

# Transformation as an Artistic Strategy in the Work of the Artist Anwar Saeed

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**Abstract** The Pakistani artist Anwar Saeed is best known for his collages, colour-intensive paintings and works of different printing techniques which often explore masculinity and probe the controversial issue of same-sex desire in Muslim South Asia. He is therefore no stranger to self-censorship. Saeed has often had to alter his works so that they could be shown in Pakistan, and has generally learned to tell stories in order to survive. These stories had to be camouflaged, so the motif of the mask along with the complex othering of the self through the staging of animal-human relations entered his artistic iconography and came to play an important role in paintings, collages, drawings, prints and photographs. Many of these works suggest the artist's concern with conflict between religious and social expectations and gender roles, but they also make a connection with cultural and political identity formation in a country with a short, but very conflicted, history.

**Keywords** South Asian Art. Postwar Print Art. Transnational Art. Global Art. Pakistani Art. Contemporary Art.

**Summary** 1 Institutional Transformations and Saeed's Early Career. – 2 Transfer Processes and the Printing Press.

The Pakistani artist Anwar Saeed is best known for his collages, richly coloured paintings and works of different printing techniques, which often explore masculinity and probe the controversial issue of same-sex desire in Muslim South Asia. Many of these works suggest the artist's concern with conflicts of religious and social expectations and gender roles, but they also make a connection between the cultural and political identity formed in a country with a short, but very conflicted, history. Central to these conflicts and disputes are power structures, which the artist translates into powerful visual narratives on different working surfaces. His works are populated by beasts and humans: men with fish, men with crocodiles, men with angels, and masked people who subvert tropes of masculinity and national identity. Many stories the artist tells had to be camouflaged, so that the motif of the mask, along with the complex othering of the self through the staging of animal-human relations entered his artistic iconography and came to play an important role in his paintings, collages, drawings, prints and photographs.

In Saeed's work, transformation thus becomes a political, erotic and poetic tool to suggest alternative visions of subjectivity. He expresses transformation through escape into fantasy, dreams, or via the use of his own body as a model for staging scenarios [fig. 1]. When earlier he evoked pre-modern South Asian and Islamic art in a series of approximately twenty-nine mixed media prints (mixed media collages and photo etchings done between 1986 and 1996) [fig. 2], the artist makes use of the formal and transformative dynamics of different artistic tools and techniques to expose the cultural, social and political reality of Pakistan. State-sanctioned constructions that attempt to collectively define identity are met with the use of transferring images from one medium to another to display a heterogeneity and diversity of experience that more adequately characterises life in South Asia. Drawing his representational strategies from Islamic visual culture and even more so from the image-rich cultures of Hinduism and Buddhism, that is, from "once shared-lived worlds" that have transformed into separate worlds, he shows how



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“religion, nation, and religious nationalisms”<sup>1</sup> inform the question of history as a subject of transformation and a signal for change.

In this essay, I will use a selected number of early and more recent works by the artist Anwar Saeed and ask, for example, to what extent the blue-coloured man and his embrace of the beast-like creature in the painting *A casual state of being in a soul-hunting haven* [fig. 1] reveals metaphorical and transcendental qualities and how this interacts with existing real-world conditions of exclusion, cultural purity and national conscience.

While works such as *A casual state of being in a soul-hunting haven* [fig. 1] and *Shahadat* (Witness) [fig. 2] indicate that the future of Pakistan and South Asia in general remains tense, it suggests that their dependence on the mutual co-existence of different communities is of central importance.

Many formal aspects and artistic strategies that Saeed employs in his later works originate

from his early drawings, collages and prints. In fact, as I will argue here, it is his printmaking that has contributed significantly to how he thinks in all the media. Indeed, a closer look at how he cuts, pastes and creates his collages and prints allows a revelation of the processes applied to the multiple cultural and personal layers of mutating identities that constitute them.

I will thus explore the transformative quality of Anwar Saeed’s work through his institutional trajectory, through societal and historical shifts but also through artistic tools and materials that build and depend on the process of transfer, especially through techniques such as collage and printmaking. Through a nuanced understanding of Saeed’s long-term artistic practice, the transformative quality of his work can then potentially be located at the intersection where he weaves together artistic, cultural, social and political threads through questioning history itself.

