

**Comparative Analysis on Queer Art in USA and Pakistan and the Prevalence of Queer
Aesthetics in Pakistani Contemporary Art**

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Abstract

Despite finding the remnants of “queer” subject matter from western iconography to all the way in Mughal period; “Queer Art” is still sensationalized and heavily argued upon, especially in nations such as Pakistan. This paper, thus, studies queer aesthetics in the contemporary art world and their prevalence, across USA and Pakistan to contemplate a discourse on the subject matter through primary and secondary research.

Introduction

Across disciplines, round the globe, changes are being welcomed to make all work places queer¹ friendly, yet in the midst of it all are some nations that are either in; transit for reforming their laws in favour of marginalized communities or “non-secular”. Art, however is known to shape-shift and transcend beyond mediums, creed and of what we now witness, from sexualities [and genders]. This paper, henceforth, conjectures to circumnavigate queer aesthetics in the modern art world and develop a hypothesis through multiple research methods in order to contemplate a discourse on the significance of such aesthetics in [South Asia]² Pakistan.

Like laws of attraction, there is repulsion too. From being addressed implicitly in O’Keeffe’s paintings to explicitly in Judy Chicago’s work, sex has been a driving force for many artistic expressions. Foucault (1998), in the first volume of his book ‘History of Sexuality’, states:

Sexuality is the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations by a certain deployment deriving from a complex political technology... (p. 127)

To further the premise of this research, one can take Foucault’s idea of sexuality to understand how queer intimacies are developed and maintained in the discipline of art, or any other institution. However the discipline of art is to be also dissected according to the intimacies being discussed, which for the scope of this paper would be “queer” art. Though, it might appear strange that queer folks are represented by an entire movement named after them, it is important for one to note that evidently queer folks have had a disproportionate role in art making in the

¹ Using “queer” throughout the paper for members of LGBTTQQIAAP+ community, as a means to relate it to the main discussion of the paper.

² To address, also, the background of the queer aesthetics that prevail in Pakistan which once was part of the Indo-Pak Subcontinent.

west as pointed out by critics such as Philip Kennicott (O'Donoghue, 2016) and thus an exponential disproportion is experienced in the east, especially in Pakistan.³

Therefore, this paper comprises of studying queer artists positioned right in the center of western liberation (that inhabits queer art) and eastern ideologues (which inhibits queer art), and how then they are influenced and what is their course of trajectory and then to identify certain aspects that connect queer aesthetics within queer art globally, to finally understanding the socio-political ramifications of such aesthetics in Pakistan and their significance.

The main aim of this paper is to reveal the prevalence of queer aesthetics in Pakistan as well as its inevitability.

Background/Context:

The Indo-Pak Subcontinent⁴ was enriched with queer affinities; both male and female same-sex desires were acknowledged through literature and visual imagery. Natif's (2015) inquisitive research proves us that homosexuality was at least visible in our region by 1258 CE in the form of *Sa'di's* literary work called *Gulistan*, which later in the Mughal Era, around 1600's was visually illustrated by Govardhan (Figure 1). While Govardhan's imagery shows platonic and implied same-sex relations; there has been evidence of miniature paintings from various sources of rather explicit and graphic imagery (Figure 2).

While historians and especially western authors argue that homosexuality was never sinful in the South Asian region (Penrose, 2006), making evident that visibility of queer folks in

³ Since there are no official statistics for queer (especially homosexuals and homosexual artists) in Pakistan, I am making use of western sources to draw parallels and make convincing arguments.

⁴ Now referred to as three separate nations, namely; Bangladesh, India, Pakistan.

west is relatively recent than in east, some scholars believe “queerness” to have emerged in late 1800s in America (Chauncey, 2019).

Queer art in present times is pivoted in a transhistorically charged direction, thus making it pertinent for one to take into account, the geo-politics affecting queer aesthetics in Pakistan.

Literature Review

For the scope of this research, sources on queer art in USA and Pakistan have been reviewed separately to identify both the similarities and dissimilarities in queer aesthetics for both regions. Sources have been drawn from published books, academic journals, empirical researches, contemporary art and online sources.

