

Presence/Absence of Human body: Artivism and Female Pakistani Artists 1980s- 2000s

By: Amina Ejaz

Curatorial Statement

The representation of the human body in the works of female artists continues to be a point of inquiry for art historians and feminist scholars. In contemporary South Asia, the human body, especially the notion of the female human body is contentious and multi-layered when located in the social and political context. In the post-1980s, when the representation of the human body was banned under the dictatorship of Zia-ul-Haq, Pakistani women artists consciously engaged in feminist art, which in one way or another was grounded in activist agenda, seeking to bring social change and raise concerns against a patriarchal society. These artists created artistic and activist (artivist) works, which became foundational for the next generation of female artists who depicted the presence of the human body as a provocative signifier of suppression and passivity. At the same time, the absence of the female body in the works of the other group of female artists spoke even louder for activist agendas. Therefore, this online exhibition provides critical insight into the works of Pakistani female artists and locates the presence and absence of the human body in their works as they continue to create a dialogue between the viewer and the artist. This dialogue is crucial when cognizing current activist practices in Pakistan.

Women Artists of the 1980s

During the dictatorship of Zia-ul-Haq between 1978-and 1988, his regressive policies under the banner of Islamization targeted minorities and women. Art was also muzzled under his dictatorship and the depiction of the body was discouraged. As a response and a form of activism, women artists in the 1980s engaged with the notion of the body. They considered these bodies as sites of conflict, desire, or as symbols of identity. These artists, through their art, protested and commented on the deplorable social and political conditions of the country. They used bodies as subversive measures to create their artistic narratives. Subversive representations and explorations of the female body as a form of activism placed Pakistani female artists into transnational feminism.



Salima Hashmi, *Morning paper*, 1983, a mixed media on paper, 38.1 x 45.72 cm
Source: <https://awarewomenartists.com/en/artiste/salima-hashmi/>

In the 1980s Pakistani women artists shifted both their narratives and media. Instead of oil on canvas, which was a commonly used medium, female artists started adopting collage, watercolor, and printmaking as their new media. As the female artists were subjected to censorship, they camouflaged the representation of the human body. Even though Salima Hashmi represented the female body as a symbol of protest, it was muted by collage, probing the viewer to question the presence of the human body.

What Hashmi and other artists of the 1980s were engaged in could be labeled as 'intensional' activism which according to Astrid N. Korporaalm, 'gathers, drags and carries the fragments of embodied experience created by the trauma of being identified, objectified, tracked, categorized and erased, allowing them (artists) to extend into invisible and virtual spheres of relation.' Hashmi creates a relationship between her subject (body), text from newspaper clippings, and kite paper to represent the tension of a dictatorial society.