## 1 Institutional Transformations and Saeed’s Early Career

There has been very little serious art historical scholarship on Saeed, and the reflections and writings within Pakistan have mainly focused on his narrative subject matter and his sexuality. An attempt to look at his work more intently has been undertaken by Naazish Ata-Ullah<sup>2</sup> and Aasim Akhtar,<sup>3</sup> both authors focusing on Saeed’s literary influences and the marginality of male nudity in the context of Pakistan. His work has frequently been shown in Pakistan, often in the company of other Pakistani artists’ work.<sup>4</sup> In a recent exhibition on South Asian Pop Art in Sharjah and in New Delhi, Anwar Saeed’s work featured amongst a range of artists from across the region in an attempt to contextualise some of his early practice within the wider realm of the popular in South Asia and its diaspora.<sup>5</sup>

The period in which Anwar Saeed began his career and practice is crucial to understand how to

position him in an art historical sense. The 1970s were a highly charged political period in Pakistan, with East Pakistan becoming independent as Bangladesh from West Pakistan in 1971, thereby halving the country. Anthropologist Kamran Asdar Ali writes about this period as “the most significant political crisis in the country’s history,” one “that has been systematically erased from Pakistan’s national discourse and popular memory”.<sup>6</sup> What followed is common knowledge: Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s (1928-79) era of populism (1971-73; 1973-77), paired with the nationalisation of industries and banks, only to be replaced by Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq’s (1924-77) period of depoliticisation and Islamisation (1978-88).

Saeed’s special talent for drawing earned him a place at Pakistan’s premier art institution, the National College of Arts (NCA) in Lahore, where he enrolled in 1974.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Guha-Thakurta, Zamindar 2023, 6.

<sup>2</sup> Ata-Ullah 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Akhtar 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Saeed’s work has also been included in national survey exhibitions outside the country, a few of which shall be mentioned here: *Crossing Black Waters*, Leicester City Art Gallery (1992); the *7th Asian Art Biennale*, Dhaka, where he received an honourable mention (1995); *Pakistan: Another Vision. Fifty Years of Painting and Sculpture from Pakistan*, curated by Timothy Wilcox at the Brunei Gallery at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. This show then travelled to other locations within the United Kingdom (2000). Saeed was also included in *Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art from Pakistan*, which was curated by Salima Hashmi at the Asia Society Museum, New York in 2009.

<sup>5</sup> *Pop South Asia: Artistic Explorations in the Popular*, exhibition curated by Iftikhar Dadi and Roobina Karode, Sharjah Art Foundation, 2022 and Kiran Nadar Museum of Art New Delhi, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Ali 2015, 204.

<sup>7</sup> The history of the NCA dates back to the colonial period, when it was established as the Mayo School of Arts in 1875. In 1958, the school was upgraded to become the NCA. For a detailed account about the NCA see Tarar 2022.



**Figure 1**  
Anwar Saeed, *A casual state of being in a soul-hunting haven*. 2017. Acrylics on canvas, 150 x 270 cm. Image courtesy of the artist

**Figure 2**  
Anwar Saeed, *Shahadat*. 1996. Photo etching and aquatint, 42 x 28 cm. Image courtesy of the artist



In the 1970s, the college and its environment offered its students and faculty “a virtual sanctuary,” or, in Ata-Ullah’s words, “a rare embodiment of an unusually liberal environment that deeply inspired the youth who came here from all corners of the country”.<sup>8</sup> There, Anwar Saeed was trained by some of Pakistan’s greatest artists. These include the landscape painter Khalid Iqbal (1929-2014); Colin David (1937-2008), who is mostly remembered for his meticulously rendered paintings of females and nudes against striped or chequered backdrops reminiscent of Op Art; Salima Hashmi (born 1942), who had incorporated mixed media into her paintings; and the late modernist artist Zahoor ul Akhlaq (1941-99), whose artistic achievements largely relate to his exploration and studies of conceptual aspects of Mughal art and Islamic visual culture in connection with modernism.<sup>9</sup>

For Anwar Saeed, the 1970s were the formative years, both for his artistic point of departure and for his personal journey as a young man who became aware of being different. As artist Naiza Khan very insightfully said about Saeed’s work, he came to employ “the use of masquerade, to control external perceptions of the self,” or simply “as a strategy to negotiate a position within patriarchy”.<sup>10</sup> Given the late modernist formal art practice prevalent at the NCA at the time, Saeed’s strong narrative approach contributed significantly to the transformation of artistic practice within and outside the institution via his practice and teaching at the NCA.<sup>11</sup>

*Alternate faces and heavenly creature to play with* [fig. 3] is a work Saeed created in 2016 for an exhibition curated by artist Amin Gulgee in Karachi, which curatorially addressed ideas of an informal history of the 1970s in Pakistan.<sup>12</sup> The work lends itself to contextualising political and historical realities and relating them to Saeed’s artistic practice.

