QUESTION OF HONOR

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My thesis, *Question of Honor*, addresses the premise of women's lack of choice in relation to men's honor, and vengeance; concepts that are closely connected to the oppressive world of women in Pakistan. These works deal with concepts of purity and minor transgressions that have an impact on the lives of women in relation to family names and the associative feelings of humiliation linked to men. The subtle nuances of women and their reactions to oppression give a strong emotive content to the work.
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INTRODUCTION

Women in Pakistan have been severely disadvantaged and discriminated against through denial of economic, social, civil and political rights, under the auspices of men's honor. Men in Pakistani society have virtually no other means of undoing a perceived infringement of 'honor' than to kill the women assumed to be guilty of it. Social pressures to eliminate the offending woman are great; men who would rather ignore rumors of infringement of honor are themselves considered dishonorable and men that are closely related to them usually perpetuate the repercussions towards them. Few positive changes have taken place in the area of women's rights in the last three decades. Laws continue to discriminate against women and they remain marginalized in the public sphere. These atrocities are tragically justified in the name of Islam, thereby making it impossible for women to stand up for their rights in the face of society\(^1\). For the sake of harmony and peace in their homes, these women become complicit in their own oppression.

The traditional role in Pakistan for a woman is wife, mother or daughter within the confines of the home. The term ‘fast woman’ encompasses all women who don’t fall into that category including women in the work place. I find this an interesting paradox, where a woman's purity is evaluated from the vantage point of a man, and how well disposed he might be feeling towards a particular woman. Due to economic necessity, women in Pakistan are now coming into the urban work force, resulting in them questioning the traditionally designated roles, which pigeonholed them into either category.

\(^1\) Amnesty International, Pakistan: Insufficient Protection of Women.
In my research on the honor system in Pakistan, I came across literature that is derogatory and demeaning to women. This research was the catalyst for my current desire to delve deeper into the subject of honor. In my artwork I want to deal with the premise of women’s lack of choice in relation to men’s honor, and vengeance; concepts that are closely connected to the oppressive world of women in Pakistan. I want my work to suggest that the stereotypical perceptions of women’s roles need new evaluation and to be unashamedly female in its orientation. I hope to generate interest and understanding towards the role of women, where most choices women make are in consideration for their home and families.

Questions

1. How do I explore the history of gender inequalities in the Pakistani Society through my artwork?

2. How do I link different bodies of work that evoke essential femininity of women?

3. How do I create a visible sense of history and memory through the processes to show the negative traditions and customs of Pakistan?

Methodology

To answer the stated questions, I will explore two-dimensional media in fibers. I will create a body of work that ranges from paper drawings to stuffed two dimensional fabric pieces. A combination of textile dyes, paints, resists, and discharge techniques will help generate imagery to create my artwork.

From a historical perspective, I will select images that symbolize ideas of oppression of women in South Asia such as the veil. I will use three specific colors, white for purity, black for impurity, and red for open wounds. I want to explore both the traditional and current nature of these colors in connection to the Pakistani culture and history. I want to incorporate wax, coffee grounds and dyes on paper. The addition of wax and coffee grounds for stains will give a sense of history through its similarity to aged parchment and the use of specific colored
dyes will create symbolic meanings. The results will allow the work to be more conceptually ambiguous.

I want to explore paper drawings, collage and layering of images juxtaposed with embroidery. Traditionally, embroidery in Pakistan has been used for identification purposes between tribal and geographical regions. I will use embroidery to depict essential femaleness of women. Cutting out areas and embroidering around the edges will create openings on the paper works. The second group will be in fabric with sculptural forms protruding outwards. I will use stuffing and embroidery to make these works. Embroidery will be the connection between the paper and fabric works. I will keep a journal/sketchbook throughout this project to answer the above stated questions, and at completion, the work will be exhibited in a gallery.
DISCUSSION OF ART WORK

My Master of Fine Arts (MFA) exhibition Question of Honor, addresses the various aspects of women's lack of choice in relation to men's honor, and vengeance; concepts that are closely connected to the oppressive world of women in Pakistan. The traditional role in Pakistan for a woman is wife, mother or daughter within the confines of the home. The term ‘fast woman’ encompasses all women who don’t fall into that category including women in the work place. My interest in social and gender related issues, culturally specific as well as on a global level stem from my own identity and placement in the western context. My work deals with concepts of purity and minor transgressions that have an impact on the purity of women in relation to the family name and the feelings of humiliation associated with men.

