

An Artist's Murder: Critical Reflections on the Relationship between Contemporary Art and Muslim Political Sensibility

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Abstract

In 2004 a young Dutch Muslim murdered a famous Dutch artist and film director, Van Gogh, in Amsterdam, Netherlands. The murder provoked an intense wave of propaganda against Muslims and Islam in Europe, particularly in the Netherlands. The outburst of propaganda demonstrated how one single incidence of criminal act by a relatively unknown man of Islamic calling could put the peaceful identity of an entire community of Muslims under threat. This essay endeavors to place Van Gogh's murder in its temporal and historical context. I engage other similar incidents and the resulting propaganda, and argue that the polemic that these incidents provoke often is not politically disinterested. Moreover, I argue that there is need to understand the troubled relationship between art and religion, especially as the appeal of violence draws a large number of people to its call.

Keywords: Theo Van Gogh, Contemporary Art, Blasphemy, Political Sensibility, Terrorism.

I: Introduction: The Murder

On the morning of November 2, 2004, Mohammed Bouyeri, a young Moroccan-Dutch Muslim, stabbed to death the famous Dutch film director Theo Van Gogh. The latter was riding a bicycle to his office. More audaciously Bouyeri stuck a note with a knife on Van Gogh's chest, which carried a threatening message for his co-producer, and a women rights activist, Hirsi Ali.

Ostensibly, one of the major reasons of the attack was the provocative film, *Submission*, which Van Gogh had directed in collaboration with Hirsi Ali. The film was based on highlighting the oppressed condition of Muslim women under Islamic law. In one of its provocative scenes, some verses of the Holy Quran were projected on naked bodies of women. For Van Gogh and Hirsi Ali such projection was part of their larger art theme in the film. But for Bouyeri it was a misrepresentation of, and insult to, his religion.

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II: Prof. Ian Buruma's Academic Investigation

Van Gogh's murder, and the ensuing anti-Muslim propaganda, deeply perturbed a Dutch-American professor, Ian Buruma, in the United States. Prof. Buruma decided to visit his home country to carry out an in-depth academic investigation. Hitherto he had been mostly writing on Asia. He had not written on the politics of his home country. This investigation was his first endeavor of academic research on a troubling subject of his home country. Having considerable knowledge of the history of his home country and the socio-political challenges, Buruma comes up with a detailed report on the tensed relationship between two major ethnic and religious groups in Amsterdam, the Dutch and the Arab-Dutch (Buruma 2007). In order to cast a critical look on the incident (Van Gogh's murder), we need to heed to Ian Buruma's analysis.

Buruma's investigative journalistic-cum-sociological work revolves around four major personalities—Van Gogh, Bouyeri, Hersi Ali and Pim Fortuyn. Van Gogh was an artist, a TV director who initiated reality TV, anchored other TV programs and directed many films. Popularly he was known as a social provocateur, an iconoclast, and a gadfly for traditionalists. Once he called himself a village idiot, primarily because of his unrefined and caustic remarks, acting, and attitudes. He unsympathetically attacked Christianity, Judaism and after 1999 Islam. Once he termed Jesus Christ "rotten fish from Nazareth" (Grimes 2006). He was particularly sarcastic toward European Jews. For instance, he once harassed a Jewish writer by making up a sexually offensive story against him and his wife. Van Gogh accused this writer of capitalizing on Holocaust's nostalgia. Van Gogh remarked that the writer would wrap his genital organ with a barbed wire and shout "Auschwitz!" (Steinglass 2006). Later after 1999 he turned his sarcasm and offensive language toward Muslims and Islam. One of his colleagues Leon de Winter warned him of his offensive language, and noted, "He shifted his obsessive hatred from Judaism (and sometimes Christianity) to Islam, but his poisonous methods varied little. And that was his mistake: No matter how repellent his rhetoric, Van Gogh would have been tolerated forever in Holland if he had restricted himself to more traditional targets. Radical Muslims are not quite so elastic" (Winter 2006). He mocked Arabs with bad names, and made other ridiculing stories about them. However Van Gogh had made some appealing

contributions for Muslims as well. For instance, he had directed some well-received Islam related films like "Najib and Julia," a Moroccan-Dutch Romeo and Juliet story.

