

## ***Bana Yeh Mulk Mashaan Kitna: A Study of the Post Partition Dystopian City***

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**Abstract:** This paper seeks to examine the modern dystopian cityscape as represented in South Asian art, with a specific focus on the post-Partition era. The volatile changes and divides resulting from the momentous year of 1947 have found a creative space in the primary site of isolation: the city. Urbanity and industrialisation have become not just historical developments but a part of modern-day complexities in South Asia. Apocalyptic visions of the Indian subcontinent are represented in different ways by F.N. Souza, Gopal Ghose and Arpita Singh in their respective interpretations of major cities. The imagination of Pakistani artists such as Zubeida Agha, Shakir Ali and several members of the Karachi School of Art over the last few decades has also been deeply captured by the fragmented, struggling metropolis, particularly through intermingled troubled memories of Lahore, Karachi, Aligarh and Lucknow. Visual images of conflicted history fused with those of a world stepping into a technological age dominate the urban landscapes of these artists. The cityscape has thus become a recurrent subject in modern Indian and Pakistani painting. The paper will look into the ways in which the dystopian cityscape is portrayed, structurally and thematically, in such visual media to bring out deeper issues of social divide and modern-day disillusionment.

**Keywords:** Dystopia; Cityscapes; Partition Art; Modern Indian Painting; Pakistani Art; Cubism

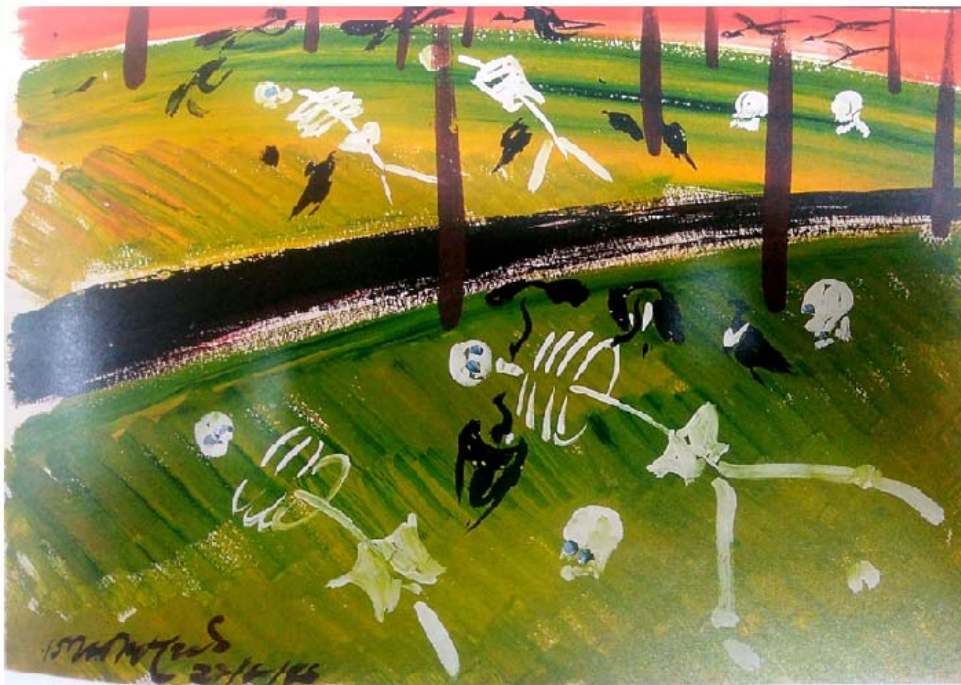
The purpose of this paper is to examine pre and post Partition art in the light of the depiction of the modern South Asian utopian and dystopian cityscape. The tremendous changes and divides arising from the momentous year of 1947 are reflected in art of the period. The urban space has thus become a subject in artistic representations. The study focuses on an examination of modern Indian and Pakistani painting and the evolution of new modes of expression. A way of representing crisis and post-war trauma in South Asian painting has been through the primary site of isolation, the city; since urbanity and industrialisation have become not just historical developments but a part of modern-day complexities. Bombay, Delhi and Calcutta were major sites of global encounter in India, represented in different ways by Gopal Ghose's riot-torn landscapes and F.N. Souza's abstractionism. The 1940s were a tumultuous period for the Indian subcontinent. There was a tremendous mental shift from British colonial rule to an independent nation which despite its liberation, was now deeply divided. This disjunct, fragmented mood is reflected in the artwork of Indian artists in this decade and beyond. The key centers of conflict, Calcutta, Bombay and Delhi are depicted as torn-apart cityscapes, reeling under the violence of riots and communal disunion.

