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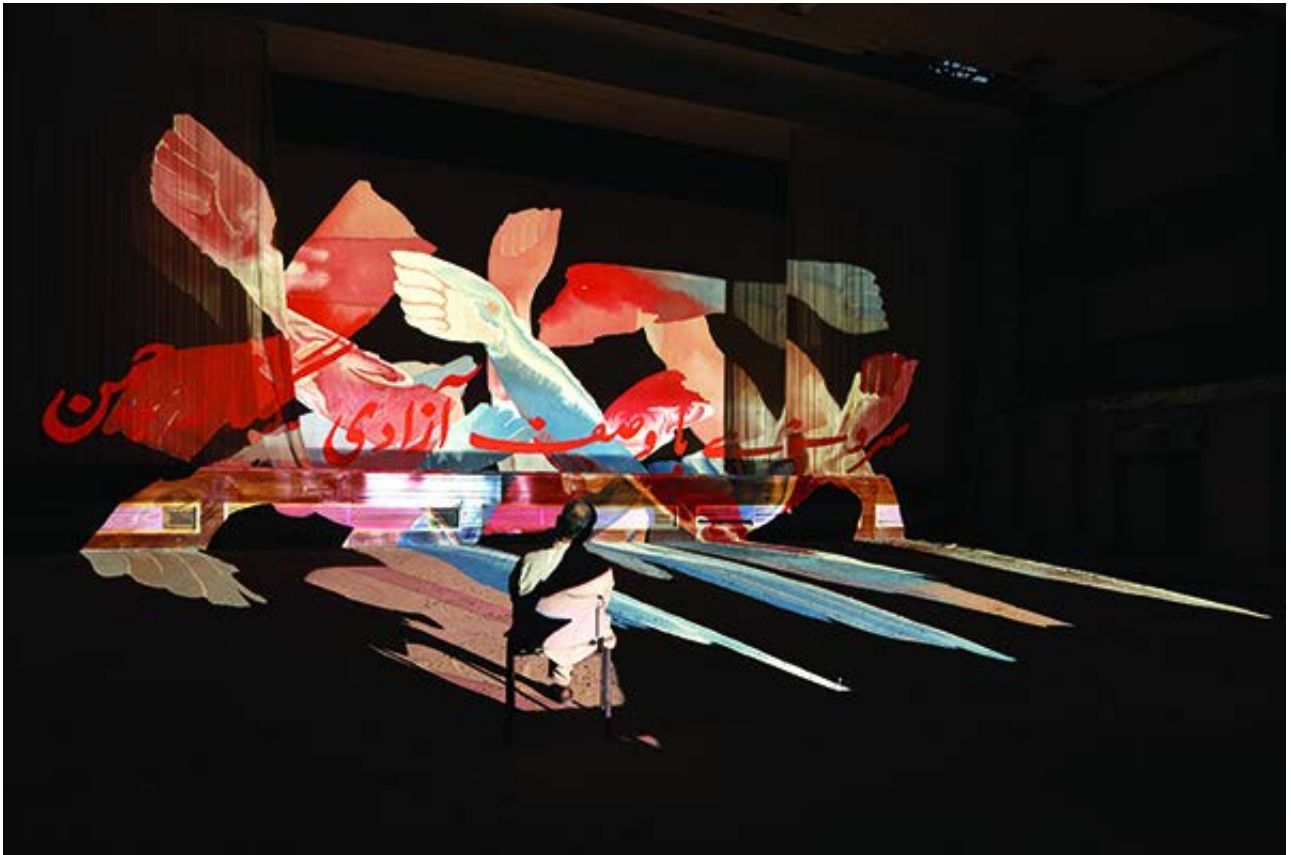
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## LITTLE DICTATORS

 FEB 24 2014  BY FAISAL DEVJI

5 COMMENTS



The Cypress, Despite its Freedom, Remains Captive to the Garden (2013) by Shahzia Sikander