With this work, Saeed responds to the curatorial initiative by reflecting on how concerns about his personal identity, i.e. his lower-middle-class background in conjunction with his sexual orientation, date back to this particular decade. In the mixed media painting, the artist portrays the country’s conflict-ridden history, namely the systematic construction of a collective cultural identity. The main composition features a central painted figure

of a man in high-waisted, bell-bottomed trousers and a shirt with a long collar, holding a glass in one hand and a cigarette in the other. With his outfit, hairstyle and posture, the male figure emphasises the temporal condition of the work. The little blue-winged devil embracing the main character’s right thigh, the blue bird positioned on his right shoulder, and the two extra portrait editions flanking the central head to either side, speak of temptations and of the multiple selves, or the alternate faces, that live inside a single being.

The backdrop for this work is heavily collaged and partly painted over with images that the artist had collected over the years from a range of newspapers. Starting at the top, a sequence of portraits is lined up, showcasing the distinctive 1970s hairstyle with long sideburns. The popular hippy slogan “All you need is love” is prominently placed in the middle, flanked by well-known singers from both the popular and the classical realm. Moving further down, by the right elbow of the painted figure we can see an image of General Yahya Khan (1917-80) and Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto signing important papers about the country’s fate. Further to the right of the work, by the lower arm of the main figure, there is an image of Bhutto addressing a public gathering with his right arm raised. Below this image is a clipping of the young Imran Khan and, next to that, an image of young Benazir Bhutto (1953-2007) and her brother Murtaza Bhutto (1954-96). In the lower part of the collaged work there are several images of sportsmen and wrestlers, as well as a newspaper clipping of the painter Bashir Mirza (1941-2000) experimenting with nudes. On the right-hand side of the picture and at knee height of the central figure is an image of the poetess and activist Fahmida Riaz (born 1945) lighting a cigarette. What follows in the lower part of the work are images of liquor, cigarettes and nightclub advertisements, along with a shop selling hashish and other recreational drugs. The fact that late hippies kept coming to Pakistan in the 1970s via the hippy trail is represented by two images. In the lower left-hand corner, a picture of a Punjabi soldier carrying out a body search by looking into a Bengali man’s *dhoti* is contrasted with an image in the bottom right-hand corner of a man being flogged during Zia’s regime.

<sup>8</sup> Ataulah 2015, 71. The correct spelling of her name is Naazish Ata-Ullah, but for the sake of simplicity I have kept the spelling as it appears in the publication.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed analysis of Zahoor ul Akhlaq’s work, cf. Wille 2015, 40-82; 2023, 76-111.

<sup>10</sup> Khan 2003, n.p.

<sup>11</sup> I see Anwar Saeed’s achievement in bridging modernism and the everyday in Pakistan as something that I am currently exploring in more detail for a forthcoming essay about the 1990s in Pakistani art.

<sup>12</sup> The exhibition was titled *The 70s: Pakistan’s Radioactive Decade* and was held at Amin Gulgee’s privately run gallery in Clifton, Karachi, from 16 to 27 March 2016.



**Figure 3**  
Anwar Saeed, *Alternate faces and a heavenly creature to play with*. 2016. Acrylics, graphite, collage on plywood, 180 × 90 cm. Image courtesy of the artist

The lined-up images in the collaged backdrop – one that is reminiscent of a faded and aged wall in a room of a certain period – deliver a mix of information that is seemingly connected. So, while politicians go about their daily business of signing important papers that will affect the fate of the country in whatever way, popular culture sweeps in and takes over in full swing. The conceptual and technical process involved in making the collage [fig. 3] – by cutting out the mixed sources from their original context to reassembling them as a composition through direct touch when pasted onto the surface – thereby evokes a form of intimacy. This then allows us to identify certain material and spatial metamorphoses between the artist's work in the studio and the world outside this space. Cutting implies both separation and alienation. Inserting, assembling and pasting, on the other hand, signifies a reshaping and distribution in which artistic agency becomes central.<sup>13</sup>

The transformative quality of the artist's work is thus seen as a strategy that offers a salient criticism of Pakistan's nationalist course, which increasingly massacred the country's rich cultural history. With regard to Jacques Rancière, this history, while it "doubts the past itself,"<sup>14</sup> it activates a discursive relation to the past about who is able to write whose history.<sup>15</sup>

Viewed from a contemporary position, in this work the artist looks back at himself with a dose of irony and reflects on the foolish and innocent young man he then was. The multiple selves are presented in the context of political and cultural events that it confronts. It defies authority, morality, patriarchy, militarism, and nationalism,<sup>16</sup> but also the officially sanctioned art of calligraphy and the genre of landscape painting.<sup>17</sup> This, together with his narrative stance, positions it against the formal modernism that prevailed at the NCA until the 1990s.

