

Introduction
Waseem Ahmad's "Pious Fear"
by
M. Athar Tahir

Amongst the finest of Pakistan's miniaturists, Waseem Ahmed has, in "Pious Fear", extended himself. Both in scale and scope.

In the works included in this exhibition, Ahmed's confidence and skill embrace an unprecedented scale for miniatures. *Wasli*, the specially prepared and burnished layered-paper for miniatures, is here seen in two large sizes. One miniature is 42 inches by 48 inches and the largest is 72 inches by 48 inches. Nothing in the traditional Mughal or contemporary miniatures quite matches these sizes. Such large sizes are a statement, exploring, challenging, technical aspects of creativity.

Ahmed's earlier works were interpretations of myths and legends, provocative renderings of popular icons and suggestive abstractions. Here he has expanded his scope. He has chosen to address a burning current issue: female existence in a stultifying environment generated by bigotry and intolerance.

All Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam -- preach that fear of the Divine shapes the pious. This underlying belief permeates Ahmad's latest body of work. But the title of the exhibition is not without ambiguity: what factors constitute "fear"? What aspects of the "pious" prompt "fear"? Can "fear" ever be "pious"? Do the "pious" always "fear"? Should the "other" always "fear" the "pious"? The irony is that this quandary spills into tragedy. And so by its very absence, one is obliged to question: what about "love"?

In the two large works, such questions are expressed in bold visual statements which are echoed in the smaller works. In the largest miniature, female repression acquires a haunting image. But it is laced with ambiguity. The work is divided into three visual areas which lend to one another. The foreground has seventeen burka-clad figures representative of all women. They make an overlapping pattern pocked with many bullet marks. On the right the females are small, diminished. On the left they are larger, imposing. The painting if "read" from left to right, can be construed to show how violence against women has gradually led to their diminishing identity. But if "read" from right to left, there is hope. Women may be scapegoats as the image of the goat, roughly calligraphed with letters from the Urdu alphabet, indicates. But no matter how severe the subjugation, it prompts women to assert themselves as never before. This ambiguity is repeated in the background. The silver-leaf area may be indicative of a stone-wall blocking expression. But it may also be positive, like the sky silver with possibilities of self-realisation. There is no male figure. The middle ground says it all. This area could be an eye weeping blood or it could be a smear of rape.

In the other large work, same faceless females appear. Only here they are not still but swirl like Furies, like assertive conscience, around a realistically rendered man bent in submission, with hands cupped in prayer. The halo of holiness has descended from the head. It has become a circle of worldly concerns.

In one painting a well-fed, pot-bellied man lounges on a bolster dreaming of Paradise. But there is a sly, subtle reference to the invidious in the apparently innocuous. His physical abnormality is indicative of his mental imbalance. He has, not five but, six toes.

In one miniature a leonine figure sporting a suicide jacket, cleans his teeth like an animal readying to hunt. In another a man is surrounded by several suicide jackets splattered with what look like dried blood spots, rendered with tea-stains. This work informs, and comments on, a companion piece where a burka-clad female is dominated by suicide-bombers with a similar blood-splatter.

Some miniatures show suicide-bombers disguised in burkas. Ironically like a wolf in sheep's skin they become their victims to kill them. In one painting combat footwear gives them away. Their hostile presence is further emphasized by the overlapping figures which transform into bullet shapes to the right. In another, the burka is revealingly transparent. In two works the figures take on the destructive powers of the Hindu goddess Kali or the many-headed demon, Ravana as it tramples females underfoot. These complex works emanate from incidents in his country and

travels abroad. Each stands on its own. Yet each illuminates a different facet of the over-arching “aesthetic reality” that the artist has conjured.

Ahmed’s repertoire consists of elements which continue, over the last several years, to combine in thought-provoking permutations. The animal shape, bearded man, blood splattered surface, chador-wrapped or burka-clad female, chubby putto that will transport the “pious” to heaven, black area indicating man’s dark design, letters from the Arabic-Farsi-Urdu alphabet suggesting the “religious” rhetoric, striped mat, figures from the Hindu pantheon, red rose, revolver and pistol in relief under silver-leaf or sketched, rosary, skull-cap, suicide-bomber, suicide-jacket, verdant vegetation of promised paradise, all form Ahmad’s visual vocabulary. From these particulars Ahmed generates the universal concern about oppression of the weak by the powerful, of the East or the West, whether they are individuals, groups or countries.

M. Athar Tahir was the Rhodes Scholar for Pakistan at Oriel College, Oxford and has a Masters from the University of Oxford, United Kingdom. He is the author of several prize-winning books on Art, Calligraphy and Calligraph-art. His books have been published by the Oxford University Press (OUP) and UNESCO. He is the Editor of the forthcoming *Oxford Companion to Pakistani Art* to be published by OUP.