**NATIONALISM, CENSORSHIP, AND THE MAKING OF A CANON FOR PAKISTANI ART.**

“Shahzia Sikander is not a Pakistani artist because she doesn’t engage with the community,” Quddus Mirza claimed at last year’s Lahore Literary Festival. It was odd to have a hypernationalist, even xenophobic, sentiment of this kind voiced by a painter and critic, whose concerns supposedly include the questioning of nationalist ideology. Even more oddly, the same Mirza had offered glowing praise for Sikander in a national newspaper some years earlier. This startling shift of opinion may be dismissed as an example of the petty conflicts and personal resentments that mark Pakistan’s cultural elite. But it signals something more ominous in a context where “culture” has come to represent Pakistan’s only positive image to many of its own citizens as much as to art buyers and investors internationally. So what is this hastily-constructed canon of “Pakistani culture” that includes some artists but excludes others?

Sikander is one of Pakistan’s best-known artists. She was born, raised and trained in the country, whose citizenship she continues to hold, and whose history and traditions her work has consistently addressed. One wonders then what “community” it is that Mirza thinks she isn’t engaging. Perhaps it is the small and self-appointed community of artist-critics, which Mirza apparently speaks for. Indeed, Pakistan is unusual in producing critics who are also artists, which in any other profession would involve them in a perpetual conflict of interest.

What this double role allows artist-critics like Mirza, Cornell University’s Iftikhar Dadi or Chelsea College of Art’s Virginia Whiles to do is to rewrite Pakistan’s art history and even erase important figures from it. In this way they repeat, on a smaller scale, the very acts of censorship and erasure for which their work criticizes politicians and religious or military leaders. In fact their ostentatious “critique” of such violence, which is externalized in the political arena, actually permits these writers to internalize it even more effectively in the cultural sphere—and all with a seemingly clear conscience.

Among the most significant victims of such historical vandalism are Pakistan’s Unver Shafi and Sikander. I wrote about the latter’s work more than a decade ago, and given the international acclaim she has received since then need not repeat my reasons for considering her an extraordinary artist, both technically and conceptually. And yet Sikander’s pioneering work is under threat, being routinely censored by the artist-critics whose writings have made them brokers for prizes, museums, and the international art market.

In his book *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, Dadi does not mention Sikander even once, despite writing about her peers and teachers—and even exhibitions in which she was featured. Since Sikander was the first Pakistani artist to achieve recognition globally, opening the door for others, including her artist-critics, to describe this exclusion as dishonest is putting it kindly. Similarly, in *Art and Polemic in Pakistan: Cultural Politics and Tradition in Contemporary Miniature Painting*, Whiles refers to Sikander’s work only very briefly and ignores its foundational character for the school of art she writes about.

Both Dadi and Whiles write art history in a genealogical style, tracing contemporary aesthetic production back to founding fathers in a comically patriarchal way. They suggest that Imran Qureshi, the Pakistani artist who painted on the rooftop of New York’s Metropolitan Museum last year, is the “father” of the new miniature, forgetting that in the 1980s and ’90s it was Sikander, working with Bashir Ahmed and Zahoor ul Akhlaq, who provided miniaturists with a new format as well as an international platform. Moreover, while Sikander fully acknowledges her indebtedness to teachers and traditions, she has broken the genealogical line not simply by garnering more recognition than any of them, but also by putting such genealogies into question in her work, which always cancels out the

idea of origins.

Neither her work nor that of Shafi, with its intensely abstract character, fits easily into the crudely “political” categories that writers like Dadi have invented for Pakistani art history and which they seem to have taken wholesale from the academic chatter common in U.S. universities during the ’80s and ’90s. Here is an unembarrassed example from a description in Dadi’s book of his own work: “We attempted to articulate a post-conceptual practice in dialogue with the vitality of popular urban visualities to create photography, sculpture, and installations commenting on the visual theatrics of violence and urban identity and serving as an oblique critique of official nationalism.” One looks in vain for the “oblique critique” that Dadi refers to, only to be met by a barrage of obvious and stereotyped oppositions, in which such overexposed terms as “clash of civilizations” or “war on terror” are subjected to rather trite reflection.

