

Exploring Ideas of Utopia in a Post-Colonial Subcontinent – and what those Utopias tell us about the present?

Contemporary Art Seminar

Abstract

This paper aims to discuss the different forms of Utopia in philosophy, literature and art and how those notions have been implemented in a post-colonial subcontinent. In dissecting the art work, we see fragments of lingering Dystopia and Utopia.

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Utopia as a concept emerges from our need to believe in something grander, some notions of life beyond the one where we exist. A society that has no flaws, where comfort is at the heart of everything. In Greek, the translation is ‘no place’. The term was coined in 1516 and since then has been a part of books, careers, conversations and art pieces. But where does this inherent need to believe come from? Why do we desire to daydream and what role does hope play in the matter?

Sir Thomas More, lawyer and philosopher, wrote a satirical book called Utopia in 1516 indirectly criticizing religious hypocrisy and political corruption. The first ever imagined utopia exists in text consisting of a self-contained community on an island where people share a culture and values. The book constantly swings the modern reader’s interpretation of the island from a Utopia to a Dystopia. Lyman Tower Sargent, a philosopher, argues that utopia’s nature is fundamentally contradictory because societies are not homogeneous and have desires which conflict within each other and therefore cannot simultaneously be satisfied. Our innate tendency to have desires is part of our human condition and cannot be satiated or stopped abruptly.

The paradox of Utopia however, is that the new world cannot be imagined without absorbing the features of the current world that we physically engage with. Fredric Jameson avers “even our wildest imaginings are all collages of experience, constructs made up of bits and pieces of the here and now.... It suggests at best Utopia can serve the negative purpose of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment.” This statement suggests that our idealized imagination does for us more harm than good, while keeping us in this loop of oppression. To support this argument Karl Marx declared that utopia and utopian ideals are inherently naive in thought and provide an escapist route from the reality – where our oppressors maintain the status quo and marginalize communities and exploit them. However, it is ironic that Marx formed an entire economic system based on critical analysis of Capitalism and founded the complete Marxism Movement – based on a

Utopian thought. Influenced by socialism and communism, it in theory, provided the working class people power and abolished hierarchy imposed by our leaders and oppressors. It is important to note although that when Marxism or its ideas rooted in Socialism have been applied in practicality – they have not been realized to last. Many socialist countries such as Cuba have suffered due to incorrect application of Marx's ideas or due to corruption, external involvement of other nations. All of these ideas support Lyman Tower Sargent's statement again, reiterating that not everyone will want the same thing at the same time; and till that does happen – Utopia will cease to exist.

Nevertheless, not all Utopias are personal and positive in nature. History has exhibited certain people such as Adolf Hitler can also have their ideas of Utopia and such ideas are not always healthy or democratic. Hitler's utopia consisted of a superior race; something which was biological was attempted to be materially constructed by getting rid of the Jewish people via a violent genocide. By 1938 Hitler had made Germany the most powerful and feared country in his bid to create a new European order through Nordic Brotherhood. "The stronger must dominate and not blend with the weaker, thus sacrificing his own greatness" he wrote in his book Mein Kampf (My Struggle), added by "Nature's rule: the inner segregation of the species of all living beings on this earth". Hitler's Utopian Society involved architects too in his plan as his attempt was to not just remove all other races beyond his own, but create a space for them physically in reality and dominate the rest of the world with this ideology and praxis. This utopia was on its way to becoming a reality, with concentration camps dominating most of Germany, the notion of Hitler's perfect world was set in motion. Which begs the question: Why do we believe in Utopias? Why do we still believe in it after the devastation wrecked by the ideals of utopia that gave rise to fascism and communism?

Some psychologists such as Sigmund Freud believed that the need for believing in something grander than our currently reality comes as "a byproduct of the way our brains work, growing from cognitive

tendencies to seek order from chaos, to anthropomorphize our environment and to believe the world around us was created for our use.” This suggests that it is a biological reasoning for our believing in grand notions of other world. Utopia draws parallels with religion and our necessity to find faith in another universe, where scriptures mention justice and freedom. A 2008 study in Science (Vol. 322, No. 5898) by Jennifer Whitson, PhD, and Adam Galinsky, PhD, established that people are likely to see signs and patterns in the world around them even if they are not there. Our mind is a powerful tool and in order for survival in our current reality, it can lead us to fantasize grander notions as an escapist tool also.

But is the need to believe in something as magnificent as Utopia simply biological? Or do social aspects play a role in this? Can people who collectively believe in similar values, traditions and ideas form communities? And can those communities meshed together with theoretical understanding of morality benefit humanity on a larger scale? Perhaps so. Drawing parallels with religion once again; this article by psychologist Jonathan Haidt, PhD, and Jesse Graham, PhD, suggest that “...religion co-evolved with morality as a way to bind people into large moral communities. Graham and Haidt argue that, through stories and rituals, religions have built on five basic moral foundations: Do no harm, play fairly, be loyal to your group, respect authority and live purely.” This proposes that religion can have a positive impact on society and this idea can be further applied to Utopias as long as people follow diligently and respect the rules in place.

