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Article:	Depiction of Shuttlecock Burqa in Pakistani contemporary Art
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Abstract

The main objective of this dissertation is to explore and study the core features of controversy that surrounds Shuttlecock *Burqa* in Pakistani contemporary art.

This paper is divided into two portions including the conclusion. The first part traces the historical view as veil (*parda*) and its origin. The second and final section presents a discussion on Pakistani controversial (especially) contemporary art, with emphasis on the paintings which are based on the subject of shuttlecock *burqa*. To explore whether the status of shuttlecock *burqa* is controversial or not? The researcher conducted a survey and presented quantified information / data. The findings and analysis of the survey, provides answers about how our public in the post 9/11 scene, perceives the issues that builds up controversy around shuttlecock *burqa*. Conclusion of the research is based on analysis of survey findings and portrayal of shuttlecock *burqa* in Pakistani contemporary art.

Keywords: *Parda*, shuttlecock burqa, oppression, vail, 9/11, controversial, Pakistani contemporary art, *dopatta*, *chadar*.

Introduction

Whenever we talk about art; it is very natural to think about something beautiful -- something which is pleasing to human eye. Generally, while attempting to create a work of art; every artist tries to create something new in terms of composition and concept.

Yet, nevertheless, it will be fair to say that concept or subject matter of the paintings and its projection is something which makes a painting acceptable or controversial. However, if we ask a simple question, that what make a painting controversial? Most probably the public would say that paintings on religious concept can be invoke criticism, some will say nude paintings can be controversial. On the other hand, it is logical to assume that when it comes to works of arts ... nothing is clearly right or wrong, because every society has its own norms, values and levels of tolerance against anything religious, social or political. It also depends on the time and period people live in.

Assessment of art is subjective; art critics and viewers from all walks of life assess a works of art differently.

In this research; an effort is made to explore some of the most controversial paintings in the history of Pakistani contemporary art that surrounds burqa, and employ it as a comparator to discuss Pakistani paintings which face criticism by the public. Considering that there are many Pakistani artists who have taken a subjective approach and painted *Burqa* to highlight what they think of it.

The work on shuttlecock *burqa* by various Pakistani artists, suggests that subject to the perception, each one of these artists enjoys a very different position on this theme.

Pakistani artists have produced notable works of art in this regard. So at present there are many working skillfully to explain the controversy that stems out of the shuttlecock *burqa*, on a global scale.

The researcher aims to employ standard research methodology based on a structured questionnaire, and interviews of artists especially those who have painted shuttlecock *burqa*. And that how, this research aims to explore how a painting becomes controversial. And as indicated earlier; focus of the research is to address the question whether the shuttlecock *burqa* is controversial or not?

Pakistani culture is diverse and rich with varied tones of colors and rhythms, offering a variety of cultural wears; some of them rooted deeply in our tradition. For example, Shuttlecock *Burqa* is cultural wear; it was introduced in Afghanistan (Pakistan). Burka was introduced in Afghanistan in the early twentieth century, during the tenure of HABIBULLA (1901-1919). Habibulla imposed the use of Burka upon more than 200 women from his harem, with an idea to make it impossible for other men see the faces of these women.

It is also said that the origin of burka and its use has been there, since the foundation of Aqueménide dynasty of Persia, founded by Cyrus II the Great (sixth century BC). On the other hand, reasonably, the veil was also used in Assyria (ancient Asian country located in the region of Mesopotamia). Written references, which dates back, from the thirteenth century BC, were discovered in this country, long before, the Muslim religion came to existence.

The work on this cultural wear by various Pakistani artist, suggests that subject to the perception, each one of these artist enjoys a very different position on this theme. Artist such as Rashid Rana, Jameel Baloch, Waseem Ahmad, Kausar Iqbal, Sylvat Aziz, Susan Saulat, Aisha

Khalid and many other contemporary are producing work in context of this stereotype depiction of female figure.

Controversial painting in modern contemporary art, with an idea to understand their importance, controversy that surrounds these paintings, and the way they make contributions to their society, if any? Art throughout history has often been used as a means to shock public?