Meanwhile, the newly born state of Pakistan suffered through violence and its nascent stages of development. While governments and regimes changed rapidly, artists strove to express their

new world in a language that would be adequate enough to express their pathos and isolation as well as intrigue and excitement. Zubeida Agha, Sadequain and Shakir Ali evolved new modes of expression to depict the cityscape around them. Parallel languages thus developed in the art of both countries, a result of the new historical era that was born in 1947.

### **Cityscapes: The City as Visually Archived in Indian Painting**

The year of Partition had its severest impact on urban spaces and the common people of both countries. The pain of this fragmentation is expressed through the paintings of various Indian artists. Gopal Ghose, a member of the Calcutta group of artists, painted during the period of riots that were tearing the country apart. One of his paintings (Fig. 1) shows a yellow-green field in which black vultures descend from the sky to pounce on the skeletons below.



**Fig. 1. Gopal Ghose. Untitled. 1946.**

Ghose picks up the theme of the city destroyed by riots in much of his work. Sanjay Malik remarks on the process of his disillusionment. “The painter who celebrated the calm and majestic expanse of rural landscapes, turned to his tormented city, the flourish of brush-strokes responding to the violent flames and burning vehicles (Malik 157). Light brush strokes have been deliberately used to depict the relentless flight of the birds and the vulnerable, fragile skeletons. Ghose explores a similar theme in another painting.



**Fig. 2. Gopal Ghose. *Riot (Burning Vehicle)*. 1946.**

*Riot (Burning Vehicle)* (Fig. 2) contains many of the compository elements of a cityscape but thrown in disarray. Vehicle, streets and throngs of people are enfolded in angry, violent colours that impinge on the vision. The artist seems to juxtapose normalcy with sudden violence, as the car bursts into flames on a routine day on a Calcutta street. The dystopian cityscapes focus on the chaos in 1946-1947, infusing the landscapes with the trauma of communal divides.

Artists juxtapose the landscape of the destroyed city with the equally destroyed landscape of the mind through deep symbolism. Perhaps no other painting exemplifies this as well as *Leaping Bridges* (Fig. 3) by Arpita Singh. She experiments with space and perspective on the canvas to create complex landscapes that deploy a quirky modernist touch to make a point. The change of power in 1947 required a redrawing of maps, an exercise that allegorically rearranged cityscapes and mindscapes. The seemingly utopic ideal of the newly born country in fact became a dystopia as citizens lived through suffering, fragmentation and violence. Singh's painting captures this hopelessness as she depicts a deer leaping through a web of unnatural lines, dividing a broken nation haphazardly. Arpita Singh remarks on her painting "This is how Partition divided the country-the Line of Control even cut through people's kitchens. The golden deer from the Ramayana leaps across the border. From a distance, the picture appears as though it is a patchwork of fabric with cross-stitch; or a barbed wire; or even an ECG reading- depending on your perspective" (Jayaraman, *Drawing from Life*). The city map is full

of broken patches and jagged lines. Singh also uses text to highlight significant words across this barren landscape, words that have taken on painful meaning. “Border,” “security” and “no man’s land,” “my land” and “your land” pepper the canvas, self-explanatory in their usage. The Ramayan motif serves to make a subtle comparison between a unified past of shared mythology and values as opposed to this modern-day fractured cityscape. The open sky is barely visible as the looming city with black colours envelops it darkly.



