



By **Hajrah Mumtaz**

If we believe in the conventional wisdom that art and culture are vital for the wellbeing of any given society, then matters don't appear to augur well for Pakistan.

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Vital they, without doubt, are, because it is in these spheres that reality and creative interpretation intersect, where societal experience can be introspected upon, examined and distilled into coherence and meaningfulness. People learn to recognise and understand themselves through culture: literature, art, theatre and music.

This is why societies, in times of flux and adversity, tend to simultaneously develop vibrant — even if repressed or censored — art and culture. Time and again, throughout the world, art and culture have become powerful tools of dissent and opposition in a given situation. In recent history, it happened in Iran, it happened in Vietnam and it happened in China.

It also happened in Pakistan. Recall the 1980s where one of the outcomes of the grotesque regimes was the parallel theatre movement. Banned from the state-run arts council venues, demonised and hunted, the activists of those years nevertheless worked on, choosing theatre as one of the avenues through which they would voice their dissent and lobby for more progressive, less damaging, policies. They faced state oppression and violence, police raids and the possibility of detention, yet they continued with their work.

With the clarity of hindsight, it is possible to place the parallel theatre of the 1980s in Pakistan amongst the notable 'resistance through culture' movements of the world, where artists came together with observers and intellectuals to hold a mirror up to society, ask it to introspect and consider its beginnings and its future. That mirror is still valid today, three decades and too much history later.

Societies, when in adversity or in times of flux, distil their experiences through cultural expression. That is why we are remembering the centenary of Faiz Ahmed Faiz's birth this year. That is why the work of Saadat Hasan Manto remains relevant. That was then. Today, artists say that back then it would have been impossible to imagine that a time would come when the Zia regime would seem a relatively more 'free' period. And yet, such is life in Pakistan, that to this matters have come.

Today, this year, and it seems from now on, there is little possibility of making sense from experience, from introspecting or in distilling. And as a result, there is little to stop Pakistan from falling, heedless, into a vortex of the infinitely prolonged now, where there is no past and no thought of future — just the now, the frenzied now of the lynch mob, the suicide bomber, the assassin, the terrorist.

The fact of the matter is that it is possible to speak out against censorship, oppression, the possibility of detention or arrest. But in the Pakistan of today, you cannot speak out because words can get you killed. They killed Salman Taseer and Shahbaz Bhatti. They killed scores of less well-known others. And you or I, the writing on the wall is clear, had better watch what we say because, when it comes down to it, do we really choose to pay the ultimate price?

This is the intolerable situation faced by those who can still think rationally in Pakistan. For those whose work it is to turn societal experience into culture, into meaningfulness, the battle is already lost. The euphemistic term 'security threat' is what killed the Rafi Peer Festival. It is stalking Veena Malik. Today, it is thirsting for the blood of anyone who, in modern Pakistan, thinks of writing a play or creating a television series exploring the life and times of Aasia Bibi. And tomorrow, it will wait in the wings to dole out the punishment for an ever-expanding definition of 'transgression'.

Words matter. I cannot do better than to quote the blog Café Pyala on this — the unnamed writer has put it far better than I could. "Words then ... are powerful enough for other people to feel threatened by. Words that carry truth, particularly when they touch upon the misinterpretation of religion, intimidate those whose words don't. In our history, or rather our

collective amnesia, we have often responded to words of truth and beauty with the vituperation, forcing into exile or silencing of those who utter them. But now I have to ask myself a different question, i.e. what is the value of mere words when the other side is using guns?"

The Pyala answer is to fight, to continue to speak out. Yet the truth of the matter is that most of us have already been silenced, reviewing every sentence and every idea for its suitability in any given situation and for the possible reprisal it may invoke.

Those who work in the realm where ideas are for public knowledge — artists, writers, journalists, theatre persons — are already in a situation where they must censor themselves. There are a number of topics in modern Pakistan that you must stay away from, not speak your mind on. And these will only grow in number. Today it is religion. Tomorrow it will be human rights. And the day after that, it'll be your right to work or dress or go where you choose.

The lone hope would lie in discourse and debate over all that ails and that is Pakistan. But we've already silenced the voices, shrunk public discourse to the vanishing point. The future, now, is anybody's guess.