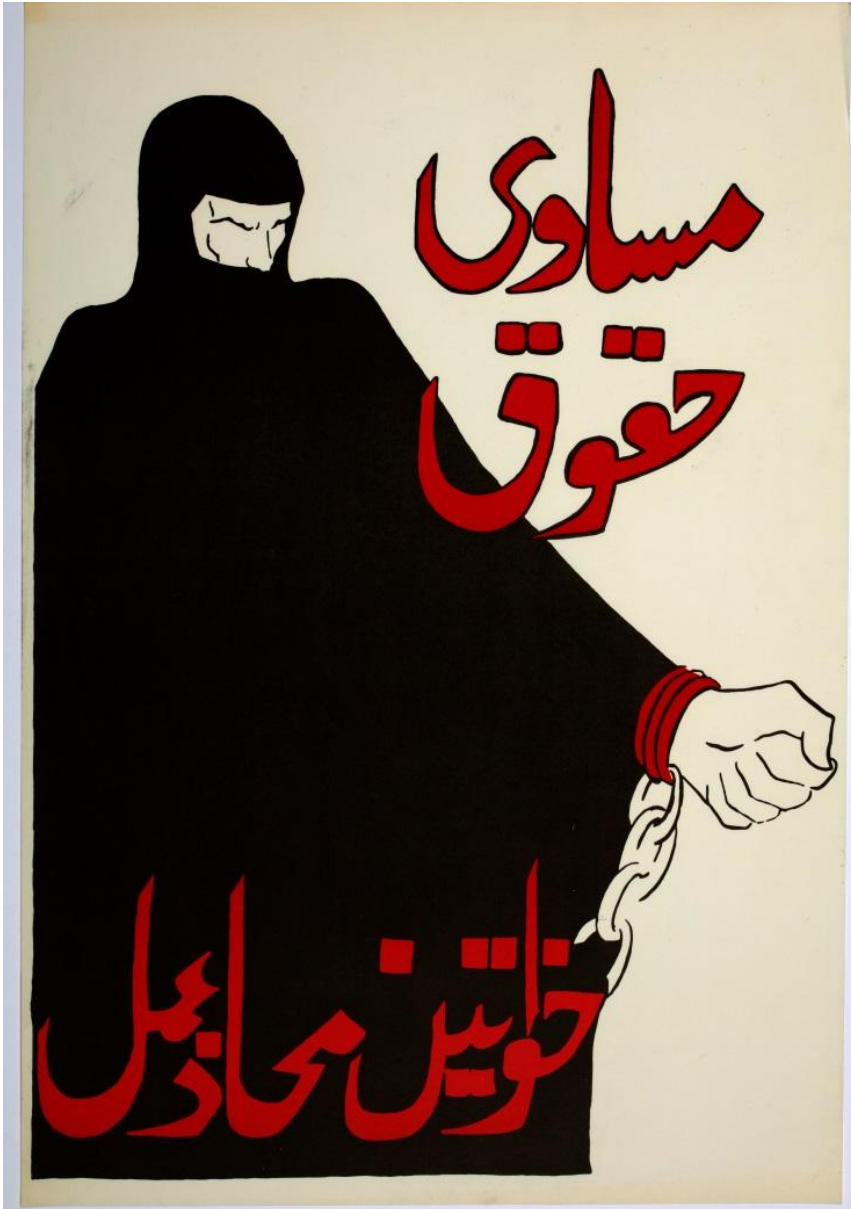


Salima Hashmi, *Alive in my time series*, 1986, mixed media on paper, 45.72 x 55.88 cm

Source:

<https://awarewomenartists.com/en/artiste/salima-hashmi/>

Lala Rukh



Lalarukh Activist poster for women's right



Nazish Attaullah

Nazish Attulah clad the female body in “chadar”. Here, Chadar signified the absence of the body. The contour of the female body is present, however, the subject is absent. Her not being actively present is a symbol of protest and activism against Zia-ul-Haq’s draconian regime, under which women were discouraged to occupy public spaces.



Nazish Attaullah



Mehr Afroze, Mask Series, Oil on board, 1988.



Rabia Zuberi, Blind Justice, Mixed Media, 1980s

Women Artists of the 1990s

Female artists in the 1990s became increasingly more aware of political and social surroundings and well-informed about global art practices and feminism. Some of these artists received their training from the West and employed feminist ideologies. Artists of the 1990s produced powerful works, which were experimenting with new forms and digital media. The human body in the works of these artists became overt and provocative unlike in the 1980s. Also, some female artists used traditional art forms, such as miniature, to deal with contemporary social issues. While the media of female artists producing works might vary in this decade, the presence and absence of the human body in artworks remained, creating space for activism or artivism.