*The double role of artist-critics allows them to rewrite Pakistan’s art history and erase important figures from it.*

Deploying as she does this logic of juxtaposition, the accomplished miniaturist Saira Wasim is thus preferred in Dadi’s *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* over Sikander, for whose subtlety his categories cannot account. Serving as gatekeepers for what counts as “Pakistani art,” figures like Dadi simultaneously deploy and “critique” nationalist narratives, thus helping to direct the flow of money going to support the culture of a country that has become globally visible because of its many problems. Everyone, it seems, can make money out of militancy and war, those who speak for as much as against it.

Even when lavishing praise on his chosen artists, however, Dadi is curiously unable to locate their work in the social and historical context that his book is meant to describe. Wasim’s *Round Table Conference* (2006), for example, is said accurately but also misleadingly to portray meetings of the Organization of the Islamic Conference; the title’s clear reference to the far more celebrated and consequential Round Table Conferences of the 1930s are left unexplored. It was in those meetings, after all, that Pakistan’s history might be said to have begun, witnessing as they did the birth of the future country’s name. Similarly, when describing the use of the number 5 in Risham Syed’s work, Dadi links it to everything—from the five senses to Islam’s five prayers—except one of the most common references in Pakistani society: that to the five members of the holy family, who the Shia, in particular, venerate. It is one thing to make Sikander disappear from Pakistan’s art history but to erase, in effect, the cultural presence of a Muslim sect under attack in Pakistan is unconscionably naive.

Minor though such exclusions might initially appear to be, taken together they indicate a systematic erasure of history. And nowhere is this more evident than in Dadi’s principal argument about “the art of Muslim South Asia,” which, it turns out, is all about Pakistan. His book foregrounds artists like Chughtai and Sadequain, whose emergence and influence cannot be understood without taking into account powerful Indian voices like S. H. Raza, M. F. Hussain and Tyeb Mehta of the older generation or G. M. Sheikh and Zarina Hashmi among the younger one. Of course, this would show up “Muslim South Asia” as a false aesthetic category, and therefore a made-up commercial label, since the artists involved clearly belong to worlds not defined by their religion. Maybe there is a critique of “official nationalism” being made in this claim for Pakistani art being synonymous with “Muslim South Asia,” but if so it is so “oblique” as to be invisible. In other words, Sikander’s banishment from Pakistani art

history is not merely the result of personal animosities; it illustrates a more general and deeply worrying trend of narrowly nationalist censorship and historical amnesia among the very champions of their “critique.”

With brokers in the art world in a position to rewrite Pakistan’s aesthetic history and set the pattern for collecting internationally, the work of these Little Dictators represents nothing less than the success of the big ones they so love to inveigh against. If anyone can break this stranglehold on the narrative of Pakistan’s cultural history, it is Sikander, who achieved global fame in the pre-9/11 world and whose work is not over-determined by the “war on terror,” itself now an aesthetic commodity. But it is a sign of the damage that has been done here if audiences have to be reminded that Sikander was the first artist to grapple with the miniature as a craft-based medium and make it central to contemporary art, internationally. In this sense, all those who came after her from Lahore’s National College of Art’s miniature department are indebted to her. But such recognition has been scant. Perhaps Sikander’s appearance at this year’s Lahore Literary Festival will spur a new appreciation of her work in Pakistan, and in doing so mount the first real challenge to an art-historical narrative that mimes real-world violence through acts of erasure.

*Devji is director of the Asian Studies Center at the University of Oxford. He is the author, most recently, of Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea (Harvard University Press, 2013). Sikander is LLF’s Artist of the Year. From our March 1 & 8, 2014, issue.*

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## 5 COMMENTS



Faisal Devji's allegations are simply outrageous.

The focus of my book is on modernism in South Asia, not contemporary art. It analyzes in some detail selected work of a very small number of artists: Chughtai, Zubeida Agha, Zainul Abedin, Shakir Ali, Sadequain, Rasheed Araeen, and Naiza Khan. The contemporary artists Devji mentions are discussed only briefly in a very short (11 page) Epilogue. This certainly does not mean that I find their work to be inconsequential, but only that following a research project requires one to focus on a set of questions and an archive, and above all, to advance an analytical and conceptual understanding of aesthetics and society based on necessarily selective cultural practices and artifacts, rather than writing a broad, bland survey. For this book, that emphasis was on twentieth century practice. The word-count of the book exceeded the limit set by the publishers, and simply could not be any longer. As a result, I was unable to discuss a number of important artists such as Ahmad Pervez, Zahoor ul Akhlaq, or Shemza.