Three women artists have influenced my work. I knew Shahzia Sikander from art school in Lahore. I had the opportunity to see Sikander’s work at her BFA exhibition in Lahore at the National College of Arts. Sikander incorporated imagery of herself and her family in the traditional Mughal miniature painting technique making it more personal and contemporary. Once I started researching Sikander, my progression to Shirin Neshat and Ghada Amer was natural. I realized I was interested in artists that have roots in Asian cultures, specifically South Asia and the Middle East, who now live and work in the United States. These three women artists fall within the same age generation and were raised in Muslim countries with traditional Islamic values. I was inspired and motivated by these artists to use imagery that was culturally specific to me and yet enable the American audience to participate and understand the fundamental issues visually.

Out of nineteen pieces of artwork I will focus on three pieces to address the proposed questions. Further more, each piece will represent one question in its entirety. The works that I want to talk about are:

- Chardevari, 2003, 21”X 29½ “X 2", dyes, wax, color photocopy, silk embroidery, screen print,

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2 Shahzia Sikander, Exhibition Catalogue: The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago
• pigment, discharge on paper mounted on board, fabric and stuffing mounted on MDF.

• *Dagh*, 2003, 50" X 38", Silk and metallic thread embroidery, coffee, dyes, wax

• *Hessiat*, 2003, 29 ½"X 22", dyes, coffee, wax, screen print, pigment, and silk embroidery on paper.

**Question 1**

*Chardevari*, finished in the fall of 2003, addresses the exploration of gender inequalities in the Pakistani society. The meaning of the word *Chardevari* can loosely be translated as an “enclosed space” usually associated with the home and its boundaries. The symbols I used are a peacock, an architectural motif- used in the inlay of semi precious stones in historical buildings and on textiles through dyes and block print; a color photocopy of a woman from a traditional miniature painting, published in Pakistan in 1988 as an image on a calendar; hand embroidery in white- tracing a veil on top of the woman’s image; wax-application; coffee stains and dye drips. The woman is enclosed inside a rectangle shape, embroidered with a red thread, with the veil escaping the confines of the rectangle. This work is made on paper, which is then pasted on a board to give it more weight formally.

The completely enclosed rectangular space embroidered in a blanket stitch in red thread symbolizes the space that a female can inhabit, in the Pakistani society and was used as a confining space illustrating the home or society at large. The boundary wall stitched in red depicts the lack of ways to pass through her prescribed restrictions.

I used a peacock as a male element because it is a universal symbol of beauty. The red color of the peacock is to show the violent temperament of the male, perpetuated by history, tradition and customs passed down through generations. The peacock is facing away from the female showing a lack of compassion or interest on the part of the male population. The size of the peacock is small in comparison with the female, showing the disparity between the sexes symbolically. The role of the female encompasses taking care of all areas within the home, by procreating, tending to the needs of the offspring, yet being unable to transcend the limitations imposed by men. The male symbol is diminutive in size but has omnipotent power over the female. The use of red dye and coffee stains was used to show violence towards the woman in this scenario.
The veil is embroidered with a running stitch in white. Parts of the veil are almost invisible since the symbolic honor of a male is keeping her captivated within her designated boundaries. The veil is coming out of the demarcated boundary to show the extent of the oppression that invades all aspects of society. The white colored veil denotes purity and also shows levels of confinement and layering within the society.