**Fig. 3. Arpita Singh. *Leaping Bridges*. 2015.**

While paintings representing the violence and pathos of Partition captured the imagination of many Indian artists, the influence of modernist art movements seeped in gradually as well. This brought about a more symbolic portrayal of the fragmented, dystopic city- in the very form and structure of the painting itself rather than an overt display of realistic violence. The modern movement, Cubism, influenced many artists, both from India and Pakistan. The artwork of this movement uses geometrical precision to delineate the fragmented nature of the subject. This is

to subtly highlight the fact that with changing times and historical eras, reality is no longer absolute; it is as broken and fragmented as is the milieu of the artist. Cubism is a rather ingenious crossover between disciplines. Art, mathematics and science blend together in a Cubist painting, implying that many theoretical and application-based subjects question the notion of reality. This is to further indicate that analysing subjectivity is not just a motif or purpose of the humanities. Even so-called logical, practical and applicable fields such as science and geometry can be used to question the nature of fixed reality.

Geometrical shapes and lines provide a strong component in artwork. In many of them, actual instruments such as compasses and rulers were used. The creators were careful about measurements and used them to provide scientifically fascinating optical illusion. In other words, the Cubists rejected linearity and single-point perspective. Their inclination was keenly towards abstraction in art and the aim was to show that there was no natural way of depicting an object; rather, there were many ways and it was completely in consonance with the free will of the creator.

There has been much study on the relationship between Cubism and science. More specifically, there has been a wide range of research comparing this movement with Einstein's Theory of Relativity. Both gained prominence at about the same period of time and albeit belonging to divergent fields, have some overlapping arguments. The comparison between painting and contemporary physics is not as outlandish as it may appear. Both, for instance, are significantly concerned with different ways of looking at space. According to Paul M. Laporte:

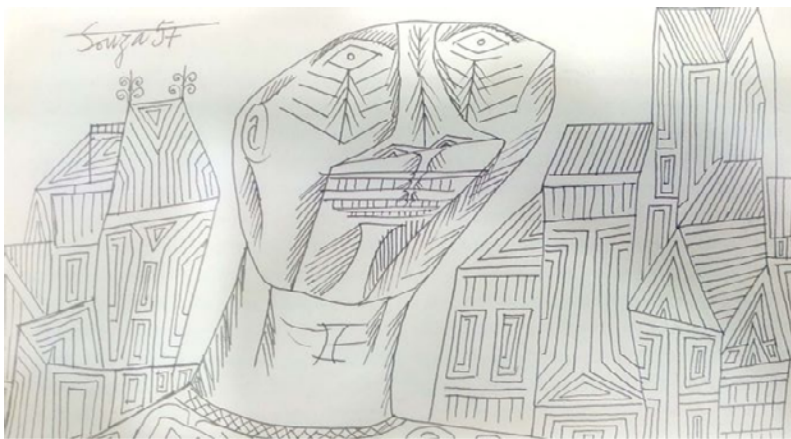
The profound change in modern physics, and with it of philosophy, came when it was recognised that space and time could no longer be conceived as absolutes, but must be considered as being in an integral and functional relationship with one another. The equally profound change in painting, which occurred at exactly the same time, can best be explained in terms of the very same functional relationship of space and time. (244)