Why does the development of Pakistani art have to be conceived as a zero sum game? Is Devji seriously implying that recent awards to Imran Qureshi and Naiza Khan are undeserving? Is Sikander the sole and singular artist worthy of recognition, and is her mention always necessary in every account of contemporary art in Pakistan? If Devji finds Sikander's work to be so significant, one wonders why he chooses to mount unbalanced attacks on the too few of us who are seriously committed to the art history of Pakistan, and not by using this opportunity to explicate the significance of her work (as by his own admission, he has not written on her work for over a decade)? Simply listing her accolades in the West and ascribing her role as a pioneer, as Devji does, is no substitute for formal and contextual analysis of actual works and projects, which will render her works aesthetically and historically meaningful. And certainly Sikander is hardly a forgotten figure, she is among the best-known artists from Pakistan internationally, a recipient of the "mother-of-all-awards," the MacArthur. She is hardly absent from the market, represented by well-established galleries in New York and London. Precisely how is she under censorship or erasure?

For the record, I have never claimed that Sikander is (or is not) "Pakistani," for me this kind of binary categorization is unhelpful in assessing the work of any artist. The question of the adequacy of nationalism and of "Muslim South Asia" in characterizing the works of artists in my book is important, and requires a much longer assessment than is possible here. Indeed, my entire book is a meditation on how artistic practice since the beginning of the twentieth century is a profound engagement with these frameworks. I do not see this as a settled matter: rather, these categories mark an ongoing crisis of self and society. My usage of them is also necessarily marked by catachresis, in that I have no recourse but to deploy concepts whose referent is neither adequate nor stable. It seems that Devji has not read or comprehended my book beyond the Epilogue, as its Introduction lays out the methodological stakes in addressing the vexed problem of "Islamic art" and its relation to modernity in South Asia.

I have never claimed that Imran Qureshi is "father" of the new miniature. I do note that he has "played a key role in training the next generation of miniature artists at the National College of Art" (p. 220), a role that Sikander never ever assumed. Does Devji have a different understanding of this widely established fact? And the allegation of my genealogies as being "comically patriarchal" is also odd, since I discuss Zubeida's Agha's pioneering work in abstraction as foundational. Abstraction as a mode of practice is a very significant for me, as can be seen in my discussion of Zubeida Agha and Shakir Ali.

On the significance of the number 5 for Risham Syed, the sentence in the book (p. 224)

begins as: “The number five has multiple connotations for the artist:” making it very clear that the meanings I describe are those the artist herself communicated to me as being of significance to her. As for Devji’s outrageous accusation that I unwittingly foster sectarianism in Pakistan, this is a malicious allegation unworthy of response, especially since I discuss the foundational importance of Shiaism for Sadequain’s art (p. 161), and how Araeen’s White Stallion is also a commentary on ongoing Shia-Sunni violence (p. 197).

To the best of my knowledge, the three Round Table Conferences of the early 1930s were negotiations between British and Indian leaders, not amongst the leaders of the “Muslim World” as depicted by Wasim in her Round Table Conference.

I have tried to be very scrupulous in not making the book into a personal platform for my own artwork. Indeed, in a book exceeding 70,000 words, my work (along with the work of Elizabeth Dadi and others) is discussed in passing in exactly 83 words, and is accompanied with no images. The so-called “Karachi Pop” has been recognized by many critics as an important development during the 1990s in Karachi (which did not have a miniature practice), and which opened up a new modality of practice by subsequent artists to engage with media and urban popular culture. Is Devji seriously suggesting that I should have omitted even this brief mention, and provide no context whatsoever for Karachi during the 1990s?