Following art historian Alyce Mahon, contemporary theories of metamorphosis about becoming and unbecoming can be linked here, which elude a fixed meaning.<sup>18</sup> If Mahon ties in with Hélène Cixous's description of the hybrid text,<sup>19</sup> which, according to Cixous, provides "access to the passage, to the *trans*, to the crossing of borders, to

the delimitation of genres-genders-genres and species,"<sup>20</sup> then Saeed's collaged painting *Alternate Faces and a Heavenly Creature to Play With* [fig. 3] can be seen as such: namely, the hybrid image that, by using different artistic materials, allows for transformation and thus for a critical definition to take place that is located outside official discourses.

A response to the uncertainty that *Alternate faces and heavenly creature to play with* [fig. 3] evokes can be found in the large-scale work the artist created a year later. *A casual state of being in a soul-hunting haven* [fig. 1] displays a line-up of male characters with a central figure in blue embracing a crocodile.

The blue figure hugging the beast can be seen as the aged version of the main figure in the previous painting [fig. 3]. While the earlier painting depicted uncertainties and insecurities as represented by the blue-winged devil in *A casual state of being in a soul-hunting haven* [fig. 1], these doubts seem to have metamorphosed into a re-union of the blue man as the body and the alligator as its soul. What is primarily and directly startling is the backdrop presented in tones of green and yellow. While in the previous work [fig. 3], the heavily collaged background reflects on a highly problematic yet diversified time defined by drugs, love, war and politics and is therefore responsible for eventually transforming the destiny of man and nation, *A casual state of being in a soul-hunting haven* [fig. 1] presents us with the result of four decades of the increasing influence of religious parties and the military, which eventually affects the psyche of ordinary men. Nothing is left to refer back to; the plain interior of the space and the green-washed walls show no more signs of historical traces or possibilities for taking avenues other than the state-sanctioned one. There is no more space for diversity and this, in fact, can be seen as a criticism of a failed present that could not keep the promises of modernity.

The increasing suspicion that the artist experiences due to his sexuality is felt on a daily basis within his social surroundings, which is represented in this painting by threats that come from all sides. The ordinary man in his white undershirt,

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Rice 2023, 129-54.

<sup>14</sup> Rancière 2006, 157.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Rancière 1994.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Mahon 2022, 92.

<sup>17</sup> With the shift of the government to the Islamist right in the 1970s, Qur'anic calligraphy became state-sanctioned in Pakistan. Salima Hashmi notes that "not a single woman artist took up calligraphy or changed her mode of working to bring it in line with official state policy" (Hashmi 2002, 8).

<sup>18</sup> Mahon 2022, 92.

<sup>19</sup> Mahon 2022, 92.

<sup>20</sup> Cixous 1998, 105. Quoted in Mahon 2022, 92.



physiognomically not very different from the central character, is influenced by his alter ego or inner voice, represented by a whisperer, a man wearing a prayer cap.<sup>21</sup> While this ordinary character seems to pay attention to his inner voice, he also, literally, takes note of the scene in front of him. Opposite, the figure dressed in brown trousers and a brown shirt is being held around the waist by what appears to be his other or alter ego. This figure's outstretched bow without an arrow is not directed at a specific person, but points to the group in general, standing on the other side of the blue man. The positioning of the figure with the bow in front of the main character can be understood as a reference to the martyrdom of St. Sebastian, albeit less for its classical iconography of Sebastian being shot by arrows, but more for its treatment of martyrdom in its homosexual allusion existent in many art forms since the time of the Renaissance.<sup>22</sup>

As opposed to the complex diversity of *Alternate faces and heavenly creature to play with* [fig. 3], here, in figure 1, the tumultuous 1970s seem to have metamorphosed into a stereotypical present. Connecting with Cixous, the artist thus challenges and disrupts established boundaries and hierarchies, societal as well as cultural categories.