Abstract Expressionism was developed in New York in the 1940s after World War II. This movement was the mixture of self-denial and emotional strength of the German Expressionists with nonfigurative and aesthetic of European abstract art such as the Bauhaus, Futurism (1909- 1915) and Synthetic Cubism (1907-1911) helped the movement to gain its name. Additionally, the movement was seen as being disordered, disobedient, and highly distinctive and some feel Nihilistic. (Kleiner, p 407).

However the question is that why this way of expression or technique gained mainstream recognition in 1950s is a matter of debate.

“This investigation has also created avenues of expression for artists across the world. The relationship between art and terror has been examined widely by artists globally and in Pakistan as artists bid to make sense of the chaotic nature of our existence. This is not a new phenomenon; artists through history have expressed the ravages of war through a range of mediums. We all know Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937) as an iconic example. The artist’s role in portraying war or terror has ranged from the documentaries to forms of protest, creating works that responded to the immediacy of an event or a distanced and thoughtful perception of it. The magnitude of 9/11 provoked an array of responses from the general public and artists alike not just in the USA but also in countries across the world that faced the repercussions of the violence and terror”.

Portrayal of Shuttlecock *Burqa* in Pakistani Contemporary Art

In the 1920s, the era of contemporary painting started in Pakistan with three subject painting traditions, and dominated in three regions. First one originated in Calcutta “oriental” style and small paintings were introduced with the layers of transparent washes. Gradually, with the passage of time, Pakistani painters replaced *saree* with their own wear like *shalwar kameez*. They also ventured into painting local themes. The second style was “western” which featured landscapes, motifs, and portraits in oil executed in the European manner. The third style was Rajput and Mughal miniatures. Most of the work was copied from the original miniature paintings. These three styles somehow changed the concepts of Pakistani painters to create their own style. (M. Sirhandi, Contemporary Painting in Pakistan, Lahore, p15)

In the post 1947 period, Pakistani painters started their quest to explore their own culture and most traditional wears, which are eyed with suspicion during the present day world owing to possible linkages with terrorist activities. Shuttlecock *burqa* is one of those traditional wears which symbolize and highlight the conservatory attitudes, suppression of women rights and explains some of the cultural transitions. Our contemporary artists are working on these conflicts which are making their work which appears controversial within Pakistan and viewed with apprehension, suspicion and questionable interest in the rest of the world.

Shuttlecock *burqa* appears symbolic of controversies which have surfaced in our society vis-à-vis the era of terrorism, extremism, fanaticism and intolerance in conflict with values reminiscent of modern life style. It is also a popular theme among our contemporary artists because of its clear divide with the common wear in the society and its symbolic impact on the personality, rights and social status of women. The *burqa*, effectively isolates the wearer from the society around her.

One of the most controversial works of Rashid Rana is the veil series in which he portrayed destructive stereotypes of women. But when we go closer to this art work we will find collage work with small images of porn girls. The concept was based on how the *burqa* is perceived as a political symbol in the era of post 9/11. Rashid Rana forcing the audience to look beyond them and critique the so-called gear of truth from which they are born. But his worldwide acknowledged work has never shown publically in his own country Pakistan. So he portrays shuttlecock *burqa* in a very unique way, totally a contrasting image of this cultural wear.



1.1 Rashid Rana, *Veil Series I, II & III*, 2004

Critical analysis of his *burqa* series shows a stark reality. A woman, like all females in the *Kingdom Annally* has the basic biological function to reproduce and perform its role in continuation of her race. At the same time, like in the case of large number of species, the males in the society want to ensure continuation of their own particular genes. Forced into sexual isolation from the society through the use of *burqa*, the woman is still a human being with her biological instincts intact. Her biological needs come forth in the form of desires for intimacy which are strictly regulated by men in her family/ society. Clad in *burqa*, where she appears "invisible" to everyone in her vicinity and where even she herself has a closely guarded limited tunnel vision through the small mesh in front of her eyes, yet her congenital desire to attract her

man, her sex partner is there. In those societies where such strict chastity guarding is present, the men still see women as sex objectives although they appear as walking piles of cloth. Even then, the vibes, sexual chemistry and the desire for intimacy are there. The basic animal attraction between the opposite genders is a very strong force which will always be there, no matter how much segregation is ensured.