Queer art in USA:

The idea of queer had been long present in the western society, however it was only used as a pejorative to otherize such members in the community. An NY Times article, confirmed that;

“Many of America’s gayborhoods emerged during World War II, according to Amin Ghaziani⁵, associate professor at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver...”
 (James, 2017)

However the advent of queer art really came about in 1980s, after the widespread of HIV/AIDS and a large population conflating it with the “stranger danger” phenomenon. It is through various forms of activism that the queer community reclaimed the term “queer”. However, it was in 1985 that a work by activist Cleve Jones, *Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt* (Figure 3)⁶, laid a stepping stone for “queer art” in the USA. It is during the same time, that theorists and philosophers began exploring the idea of “heterotopology”⁷. Foucault (1984), in a journal published in 2014, notes:

⁵ A. Ghaziani elaborates in his book, *There Goes the Gayborhood*, of how queer sub-cultures spread out through space and time.

⁶ The quilt was nominated for Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.

⁷ An idea by Michel Foucault that expands on how certain spaces differ from each other in an atypical manner.

Societies could perhaps be classified according to the heterotopias they prefer, according to the heterotopias they create. (p. 20)

With the idea of “queer” being extensively explored in terms of geo-sexual-politics, the advent of queer art in USA, one can believe to have been, propounded towards didacticism and subversion. For example Gran Fury’s *Kissing Doesn’t Kill* (1989), is a testament to both educating the wider population and subverting the present system that exhibits prejudice (Figure 4).

Queer art in Pakistan:

It has been less than a decade that the word “queer” has even made it to the news in Pakistan. One can easily point out that the term was widely accepted when Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act of 2018 of Pakistan was passed: confirming a legal status⁸ for third gendered folks on official documents such as passports. A battle that most part of Europe and USA is still fighting to win.⁹

However the term queer has been a rather complicated affair to dissect in Pakistan, both theoretically and visually. With no substantial research on queer demographics in Pakistan, Afzal (2016) reported one of his subject’s testimony;

“I would never even think about being with any other man except my childhood friend. We had been friends for so long that it seemed only natural that we would eventually ‘be together [sexually].’ But, I would never cross the line with someone else.” (p.193)

⁸ An identity marker of ‘X’, rather than an “M”(male) or “F”(female).

⁹ USA still doesn’t recognize ‘X’ as an identity marker on passports.

These sentiments expressed by one of the locals, clarifies that the culture in Pakistan does not adhere to labels such as “queer”. I argue that it is relatively more intimate in Pakistan or perhaps that “queer” is an ethno-centric term which loses its charm when it makes way all the way from west to east, in Pakistan. Even the visual imagery of queer lives in Pakistan is hardly about being “queer”. Artists like Anwar Saeed, have been painting queer male bodies since the 80’s, regardless of any political ramifications. However, Pakistan is also the very country from which many like Iftikhar Nasim, known for being the first openly-gay Urdu poet, emigrate in their twenties to USA in hope for being accepted for their queer-ness and to have a better life. Quddus Mirza (2012) remarks on Anwar Saeed’s work to serve as a “foundation on which other narratives are established.” Yet, now in 2020, we see other [queer] narratives being developed that deviate from melancholic and tormented representation of sexuality in Saeed’s work and yet celebrate the triumph of queer-ing Pakistani contemporary art. For example, while Saeed’s exhibition in 1984 was raided by police for having controversial content¹⁰, one can see police gazing at Amra Khan’s work in 2008 (Figure 5). Taking into account, both the time and context of the two incidents, queer art in Pakistan is a riddle muddled with both warmth and violence.

¹⁰ The show was at Rohtas Gallery in Islamabad. Confirmed from Noor Alainah Asif’s thesis dissertation on, *Queer Masculinities and Spaces of Intimacy in the Work of Anwar Saeed*.

Methodology

Considering the sources collected, it makes one cerebrate if queer art is didactic and subversive in Pakistan as it is in the USA. Attempting to then a) identifying the similar queer aesthetics in both USA and Pakistan, and b) testing if the identified aspects are similar in queer art throughout both regions, to finally c) examining the significance of queer art movement in Pakistan, both qualitative and quantitative methods can better assist one to get a holistic picture on the subject matter. As this is an ethnographic study, aiming to look at patterns in queer art in two separate regions, the research methods used were:

Mixed Method (Case Study+Polling):

“ Case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied.” (Stake, 2004, as cited in, Blaikie, 2009, p. 187)

Taking Stake’s idea further, and developing an ethnographic research that allows one to understand the western perspective towards queer art and respect the personal values attached to this paper, conducting a case study to obtain qualitative data proved to be most useful for the scope of this research. However, the findings from the case study were then tested through a poll on a purposive sample, which were students from Contemporary Art Seminar¹¹,

The subject for the case study was Barton Lidice Beneš, an artist from New York, USA. Carrying forward Stake’s “flexible approach” (Yazan, 2015) towards conducting a case study. The two main questions, initially, to develop the case were:

- 1) Is Beneš’ art practice representative of queer art in general in the USA?, and
- 2) Is the artist’s practice subversive and/or didactic, especially if statement in 1) holds true?

