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ACTION AS MODERNIST CODE

Naveeda Khan

Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia by Iftikhar Dadi.
Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. Pp. 312.
\$41.95 cloth.

In the late 1990s, I was in Lahore, conducting doctoral research and befriending the artists and scholars associated with the National College of Arts (NCA). Of these, Rashid Rana, at that time a teacher at the NCA and very much a rising artist, was my favorite for the easy affection he showed me, a newcomer to Lahore. Later when he became famous and I started seeing his artwork splashily displayed, I was proud. At the same time, I wondered whether his rise in the international markets did not coincide a little too neatly with the downward trajectory of the nation of his birth, Pakistan, into political chaos in the 2000s, as if it amused art connoisseurs that a country so bungling in statecraft should produce such fine art. I wondered whether Rashid did not pander a bit to the widespread representation of Pakistan as an extremist religious stronghold, if only to shock, for instance with his image of the veiled woman who dissolved into thousands of images of naked, strutting playgirls upon closer look.

Banish such cynical thoughts, urges Iftikhar Dadi in his cogently written and lushly illustrated 2010 book *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*. Dadi, an art historian at Cornell University and a respected artist in his own right, contends that if we are to have a proper appreciation and a pleasurable encounter with some of the most serious art entering the world's scene,

we must step away from such easy criticism and grapple with the difficulties of the emergence of modernism as a movement within the art of what he calls “Muslim South Asia.” As an aside, “Muslim South Asia” is a formulation worth unpacking. Presumably, Dadi uses it to bring colonial India and pre-independence Bangladesh within the purview of artistic inheritance and production in Pakistan, without having to delve too much into the histories of art in those two nations. I understand this formulation as allowing art in Pakistan to be grounded in its own terms and not in a derivative or defensive posture to the nations in the region with which it has shared and conflicted histories. It is a bold and perhaps founding move on Dadi’s part to suggest that in attending to the art that Pakistan feels to be its own, we also attend significantly to the art of the Muslims of South Asia.

That artists of the region have had to contend with postcolonial anxieties about the originality of their contribution to modernism, and the politics of influence is the assumed background to this work. Dadi presents this dilemma succinctly in his introduction to the book. The plight of Muslim artists is further complicated because they stand in a problematic relationship to an aesthetic tradition established as Islamic art by Western scholarship. The problem is simultaneously one of determining how to

lay claims upon this tradition while critically perceiving and representing the structures of mediation, and one of securing the artist as an independent subject as opposed to a master prier of the tradition. Besides such questions of the positioning of the artistic self and its sovereignty, there is the further conundrum of the artist’s target audience—that is, whether it is the nation, the people, or an emergent cosmopolitanism.

Disclaiming any attempts at representativeness, Dadi takes up a handful of artists—Abdur Rahman Chughtai, Zainul Abedin, Zubeida Agha, Shakir Ali, Sadequain, Rasheed Araeen, Naiza Khan and those around them—giving them four meaty chapters in more or less chronological order to work through the range of possibilities, limitations, contradictions, ambivalences, and transcendences within the afore-sketched terrain of dilemmas facing the modern Muslim artist. Blending biographical sketches, vignettes that illuminate a particular path taken, historical contextualization, description of specific milieus, focused attention to formal elements within individual works, and engagement with wider theoretical and political concerns, Dadi masterfully presents less the profiles of artistic subjectivities and more a series of actions, productive and proliferating, converging and differentiating, that run through and constitute the current generative code of Pakistani art.

It is worth taking up each chapter in turn to consider the astonishing variety of actions undertaken by each artist. In so doing, I do not quite do justice to the capaciousness of references and careful arguments specific to each chapter but rather trace this lay reader's productive pathway through a very rewarding book. My focus on action also enables me to make a few final comments about the specificity of the contribution of Muslim South Asian art to not only modernism but modernity more generally.

Chughtai, the subject of chapter 1, positions himself to launch a Punjab school of art rivaling the Bengal school predominant in the early twentieth century. While the Punjab school does not ever acquire the status and reach of its rival, Chughtai teaches; he paints relentlessly, participating in numerous exhibitions; he publishes his work in Calcutta-based journals, the first Muslim artist to acquire such publicity in the emergent print media; he organizes exhibitions, the most well known being the 1920 exhibition of the Punjab Fine Arts Society; he illustrates poetry books, the most celebrated of these being the *Muraqqá-i Chughtái*, reinventing the classical genre for the age of mechanical reproduction in the words of Dadi by even running a press at his home at one point; he starts art journals to educate the public on the reception of visual images; and he establishes his signature style in