In other words, both Cubism and the Theory of Relativity contest the notion of an absolute, or a transcendent. "The absolute of one is necessarily the relative of the other" (Gleizes and Metzinger qtd in Laporte 243). It is therefore interesting, also surprising, to see a field as logical and cause-effect based as science question the nature of reality. This theorisation can be further enhanced by a short discussion on Einstein's Theory of Relativity. In his path breaking book, the scientist points out that geometry has always been associated with terms such as "plane," "line" and so on. He immediately questions the idea of definite, the propositions that all scholars are trained to believe as true. We might work according to the assumption that a certain proposition, in geometrical, mathematical, or scientific terms, has been proven to be true. However, it can be stated equally effectively that these propositions have been derived from certain axioms. Thus, the truth of the former then needs to be based on the truth of the latter. The axiomatic principles, in their turn, are also derived from a particular vantage point and not a universal one. Einstein simplifies this theory by giving a few examples. If a straight line, he says, stretches from one point in space to another, these two points are also seen from a particular angle. Moreover, locations, lines and geometrical conclusions are drawn keeping in

mind a “rigid body” or a “well-defined point,” from which the coordinates are calculated (Einstein 16-18). In actuality, however, objects in space, time and location in the science field are drawn keeping in mind a frame of reference, a rigid body.

In the first place, we entirely shun the vague word ‘space’, of which, we must honestly acknowledge, we cannot form the slightest conception...it is clearly seen, then, that there is no such thing as an independently existing trajectory, but only a trajectory relative to a particular body of reference, [or] a ‘system of coordinates.’ (Einstein 27)

A painting that applies the above theoretical principles is *Portrait and Township* (Fig. 4) by F.N. Souza, a member of the Progressive Artist’s Group. It was painted in 1957 and shows a dismembered city and the horror of ever-changing political regimes and the unrest and fragmentation in urban life that follows consequently. According to Karode and Sawant, “The draconian face of state power and the mass mobilisation of religious fundamentalism both reared their monstrous heads during this turbulent period” (192).



**Fig. 4. F.N. Souza. Portrait and Township. 1957.**

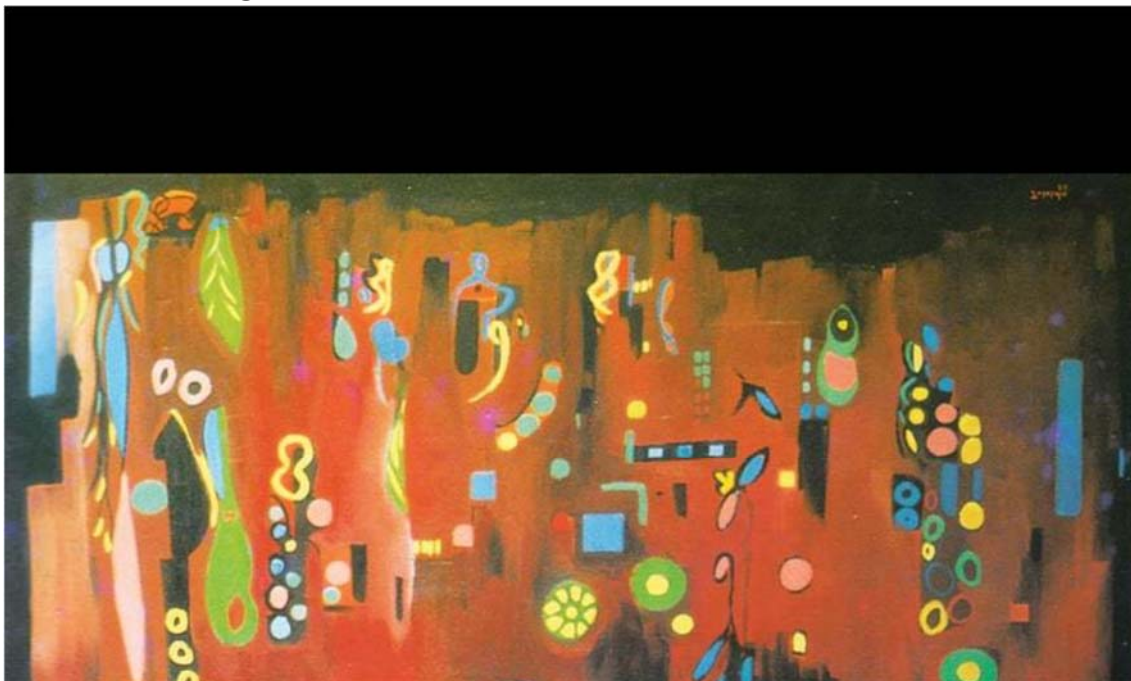
### **The Dystopic City in Pakistani Art**