¹¹ The same course, for which I am conducting this research.

For data collection, an interview with Beneš' own testimony on YouTube¹², academic papers discussing his practice and personal interpretation of artworks he produced were used.

While many writers have categorized Beneš' work as provocative and subversive (Vitello, 2012; Rajgopal, n.d.; *The Curious Closets of Barton Benes*, 2016; Briana Livingston, 2016), no one has out-rightly believed his practice to be didactic. Even though some writers have compared Beneš' work with the term "didactic" (MacDonnell Eichhorn, 1999, p. 41; Hornblow, 1999), yet only in a suggestive manner. However, Watson (2004), in an interview remarked on Beneš 'practice:

“... It wasn't until Barton's responses to the AIDS crisis and his own health crisis that I became sort of profoundly moved by the work and for me it moved from clever art making with a clever idea to very personal art making expressive of his sorrow his pain and society's pain and sorrow.” (Galleri Andersson Sandström, 2013, 18:50-19:25)

Considering Watson's sentiments on how Beneš' work shows the society at large and an iconographical analysis¹³ on Beneš artworks, the artist was then presented and discussed in a seminar setting, in which students remarked his practice to be "elitist" or the artist himself having a "Jesus complex". Students were then given a poll after discussion in the seminar, to relay if they believed Beneš' practice to be subversive and or didactic.¹⁴

¹² This is the same video that I showed to present the artist to the students in Contemporary Art Seminar.

¹³ See appendix B, pg. 31.

¹⁴ In the poll, student's were also asked to specify if artist used "collection" or "intuition" as a strategy of art making to gauge each participant's attentiveness. (See Appendix D, pg. 33)

Survey:

McIntyre (1999) argued:

“Surveys can also elicit information about attitudes that are otherwise difficult to measure using observational techniques.” (as cited in, A. Glasow, 2005)

Thus, a web-based questionnaire was designed with a total of eight ,both, open and close-ended questions. The questions asked for participant’s age, gender and sexual orientation, to obtain demographics for replication of research in the future. In addition, participants were asked to evaluate their knowledge for terms such as “queer” and “queer art” and if they were aware of any queer artists in Pakistan. Lastly, the survey provided participants with the definitions of “subversion”¹⁵ and “didactic”¹⁶ and then asked if they believe queer art in Pakistan to be subversive and/or didactic.

Secondary Research:

Since the survey was conducted for over a period of month, queer artists from Pakistan identified by survey participants were studied, namely; Salman Toor, Abdullah Qureshi, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto Jr., Numair A. Abbasi, Umair Sajid, Hadi Rehman and Zulfiqar Mannan along with three other artists, who I gathered from my personal research, namely; Anwar Saeed, Amra Khan and Asim Butt.

¹⁵ See glossary, pg. 35.

¹⁶ Ibid

The selection of artists helped further the research as almost half of the artists being studied had some direct or indirect connection with USA¹⁷. In addition, all data was collected through online sources and personal interpretations of visual artworks.

¹⁷ Ties to the West in general were found, for example Abdullah Qureshi received an art education from Britain rather than USA.

Results

Case Study (Qualitative):

After a detailed look at Beneš' practice, the answer to the two questions posed are as followed;

- 1) While Beneš' work is representative of queer art, it is by no means representative of entire queer art movement in USA. As artists like, Andy Warhol or Robert Mapplethorpe, etc. were truly in comparison more successful than Beneš to develop a household name for themselves and represent the western society.

- 2) Beneš' work is both subversive and didactic.¹⁸

Polling at Seminar (Quantitative):

Out of 15 students in the Seminar, only 6 responded to the poll. Out of which only 2 students believed finding 2) from case study to be true. Only 3 students believed the practice to be either subversive or didactic. (Table 1)¹⁹

Although, not a sufficient sample size, this poll can at least be a good measure of senior year undergraduate art students in the seminar course on how they perceive terms such as subversive and didactic in relation to queer art.

¹⁸ See Appendix C, pg. 33.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Survey (Quantitative):

A total of 52 responses were collected, with 57.7% of the sample being female and only 7.6% of the sample being gender queer. However, 61.5% of the sample identified as sexually queer.