I have made no work called War on Terror. As for the billboard work Clash of Civilizations (with Elizabeth Dadi): this was created in the US after September 11, 2001, a deliberately provocative response to developments within the United States at a time when I was already based there. It is emphatically not a subject of any of the arguments in the book that discuss nationalism in South Asia (but it should be noted when it was exhibited in Islamabad’s National Art Gallery’s inaugural in 2007, the work had to be re-sited in another part of the building so that President Musharraf would not encounter it upon inauguration.)

Devji writes, “the work of these Little Dictators represents nothing less than the success of the big ones they so love to inveigh against. If anyone can break this stranglehold on the narrative of Pakistan’s cultural history, it is Sikander....” I leave it to the readers to assess whether equating the work of serious scholarship with dictatorship is worthy of someone who is director of the Asian Studies Center at the University of Oxford, and whether this is a “SENSIBLE, RELIABLE, AUTHORITATIVE” account that Newsweek proudly proclaims on its masthead.

Iftikhar Dadi

Associate Professor

Department of History of Art

Cornell University



**Harris Alexander Ahmed** 3 DAYS AGO

(Reply)

Mr. Iftikhar Dadi,

Your comment smells of shallowness and it is so disheartening for a person of your stature to stoop to such levels of pettiness. You should welcome any critique rather than start beating the bush. Everyone finds the article of Mr. Devji as an eye opener as to how Pakistani art / artists fate is dependent upon these few kingmakers, irrespective of the quality of work they produce !

Your comment clearly reflects the defence of these so called art gatekeepers as if you are a puppet / spokesperson of them. My respect for you as an Art Historian has totally

diminished as you mention in your biased comment :

"I have never claimed that Imran Qureshi is "father" of the new miniature. I do note that he has "played a key role in training the next generation of miniature artists at the National College of Art" (p. 220), a role that Sikander never ever assumed.

Mr. Dadi ! What about Prof. Bashir Ahmed under whose tutelage, all miniaturist have emerged ! How can you say Ms. Shazia has not played any role ? Is it about just training or putting miniature art on world scene !

Harris A. Ahmed,



**Virginia Whiles** 1 DAY AGO

(Reply)

To Editors of NEWSWEEK re article 'Little Dictators'

From Dr. Virginia Whiles

Faisal Devji's article reads like a rant from a frustrated groupie. Shahzia Sikander will shiver with shame if she reads it. This is a foul text full of anger and subjective spite, for what reason? Clearly Devji has not read my book. I refer to Sikander on eight pages, citing her serious and humorous reflections on her Ustads at NCA and on the nature of the training in the practice of miniature painting. Her comments reflect her political awareness of the threats of patriarchy that dominate Pakistan, the kind of which is perpetrated in this article, and illustrate Devji's total misreading of the feminist perspective in my book.

I know Shahzia Sikander and respect her work, the fact that she is not a protagonist in my book is because it is an ethnographic study of the specific practitioners of miniature painting whom I observed whilst participating as both student and lecturer in the NCA (National College of Art) from 1999 to 2002. Sikander had already left Pakistan when I arrived but her aura hovered maternally over the students, indeed she was a role model for the female practitioners. Devji's ignorance of the context is proven by his erasure of facts: that Sikander and Imran Qureshi were co-students and united in their profound respect for Zahoor ul Akhlaq, and if anybody has to play the 'father' role to contemporary miniature practice, it is he, loved and missed by all of us who had the privilege of knowing him. (Sadly Zahoor cannot read Devji's text as he would challenge him to fisticuffs and give us all a patriarchal laugh).

In response to his accusation of 're-writing art history': where lies the 'original' art history of Pakistan? Devji's implication that 'artist-critics' are an unusual product of Pakistan not only demonstrates his utter ignorance of cultural history throughout the world, it is an insult to the the honourable profession of criticism and the vital necessity of sustaining "a perpetual conflict of interests." As Said wrote: "Criticism must think of itself as life enhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination and abuse..." As to his vitriolic accusations of 'historical vandalism', of 'censorship' and of 'miming real world violence through acts of erasure'... and to crown it all 'Little Dictators', I will simply ask how an apparently eminent historian can cast such brutal stones on fellow comrades in search of speaking truth to power? There lies the anthropological, or psychoanalytical question.

