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Counter-discourses

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'Mughal Mania' under Zia ul-Haq

As the first nation created as a religious asylum, Pakistan has a short but tormented history of fifty-four years, half of which was controlled by a military regime. Founded in the name of 'Islam in danger' by Muhammed Ali Jinnah (1876-1948), Pakistan officially elected Islam as the religion of the state in 1973, during the tenure of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1928-1979), the first popularly elected Prime minister of the country. Bhutto was arrested and hanged by general Zia ul-Haq (1928-1988). While the Islamization rhetoric of Bhutto was characterized by its mixture of socialism, nationalism and populism, the discourse of Zia ul-Haq appeared to be of a much more straightforward military-Islamist type. In opposition to his rule, a counter-discourse developed in which Mughal heritage was revived.

Without going deep into details of the selective brand of Islamization the state promoted, let us say that the regime was above all a dictatorship: eleven years of military rule (1977-1988) that ended only with Zia ul-Haq's death. Zia's Islamization programme was mainly twofold: Firstly, it comprised a deliberate attempt at reforming selective aspects of the penal code inherited from the British through the Hudood Ordinances (1979), the Law of Evidence (1984) and the Blasphemy Law (1986). It was then a kind of juridical *bricolage* that tended to harm above all women and religious minorities. Secondly, it used propaganda through the media (television, radio, and schoolbooks) in favour of religious education, Arabization (Zia ul-Haq himself put on an Arabic accent when he was speaking in Urdu), sanctity of the mosque, canonical Islam, and women's modesty (veiling, restriction of the image of women in commercials and cinema). During the 1980s, Pakistan's national television was notorious for John Wayne movies: a homosocial universe where, except for the saloons, women were virtually absent.

Pakistani society responded to the state Islamization process at different levels. Some – extremely vocal – women's groups, intellectuals and journalists spoke out against the policies, but among them were also animators of the media scene (dancers, painters, music bands, fashion designers, etc.). The latter is a universe which, as a matter of fact, cannot do much without women or the image of women. It was in the 1980s, at the zenith of Zia's dictatorship, that the trope of the Mughal Empire, or rather a specific reflection of the lost Mughal splendour, became a kind of *passage obligé* for a certain section of the media.

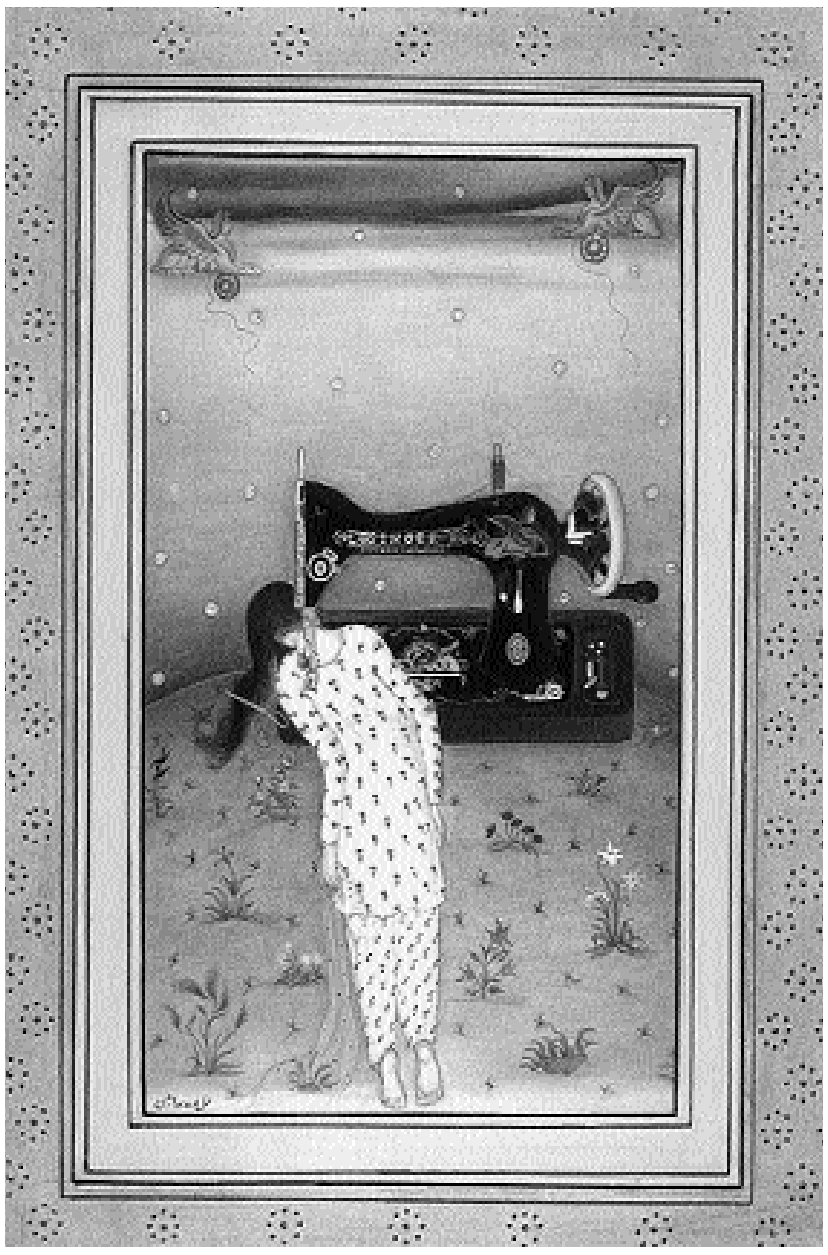
It should be noted here that the Timurid dynasty, widely known as the 'Mughal' dynasty, founded by Babur in the mid-16th century, dominated India politically until the 18th century and culturally up to 1857 (which marked the Sepoy Mutiny). But by the second half of the 19th century, effective Mughal power was no more than a memory. What is now considered Pakistan was then at the periphery of Mughal India, the heart of which was Delhi, Fatehpur Sikri and Agra (located in present-day India). The flamboyant exception was Lahore, which for 13 years (1585-1598) was the main seat of the 16th-century Great Moghul Akbar (1542-1605) and one of the major imperial cities during the Mughal period.