According to theory of Abraham Maslow (1908- 1970) love and affection is the fourth most basic need in life coming in importance immediately after air, water and food. The images also symbolize the male sexuality. When the normal option of having a female in life is not there, the attention is diverted to pedophilia and homosexuality. It is a strict taboo in the modern societies, yet so common among sex deprived men in "conservative segments" of our society, especially truck drivers who are deprived of female intimacy due to their rather long stays away from the family scene.

In 2005 another artist from Baluchistan Jameel Baloch (b 1972) created a *Burqa* clad fibre glass form, with the title *Valentine's Day*. As there is no apparent correlation between *burqa* and Valentine flowers. This is a very conflicting concept. Because, according to our social perception a female with shuttlecock *burqa* should be reserved and inexpressive of her liking or disliking. So this conflicting concept in this fibre glass sculpture makes it controversial, or unacceptable for our conservative people.

Valentine's Day is celebrated on February 14th every year as a symbol of love. Bringing the symbolic red roses into the hands of a sexually isolated female figure clad in a *burqa* is a powerful theme. It is a bold, yet very rational concept delving into the mysteries of the *burqa*. The woman inside the thick walls of isolation is a human being. The human being is alive like the rest of the members of her society. She has emotions, desires and biological needs for

intimacy. She desires for the company of opposite gender, but her congenital urges are tightly controlled and regulated by men in her family and society.



1.2 Jameel Baloch, *Valentine's Day*, 2005

By pushing a woman inside the confines of a *burqa*, men folk strive to control her behaviour and isolation. The tool works with limited efficiency. Even when a woman is dressed up in a restrictive *burka*, deep inside, she is still a woman, and in her own way and with her own desires, she is still alive and available for human contact. The world does not see her but she looks at the outside world through her tiny window (mesh like screen) with the normal feelings of a woman which includes the desire for companionship, femininity, desire, protection and continuation of human race. The Valentine flowers in her hands, held outside the thick wall of *burqa* still welcome the company of her male counterpart.

Kausar Iqbal (b 1980) *Burqa* series is almost humorous on the surface, with nostalgic pottery motifs and kaleidoscopic designs based around women in *burqa*. However, as Iqbal says, his work highlights the more pertinent issues surrounding women in his society.

Thoroughly immersed in the history and way of life in Pakistan, he thinks of his work as describing “my people and my culture, through my eye.”



1.3 Kausar Iqbal, *Untitled*, 2010, mix medium, 11"x9"

This series, like his other, is symbolic of the strength and resilience of the Pakistani women. According to the artist “Some people see the *burqa* as a form of oppression whereas for many women it affords a sense of security in a male-dominated society.” Kausar Iqbal talked about the security for women in *burqa* that seems to choke the women as portrayed in his work. *Burqa* might provide some respite from hungry gazes of opposite gender starved men in a conservative societal set up, but at the same time, *burqa* remains a strong symbol of suppression and subjugation. The *burqa*-clad women on *wasli* are bound—some in a noose-like grip, some with their feet bound and at least one dangling like a string puppet from the edge of the veil. It is interesting to see that ropes around the mid body region of the women in

his painting symbolize the control on their sexuality induced by the societal taboos and traditions. The question is that if *burqa* is to hide a woman and to avoid male gazing then why it is so decorative and eye catching?

If we say our country (Pakistan) is often part of the headlines of international news; mostly for negative reasons then it would not be wrong. So the beauty and depth of its culture diversity of this nation at the crossroads of Asia tends to disappear in the waves of terrorism, conflict, turmoil, intolerance, extremism and religious fanaticism. It would be a farce if we blink away the strength of the negativities faced by Pakistan and their pronounced role in shaping our expectations. Nevertheless, as a result a new generation of artist with new negative or controversial thoughts has emerged. Mostly Taliban and other fundamentalist groups is often the subject of work of art. Waseem Ahmed (b 1976) was born in the era of Zia ul Haq ruled (1978-1988) extraordinary series of miniatures turns this traditional taboo upside-down.

His first solo exhibition, titled *Silver Bullet*, was held at the Laurent Delaye Gallery in London in 2010. If we define the word silver in the scale of correspondences between metals and planets, silver relates to the ‘moon’ and belongs to a symbolic scheme, or chain, linking Moon to water to female principle. The color of silver, the passive, female, lunar, watery and cold principle. The color of silver is white; that of gold, yellow.



