

Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010)

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This book states at the outset that it is not a comprehensive survey, and will not attempt to provide a complete account of the artists or a complete “reading” of their works. When such conditions are given, the result is generally an informative but insubstantial narrative of a period and/or its leading artists. However, Dadi then proceeds to deliver one of the most methodical introductions to the history of modern and contemporary South Asian art yet to appear in print—a feat that only a few have successfully managed, notably Partha Mitter and Rebecca Brown.¹ Dadi examines the work of seven Pakistan-based artists, and argues that they must be assessed according to a new narrative. Thus, rather than follow a standard “national art history” of Pakistan, Dadi seeks to find the “genealogical trajectories” of these artists and trace the emergence of the “South Asian Muslim artistic self and . . . global and public Muslim subjectivities” (p. 4).

First, there is a need to establish the context of such inquiries. The study of art history in a postcolonial context has proved to be a vexing issue for many scholars, mainly due to the need to translate and modify concepts of the “center” (the West) to make them appropriate for the “peripheries.” It is also necessary to explain the discrepancies between the center and periphery;

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that is, the consequences of the construction of colonial space, in which the colonized remains in a state of lack, eternally “not yet” ready²—not yet ready for democracy, not yet ready for industrialization, not yet ready for “modern” art. Thus the foundation of postcolonial South Asian art history lies within anticolonial and nationalist histories that resisted such discourse. These anticolonial and nationalist histories were then themselves challenged and criticized as nationalist legitimizations produced by the postcolonial national bourgeois. We are now in the third generation of postcolonial art histories in South Asia, in which authors are no longer committed to the nation, but seek a new subject, and Dadi frames his argument around the subjectivity of the South Asian Muslim artist.

In order to even consider a new approach, a critical review of prevailing conceptual frameworks is needed. In order that one may grasp the notion of “Muslim South Asia,” Dadi starts his introduction with a brief summary of historical developments in the subcontinent from the Mughal Empire to the contemporary nations post-independence. He also defines the concepts of modernism, modernity, and tradition within this context, which reveals the centrality of Western modern practices in South Asian art history. Modernism, as an art-historical term, developed as an upheaval against a (Western) tradition: for example, the avant-garde in the West was the result of struggles against prevailing institutions. However, the modernisms of non-Western countries were not upheavals against their own traditions, nor did they have any established artistic institutions to rebel against. As a result, modern artists of postcolonial South Asia needed to construct a different framework, as well as to refer to the modernism of the West.

In addition, Muslim artists of South Asia were faced with the problems raised by the new nations of India and Pakistan. Dadi delivers a succinct review of Muslim consciousness in South Asia, which was based on a Persianate intellectual life complicated by reforms and the rise of Pan-Islamism following the loss of the Ottoman Caliphate. Dadi also argues that the South Asian Muslim experience “differs from other experiences of nationalism” in that, among other things, Islam was one of the founding principles of the new nation, but failed to provide cultural aspirations (p. 31).

A final theoretical complication remains. Dadi reveals the problems inherent in the concept of “Modern Islamic art.” Universalist Islamic art, according to Dadi, is but a “catachrestic signifier” (p. 32): the concept itself is Western. For the best part of the twentieth century, Muslims themselves were not interested in “Islamic art,” an entity they considered to be of the past. They were also preoccupied with the new nation, and in addition there was

no aesthetic theory or discursive ground in Islamicate tradition that would aid the construction of a national or religious identity. Dadi argues that this “constructed and groundless nature of the discipline [Islamic art] itself” (p. 35) enabled the rise of the modern Muslim artist. Thus the modern Muslim artist sought to find a discursive foundation in textuality, a discursively articulated discipline in Islam, through the understanding of Islamic art by Western Orientalists, and by affiliation with transnational modernism. As this statement might raise more questions than provide answers, Dadi astutely focuses on the emergence of the artistic self, displaying much dexterity in dealing with actual artists and their works in the following chapters.