The circular architectural motif was used to depict the Pakistani society. The drips in liquid dye were used to create a visual correlation for violence. The wax application, with its feeling of old parchment was to signify the historical implications of customs and traditions. To show that negative traditions are still an integral part of the society, a combination of processes like wax and staining were used alongside an image of a woman in traditional clothing.

Question 2

*Dagh* was finished in the fall of 2003. My decision to work with a larger format was created by the subject matter and its need for space. I choose pure white Stonehenge paper. The choice of paper has an impact on the eventual color and texture of the work once the various techniques have been processed. This particular work deals with themes of purity, honor and transgressions.

Embroidery is the key element that connects all the work. This linkage specifically deals with the label ‘women’s works’ as well as my own personal desire to embroider obsessively. My mother taught me how to embroider at the age of 3. This is the traditional age of a female child to begin learning womanly attributes, which are the hallmark of true femininity in Pakistan. In rural areas, women are still expected to make their own marriage blankets as part of the dowry, embroidered in the traditional stitch work of the region. Through the ages, embroidery also has been used as a marker of domestic identity for women. The manipulation of paper or fabric by incorporating a needle piercing the surface can elicit either a painful or joyous response. The embroidery is viewed both as a humane action that helps in rejuvenating old scars and also of being destructive in its very act of penetrating the surface. There should be a feeling of impotence generated by the obsessive action of embroidery, which is in its very act, similar to trying to cover up dishonorable acts perpetuated
in the name of honor and chastity. I want the audience to feel an emotional involvement with
the work through the repetitive task of embroidery which generates therapeutic and healing
qualities.

I chose a paisley design from a book- *Paisleys and Other Designs from India* that
included patterns for artists and crafts people and decided to appropriate it by enlarging it
approximately 400%\(^3\). The choice of a paisley pattern either printed or embroidered, was due
to its association with shawls and chadors. Culturally shawls and chadors continue to be a
symbol of chastity and honor for both men and women. I also wanted to reference the fact
that a few simple transgressions like leaving the home without a shawl to cover her body
meant that a woman brought dishonor to her family. This in turn would have a deep impact
on her life. The decision to use white silk and silver metallic thread was to connect the white
color of the paper with the embroidery threads, creating a level of purity that was soiled with
the coffee stains.

The decision to add Urdu text to the work was important since I used the words that
were derogatory to women. These types of words are still in use in contemporary Pakistan,
and are frequently used to belittle women. Personally disagreeing with derogatory terms to
describe a woman I deliberately erased these words whilst leaving a residue of the text where
it could scarcely be read. The large red circle embroidered in a red blanket stitch is to show
the ever present danger of rape and violence against women at the slightest misdemeanor. I
applied a second coat of wax to the surface after I was completely satisfied with the impact of
the text and the embroidery.

**Question 3**

I am comfortable in using processes that are associated with textile arts, like screen
printing and wax resist. In the summer of 2003, I started incorporating wax on paper in
relation to dyes. I found it intriguing to see an imprint of an image left on the paper before
and after the manipulation of dyes, wax and embroidery. The sense of history through the

\(^3\) Prakash, p 28.
addition of wax and coffee stains, added to the depth of meaning of the waxed surfaces. The results allowed the artwork to be more conceptually ambiguous and still created an emotional connection to the viewer.

Simultaneously during my research on the honor system in Pakistan, I came across a definition of women in an Urdu dictionary, published in 1985. The words were disparaging to women. This definition was the stimulus for creating the work titled Hessiat. The word Hessiat loosely translates into English as essence or a sense of being. I decided to use this definition in its entirety in this work, isolating the Urdu text and giving it an empty field around it. I wanted to show the level of importance that is given to meanings that are derived from historical customs and traditions. I used dyes to screen print this definition, because I wanted the words to bleed when I applied a cleaning wash.