1.4 Waseem Ahmad, *Iwa db12*, 2010, Guche, watercolor, 11"x 15"

Waseem Ahmed paints with great delicacy and his work has helped emerged a unique style has that blends tradition with contemporary interventions. His previous exhibitions in Karachi have contributed significantly towards enriching the Pakistani visual arts scene with his novel, unique and difference viewpoint. His new series *In the name of faith* is likely to bring more enrichment to the contemporary art in the country.

Werewolf is not a natural animal. It is certain individuals who become wolves when there is full moon, the sign of lunacy or madness. A Werewolf is a mythical creature in European Folklore. It is capable of changing's its form and shape. Its behavior spans from totally docile to that of a ferocious animal capable of great harm to those who come in contact with it. A werewolf is vulnerable to specially made silver bullets. Those wolves cannot be killed by ordinary bullet from a gun, since they are mythological creatures therefore special bullets made of silver used to kill them. The artist considers *burqa* as a sign of madness or lunacy either by the society or just as a symbol of male dominance. He suggests special means and efforts to bring this social evil to an end.

According to Virginia Whiles, the tradition of South Asian miniature painting, particularly the Mughal style, emerges as the breeding ground for giving birth to some of the most radical contemporary art work in Pakistan today. She appreciates that: “within the current ‘reinvention’ of miniature painting; practitioners are interrogating the ideological motives behind such revival strategies, while still fascinated by the tradition”.

Waseem Ahmed has successfully endeavored in beautifully presenting the nexus of the two otherwise contradictory factors. He depicts the cruelties and injustices which are done in the name of religion and efforts to attain bliss in the afterlife. He makes a clear distinction in the wrongdoings in this world as compared to the trouble-free life in the Hereafter. He presents a landscape of desolation and uses careful ideas so as not to bring a shock to his fellow beings. However, the *burqa* does not remain a docile piece of attire meant for seclusion of sexes, it becomes a camouflaged guise for a suicide bombes in his paintings and the individual figures are turned into bullets and shrapnel, personifying fear for the society. He effectively uses the Mughal art traditions in skillfully portraying the present day paradoxical conflicts in the society. It is a unique experience to see the blending of traditional medium with controversial subjects of the contemporary world.

While talking about contemporary social issue it is very important to discuss old social problems still existing in Sindh. A group of artists exhibited their work on the topic of *No Honor in Killing*. Sylvat Aziz (b 1954) describes this theme with a floating hallowed Shuttlecock *Burqa* in the air. World does not see her because of the high walls around her yet her sexuality survives as she has the option to look at the men folk through the narrow restrictive window available to her. She faces fears from those guarding her chastity yet she has the desire, her desire as a human being to have intimate contact with a man.



2.7 Sylvat Aziz, 'No Honor' in Killing, 2010, Photograph

The installation of shuttlecock *burqa* by Aziz is a very unique concept in the sense that a restricted or conservative wear floating in the air with golden flowers background. The *burqa*-clad body (which is Aziz's photograph of her daughter posing in the garment) covers any human being who was there, and shackled into submission to the ideas of the dominant males in her surroundings, yet the portrayed image is indicative of the imminent eruption of the emotions and angers in that encapsulated female. Her emotions are like a torrent of gushing flood water that after breaking the boundaries will break every bond.

Aziz portrayed a very strong notion of *No honour in Killing* through a *burqa* is always described suppression for women now a days. That she has no right to describe her own life or float in the air of her liking and disliking if she did then will be killed in the name of honor killing.

We can say it exploits of tradition and religion and trying to impose mindset of medieval days, and consider it as, morality and ethics disused. These so-called medieval values suppress women and forced them to be submissive in front of the men. A painting (titled as 50 Shades of Grey), by a young artist Sausan Saulat (b 1990) is good example. This contemporary

painting glorifies the dull and ordinary subjects with eye catching bright floral background. In a closer look one can notice that subjects are everyday objects, and we would ordinarily fail to notice, or choose to ignore.



2.8 Sausan Saulat, *50 Shades of Gray*, 2015, Oil on canvas

If we see visuals of this painting we can see dull subjects with a bright and colorful background, and white images of pavement. On the right side in the same painting we can see female figure set in very seductive poses with white outline and reflecting two sides of grey. In one side submissive subjects with dull grey *burqa* on the other side two woman outlines in seductive manner reflecting spectrum that is existing in our society.