The first artist that Dadi examines is Abdul Rahman Chughtai (1897–1975). Chughtai is often regarded as the first significant modern Muslim artist from South Asia, with his work reflecting Mughal aesthetics along with literary references to the Persian and Urdu poets Omar Khayyam (1048–1131), Mirza Ghalib (1797–1869), and Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938). However, he was clearly ambivalent about the new nation. In this chapter, Dadi offers a brief survey of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century painting in South Asia, which culminated in the establishment of the Bengal School of painting led by Abanindranath Tagore and a number of Western and Indian critics. The Bengal School was influential in placing Mughal/Muslim pictorial styles below Buddhism and Hindu art, which was considered religious and “national.” While Chughtai is often considered stylistically parallel to those of the Bengal School, Dadi argues that he clearly sought a different framework, leaning on the firmly established textuality of the Persianate world. Chughtai also sought out new media, which resulted in his most famous works being published in printed *muraqqas*, or a reinvention of the Mughal albums. According to Dadi, Chughtai’s works reflect a struggle between negotiation with and resistance to Western modernism and modernity; his huge success as an artist also, paradoxically, enabled younger modernists “to repudiate [Chughtai’s] nostalgic and enchanted world and initiate a new openness toward transnational modernism” (p. 92).

Zainul Abedin (1914–76), Zubeida Agha (1922–97), and Shakir Ali (1916–75), three artists discussed in chapter two, were instrumental in leading transnational modernism in post-independence Pakistan. Dadi sees similarities among the three artists in that they were all builders of key institutions (such as art schools, artistic societies, exhibition venues, and English-language publications on modern art), as well as producing works that clearly bypassed the “national.” For example, Zainul Abedin produced

“realist” works depicting narrative and social subject matters such as the Great Bengal Famine, as well as “modernist” works focusing on formalist balance; his works concurrently valorized the rural and the folk (of east Bengal, or East Pakistan) while questioning the nation (the dominance of the state of West Pakistan). On the other hand, Zubeida Agha’s work, often heralded as the first example of transnational abstraction and painterly modernism in Pakistan, baffled contemporary critics. Dadi argues that this confusion led to a new approach towards modern Islamic art, in which not only stylistic, thematic, or material borrowings from the past, but also the ideational dimensions of Islam—that is, Islamicate ideas—were related to visual form. Agha’s reluctance to articulate her concerns corresponds to Shakir Ali’s awareness of language as an inadequate medium: both remained private persons, leaving the role of critical interlocutor to others. Shakir Ali also concentrated on formal problems rather than narrative or expressionist drama in his works. According to Dadi, “by persistently disregarding formulaic responses and opening up the question of the impact of modernity on the individual’s inner state,” Ali led the modernization of the postcolonial artistic subjectivity in Pakistan (p. 131). However, Dadi argues that while these three artists’ approaches allowed them to “bypass ideological minefields,” they did not lead to a rigorous discussion of the relationship between modernity and the self. As mentioned earlier, Dadi argues that this was due to the very lack of critical discourse on visual art, the foremost feature of the discipline of Islamic art.

The work of the celebrated Pakistani artist Sadequain, and especially his engagement with the influential Urdu poets Ghalib and Iqbal, is discussed in chapter three. The works of Sadequain (1930–87) are described as examples of “calligraphic modernism,” a movement based on a concern with the abstract and expressive possibilities of the Arabic script. Many have claimed that Islamic calligraphy, with its extensive biographical and authorial genealogy, exalted social status, and conceptions of aesthetics in technical and transcendental discourses, was the closest to attaining an “artistic” status according to Western standards. Sadequain’s calligraphic works, reformulating classical calligraphy as a viable visual “tradition” open to the modern artist, led to his recognition as an “Indo-Muslim” artist, as well as a powerful force in transnational post-cubist modernism. Astoundingly productive, he soon came to be revered as a national artist with significant patronage from the Pakistan state, which was by this time following an increasingly coercive and austere project of Islamization. This led to wider venues for Sadequain, including mural paintings and other public artworks; and while this resulted in a popularization of calligraphic paintings among an expanded public, the

artist himself remained a personal, sexual, and Sufistic character, expressing himself through his paintings as well as his poetry, non-conforming to the boundaries of the state.

