derogatory social to a profound spiritual. However, it was a response to the political move encoded as the Haddood Ordinance, which promoted the view that a woman should be restricted to household.

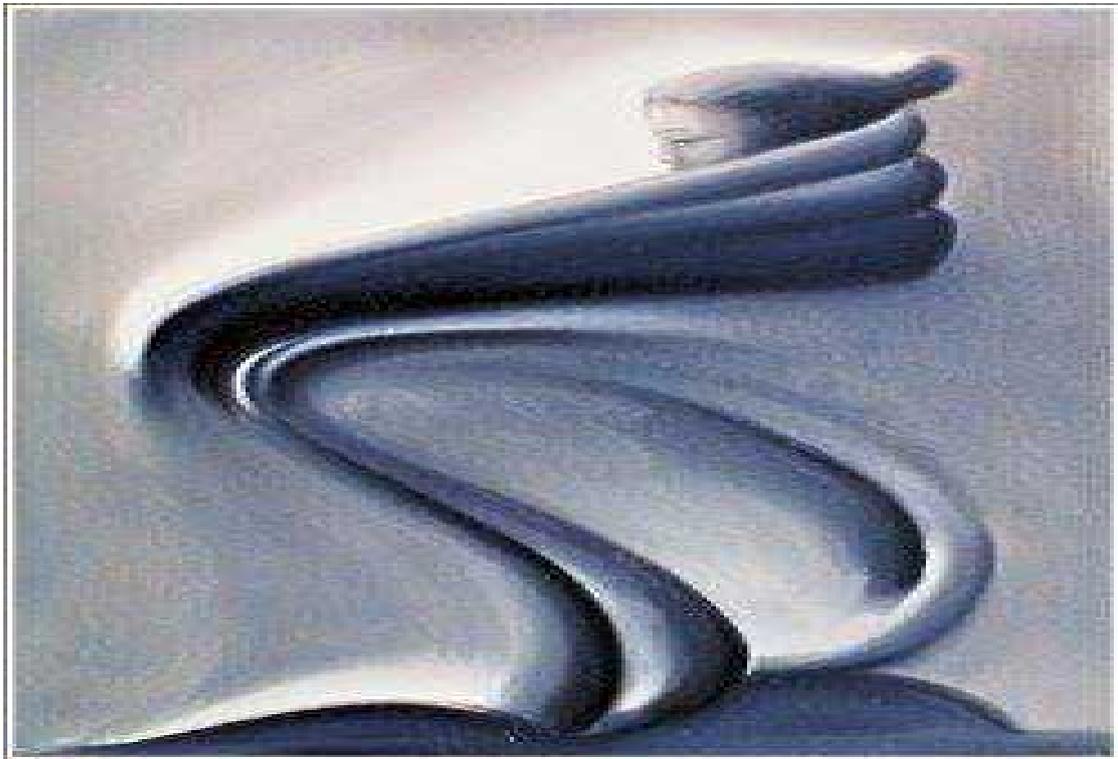


Figure 3. Laila Shehzada, Chadar aur Chardiwari, Oil on canvas, 1980s.

Another important woman artist who expressed a feminist voice through her paintings during the hard times was Lubna Agha. She came from a family where women were given every right to express themselves. Her grandmother was prolific writer and an advocate of women rights. The element of anger that is one of the features of feminist sensibility can be clearly observed in her paintings produced during the Martial Law. In the following painting the misery of women is clear from their face expressions. They are shown afraid, tangled and cornered. The man on the other hand is shown walking upright. The use of red color

symbolizes violence committed against women. The painting does not depict a single woman but woman as a social group cornered by the gender divide. The same face expression on the faces of different women suggests a social treatment in which all women are thought to be alike regardless of individual abilities.



Figure 4. Lubna Agha, Night and Day, Acrylic on canvas, 1994.

Nahid Raza, another feminist painter of the same era, focused more on the collective experience of women. The Hidden Faces produced during the Martial Law brings to front the fact that the woman of the society has been pushed to an existence that there is no individual identity of a woman. Women are being treated as objects and not as human beings. They are shown as if their existence is gradually withering away and their presence does not matter anymore. In her painting 'shared miseries' she creates a powerful imagery through body postures of two women shown through the use of intense colour and textured surface. The blazing sun on the top of the painting and the women walking under it while covering themselves as if their bodies are being burnt symbolizes the hardships due to gender discrimination and domestic violence.



Figure 5. Nahid Reza, Shared Miseries, Acrylic on wood, 1996

Another artist, Mehr Afroze, who signed the manifesto, communicated her viewpoint through powerful symbolism. Her Mask Series produced during the dictatorship commented on the deceit of people in power. In her puppet series, she communicates the idea that how patriarchy has controlled women. In one of her paintings, she has shown a woman as a wooden puppet. The face expression tells the story of helplessness that a woman was likely to face in a patriarchal society oblivious of fundamental human rights. The symbolism became a preferred device of communication by female artists to avoid persecution. Figurative art was banned and anti-government stances were not tolerated.