The imagination of Pakistani artists over the last few decades has been deeply captured by the two invigorating cities of Lahore and Karachi. These were cultural hubs in the second half of the 20th century and beyond, places where there was rapid globalisation and urbanisation. “A new set of visual images was invading dreams, fueling aspirations, and creating desires...trucks, tractors, rickshaws, food stalls, cinema posters, and calendars, employing a multitude of motifs, decorate and drown the urban environment” (Salima Hashmi, 27). There was a constant influx of migrants to the cities, and the rise of Karachi as a buzzing metropolis, especially through Ayub Khan’s regime and “decade of development” (1958-68). The cityscape thus became a recurrent subject in modern paintings. The existentialist crisis and disillusionment with humanity after Partition was profound. The post-Partition artists Zubeida Agha and Shakir Ali, in Fig. 5 and Fig. 6 respectively, provide different interpretations of the modern Pakistani cityscape. They both employ fragmentation to skillful effect. Ali’s painting

evokes a sense of anguish and gloom in a pile-up of broken pieces, within what appears to be a series of buildings. The dull colouring and jagged edges are expressive of a fractured post-war world. This recalls F.N. Souza's sketch of Fig. 4, which encompasses a similar theme.



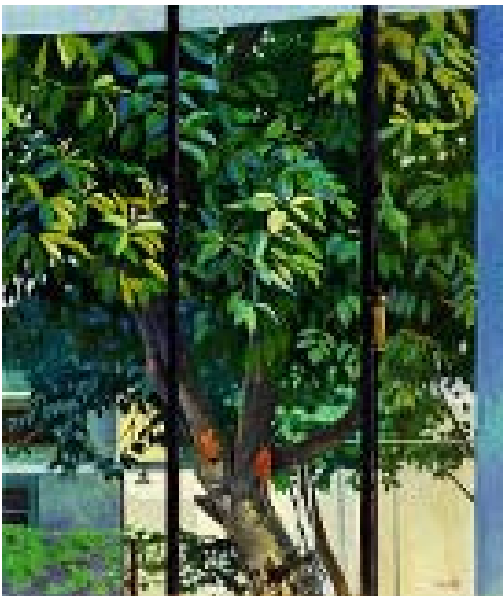
**Fig. 5. Shakir Ali. Untitled.**



**Fig. 6. Evening. Zubeida Agha**

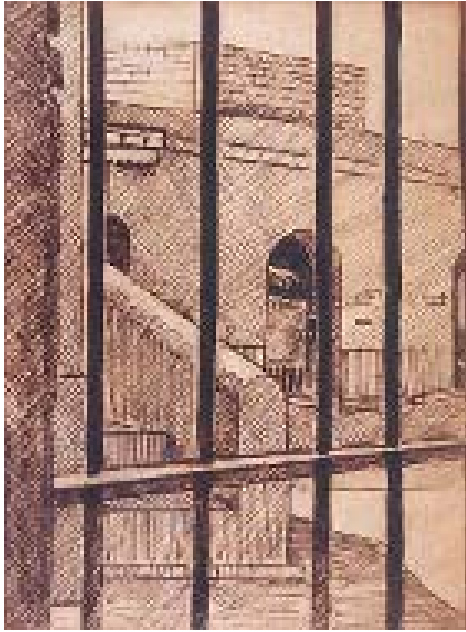
*Evening* (Fig. 6) is similar to this one in its depiction of Pakistan's urban cityscape and culture. Agha's fragments are brightly coloured and full of life and energy. However, the very