The fourth chapter, examining the two contemporary artists Rasheed Araeen (1935–) and Naiza Khan (1968–), offers the most powerful imagery, yet is the least satisfying chapter of this book. Dadi categorizes these two artists as “contemporary” according to the following features: the use of a variety of media other than painting, work that underscores aporias of the self and the social, a more direct and intensified engagement with the social, and interaction with the realm of urbanized popular cultural forms in Karachi (p. 177). Araeen’s work was strongly influenced by the writings of Frantz Fanon, in which the persistent legacies of imperialism and racism were highlighted, as well as the feminist artistic consciousness of 1970s Britain. Through his involvement with *Third Text*, one of the leading journals on postcolonial visual and literary arts in South Asia, Araeen has also led a critical engagement with Islam and tradition. Dadi argues that Araeen, by deploying forms and tropes of “Islamic art” in odd contexts, such as graffiti and billboards, has “persistently enacted an immanent self-critique of Islamic tradition, without reification or sacralization” (p. 197). On the other hand, Naiza Khan’s work is included in this chapter due to its focus on gender in Pakistani society. Khan seeks to bring the discussion of women’s space into the public and reaffirm the presence of the woman; however, rather than drawing from visual traditions, Khan looks towards discursive and textual references to assert the space of women. Particularly, the use of charged objects (such as chastity belts) suggests the tension between the demands of the social order and the intractability of the body, making the presence of the female body visible in Muslim South Asian art. Thus Dadi seeks the achievements of these two artists in the contemporaneity of their “artistic modalities” (p. 216), which conceptualizes the question of Islamic art in relation to values far beyond mere fidelity to forms and materials.

In addition, as “contemporary” artists, Araeen and Khan both face a new challenge of Muslim selfhood in a context in which the Islamic world arose as the geopolitical “other” after the events following September 11, 2001, as well as the demise of communism in 1991. Dadi argues that both artists’ work, “although not addressing predicaments that are limited to Muslim subjects alone, nevertheless bears particular salience for Muslims with respect to their belonging and participation in the contemporary globalizing public arena” (p. 216). However, this leap from twentieth-century modernism in Muslim South Asian art to the recent developments in global contemporary art

warrants further exploration, in that the “Islamic” component is reduced to a mere fragmentary link in the works discussed. This leads to the questions: How then does one define contemporary Islamic art? How does one avoid an art of Islamic “fundamentalism,” as well as an art that aims to locate and provide “an appropriate model of Islam itself”? In seeking an answer, Dadi first offers what it is not: not “fidelity to past form, media or spiritualism nor . . . a mere reflection in the value-mirror of Western liberalism” (p. 218). The epilogue addresses the multiplicity embedded in this response, by examining thirteen active artists as well as critiques of modern South Asian Muslim art, and proposes two salient features from works of the last two decades: the continued interrogation of “tradition” and the exploration of the “popular” or the “everyday.”

The aim of this rather detailed review has been twofold. First, to provide the casual reader or non-specialist with a brief overview of modern and contemporary South Asian “Islamic art” through a consideration of Dadi’s book. The second and more crucial purpose, though, is to urge specialists of disciplines other than art history or South Asia to take note of this subject matter, which might otherwise seem a peripheral topic. This is not simply a book on modern/contemporary Islamic art in South Asia; rather, it is a book that covers each and all of the concepts referred to above. This richly illustrated book belongs on the shelf of every scholar and enthusiast of South Asian or Islamic art, as well as those of the modern and contemporary period of Asia and the Islamic world in general. However, while it provides extensive endnotes with references to further readings, the text itself is not completely readable, and even someone versed in academia will probably benefit from rereading the dense introduction after finishing the chapters discussing individual artists. Questions remain about some dates, such as the birth of Chughtai, which is given as both 1894 and 1897 (p. 41, p. 60). Yet Dadi’s book will be of value to everyone interested in the “modern” and “contemporary” of Asia and the Islamic world, the very space and time that we occupy.

NOTES

¹ Rebecca M. Brown, *Art for a Modern India, 1947–1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India’s Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1922–1947* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007).

² Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 65–66.