This brings us to an important series of mixed media collages and photo etchings that the artist did in the 1990s which explore history and the way it is being transformed. After training in printmaking at the Royal College of Art in London between 1984 and 1985, he applied these skills, along with collage, in Lahore from 1986. Many of these works

are about the brutality of the army and police and reflect on the human suffering they cause. Apart from the complex message these works convey, I am interested in the question and discussion of why the artist chose printing techniques to question the country's conflicted situation, in general, and the official rewriting of history, in particular. Following art historian Jennifer L. Roberts, who elaborates on the basic function and modus operandi of printing and then shows how these can be consistently transferred to other media,<sup>23</sup> I will be able to identify the ways in which Saeed's prints, paintings and collages are interconnected. It is important to note here that Saeed employed printmaking primarily between 1986 and 1996, after which his involvement with painting and mixed media increased. This largely had to do with the disastrous shooting at the home of the artist Zahoor ul Akhlaq in Lahore in January 1999, in which both Akhlaq and his daughter Jahanara were killed, and Saeed was shot in such a way that he almost lost the ability to work with his right hand. Working on printing plates became almost impossible for him after this incident. However, the connection between the time prior to and after January 1999 is recognisable. On the one hand, he very often uses iconography and visual imagery that he had already established up to 1999, and on the other, there is the connection between the printing technique and other media. Then there is his working method and how he approached work in the print studio, which, to a certain extent, was transferred to his paintings and mixed media works.

## 2 Transfer Processes and the Printing Press

The series that the artist collectively titles *History was a court dancer* consists of fragments of visual and textual information: calendars, images of Buddhist sculptures from the Gandhara era,<sup>24</sup> popular representations of Buraq (a winged creature, usually a horse, with the face of a woman),<sup>25</sup> Arabic and calligraphic texts, but also snippets of images by iconic modernist artists, both from Europe and Pakistan. This approach of assembling, rearranging, and pasting, which we've already observed in

the much later-dated collaged painting *Alternate Faces and a Heavenly Creature to Play With* [fig. 3], is thus anchored early in Saeed's work.

Works that make up the series [figs 2, 4-8] are seemingly imbued with the idea that bodies and identities can be reinvented to potentially challenge established power structures and arrive at new means of collective and self-invention. The metamorphosis that these works suggest is thus linked to the theme of identity and otherness.

<sup>21</sup> The white cap is indicative of a man going to or coming from prayer.

<sup>22</sup> I am thinking of depictions of St. Sebastian by Andrea Mantegna from 1480, El Greco from 1578, Guido Reni from 1615 but also Egon Schiele's self-portrait as St. Sebastian from 1914.

<sup>23</sup> Roberts 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Gandhara refers to the historical region which is now northwestern Pakistan. It was a crossroads of different cultures since ancient times. From the first century BCE to the seventh century CE a distinctive visual art developed, known as Gandhara art.

<sup>25</sup> Buraq traditionally carried the prophet Muhammad on his celestial journey-*mi'rāj* from Mecca to Jerusalem and from there up to heaven, although in some versions he went directly from Mecca to heaven.

Compositionally, works in this series are characterised by a basic structure through a two-part or three-part sheet framed by calendar numbering running along the outer sides [figs 2, 4, 5, 6].

The calendar numbers evoke a temporal character, and the frames that Saeed applies derive from sources such as devotional calendars [figs 2, 6] or a traditional manuscript page from the Mughal period [figs 4, 5, 7, 8].

Visually, Saeed cites the *yakshi/yakshini*, a mythological being in Hindu, Jain and Buddhist mythology,<sup>26</sup> floating in figures 4 and 7 and reduced to its bust in figure 8. Beautiful and voluptuous, these figures are also referred to as dancers or courtesans. In figure 5, the prototype for the central figure is Ardhanari – a version of Shiva who is half-woman, half-man,<sup>27</sup> whereas in figure 2, the central image of the dancing Shiva has been altered in such a way that the head has been replaced with bull's horns, which normally belong to Shiva's riding animal, the bull Nandi.<sup>28</sup> In figure 6, the central figure is based on a photograph of the giant statue of the Jain prophet Bahubali, from Shravanabelagola in Karnataka. The fact that the artist obscured Bahubali's naked lower body with a piece of calligraphy to hide male nudity can be interpreted either as an act of beautification or simply as an aesthetic addition, the voluptuous form of the Arabic letters complimenting the physical curves of the sculpted figure. On the other hand, it can also be seen as a criticism of an increasingly intolerant society that finds itself struggling between hopes and betrayals in a nation that suppresses cultural pluralism and the rich inheritance of South Asian Islam, in order to proclaim a state based on a simplified Islamic ideology that conceals its non-Muslim past. The destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992 and the subsequent massacres of Muslims across India are incidents that appear reflected in this work in particular. In this series of works, through his complex economy of citations, which include textual references from a diverse range of sources, Saeed clearly stresses the transcultural