brokenness of the subject subtly indicates the pain within. There are natural images, such as flowers and leaves, but tossed carelessly in broken pieces on the canvas, suggesting their displacement and the loss of a simpler time. Ali's painting captures the commercial, industrialised nature of the modern city, a definite break from the past, as well as the self-same city in a state of fragmentation and divides. While both artists present an individualised form of art, this in no way takes away from the way in which they represent their milieu. Other artists have paralleled this trend. In Lahore, and later Karachi, Ijaz-ul Hassan during the 70's used specific images to represent the city, particularly through pop art motifs such as billboards and cinema hoardings. His art later evolved into a form of protest against the stultifying landscape of the Zia Ul Haq regime, a unique response to crisis and suppression that used subtle symbols. One of these was the window, which formed a series of paintings showing the bars of a window looking out on an outside world, caged literally and metaphorically (Figs. 7 and 8).



**Fig. 7. Ijaz-Ul-Hassan. View from a Window Series. 1980.**





**Fig. 8. Ijaz Ul Hassan. *View from a Window Series 2*. 1980.**



**Fig. 9. Zubeida Agha. *Urban Landscape*. 1982.**

*Urban Landscape* (1982) (Fig. 9) has elements of the natural with the artificial as the artist depicts flowers which are yet caged within a vase. The buildings provide a backdrop to the image of enclosure in the painting.

Representations of the city have the thread of loneliness and estrangement as a weaving motif, also seen in the artists' public personas. Artists like Ali and Agha consistently refused to speak

about either their art or their personal life on public fora. On the one hand, the silence and evasion can mean a disavowal of political “reality.” On the other, however, the fact of escape may indicate the pain of this reality and consequently, the adoption of new techniques to both escape from and in a sense, deal with it. Dadi discusses Ali’s views in the following lines:

He claimed that the adoption of modernism by Pakistani artists was not a repudiation of the past but was in a deeper sense in conformity with it. In another essay, published in 1963, he articulated in a more detailed fashion the existential cosmopolitanism of modern artistic practice, claiming that “today, relationships in life have become more complex, and the mutual link between the artist and society that was tied to one group, one nation or religion is no longer there. Under today’s industrial commotion, the artist has become lonely to the degree that he has become a stranger [*ajnabi*] to his very self [*zat*].” (Dadi 128)

This parallel conflict of a divided self and a divided country deeply connects the art of Pakistan. There are conflicts not just with the world and the dizzyingly transforming society around them, but also with the self. Dadi remarks that Pakistani modernisms are constructed around “evasions and silences” (99). One of their major preoccupations is addressing philosophical questions about the society around them and the position of the individual.

For them, the break from the old order and the entry into the new has left an indelible scar. Their subjects are fragmented, yet there is a relation between the various components, an internal sense of unity. The unity arises from a shared experience of occupying a broken era, yet accompanied by a desire to find a space for their art within all the repressions. In a sense, Pakistani artists are *ajnabi*; they withdraw into themselves and refuse to participate or voice their views. There is a deep sense of isolation in their cities; they reject any formulaic notions and instead focus on personal response to the angst and schisms of 20th century Pakistan. These paintings and the cities they represent become microcosms of the larger position of Pakistan within South Asia. Like its citizens, Pakistan’s conflicts arise from changes of rulership, religious divides and violence. The constant divide between a sense of national identity and a personal one appears to have deeply troubled Pakistani artists. The former languages and conventional modes of expression hence become redundant in capturing this state of being. An intricate, intersecting web can thus be traced, where each artist strives to find a new language to address the seemingly inexplicable realities of their modern existence.

Dystopias in art reflect the changing moods of the times and trauma of the Partition era. The symbolic representations of the cityscapes of Bombay, Calcutta, Karachi and other centers of conflict reflect the boundaries that seemed insurmountable to the artists who lived through such troubled historical times. The suppression, claustrophobia and violence of the times found creative space in the artwork of these individualists, who grant a voice to the very human pain that moves beyond all barriers of religion and nationality. While the conflict continues to this day, artists continue to seek meaning in the existential angst of the *mulk* that has become a *mashaan*.

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