Laila Rahman



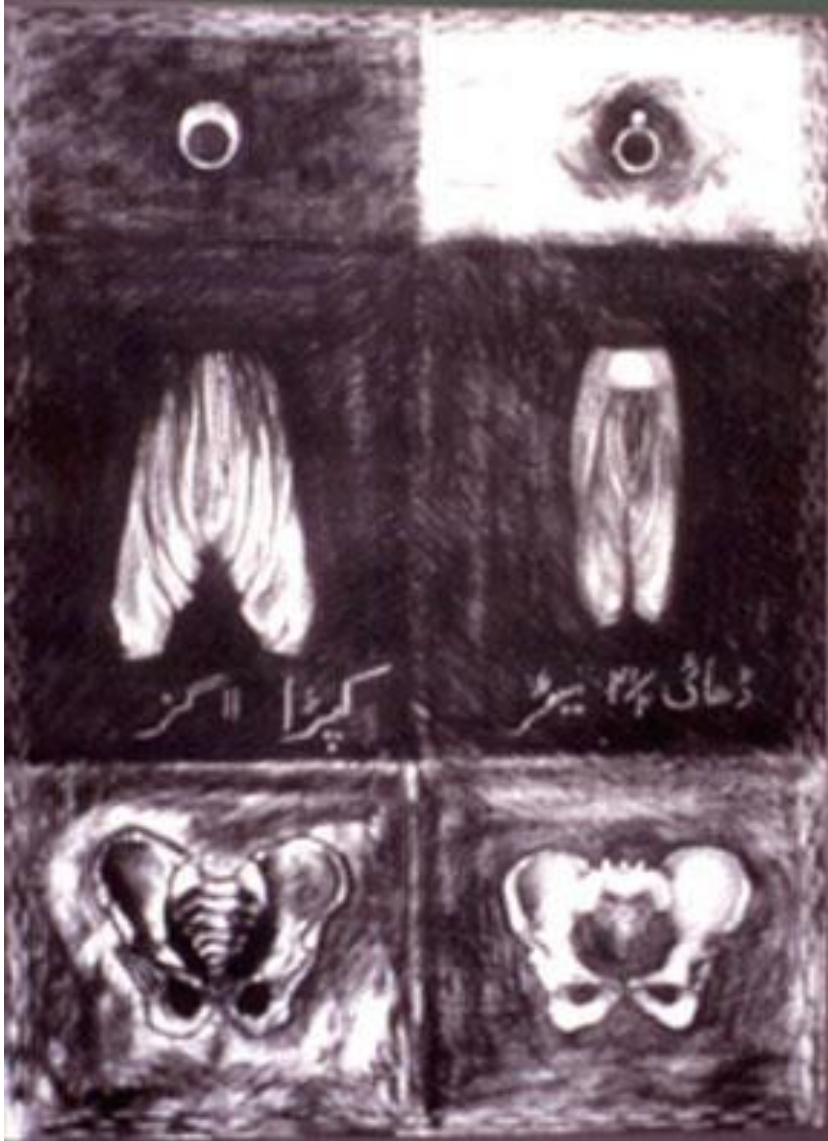
The Worshippers Dance
Etching and aquatint
15 x 15 Inches
1993



The Last Journey
Oil and pencil on paper Triptych
2.5 feet x 5 feet
1999

Laila Rahman: image courtesy

Duriya Kazi



Shazia Sikander



Cholee Kay Peechay Kya? Chunree Kay Nichay Kya?
(*What is Under the Blouse? What is Under the Dress?*),
1997

Vegetable color, dry pigment, watercolor, and tea on
wasli paper



Cycles and Transitions, 1996
Watercolor, gouache and tea on wasli paper
9 x 13 1/2 inches

Summaya Durrani



Naik Larki 1991
Offset Print And Mix Media
47 X 26 Inches

WOMEN ARTISTS 2000s to PRESENT

Pakistani women artists who produced works in the 2000s and later, addressed the complexity of gender, society, and public vs private in both local and global contexts. This gave female artists a unique position as contemporary South Asian artists. In this period, the female body appeared in the public as both a work of art and activism. Female artists, by this act, attempted to reclaim public space that remained constricted and contentious for women in general. While these female artists used contemporary media such as installation, photographs, and digital art for their art projects, the female human body (in both its absence and presence) still became central to the works of these artists.

NAIZA KHAN



Armour lingerie IV
2007
galvanised steel
82 x 40 x 24 cm



Henna Hands
2002 Site-specific project near the Cantonment Railway
Station, Karachi