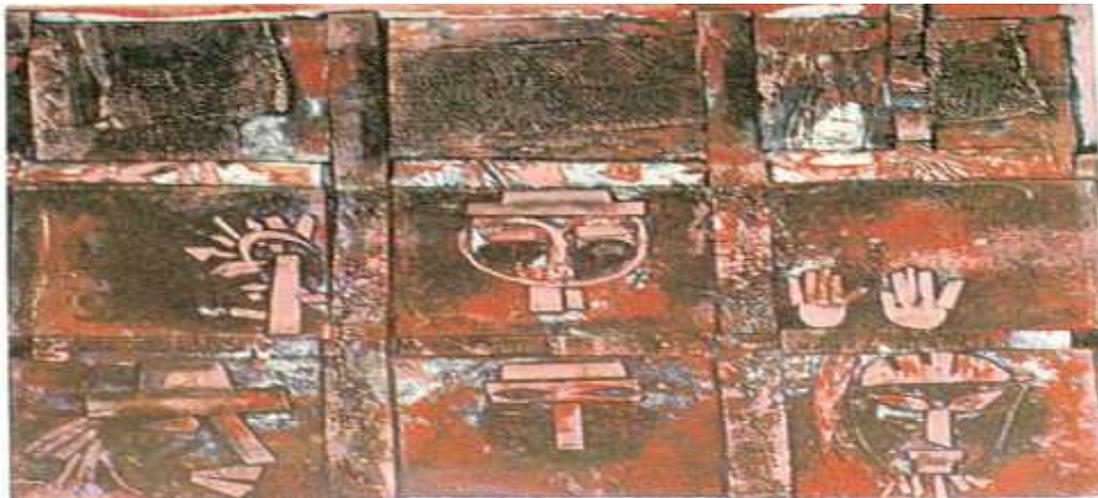


Figure 6. MehrAfroze, Mask Series, Oil on board, 1988.



Figure 7. MehrAfroze, Puppet Series, Oil on canvas, 1990s.

Rabia Zuberi's "Quest for Peace" can also be seen as a powerful visual argument, where a flat faced distorted woman is holding up a pigeon in her hand. The depiction of woman is by no means glamorous, it presents a woman who is limited to the bare necessities of life and from a position approaching non-existence in terms of individuality and womanhood, still there is a message of peace. The painting is striking since it is a blended expression of anger and hope in line with feminist sensibility.



Figure 8. Rabia Zuberi, *Quest for Peace*, Oil on canvas, 1980s.

Similarly, in “*Blind Justice*”, she makes a powerful comment on the dictatorial regime. Instead of the popular meaning of ‘blind justice’ which implies that justice does not discriminate, it shows the insensitivity of justice, when crimes are being committed against women, the oppressive policies are silencing voices, the people in higher ranks are unmoved. Rabia Zuberi uses ‘irony’ as a tool to communicate the essential idea.



Figure 9. Rabia Zuberi, *Blind Justice*, Oil on canvas, 1980s.

The second-wave feminist paintings can be seen as a product of socio-political circumstance of the 1980s continuing to 1990s. The above paintings, regardless of the fact that the artists producing them were consciously advocating feminist ideology in letter and spirit, coincided with the ideals of second-wave feminism.

### **The Post-Feminist Sensibility**

The post-feminist sensibility is a relatively recent phenomenon and can be attributed to the third-wave feminism. It deconstructs the binary oppositions created by feminism. All the salient features mentioned above acquire a distinct focus and form in the post-feminist sensibility. For instance, Equality is replaced with **Choice**. Post-feminist perspectives endorse that equality has already been achieved in some societies and therefore the essential concern is making choices and determining one’s own destiny. “The notion that all our practices are freely chosen fits well with broader postfeminist discourses which present women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances whatsoever” (Gill, 2007). The freedom to choose implies that woman is equally privileged in a society and has the wisdom and right to choose whatever she thinks is right for her. According to Budgeon (2015, p. 314),

Choice feminism, while not a unified position or movement, coheres around a set of key principles including a privileging of individual women as best positioned to make choices about how to live; a belief that women are able to unproblematically exercise autonomy because of the achievements of feminism; a claim that traditional feminine norms are no longer connected to gender inequality; and that the role of feminism is to withhold judgement of the choices women make ( Budgeon,2015).

The concept of equality has also been substituted by discourse on 'natural difference' which amounts to a frank acknowledgement of difference rather than its denial. In this context, sexual attractiveness of female body is considered a source of power over patriarchy rather than a subjection to it.