Chughtai Art. Although this signature style appears to make conscious and nostalgic reference to an earlier Islamicate and Persianate period of art and confounds the Urdu literati of the time, Dadi argues that formal details within Chughtai's paintings suggest less a mimicry of a time past and more a play of elements that give birth to the notion of a singular artistic subjectivity. In chapter 2, Dadi turns to Zainul Abedin, Zubeida Agha, and Shakir Ali to draw out the lineaments of midcentury modernism. Here, too, actions dominate as the means of establishing modernism within the national art scene. We hear of Shakir Ali's work with the National College of Arts, Zainul Abedin's establishment of the Institute of Fine Arts in East Pakistan, and Zubeida Agha's heading of the Rawalpindi Art Gallery alongside their unremitting painting, travel, and exhibiting and Shakir's further engagement with literary circles. A uniting theme across the three distinct figures is a disjuncture within their artistic personas, with Ali immersed in, though silent, among the literati, Abedin split between neorealism and more abstract painting styles, and Agha as prolific but intensely private about her painterly influences. In chapter 3, Dadi focuses entirely on the most enigmatic and popular of Pakistani artists: Sad-equain. Dadi again provides a crucial catalog of actions undertaken

by Sadequain in crafting what Dadi calls a portrait of the artist as both superhuman and a tortured subjectivity. These actions include teaching art in an agricultural college, working in Radio Pakistan, illustrating Urdu poetry, painting commissioned murals, living and painting abroad for a long spell, establishing a private gallery in Karachi, writing and publishing his own poetry, illustrating his books with his own lithographs, and turning to popular media, even streets and pavements, on which to present his artwork to a wide public. With the move to contemporary art produced in both Pakistan and abroad in chapter 4, Dadi concludes his series, as it were, of unceasing actions as a modality of modernist art among Muslim South Asians. Taking up Rasheed Araeen and Naiza Khan in turn, he considers how they respond to the present moment that engulfs them and informs the reception of their work beyond their individual intentions and desires not only through close attentiveness to embedded structures in their artwork but also through the creation of international journals; wide experimentation with new media, including performance, installation, printmaking, and photography; and undertaking billboard and stenciled art in public sites. In them, Dadi finds the most sustained exchange between political critique and art production, what

he terms an antifoundationalism with respect to both Islamic art and classical modernism, that runs through all the artists he considers. The concluding chapter follows actions into the present through its consideration of a range of young, emergent artists.

Let me mention two further noteworthy themes that run through Dadi's analysis before turning to my own understanding of what a focus on action has to provide us. I was struck by the various ways the poet philosopher Muhammad Iqbal shows up as an important point of reference for Dadi, making Dadi's text a consideration of sorts of the enormity of Iqbal's influence upon the Pakistani imagination—in this instance, its visual repertoire. A few examples should suffice. Iqbal appears as an ambivalent endorser of Chughtai's art. In Chughtai's work, Iqbal finds a contemplative mode marked by more lassitude than he sought to project in his own literary representation of the new Muslim self. Sadequain's art, on the other hand, better captures the kind of dynamic, active persona closer to Iqbal's own vision, while Rasheed Araeen embeds Iqbal's poetry in his billboard art, effecting what Dadi calls an immanent critique of Iqbal. Secondly, the consistency with which each generation of artists attempts to put their work alongside literature and to be involved in literary circles and debates points to

the importance of literature as not only cultural production but also creative action within Pakistani history. That the visual seeks to sit alongside the literary even while the visual struggles to be considered on its own terms suggests the mutual attraction of the two media in Pakistan. It raises the intriguing possibility of using the visual in an analysis of literature—of even, say, Iqbal—which may yield not only a different set of readings and interpretations than the usual but also a considerable expansion of the scope of the visual in Pakistani society. While a consideration of Iqbal's place in art history and the interrelation of art and literature are not Dadi's main interests in this book, they may be productively plumbed from it.

Let me now turn to my final comments on the fecundity of such artistic actions. In an important rereading of Michel Foucault's writings, Frances Ferguson suggests that the creation of categories of persons is not the sole focus of modern organized social life. Rather, this organizing seeks to set up "a social group as a way of establishing a relative value for individual actions."¹ In other words, action dominates subjectivity. Consequently, individual action derives its value by comparison to the actions of others within a group and not from intentions or emotions. Thus, ongoing comparisons, evaluative sequences,

and reporting systems inform the social in modernity. And the obligation of the social is to "provide new occasions for recognizing the value of all the individuals who are part of it."²

By describing the work of the artists Dadi writes about as actions, I wish to draw attention to three ways in which we might take these artists to be committed to modernism through their participation in and contribution to the generative code of modernity. They act—that is, establish schools, operate galleries, publish journals—so as to produce new occasions for the comparison and evaluation of individual actions. They seek to be the founders of evaluative criteria, to be able to make and pronounce the value of the visual images produced. And through the self-reflexive nature of their actions and contemplations, they make visible that value is everywhere in society and in need of commentary and perhaps criticism. My sense is Dadi seeks to put into words his instinct that the artists he speaks of are intrinsically and productively modern and, therefore, have no need to make claims of originality within the field of modernism or Islamic art, whatever may be their individual subjectivity, the form and content of their work, and their reception. If that is the case, then Dadi more than amply grounds this instinct by a loving, careful catalog of their

ceaseless actions that extend into the present. Rashid Rana's work finds a ready home within this fine book.

Naveeda Khan, assistant professor of anthropology at Johns Hopkins University, has written Muslim Becoming: Aspiration and Skepticism in Pakistan (Duke University Press, 2012) and edited Beyond Crisis: Re-evaluating Pakistan (Routledge India, 2010). Her work at present spans

mosques in the urban landscape of Pakistan to land erosion in the riparian landscapes of Bangladesh.

NOTES

1. Frances Ferguson, *Pornography, the Theory: What Utilitarianism Did to Action* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), xiv.
2. *Ibid.*, 23.