50 shades of grey is inspired from (and draws its name from) the famous Hollywood movie of 2015. The movie is based on a novel Fifty Shades of Grey 2011, carrying erotic romantic themes by a British writer E.L. James. This movie revolves around an agreement between a billionaire and a common girl. The parties to the agreement are the Dominant and the Submissive. This carries an uncanny resemblance with the forced seclusion of human beings in our society with a view to exercise control over their sexuality. The image depicts several women attired in *Burqa* of various shades, yet, carrying the same significance of erecting thick walls around the women, ensuring her societal seclusion from the male members of the society.

The women have patterns and motifs in the background which is depiction of orthodox Muslim art tradition of human or animal forms as taboo for the visual arts. We do not see any human beings in the images. There are shades of some form shown. There is no visible element in the image which shows that there are any living human beings inside the thick *burqa*. With the backdrop of the name of the image, the women in *Burqa* are the submissive in our society and they are under the slavery of the Dominant. They are not allowed to make decisions about their own life and future. Another interesting aspect about the supposedly female forms clad in *burqa* in the foreground, is that they do not essentially portray human form, yet they symbolize the gender and are an object of lust for men looking at them. We see only objects.

The role of women is as important in our society that of a men we cannot deny this reality. Nature has already defined the role of both genders we can not change it. Selina Roman (b 1978) born in Florida is not a Pakistani artist but researcher feel necessary to describe her work to support importance of female. Her installation is very bold and communicative to highlight the nature.

Selina Roman has shown a very powerful image. The woman is dressed in her restrictive *burqa* supposed to make her invisible to the world. She could not see the world and should not have been seen as a woman. However, somehow she ended up in successfully performing the biological role assigned to her by nature.



2.9 2010 Salena Roman, *Growth*, 2010, photograph

She let her desire overcome the restrictions and now she appears in the family way. Her unborn child is ready to enter the world but she is not. She does not have the answer or the courage to explain to the people in her surroundings as to why she violated the norms of the society. Why she could not adhere to the strict code expected of her. Now she has a life growing inside her and she is dead because of the fears. Fear of those who have control over her life and death. Roman discussed *burqa* in its literal meaning through the medium of photography and visual composition with natural surroundings to judge or challenge the audience conventional knowledge of it. And she gave a very different and natural perspective of a female.

Burqa, in its spirit, is essentially a sign of sexual and social bondage, yet in order to rationalize it and to depict it as kosher, religious significance is attached to it. Selina successfully distinguishes it from its *prima facie* religious context, and looks at other features. Instead of showcasing it as a domineering garment, she views *burqa* placed within the backdrop of serene yet sunny Florida, where it appears a floating and bellowing icon. She effectively disassociates

the iconic symbol of bondage and brings it to a free world where it does not have any association with its political context.

At a distance from *Roman's* obvious emphasis on the beauty and femininity, that these garments project, she brings forth the “good side” of the restrictive garment. The positive characteristics include privacy, security, and freedom from the efforts for survival. Essentially, these factors appear only from a certain perspective or angle of view. Even if these factors are viewed with positivity, yet, the small print shows the woman as a second rate citizen of the society, subject to the whims and controls exercised by the dominant males in her family, and a very restrictive patriarchal social set up.



2.10 Aisha Khalid, *untitled*, 2012

A miniature painting by Aisha Khalid (b 1972), a leading artist in Pakistan convey a very strong message through a small scale painting on *wasli*. Interestingly she works in a different

way with this same subject *burqa* and tried to highlight very soft thoughts about it, as compared to other contemporary artist as the researcher discussed. Sometimes she merge it background with geometrical shapes to portray two contrasting concepts. In her paintings *burqa* is sometime as a means of oppressions and sometimes as a means of shelter or security according to the perception of Aisha Khalid. The most different aspect she discussed as compare to Rashid Rana, Jameel Balooch, and other Pakistani artist who worked on this subject. The above painting is about that *burqa* or vial is a harder between lovers and beloved. She did not discuss any issue of women subjection or oppression.