Around 87.5% of the sample was aware of both the terms, “queer” and “queer art”.

Only 57.7% of the sample was aware of any queer artists from Pakistan, out of which most renowned in the given sample were Salman Toor and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto Jr.

73% of the sample believed queer art in Pakistan as, “maybe”, didactic. While 55.7 % believed it to be subversive.

Secondary Research (Qualitative):

After conducting the secondary research on ten Pakistani queer artists, it was clear that Salman Toor was the most renowned queer artist in Pakistan, followed by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto Jr. and Abdullah Qureshi.

However, all mentioned artists have art practices mostly based in USA, thus suggesting that queer aesthetics from the west do prevail in Pakistan. Whilst, the other artists mentioned are up and coming artists who are still creating their niche via various social media platforms, mainly through Instagram.

The reason for perhaps their recognition is the Western critical acclaim each has received, especially in the case of Salman Toor, who has one of the highest bided paintings (Figure 6) in the history of Pakistani contemporary art.

In addition, the five artists which I picked were all based in Pakistan. In which, Asim Butt's work was subversive, yet it did not fall under “queer art” just because of his sexuality, the same as Amra Khan's work fell under the category of “queer art” regardless of her sexuality. While, the rest of the artists seemed to have only been archiving their own experiences through visuals rather than being subversive or didactic (Figure 7).

Conclusion

Setting aside the short-comings for each data collection method, to achieve some amount of validity, and just assessing the results; the main aims behind this paper were achieved successfully. Employing both primary and secondary research, it allowed one to consider the role space and geography plays in informing queer aesthetics, as those who identify as such, are constantly inhibited or inhabited by the socio-economic-political intricacies of the society at large. The identified elements, similar in queer art throughout USA and Pakistan, upon further field research showed that queer art is subversive in Pakistan, to which the only logical reasoning could be of the “queer” phenomenon not being completely embraced by the state of Pakistan, making every queer work inherently subversive. Whilst having inconclusive results on the debate of didacticism, according to the survey findings, it can be argued that queer art in Pakistan does contain at least some modulations of being didactic, the same as Barton Lidice Beneš’ practice.

Limitations:

Whilst, the qualitative data collected through case study and an iconographic analysis was reliable and valid, it was difficult to draw generalizations for a larger population, especially in the case where one artist and certain aspects of that artist’s practice are being studied to represent an entire region.

Furthermore, a great amount of non-sampling error²⁰ occurred when collecting quantitative data, especially in the survey questionnaire, as the aggregate sample size was small, in which, participants identified as “questioning” and “pansexual”²¹ etc., yet for the scope of the

²⁰ See Glossary, pg. 35.

²¹ See Appendix D, pg. 34.

research had to be all labeled under the term “queer”²², thus not fully taking into account the individual differences within the queer community.

Directions for Future Research:

Acknowledging the fact that the research done is currently in its preliminary stages, by revisiting the initial research questions, an extensive field research with an in-depth analysis is required in studying, analyzing and designing a proper framework for the study of queer aesthetics in Pakistan.

Furthermore, to ensure a good target population, the research should comprise of different groups of participants, both from Pakistan, and Pakistani’s based in the West, and based on different sexual orientations.

In addition, a thorough case study on a Pakistani artist also needs to be conducted the same way Benes’ was done.

²² As clarified in the first foot note

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Appendix

A: Images



Figure 1: “Sa'di in the Rose Garden by Govardhan on folio 6a of the Gulistan of Sa'di, F1998”



Figure 2: ([A devil buggering a man. Gouache Painting. 15.5 x 8.8 cm], n.d.)



Figure 3: “October 1996 Display of the AIDS Memorial Quilt on the Mall in Washington, DC. Courtesy of The AIDS Memorial Quilt, The NAMES Project Foundation, 2006.” (Fee, 2006)