In history, Utopia has been widely popular during discursive practice, in literature or political writing. An important space of representation is the painted space; it is a wonderful medium to transmit the imagined ideals through creative expression. Paintings transform these private fantasies into public ones, furthermore the spaces in which these desires are depicted are born from an existing culture, thus providing an ideological framework to the work. Pre-Colonization, Mughal Paintings particularly

Miniature paintings employed Utopia in an interesting manner. Monica Juneja writes “A further characteristic that made for the specificity of Mughal notions of an ideal realm was the subordination of nature or the universe to a system of order imposed by a central human authority, embodied in the person of the monarch. While nature was perceived as a source of life and beauty, it was at the same time feared to be potentially inimical and destructive if left uncontrolled and unsubordinated. A condition of Utopia was a ‘civilizing’ of nature through the laying down of formal gardens, orchards, through building activity, all of these canonized in medieval texts and practice as acts of piety.” A double page miniature painting from the Akbar Nama, painted by Miskin and Mansur depicts Akbar busy in a hunting near Lahore and while that is a busy work with multiple visuals to be read closely, it gives us an idea to what Utopia meant before colonization and how that idea was then further challenged and molded by Modernity and the progression of time.

Many artists from the subcontinent channeled their utopian ideas through art, poetry and literature. The British Colonization of India brought with it conversations on the differences between Modern Western Art and Indian Art. The art of the subcontinent was born and nourished on imagination with historical allegory being its abiding force, and those same attributes were involved in the making of art – during and post colonization. Western art, at the time, was realistic in nature and embarked on a journey of romantic depiction of the truth; there was mastery of anatomy and expression. Landscapes and Royal Portraiture were also heavily appreciated in the west. Benjamin West, an American-British artist stated; “The same truth that guides the pen of the historian should govern the pencil of the artist.... I want mark the date, the place, and the parties engaged in the event; and if I am not able to dispose of the circumstances in a picturesque manner, no academical distribution of Greek or Roman costume will enable me to do justice to the subject.” As President of the Royal Academy, West took his craft very soberly and stuck true to his ideology.

However, Art in the Subcontinent was treading different waters. Employing divine iconography, Nandalal Bose's Annapurna (1943) was set within the context of the Bengal Famine. "Annapurna, literally the provider of food captures the aspiration of starving millions while the emaciated figure of Lord Shiva reflects the ground reality. Creating an interface between myth and reality, Bose's political allegory about the present reworks the traditional iconography of divine figures. ... Emaciated figure almost embodying Hungry Bengal of 1940s. It was almost as if the golden past peopled by gods and goddesses comes under the shadow of the present that witnessed tragic human predicament of a man made famine, caused by the British stockpiling rice for World War II military rations." Creating a world within a flat surface Bose's painting captures the essence of Utopia - where under colonization from the British, the only safe haven for civilians exists within a painting depicting Annapurna, the food goddess. As she stares in solid compassion, the people's hope rides on her to present them food, transporting them away from their current Dystopia.

Another contemporary artist, Muzzamil Ruheel challenges the way Utopias in art are approached. Ruheel, in his video installation Yak Yak Yak, employs multiple small televisions which are all interconnected and transmit local news channels and the live coverage they provide. Ruheel dives into image saturation and the traces it leaves onto the human mind. There are a total of 21 small antique television sets and collectively assembled, the flashing images and their loud sounds are chaotic and jarring. This installation brings the audience to experience Pakistani Politics, through the eyes of the common man watching television at home, flickering the hundreds of local news channels, drowning in waves of information and happenings in the country. The work allows us to dwell onto the realities of the country, which are loudly advertised, as well as the mental space of the citizens who consume such dark content every single day. The oversaturation of information can offset desensitization as well as symptoms of anxiety and depression from living in such a state constantly. The technique that

Ruheel adopts is one of visualizing a dystopia. The mood of his work is a representation of reality, yet at the same time is exaggerated to overwhelm the audience – but nonetheless provides a frame for the viewer to look inside the mind of Pakistani Society. Through the visual dystopia, we see a glimmer of hope desiring for an escape from constant bombardment of information to a Utopia comprising of peace and no political internal conflict within Pakistan and its news coverage. Post Colonisation, after the separation and founding of Pakistan, it, as a nation, has had many internal conflicts which make their way to the people, some physically and some mentally. Muzzamil Ruheel's practice is described as “social, political, historical and religious themes articulated through a personal perspective, resulting in a whimsical satire of our times.”