nature of the region of South Asia by laying bare some of the disparate aspects of its cultural forms. He is therefore a catalyst for exposing transcultural developments, much in the way that Nikolas Jaspert refers to a "cultural broker".<sup>29</sup> His visual concept, which unfolds through "concrete modalities of processes and the dynamics inherent to [them],"<sup>30</sup> is thus transculturally informed in that he critically establishes connections between cultures through engagement.

Comprised of magazine and book cut-outs and fragments of personally collected images, Saeed's mixed media collages and photo etchings are ideologically and politically charged so as to question and challenge state-enforced notions of cultural purity and the country's official historiography to the extent that he ridicules them. He does this by suggesting that rulers of the past, not unlike today's politicians, commissioned their favourite version of written history. In figure 4, we thus see the floating image of the *yakshi*, suspended and drifting in undefined space, while the lower part of the print shows a nobleman receiving a book, a scene taken from a Mughal miniature painting.<sup>31</sup> As the artist explains, he uses this particular scene as a visual representation of the ruling class commissioning the writing of history.<sup>32</sup>

He thus links the past with the postcolonial Islamic state of Pakistan, with its "political turmoil over One Unit, the partition of West Pakistan, and General Zia ul-Haq's Arabisation and Sunnification policies, which provide(s) the political and cultural framework" within which historical narratives in "school textbooks, official accounts, historical novels, tele-plays, and public histories" have been created as well as rewritten.<sup>33</sup> The state invested a lot of effort in rewriting history, which became known as the national "New Education Policy"<sup>34</sup> under Zia ul-Haq's Islamisation process as of 1977. At that time, Zia ul-Haq proclaimed his goal for "state education" to "create an awareness of the Pakistani nation as a part of the universal Muslim Ummah

<sup>26</sup> *Yaksha* are male and *yakshi* or *yakshini* are female. They are generally spirits of fertility.

<sup>27</sup> This image is taken from a fragment of a ninth century portal in Ardhanari at the Harshat Mata temple, as depicted in Harle 1986, 150.

<sup>28</sup> I would like to thank Stephan Popp for helping me establish these connections.

<sup>29</sup> "Cultural Brokers between Religions: Border Crossers and Experts at Mediterranean Courts" was the title of a conference organized by Nikolas Jaspert, Jenny Oesterle and Marc von der Höh, at the Ruhr University Bochum, from 28 to 30 October 2010. The conference proceedings were published by von der Höh et al. 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Bachmann et al. 2017, 15.

<sup>31</sup> The original image, titled *Allah-wirdi Khan Receiving a Petition*, can be found in the Jaipur Museum and was published in Mark Zebrowski's work on Deccani painting (Zebrowski 1983, Plate XXII). I would like to thank Ebba Koch and the late J. Losty for their valuable insights in helping me locate this image.

<sup>32</sup> From a personal conversation with the artist in Lahore, 25 February 2016.

<sup>33</sup> Asif 2008, 10. See also Asif 2014, 135-65.

<sup>34</sup> Asif 2014, 141.