The concepts of solidarity and politicization are now partially substituted with individualism and empowerment. These new elements in many ways banish the political and collective expression of feminist ideology and center around the individual who may seek empowerment according to her own specifics. Although this position has been contested by feminists on accounts of reducing the possibility of a collective movement, nevertheless, individualism remains an important component of post-feminist sensibility.

Perhaps the most important feature of post-feminist sensibility is the use of '**irony and awareness**'( Renegar and Sowards,2003). The use of irony in post-feminist discourse does not furnish direct opposition to long-held patriarchal views and therefore becomes difficult to oppose. The post-feminist sensibility essentially views feminism as a thing of the past, a stepping stone to what had to come next in an upward spiral of awakening.

The post-feminist sensibility has been contested by feminist scholars in many ways but some of its features are consistent with the post-modern world, wherein, truth is increasingly seen as a social construct and not as an objective fact. However, by the start of 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the advent of globalization and the maturity of third-wave feminism, there is a gradual shift in the themes. The woman is shown not from the position of weakness but from a position of strength. We observe traces of post-feminist sensibility in the paintings produced by Pakistani female artists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

For instance, the female identity in Rahat Naveed Masud's work is not a statement of reaction. The woman is neither weak nor suppressed. She appears composed and calculated often wondering the roots of her identity. In the following painting, Rahat Naveed shows a woman standing against a mythical backdrop with light radiating from her being. She is meditative, lifting her hands with closed eyes, which is suggestive of her relationship with God. It seems that she is gaining emotional strength from her spiritual existence. The painting is essentially a statement of growing self-awareness in the spiritual domain.



Figure 10. Rahat Naveed Masud, *Untitled*, Oil on canvas, 1990s.

The above painting characterizes the changing sensibility. By the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century, there comes yet another shift in perspective. The female identity is asserted along with her beauty and attractiveness. The following painting by Hajra Mansoor celebrates womanhood by representing female as a symbol of beauty and delicacy. The pigeon as a symbol of peace remains a feature suggestive of the intent of a woman but at the same time she is glamorous, self-aware and free.



Figure 11. Hajra Mansoor, Lady with Pigeon, Acrylic on canvas, 2003.

A similar example can be seen in Sajida Hussain's work. A woman sitting in a colourful dress and confidently posed posture is a symbol of strength and awareness. The pigeon in her hand is not a request but an attribute she is proud of. The lyrical and flowing lines add delicacy and subtlety as part of female identity.



Figure 12. Sajida Hussain, Untitled, Oil on canvas, 2010.

One may observe, how woman appears in Shazlay Khan's work. Again we observe woman as a symbol of beauty and elegance. She is colorful, charming and self-aware. Khalid Rehman commented on her in following words, "Feminism, friendship and fertility are the three most obvious aspects of her art which, over the years, has evolved into a potent but subtle form steeped in a powerful stylistic imagery" (Tribune, 2014). The title of the following painting "My Tea Party in Paradise" adds into the celebration she associates to female identity.



Figure 13. Shazly Khan, *My Tea Party in Paradise*, Oil on canvas, 2013.

Mahnoor Shah, another young artist and a graduate from National College of Arts depicts the eastern female identity. The woman depicted in glamorous and yet mysterious. She is not the suppressed weak woman, neither she is the liberal Western woman, she is essentially eastern and conscious of her power as a woman.



Figure 14. Mahnoor Shah, *Untitled*, Oil on canvas, 2017.

The theme of woman empowerment has recently acquired a greater momentum in Pakistan. As a result, there are now realistic paintings directly advocating women rights, individuality and power. Some of the trends does not show the woman as a symbol of beauty or glamour but as an inspiration of achieving something larger than life. The portrait of Malala Yousafzai by Shazia Sikandar can be seen as a powerful expression advocating woman empowerment and the scope she has for social change.



Figure 15. Shazia Sikandar, *Malala*, Oil on canvas, 2018.



and it claimed that the social relations that define the purview of women are a product of patriarchy. The injustice with women was seen as a consequence of male dominance in social power structures and hierarchies. Patriarchy itself was seen as a social system with non-negotiable covert rules, historically conditioned to exploit women. Radical feminism also addressed biological differences. It promoted the view that the cause of cultural difference between men and women is not a corollary of biological differences. The Pakistani paintings produced by female artists in the 1980s can be seen in alignment with the ideals of second-wave feminism.

The third important school of thought, which emerged out of third wave feminism is post-feminist conception of **Power Feminism**. Although it has been a debatable position within feminist circles, many concede that it is a continuation of growing feminist awareness. In postfeminist thought even if a woman chooses to be a house-wife, it does not negate her right to freedom and power, in fact, it ensures it. It is the womanhood that is the basis of power and sexuality is central to it. The post-feminist sensibility in Pakistani artists is mostly about the freedom of woman within the cultural space, wherein, a woman is seen as a symbol of beauty but there are other examples that advocate the power of woman due to her ability to change society. The power symbolism comes with individual empowerment and the power to positively change the world.

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