Dr. Virginia Whiles



**Manail** 15 HOURS AGO

(Reply)

This article and the comments in response to it make for a fascinating debate regarding

history and its alleged erasure.

May one suggest, as a non-scholarly yet modestly informed reader of Pakistan's history and that of its art, that the truth is, as usual, somewhere in between? That is to say, neither are the country's current critics and cultural csars blameless in their alleged excising of significant artists from the 'canon', nor are they deserving of such a harsh critique themselves as the moniker 'little dictators' Dr. Devji reserves for them.

There is precious little by way of art history, even of the textbook variety, existing with regard to Pakistan's art. (Akbar Naqvi's 'Image and Identity: 50 Years of Pakistani Art', deserves special mention here as a rambling, lovable, eccentric and rather poetic work) of Anything any scholars throw the way of us little people would be eagerly received – censorial or otherwise.



**Ardy Cowasjee** 2 HOURS AGO

(Reply)

Dear Dr. Devji,

Thank you for exposing two of the caporegimes of Pakistan's small yet powerful Art Mafia, in your recent essay in Newsweek Pakistan.

The purpose of my comment is to mention another instance of artist exclusion and to highlight the recently "self-appointed" role of artist-curator in Pakistan which seems to be the next mortarboard to be worn by artists after the artist-critic role. (No reference to Quddus Mirza, of course & kudos to him for his current silence in the comments section !)

For the record, I would like to include a open letter which was written to Nazia Khan, the artist-curator of one of the biggest exhibitions in Karachi in recent years, " The Rising Tide " which also marginalized Unver Shafi & Amin Gulgee from the 42 artists in the show. Yet another example of manipulating the course of Pakistan's art history and erasing important figures from it.

Best Regards,

Ardy Cowasjee.

Owner of Ziggurat Gallery, Karachi (1990-94)

P.S. Art needs an artist-critic like a fish needs a bicycle.

OPEN LETTER TO THE CURATOR OF THE RISING TIDE : NEW DIRECTIONS IN ART FROM PAKISTAN 1990- 2010.

8th Nov.2010

Dear Naiza. How are you?

I went to see the "Rising Tide "yesterday afternoon. The first thing that struck me when I walked in was the glaring omission of Unver Shafi and Amin Gulgee's work from the exhibition that covers a period from 1990 – 2010.

Let me take you back to the early 90's. These two artists had already gained more prominence in Pakistan by 1991-93 than practically anyone in the Rising Tide. They had solo shows nationwide and were written about by everyone. They were breaking new ground/direction in their field, in a country which had a dismal art scene at the time, where painting pigeons and carving wooden figures was the order of the day. This was at a time when a large percentage of the Rising Tide's participants were having their fledgling group shows or hadn't even finished art school.

I was someone who was promoting new directions in art in the 1990's with the Ziggurat Gallery as you well know, and having shown Unver and Amin, I am curious to know on what grounds or valid criteria they were not included in the Rising Tide. Surely personal differences and other influences have to be put aside when dealing with a historical exhibition which appears to be undefined within any theme or one particular sphere of



art, be it contemporary or cutting edge, painting, sculpture etc. etc. and envelops all the different facets of art.

I know it's not easy to encompass 20 years of art in one show and people are bound to be excluded. But if I have to ask someone who artists as obscure as Polack & Hutcheson are (I called David Alesworth during the show), surely 2 of the most prominent Pakistani artists of the last two decades should have been included instead/as well !! Sadly all the reviews the Rising Tide has got, have failed to raise this question as well. Perhaps this perpetuates my belief that artists should be artists and curation left to gallery owners and professional curators. But then as you know anything flies in Pakistan where the definitions of artist, critic and curator all blur their dividing lines!

I await your reply,

Regards, Ardy.

P.S. 13th Nov.10

Naiza replied 3 days ago. Unfortunately her reply was too personal and patronizing to print here. It was written in a fit of pique and it would lower the tone of this letter and will not reflect well upon her. Her main defence to their exclusion was as expected, that Unver & Amin's work did not fit into the "theme" of the Rising Tide. A theme, that if it exists beyond being described on a board in the show, is one that is widely open to interpretation, and one she claims I failed to grasp !!

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