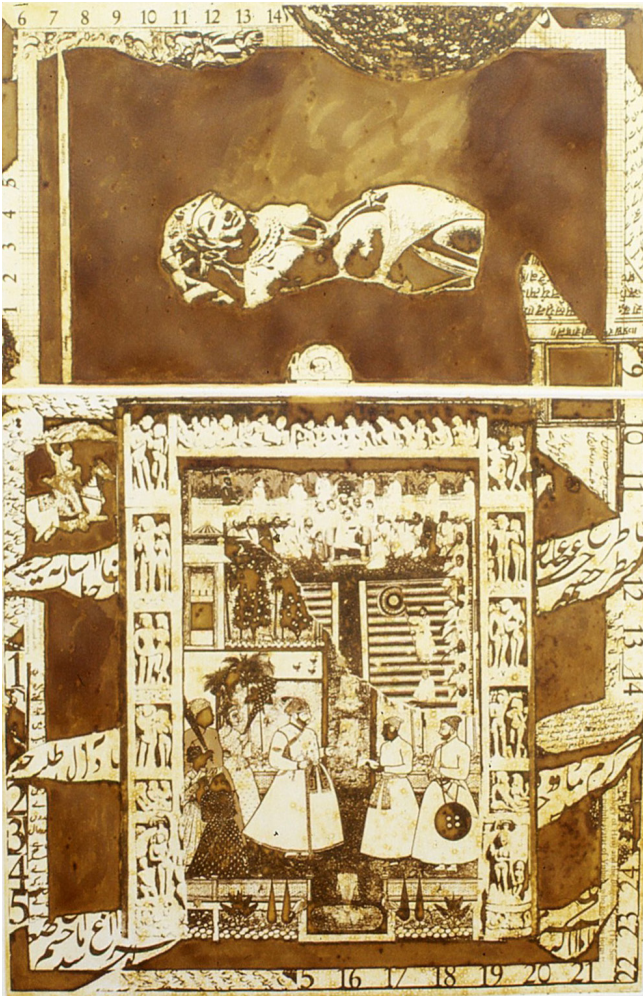


Figure 4 Anwar Saeed, *History was a court dancer II*. 1993. Photo etching and aquatint, 60 x 41 cm. Image courtesy of the artist



Figure 5 Anwar Saeed, *History was a court dancer IV*. 1993. Photo etching and aquatint, 60 x 41 cm. Image courtesy of the artist

(Brotherhood) striving through successive stages to spread the message of Islam throughout the world”.<sup>35</sup> Historian Manan Ahmed addresses how Zia ul-Haq “called attention to the centrality of Islamic history to Pakistan’s ideology” and how he “mandated Arabic instructions from mid-level grades and established the mosque as the fundamental unit of public education”.<sup>36</sup> By propagating the ideology of Pakistan as a Sunni nation, the government and other organisations have made tremendous attempts to destroy the rich cultural and historical memory associated with the geopolitical region from which Pakistan emerged. In a more recent book-length study dedicated to the question of whether or not South Asia had ever a

shared regional identity, Manan Ahmed refers to the current politically orchestrated acts of imagining “a Hindu-only Republic of India or a non-Bengali Islamic Republic of Pakistan” as a “project of political forgetting [which] targets minorities to deprive them of history, of the right to narrate, of the capacity for recognition in the collective.”<sup>37</sup>

Against the backdrop of “political forgetting” and the transformation that this brings – from the writing and rewriting of history and school textbooks to the curtailment of women’s and minority rights, etc. – it is useful to consider Anwar Saeed’s series of mixed media collages and photo etchings in the order in which the artist set out to create the works. I would like to begin with collage and draw

<sup>35</sup> Shehab 1990, 299. Quoted in Asif 2014, 141.

<sup>36</sup> Asif 2014, 141.

<sup>37</sup> Asif 2020, 5.





Figure 6 Anwar Saeed, *Divine idleness*. 1996. Photo etching and aquatint, 48 × 30 cm. Image courtesy of the artist



Figure 7 Anwar Saeed, *History was a court dancer I*. 1993. Photo etching and aquatint, 60 × 41 cm. Image courtesy of the artist

on art historian Kobena Mercer's essay on Romare Bearden, in which he considers this artist's use of collage and montage in a broader sense. In relation to Bearden's use of collage, Mercer explains the "formal dynamic of collage" and how this "lies in the purposive selection of signifying elements, found or taken from disparate sources, that are combined in unexpected juxtaposition to create something new that exists as an independent form in its own right."<sup>38</sup> While Mercer sees Bearden's art as testimony to a shift in the representation of race, he emphasises "the dialectical flux of historical becoming" in terms of understanding identity.<sup>39</sup> If, according to Mercer, Bearden's collages are an exploration of the "socially constructed" and the "struggles over the relations of representations,"<sup>40</sup> then Anwar Saeed's

use of collages can be understood as that which explores and consequently exposes relations of representation and hierarchies in unexpected ways. In *Alternate Faces and a Heavenly Creature to Play With* [fig. 3], it is, above all, the popular culture of the 1970s that defies politics. In the works of the series *History is a Court Dancer* [figs 2, 4-8], it is different cultural, religious, mythological and art historical images that, combined with fragments from Arabic war-strategy books and astronomy, along with pieces of calendars and excerpts from Persian, Urdu, Sanskrit and European language texts, see the unfolding of both Pakistan and South Asia in their "creative and destructive"<sup>41</sup> ways.