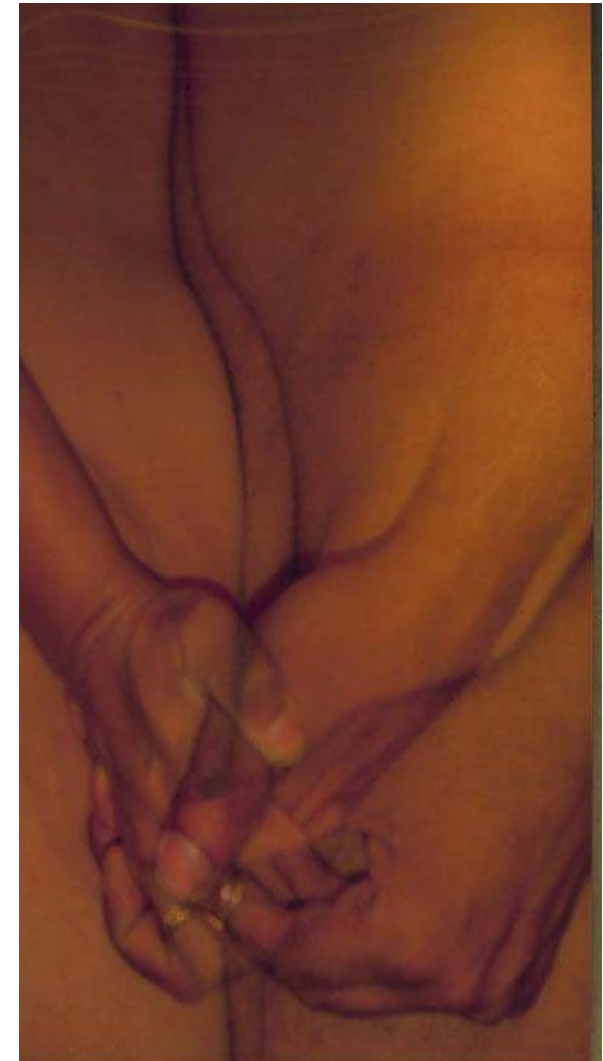
Farida Batool



“Nai Reesan Shehr Lahore Diyan

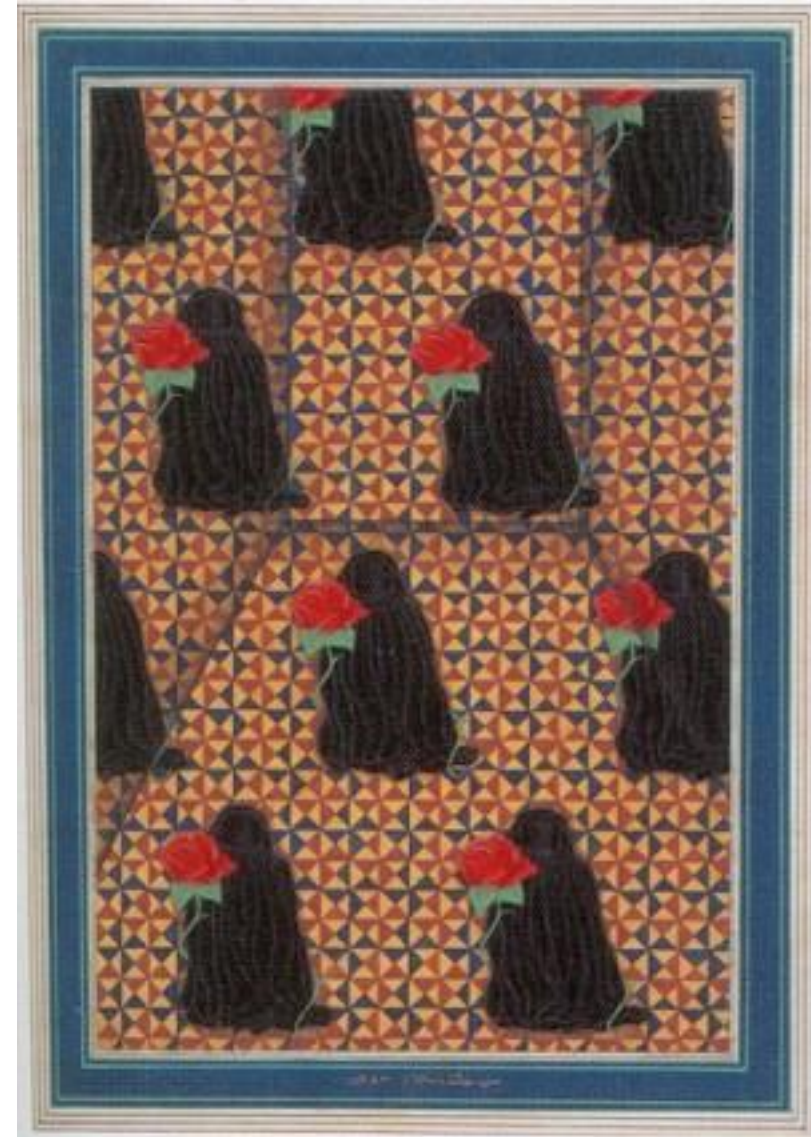
(There Is No Match of the City Lahore)” by the Pakistani artist Farida Batool

at Aicon Gallery.Credit...Farida Batool/Aicon Gallery



Farida Batool, *Line of Control*, 2004

Ayesha Khalid



Huma Mulji



Lost and Found

Buffalo Hide, fiberglass, glass eye and yarn

114.3 x 38.1 x 193 cm

2012

Photo Credits: Stefan Altenburger (*Burning Down the House* 10th Gwangju Biennale, 2014)

Adeela Suleman



Adeela Suleman, *Mubarizun No More Series 3*, 2014. Hand-beaten stainless steel and iron. 106 x 104 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Aicon Gallery.

Aisha Abid Hussain



Two Not Together Series III, 2014
Archival print on Hahnemuhle photo rag
12 × 16 in
30.48 × 40.64 cm