The 'Mughal miniature'

The most prestigious art school in Pakistan, the National College of Arts (NCA, a 19th-century institution built by the British), became one of the centres for the revival of the Mughal nostalgia during Zia ul-Haq's era (when non-figurative art and calligraphy became the dominant ideological style). Miniature painting was the epitome of this attempt at revival – not, of course, that the reproduction and merchandising of the so-called 'Mughal miniature' were entirely new. In the 1970s, for instance, under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto the reclamation of traditional Mughal style became a part of the nationalist rhetoric and the miniature was regarded as the perfect gift for visiting dignitaries.[1] But it was definitely under the regime of Zia ul-Haq that 'Mughal mania' really took off at the NCA, where art was promoted as a major study, a department in its own right.

The NCA, which is a semi-governmental institution, always stood as a bastion of liberalism (or objectionable *laissez-faire,* according to one's convictions). It is a co-educational institution where the golden youth of the country mix freely, female students and teachers never donned the veil (even at the peak of Zia ul-Haq's regime); short hair (for girls), tight t-shirts and cigarettes are commonplace. In short, in a milieu where study of nudes is compulsory as a part of the curriculum, the NCA was considered to be at the forefront of 'westernization'. Hence the importance of this concept of 'endangered Islamic tradition of miniature art' vocally promoted by the teachers from the 1980s onwards. However, the students, especially the current generation of graduates, are more than keen to shake the model of reference. While portraits of the 'Great Mughals' (Jehangir, Shah Jahan, etc.) are still produced, exhibited and sold, and the production technique is as close as possible to the original, the graduates from the miniature department have also produced a great deal of avant-garde or *engagé* work. For example, the miniature entitled 'Stitched to Order' (Sadir Amin, 2000) reads as a critique of development programmes for women, which identified the sewing machine as the key to emancipation.

Stitched to Order.