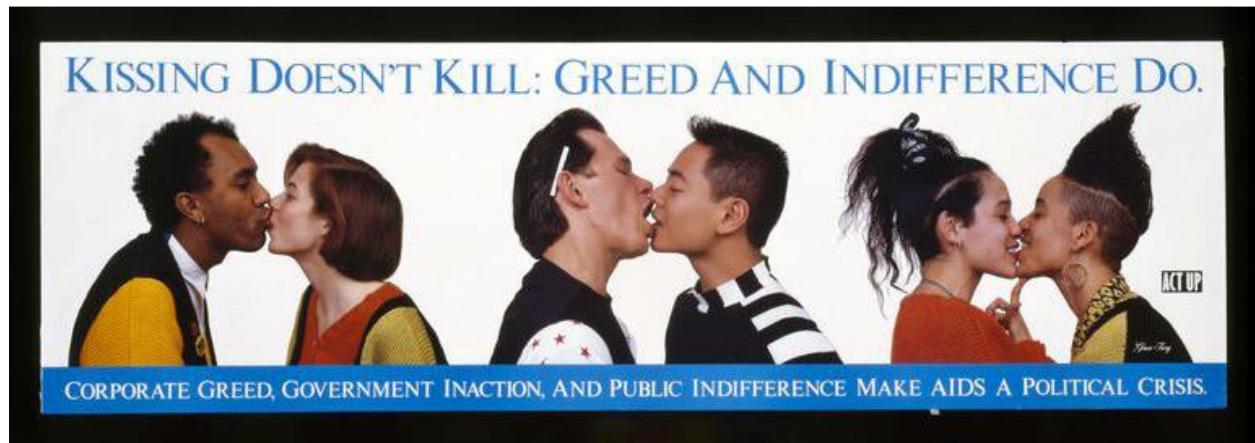


Figure 4: Gran Fury's Kissing Doesn't Kill. (V&A's collections, 1989)



Figure 5: Police officials viewing one of Amra Khan's painting. (Image taken from Khan, 2016)



Figure 6: Salman Toor (b. 1983) *Rooftop Party with Ghosts 1* oil on canvas 46 ¾ x 66 1/8 in. (118.7 x 168 cm.) Painted in 2015.
(Image taken from Christie's, 2020a)



Figure 7: Komail Aijazuddin's, *Kiss*, Oil on Gold, 2020. Painted here are two boys in Aitchison College's uniform. (Image taken from artist's Instagram).

B: Iconographic Analysis



Figure 8: "Brenda, 1994"

The work titled 'Brenda' by Barton Lidice Beneš was made from cremated ashes of a woman, whose family did not accept her ashes because of her death due to AIDS. In order to honor her, the artist made these ribbons of her ashes to strike an emotion in people and humanize the sufferings of an AIDS patient. This work, in my opinion, served as a tool to subvert the system that was at place which was continuously stigmatizing those stricken with AIDS.



Figure 9: "Lethal Weapons: Silencer, 1992"

The work titled "Lethal Weapons" was an installation with various objects weaponized with HIV infused blood, collected from patients who had HIV blood. Through this work, I believe Barton wished to teach the viewers of the severity of the HIV/AIDS situation at the time and show through didacticism of the moral ramifications of mistreating such a situation.

C: Survey Questionnaire

Gender *

Age group *

- 0-18
- 18 - 30
- 30 - 45
- 45 +

Sexual Orientation *

Do you understand what "queer" means? *

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Are you aware of the term "queer art"? *

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Do you know of any queer artists in Pakistan? If yes, please mention. Write N/A, if you don't. *

Didactic

meaning: intended to teach, particularly in having moral instruction as an ulterior motive.

Given the above definition of didactic, do you believe that Pakistani queer art is didactic? *

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- Other: _____

Subversion

meaning: the undermining of the power and authority of an established system or institution.

Given the above definition of subversion, do you believe that Pakistani queer art is subversive? *

- Yes
- No
- Other: _____

D: Tables

Contemporary Art Seminar Students				
Participant No:	<i>Collection as a strategy</i>	<i>Intuition as a strategy</i>	<i>Subversion</i>	<i>Didactic</i>
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				
9				
10				
11				
12				
13				
14				
15				

Table 1: Results from Polling

Key	
	Yes
	No

Survey Participants	
Sexual Orientation	No. of Participants
Bisexual	9
Pansexual	9
Asexual	2
Queer	2
Homosexual	3
Questioning	7
Heterosexual	19
Female	1
TOTAL	52

Table 2: Demographics for sexual orientation from Survey Questionnaire.

Glossary

LGBTQQIAAP+ : The acronym stands for, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Ally and Pansexual.

Non-secular: Relating to or involving religious or spiritual matters. (Oxford, n.d.)

Subversive: the undermining of the power and authority of an established system or institution. (Oxford, n.d.-b)

Didactic: intended to teach, particularly in having moral instruction as an ulterior motive. (Oxford, n.d.-a)

Non-sampling error: A non-sampling error is a statistical term that refers to an error that results during data collection, causing the data to differ from the true values. (Kenton, 2020)