

By **Zehra Naqvi**

Artists exist on borders, continuously striving to extend them or push them, crossing them to see what the view looks like from the other side. If nothing else they question them. Some going as far as Marcus Harvey depicting a collage of Myra Hindley, a hated figure in Britain, while some like Anish Kapoor prefer a much more abstract way of expressing themselves. But Muslims seem to have placed a restriction on the representation of Islam that prevents people, or more specifically artists to explore and question without inhibition.

Pakistanis pride themselves on being tough and being strong enough to be able to survive in a dysfunctional country, where every day is a struggle against poverty, violence, injustice, lack of electricity etc. But somehow we make it, because we are survivors. As Muslims we are surprisingly sensitive, unable to contain our emotions on hearing anything negative on Islam. Kind of like those doting parents who directed by blind love shower their spoilt child with chocolates refusing to acknowledge that in reality they are raising little monsters and loudly condemn those who point it out. We have a weird sense of tolerance - on one hand we easily take in all the violence being carried out in the name of Islam by refusing to call the perpetrators Muslim, because our religion is a peaceful one and whoever practices otherwise is not part of it - with that logic the majority of people who call themselves Muslim are not since we are all human and we sin which is forbidden in Islam. However the reason we are called Muslims is because we chose to be Muslims, even when we go against the teachings of Islam. The whole Muslim community roars in protest on issues like the cartoons of the Prophet or the Burqa ban in France, however this outrage surprisingly vanishes when violence is openly carried out in the name of this very religion which they cannot bear to hear ill of. Women can still not drive in Saudi Arabia, in Pakistan Salman Taseer was shot for committing blasphemy; in both cases the reasons are Islamic and Muslims everywhere remain chillingly silent.

Recently I finished reading the Satanic Verses by Salman Rushdie and remember feeling a bit sinful when buying the book knowing that my money was being spent on something that criticized my religion. I can understand how some people might get offended when reading their Prophet being described as “Mahmoud the businessman, climbing his hot mountain in the Hijaz” - however the novel is not a commentary on Islam and the Prophet. Rushdie creates a fictional world using fantastical imagery to explore issues around immigration, change and alienation. To me the novel represents the fictional side of Islam; or rather people’s interpretations of Islam, the Hadiths and events in the prophet’s life that exist only in the accounts narrated by parents or elders and passed on to the younger generation which place the Prophet Muhammad in an exalted pedestal and praise him but through events that historically never took place. However these stories are as real as those penned in history books primarily because people believe that they actually happened and use them as examples to live their own life. Through a dream sequence Rushdie creates his own version of Islamic history that reveals the truths and flaws of Muslim society. Many may object to the portrayal of the Prophet with “long lashes like a girls,” and on other fictional aspects of the novel, but Muslims conveniently chose to ignore the stark portrayal of reality imbedded within the words. In a flamboyant style Rushdie paints a very real picture of a changing Islam, the kind that exists in people’s interpretations rather than facts. An extract of the novel which struck me the most was the account of the gatekeeper after witnessing Rekha’s suicide who jumped from top of the Everest Vilas after making her children leap before her. He describes watching the bodies falling from the building however on seeing the Begum coming down and her sari “floating out like a big balloon and all her hair was loose,” he looked away “because she was falling and it was not respectful to look down her clothes.” To me this highlights how distorted our reactions have become, how we now react towards situations as “Muslims” rather than as “human beings” and by doing this have made the two mutually exclusive. As Muslims we go as far as to defend murder in the name of religion, while as people our basic human right is the right to live.

The cartoons of the Prophet were offensive, Salman Taseer’s comments may have hurt many people’s sentiments, but death does not solve anything. Recently I saw a video that has been circulating around facebook and found it highly offensive. It documents a speech by a ‘religious Muslim cleric’ on the sexual pleasures men will receive in Muslim heaven and uses derogatory terms for women, calling them “dirty”. The language used in the speech is quite visual, pornographic and patriarchal and is rightly being criticized by those who saw it. However a more direct action needs to be taken to prevent such clerics from addressing the public but I still don’t think he should be killed. Islam is a religion that can defend itself when faced with mockery and ridicule; the Prophet’s life, the Quran and the teachings of Islam alone are enough to counter such criticisms which are not a threat to the religion but create a space for debate and discourse. However the real threat lies in our denial to accept and openly condemn the actions of other Muslims. Somehow it is easier to condemn art instead.

As Muslims we need to grow a sense of humour and stop throwing a tantrum every time someone says something we don't like. Visual artists like Shirin Neshat who base their works on Islam are often forced live and practice in Western countries due to the death threats they receive in their own homeland. Art includes diverse forms of self expression that creates new ways of looking and thinking about things. It is a celebration of diversity of opinions, and of the world, its customs and cultures. Islam should be no exception since it is through its expression, its exploration and even its criticism that people will begin to understand it better. By isolating it, it will forever remain a contained institution discussed through hushed respectful tones and criticised only after a thousand apologies were made to the whole Muslim community. I saw a cartoon online, which made me smile and I think it depicted a woman telling a very worried looking Prophet that a few cartoons were the least of his image problems. There you go, that one cartoon basically expresses the whole point of my article, in the Muslim community we have far more pressing issues to deal with than art.

Below I have attached a poem by a Punjabi poet Bulleh Shah, who paints a grim reality but in a beautifully thought provoking way. Enjoy!

Parh Parh Alim Fazal Hoyo

Parh parh alim fazal hoyo

Kade apne aap nu parhya yi nai

Ja ja warhda mandar masita

Kade man apne wich warya yi nai

Iwe roz shetan nal larne

Kade nafs apne nal larya yi nai

Bulay sha asmani udthia pharne

Jera kar bethe aunu pharya yi na

Translation:

You have learnt so much

And read a thousand books.

Have you ever read your Self?

You have gone to mosque and temple.

Have you ever visited your soul?

You are busy fighting Satan.

Have you ever fought your

Ill intentions?

You have reached into the skies,

But you have failed to reach

What's in your heart!