Using architecture and urban landscape, Pakistani Artist Rashid Rana goes on a quest for exploring dystopia within ideals of Utopia in his structural art pieces. Rana works in photography and photomontages and challenges the viewer to question the kind of society they live in. Rana's Desperately Seeking Paradise II (2010-11) is a large structure which looks mirrored and appears to be multifaceted, however when the viewer stands at a particular spot, an image of a skyscraper is formed. When zoomed in, small photographs, which make up the large image of the sky scraper, are banded together of local urban environment. These pictures contain visuals of houses, shops, streets and so on which are honest reflections of the class disparity within Pakistan and the poverty that follows it. The title of the work addresses the fine line between utopia and dystopia and that fine line is held together by hope. When the audience zooms in, the sky scraper disappears, which is rather illustrative of the fact that the hopeful world is held on by something very fragile; as the audience zooms out, a whole image presents which can be read as the way cities are held together by its citizens, regardless of the problems they face. In Rana's work, the tall skyscrapers are manifestations of utopia, and modernity. Hinting at an escape from poverty, they are the dream of an average Pakistani citizen stuck in

intergenerational poverty, the representation of a better life comes through this visual of progress. The work in this way is deeply political, highlighting the after effects of Capitalism in a third world country and its impact on people and their perceptions. Utopias, while they are figments of imagination highlight a great deal of the present mental state and political state of a place, they are representative of everything that has not been achieved. In a way, Rashid Rana's work functions as a bridge between a utopia and dystopia, and showcases the absurd collisions between the two with heavy nuances between them. The two extremes come together, with dystopia being the current state of overpopulation, rule under dictatorship, censorship and so on.

Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto Jr. is a Pakistani US based artist that dabbles across textile, drawing, video, and drag performance; the unifying factor in his practice is the direct confrontation with white supremacy, and a repossession of what it means to be queer and Muslim. His work references Orientalism and the attitudes of the West in regards with being perceived as a person of colour and fitting into the white person's idea of what it means to be a queer, or to fit into the mold of the oppressed brown man. Bhutto Jr. constantly aims to push the limits of what a Muslim looks like and what it means to be one. In his series "Mussalmaan Musclemen" masculinity is explored through nude male bodies, with juxtaposing soft floral fabric concealing their privates. The artist attempts to find acceptance in nuance and contradiction of the present world and its one dimensional attitudes towards gender, sexuality and religion. These collages open a window into the artist's perception of Utopia.

Prior to British Colonization of the subcontinent, "In an attempt to implement a vision for utopia dictated by Victorian Christian values, the British ruled that forms of intimacy that did not adhere to "normal" conducts of one man and one woman in one (married) relationship were to be penalized." India held many rich cultures alongside a diverse understandings of human interaction and Section 377 in 1860 came as a means to police desire. This shift between what was acceptable to an act now

criminalized meant that the vision of Utopia that the British had for India came to reality – and left its citizens facing a harsh view of Dystopia. Due to this particular law, a lot of the LGBTQ+ community shifted underground, away from the public eye in order to survive. This experience of obscuring identity, and attempting to find solace in imaginative Utopia (which still has a lingering presence in post partition India, Pakistan and Bangladesh today) is what Bhutto Jr. references in his work. “In Pakistan, same-sex sexual acts are prohibited by law and there are no anti-discrimination laws to protect LGBTQ citizens. Although the Senate recently approved amendments to a bill that allows trans genders to choose their gender without needing to appear before a medical board, they are still at a huge risk.” This legal system and its reforms allow us to understand the sentiments of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto Jr. and all members of the LGBTQ community who are unable to express themselves and live a life free of persecution and torture in Pakistan.

Ryan Farrar, an educator, writes: “While we each form ideas as to how a society should operate, for others and/or ourselves, the realities of social practice, which ultimately diverge from our own fantasies, often compel us to compromise our ideals in order to fit the political landscape. We manipulate the prevailing hierarchical structures for the purpose of cultivating the individual advantage and, in doing so, obstruct the opportunity to entertain alternative societies that could promise a better existence. When the lust for control, power, and advancement increases exponentially, dystopias (i.e., bad places) begin to sprout and cause suffering for characters subject to the whims of oppressive vices.” Each of the artists mentioned have criticized their current reality and put forth their own ideas of what should be acceptable, and while this is commendable – it is important to take note of Farrar’s statement and understand that individual advantage often overlooks the needs of the masses and that evidently is not successful. Utopias start from ideas which are inherently selfish and personal, and once they grow they form institutions. Artistic depictions of

Utopia tell us a great deal about the present human condition but not nearly enough about the Future. Instead, it also points towards the inevitability of our desires; never-ending. After the Colonization of the subcontinent, Utopia took many different shapes – influenced by rebellion to the colonial ideas to advancing modernity and its technological approaches, all artists explored their vision and brought new debates and ideas to the table through their enticing visuals over the course of history. In the future, as technology advances and debates on the realms of reality continue – we will find notions of Utopia, once again, to be at the heart of the debate.

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