ARTIST: SADIA AMIN

The empire strikes back

During the Zia years, the fashion scene went through a tremendous change as well. If 'truly Islamic' calligraphy was the regime's motto in the art scene, the anti-sari campaign (the sari being seen as Hindu and non-Islamic in origin) as well as anti-Western dress propaganda (Western dress being seen as repugnant to tradition) were very active in the 1980s. In the glamorous fashion scene, the glittering splendours of the lost empire were particularly revived, but not of course without a heavy dose of eclecticism. In a country where the vestiges of Muslim grandeur are more likely to be found next door (in India), Pakistani fashion designers created a fantastic repertoire where the intricate, so-called 'Mughal' embroidery (brocade, gold and silk) coexisted with a kind of pastoral evocation and pseudo-mystical inspiration: colourful cotton peasant dress, ethnic jewellery and even the accessories of religious mendicants (such as amulets 'recycled' as necklaces). In short, at a time when, following (or competing with) the government rhetoric, Arab-style *ᶜabaya* and *hijāb*, Iranian-style *chādar*, and the South Asian tight and covering *duppatā* (veiling) became more and more visible in public spheres, the urban fashion scene was celebrating the flamboyance of the Mughal court, the colours of the countryside and the mystical light of the Sufi saints. Such an outcome would be fruitfully evaluated through the problematic of hybridization, or *métissage* as it recently has been developed in contemporary research.[2]

Cosmetic though it may seem, this selective appropriation of the 'ethnico-mystical-historical' register was very much in accordance with the strategy of certain opponents to Zia's regime. Against the centralized state-sponsored Islamization, many intellectuals opposed to Zia ul-Haq's dictatorship used the Sufi poets of the Sind and Punjab as a political device to show how much these figures of traditional Islam (or traditional religiosity) had been the champions of the people's cause and the adversaries of tyranny. That this interpretation might be somehow anachronistic and historically inaccurate is not of concern here. The purpose is to show how a kind of counter-discourse – advocating the periphery rather than the centre, pluralism rather than a singular dogma, traditional mystical poetry rather than universalist *sharīᶜa* – an alternative way of presenting 'authenticity' which does not necessarily deny but rather questions the state's propaganda, became an extremely powerful force during Zia's time.

It is ironic that more than 150 years after the collapse of Muslim rule, the empire or (the vestiges of the empire) struck back in certain Pakistani media. Now, this consumption and reconstruction of the past is in accordance with what Hobsbawm has described as the 'invention of tradition'. Admittedly these mediatic spheres were – consciously or unconsciously – bypassing the censorship board (which the Islamists successfully invested in the 1980s) by using a historically defined, profane, mundane, but nonetheless resolutely Islamicate register. The concept of Islamicate, as coined by Hodgson, implies a repertoire 'referring not directly to the religion, Islam itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims'. As he rightly puts it, '[…] much of what […] Muslims have done as a part of the "Islamic" civilization can only be characterized as "un-Islamic" in the […] religious sense of the word'.[3] And indeed, against the constant criticisms of westernization and violation of tradition, the strategy displayed by the animators of the media scene paid off (and to a certain extent still does).

Beyond the fear of the censor's scissors, in a young nation like Pakistan (the *raison d'être* of which is still a matter of polemic) this inventive derivation of a prestigious Muslim *grandeur et décadence* allows, in Hobsbawm's words again, 'to establish continuity with a suitable historic past'.[4] The strategy has also become a quest. Through the media and artistic space, Pakistani creators seem to have presented a more pluralistic view of what being a Muslim and a Pakistani could mean.

Notes

1. Whiles, Virginia, 'Miniature Painting in Pakistan Today', lecture at the EHESS, Paris, 10 January 2001.
2. See for example, Amselle, Jean-Loup (1990), *Logiques métisses, Anthropologie de l´identité en Afrique et ailleurs*, Paris: Payot; and Gruzinsky, Serge (1999), *La pensée métisse*, Paris: Fayard.
3. Hodgson, Marshall G. S. (1974), *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, Vol: I, Chicago, pp. 57-59. See also Mukul Kesavan (1996), 'Urdu, Awadh and the Tawaif: The Islamicate Roots of Hindi Cinema', in Zoya Hassan (ed.), *Forging identities: Community, State and Muslim Women*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, pp. 244-257.
4. Hobsbawn, E. J and Ranger, T. (eds) (1983), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 1.

Christèle Dedebant wrote her Ph.D. dissertation on the figureheads of the women's condition in Pakistan (EHESS, Paris). She is currently (2000-2001) a post-doctoral fellow in the Working Group Modernity and Islam (AKMI), Berlin, Germany.
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