The significance of the transfer process through the printing technique now adds another layer of complexity to these works, both in conceptual

<sup>38</sup> Mercer 2005, 126.

<sup>39</sup> Mercer 2005, 126.

<sup>40</sup> Mercer 2005, 142.

<sup>41</sup> Dadi 2010, 223.



artistic and in ideological ways. The question of why the artist chose the printing technique for this series is surely due to the experimental artistic nature of the medium. Saeed learned etching in London at the Royal College of Art, but in Lahore he was forced to experiment and to apply his skills to teach others, for lack of technically well-equipped workshops.<sup>42</sup> However, there are principles that apply to printing in general, whether they are created when technical equipment is available or not. In particular, I would like to refer here to the principle of reversal, pressure and transfer, and to the fact that the exact result of a print is indeterminable.<sup>43</sup> Kathryn Reeves writes about “the printmaker’s understanding of the mirror images”<sup>44</sup> by saying that “printmakers have the capability to see the dual nature of all images/texts/identities which exist always as themselves and always as their mirror images.”<sup>45</sup> The transfer of the image from one medium to another through the printing press allows the figure to be placed in another space. The printing process thus authorises this figure as being logically present in this new space.

This then leads to the creation of a critical social space, as, for example, in the work *Shahadat* [fig. 2]. The title means ‘witness’ in the sense of bearing witness or testimony. In reference to the martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad’s grandson Husain and to the Karbala tragedy, Indo-Muslim cultural historian Syed Akbar Hyder explains that “the word that most commonly signifies martyrdom in the Islamic cultural lexicon is *shahādat* (witnessing), the word for martyr being *shahid* (witness).”<sup>46</sup> Hyder continues by explaining that “*shahādat* itself literally means ‘bearing witness’”<sup>47</sup> and sees this “forever etched into the historical memories of his [Husain’s] devotees.”<sup>48</sup> Historical memory against “political forgetting” is also required when locating the central figure of a dancing Shiva, from a transcultural point of view, in the Indus or Harappan civilisations (ca. 2250-1750 BC), where terracotta seals were found depicting figures seated in yogic positions on low thrones.<sup>49</sup> The fact that some of these figures were horned establishes a link between Anwar Saeed’s work *Shahadat* [fig. 2] and Mohenjo-daro. The large calligraphic motif (perhaps a



Figure 8 Anwar Saeed, *History was a court dancer III*. 1993. Photo etching and aquatint, 60 x 41 cm. Image courtesy of the artist

shield) in the central figure’s left hand is made of the intertwined words of Allah and Mohammad. In the upper part of the calligraphic shield, a face-like image appears to pop up, which is mirrored and intertwined as the shapes of two abstract faces looking at each other to signal oneness.

Artists who work with printing are used to thinking about reversal even when not applying it directly, since photo etching does not flip the image. The ability to imagine things from the other side, however, is something that is required in

<sup>42</sup> Anwar Saeed explained that, initially, it was difficult to find a well-equipped printing studio in Lahore. Over the years, the NCA’s printmaking studio acquired technology and became a well-equipped workshop. From a personal conversation with the artist in Lahore, 2 February 2018.

<sup>43</sup> Jennifer L. Roberts elaborates on pressure and reversal in her online lecture series, Roberts 2021 (last visited 20 August 2023).

<sup>44</sup> Reeves 2018, 78.

<sup>45</sup> Reeves 2018, 78.

<sup>46</sup> Hyder 2006, 4.

<sup>47</sup> Hyder 2006, 123.

<sup>48</sup> Hyder 2006, 4.

<sup>49</sup> Due to the extensive time gap, however, experts are hesitant to call these figures proto-Shivas.



printmaking and this, in fact, allows us to summarize some of the artistic strategies applied by Saeed – bodily transformation, on the one hand, and migration of historiography, on the other. The myriad transformations that Saeed expresses in his work – from using and blurring body parts to hybridisation as seen in figures 1 and 3; or the

recontextualising of bodies in a constructed historic setting such as the *yakshi/yakshini* in figures 4, 7 and 8, or the transformed Shiva in figures 2 and 5.

Saeed's work does not suggest a fixed meaning, but provokes the need for passage and transfer, which is anchored in his artistic method.

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