The circular architectural motif in Chardevari was also used in Hessiat printed with black dye. The connotation of this symbol was however changed by adding a half completed circle of blanket stitch embroidered in white and a length of thread left dangling on the paper denoting that the healing process needs continuity. I also added an embroidered hole in red silk, close to the architectural motif. In Pakistani culture, a female is identified by the norms that the society imposes on her and exposing the injustices perpetuated in the name of honor questions concepts of traditional identity and placement in society. The symbol of the hole, beautifully embroidered in red silk, shows the need for a change of perception in the traditional roles of women. The actual cutting out of the hole is violent in nature, even though the edges are uniformly embroidered. The hole also represents the woman as a receptacle, where everything is either put on her or in her, but there is nothing that creates understanding of her needs. I also wanted to focus on the task of remembering and recreating painful history by uncovering and recovering that which has been lost or forcibly taken away. The act of exposing memories of injustices and slights, made in reference to gender complexities brings out a strong emotional response in me. The coffee stains and the wax application were used to show historical impact of the traditions and values that are being passed down through the generations. I wanted this work to have an emotional depth, where even though the words are not in English, the composition of the elements would provide comprehension to the American audience.
The work exhibited at the Cora Stafford Gallery was inter-connected and cerebral. In addition to providing the requisite formal attributes of cohesion in the use of elements and principles of art and design, the show “Question of Honor” also produced an intellectual connection to the audience, which is valuable in creating a better understanding of the issues confronting the East especially in the current global environment. The use of imagery was culturally specific yet the comprehension of the American audience was facilitated by the use of symbols that are familiar to both the Eastern and the Western viewer, like the elephant to reference memory, camel for its longevity, and the perforated holes to insinuate women. My goal of creating a query in the mind of the audience was successful in regards to the merit of preservation of negative traditions that undermine our basic rights as human beings and as women both in the East and the West.

It was important to use a mixture of techniques to add depth to the art work. Screen printed images of symbols, discharge technique for elimination of color, vinyl transfers of dyes, wax application, coffee stains and embroidery allowed me to create works that were unrestricted and open to viewer participation and interpretation. The use of open fields around the elements made the work uncluttered making it easier to focus on the concept. All these essentials combined to give a cohesive face to the show.
Figure 1 Chardevari (2003), 29 2 A X 21@X 2", Dyes, Wax, Color photocopy, Silk Embroidery, Screen Print, Pigment, Discharge on Paper mounted on board, Fabric and stuffing mounted on MDF

Figure 2 Chardevari (detail)
Figure 3  Khamosh, 2003, 29 ½” X 20 3/4”X 2”, Dyes, Color photocopy, Silk Embroidery, Screen Print, Pigment on Paper mounted on board, Stuffing, Fabric mounted on MDF

Figure 4  Khamosh (detail)
Figure 5  Dagh, 2003, 38" X 50", Embroidery w/ silk and metallic thread, Coffee, Dyes, Wax
Figure 6  Gardish, 2003, 22”X 29½”, Dyes, Coffee, Wax, Screen Print, Pigment, Silk Embroidery on Paper
Figure 7  Nazuk, 2003, 22"X 29½", Dyes, Coffee, Wax, Vinyl Transfer, Silk Embroidery on Paper
Figure 8  Zindagi, 2003, 22"X 29½", Dyes, Coffee, Wax, Silk Embroidery on Paper
Figure 9  Hessiat, 2003, 22”X 29½”, Dyes, Coffee, Wax, Screen Print, Pigment, Silk Embroidery on Paper
Figure 10 Yadiasht (Memory) (2003), 22@X 29 2@, Dyes, Coffee, Wax, Screen Print, Pigment, Silk Embroidery on Paper
Figure 11 Sharam, 2003, 24" X 11 3/4"X2", Stuffing, Embroidery Synthetic Fabric Mounted on MDF

Figure 12 Besharam, 2003, 24" X 11 3/4"X2", Stuffing, Embroidery Synthetic Fabric Mounted on MDF
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