But one profound by-product of such repetitiveness in contemporary Pakistani art is that is that variety of pieces goes down their identities, loses much of their impact, and causes them to be perceived in terms of a composition of redundant mannerism. Not to say that artists should restrict themselves to painting non-controversial subjects and leave political concerns to the politicians but we have become so used to/insensitive to the ‘representation’ of things/issues that we can perceive that Art which contain political issues seems to be ineffective, (especially in front of capitalism which so effectively neutralizes its message).

After analysing the works of Pakistani contemporary artists, it becomes clear that those have worked on Shuttlecock *Burqa* have done so in line with their perception; they have a stand point of their own standpoint from they observe and judge subjects they paint. Amusingly all the artist painted Shuttlecock *Burqa* in a controversial way, which is confusing. The audience is left to decide whether the work of an artist is controversial or not?

Controversy

Connection with shuttlecock *burqa* is all about the controversy that surrounds it. During the discussion in the earlier chapters it became clear that nobody noticed anything wrong about

shuttlecock *burqa*; until its negative depiction by some artists. Therefore, in the first place it was essential to find which medium artists use most to depict shuttlecock *burqa* negatively. And in the second place take the bull by the horns and ask the public whether they consider shuttlecock *burqa* controversial or not?

To acquire quantitative information; the researcher opted to carry out a survey. In doing so emerging themes were identified and discussed. These identified themes were used in creating a survey questionnaire to carry out an online survey-based research.

This foolproof systematic data collection and entry of responses on Excel helped the researcher to visually present the quantified information.

Conclusion

The researcher has made an effort to find the answer to the question: is the *Burqa* controversial or not? With special reference to the Pakistani contemporary art. The most important part of this dissertation is the discussion of Pakistani contemporary art after 9/11 in which shuttlecock *burqa* is being depicted frequently with different aspects that touches some of the political, cultural and women liberation/suppression issues. Their paintings are controversial or unacceptable in our conservative society. But we cannot say that artist should be bound or restrict his or her creativity which originates in artist mind after a profound and deep observation. The artistic attempt on contemporary ‘political’ or ‘cultural’ topics is making it more controversial in present day Pakistan society.

In this research paper the researcher has made an effort to document the few of the known contemporary artists who portrayed shuttlecock *burqa* with different controversial angles. There was an intense need to explore that is shuttlecock *burqa* controversial or its perception or depiction is making it controversial?

Keeping in mind, all the questions in survey are related to our traditional wear, which is closely related to religious tradition, researcher has made an effort to cover all these areas. Researcher is more confident about her research that it will be beneficial for the future researchers to explore it further with different angles in addition to the documentation of controversies that surround Shuttlecock *Burqa* and its impact on Pakistani contemporary art. As a result of empirical research the researcher finds, that the Shuttlecock *Burqa* is not controversial. But the controversy surrounds in the ways it is portrayed and how it is perceived by publics. For example, in the research survey questionnaire, a question was asked; "Do you think Shuttlecock *Burqa* is controversial?" As a result 39.3% respondents said "No" it is not controversial and 36.3% respondents said "Yes" it is. Whereas 24.4% respondents opted for "Don't know". This means that the respondents who used the option *don't know*; were unsure whether the shuttlecock *Burqa* is controversial or not. Therefore, it would be unreasonable to think that Shuttlecock *Burqa* is a controversial wear. However, when the researcher talk about portrayal of Shuttlecock *Burqa* in Pakistani contemporary art, the researcher came across enough evidence that with authority the researcher can say "Yes" the portrayal of Shuttlecock *Burqa* is controversial. For example, in response to a question in the research survey that "to what extent do you agree Shuttlecock *Burqa* is presented in a negative manner? 53% respondents indicated that *Burqa* is depicted negatively in Pakistani contemporary art.

The scope and limitations of Quantitative Analysis is restricted to this piece of empirical research, which was carried out in the month of January / February 2016. The findings of this research generally support stereotype public perceptions about Shuttlecock *Burqa*. It is needless to say that it was adverse post 9/11 attack environment that forcefully shaped public perception about anything linked to Muslim ways of life. However, as public perception keep

changes from time to time. Therefore, the findings of this survey based research do not present a clear cut answer about status of Shuttlecock *Burqa* as a controversial item of day to day use.

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