

Madness in Culture and Art

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Although creativity is a universal trait, a certain cultural ethos and mind-set affects its processes. When it comes to the general concept and perception of creative vocations in Pakistan, most of the artists, poets and literati tend to have very obverse and misplaced notions. As a result, a certain attitude has emerged which celebrates madness, eccentric behavior and an antipathy to thought. Since the mystical way of perception is a part of the cultural ethos, cognitive apparatus and epistemic structures in Pakistan, people tend to seek thought from feelings and extract feelings from thought. Hence, people embrace those ideas that feed feelings. Under the influence of such a mystical outlook, the social mind imbues external realities in subjective colors, and remains confused between subjective reality and objective fact.

Owing to the subjective nature of creative activity, the poet enjoys license to break epistemic rules and literary practice. Poetic license is one among such licenses to transgress established canons. This license sans responsibility sometimes takes the artist into the land to which our irrational and mad self has been banished. It is a very precarious position in which to maintain one's balance. Shakeeb Jalali, Sara Shagufta, Ans Moin, Sarwat Hussain, Mustafa Zaidi and Jaun Elia are among the Urdu poets who inhabit the boundary situated between sanity and insanity, and from that threshold they create a conduit for interface between the banished half living in the uncanny land and the sane world of reason.

The literary traditions of Persian and Urdu see symbols of metaphorical wounds in the heart (blood of heart, scar in heart, etc.) as the source of creativity and a sign of genuine feeling. In modern times we find much blood in the poetry of the eminent Urdu poet Jaun Elia. His wounds are not those of tradition, but are ones inflicted by experience of the metaphysical pathos of modernity that rendered him disenchanted from tradition but failed to give him alternate solace.

In Jaun Elia blood and blood-spitting resurface frequently on the pages of his poetry. Psychologically speaking it is a symptom of a sanguinary world created by the banished half in the inner world. This inner strife between his sane and deranged selves rent asunder Elia into two halves. His was the scream of a figure who in the words of Michel Foucault was banished from rational society and relegated to a carceral space where the mad, sick and the criminal live. That banished self is wounded, and his blood is oozing out from the weak pores of the sane self. Hence, blood is the symbol of death. Elia writes (translation): "The gate within me is locked for me from outside / I do not inhabit in me that is news within me / Although bruised by umpteen wounds, there is no trace of blood / Who is that who is drained in the blood of my sanguinary self." In another couplet he says: "My eyelashes are blood-spattered, and the face came out to be pale / The heart has proved to be a unique self in this trick."

Another tendency among artists in Pakistan is indulging in a bohemian lifestyle, employing a mystical mode and harboring pain to experience epiphany for creativity. If an artist or poet looked

unkempt and distracted, it was because they were totally engrossed in creating something genuine. In this case appearances infatuate artists so much that they forget the real creative self. There is no denying the fact that the artist needs personal space and freedom to express his/her ideas, but a problem emerges when this trend becomes a cogent reason for lassitude. Consequently, thought disappears from art and literature. When an outlook is adopted as the identity of the artist, then it functions as a mask. Gradually, the mask makes inroads into the self, and captures the inner self. Masquerade does not have anything substantial and meaningful to hide except emptiness. The more dominant the masquerade in art, the more it is empty of substance and meaning.

Part of the problem arises from institutional practices and the intellectual ambience that the artist internalizes. As a part of the intellectual milieu, the artist embraces prevalent practices among the doyens of art and literature. Being a poet or artist means one needs to be heartbroken, feed on sadness, look shabby and mad and be bohemian in lifestyle. There is a general perception in our society that a person ought to be deranged to rethink thinking and disrupt social patterns. All the cultural and intellectual paraphernalia for the making of an artist or writer is based on myths created by the lethargic mind and depressed heart, which avoid the excruciating process entailed in novelty and thinking. Hence, they are absolved of any rules and organized learning.

Immanuel Kant also exempts the work of artistic genius from any rules because genius is mysterious. Here is the point where divergence between art and thought occurs. Later that gap grows into a yawning abyss. It is in this space/gap wherein myths and fallacies about creativity flourish. When the subjective whim and unconscious delirium reaches an extreme level, the artist loses his faculty to distinguish between intuition, fancy, fantasy, illusion, delusion, ecstasy, fallacy, imagination or hallucination. As a result, religious experience merges with amorous experience, fantasy with imagination, and hallucination with reality.

At the social level, it manifests in the shape of cults and delusionary views about time and space. The gap between thinking and poetry is further widened due to the absence of conversation and exchange between the two realms. Literary criticism is a conduit that connects art and literature with the world of ideas. But literati in Pakistan decry literary critics as lame souls who teach others how to walk. No artist can attain sublimity without sublime thoughts. When the dark clouds of emotion engulf the mind, the demons from darkness get free to devour thinking. Feeding only on madness degenerates society, politics, morals and religion. The rampant corruption, antipathy to thinking, suicide bombing and religious strife in Pakistan are manifestations of a culture that has gone insane. To cure culture from insanity, it is imperative to cherish beautiful ideas, not the sanguinary narrative in art and society.

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