Ian Buruma describes Mohammad Bouyeri as an intelligent and confident young man. However, his efforts to make a career in the mainstream society of Amsterdam met repeated failures. Hence he gradually retreated to violent ideology. Bouyeri had done well in his high school. He had tried several university programs as well, but none could hold his interest. Later he decided to start a local Muslim community youth center, but his application for funding was turned down. Bouyeri was also said to be angry on his sister making a boy friend, something that Islam strictly forbids for the purpose of sexual celibacy. Gradually, he fell victim to the teachings of hard-line Islamists, and become misfit in a liberal society of Amsterdam. He had spent one summer in Morocco to find himself a new home, but he soon realized that he did not belong there either.

On the other hand, Hirsi Ali was a brilliant and beautiful Somali-Dutch woman. She had been a member of Dutch parliament. She had immigrated to the Netherland at young age. In fact, she had fled from Somalia after denying a marriage forced on her. In the Netherland she quickly learned Dutch language, joined leftwing Labor Party, and began to advocate for abused Muslim women immigrants. She gave up her Somali Islamic dress and social ways, and picked up the liberal Western ones. Her new western personality made her a controversial figure among the Dutch Muslim community. However, she faced all the criticism and continued with her new personality and life. Inasmuch as Van Gogh's murder produced anti-Muslim sentiments, it also produced slow backlash against Hirsi Ali. Finding herself increasingly unsafe in Amsterdam, Hirsi Ali relinquished her parliament seat and immigrated to the United States.

Another important figure indirectly related to Van Gogh's debate was Pim Fortuyn. He was a political and an important conservative political figure. Much of his political persona related to his anti-immigration politics, which impinged on anti-Muslim immigration politics. An animal rights activist murdered him in 2002. His killer did not like his animal fur collars. Interestingly his killer was not a Muslim. Fortuyn was an intelligent academic, who later entered politics and became one of the leading contestants for

the seat of prime minister. His manifesto included anti-immigration promises. He was a gay, and a flamboyantly gay activist. Fortuyn used his homosexuality as armor for his anti-immigrant conservatism. He used to say: “It is because we Dutch believe in equality for gays and women that we cannot put up with the fundamentalism of these ‘kut-marokkanen’” (Steinglass 2006). However, he ignored to see the fact that equality for gays and women had only been accepted in the Netherland only 30 years ago. Van Gogh had admired Fortuyn, and this admiration ostensibly strengthened the view about his hostility for Muslims and Islam.

In fact Van Gogh’s murder involved various factors. Ian Buruma for instance draws an elaborate picture to accommodate as many factors as possible. We on the other hand present a unique factor and give our analysis. This factor relates to the relationship between art and religion in a fast technologically growing world. We also argue that religion became a victim of both sides—Van Gogh’s film and Bouyeri’s violence. Our understanding of the issue, especially the Islam bashing debate, which has repeatedly surfaced in several other instances such as in the controversial cartoon portraits of prophet Hazrat Mohammad (SAW), and Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* leads us to develop a proposition, an assumption or hypothesis about the explanation of such controversial debate and propaganda. The proposition is: the gap between art and the everyday, and the confusion between Islamic precepts and individual Muslim’s conduct, are the primary binaries, which entail tensed relationship between Muslims and the West. Moreover, we argue that murder of Van Gogh was not an exception(al) or singular act, which only a Muslim fanatic could have conceived of and have committed. Taking into account the murder of Fortuyn by an animal activist (who was not a Muslim), one can say that people of other religions can commit murders for other causes. The anti-Muslim propaganda orchestrated after Van Gogh’s murder made it look like an exceptional act of a Muslim.

III: The Limitation of Art Representations and the Excess of Political Reaction

The political propaganda in the wake of Van Gogh’s murder shows that the distorted perception of Islam in the West arises the gap created by the way an artist perceives or represents the subject

and the way it is received by a common man (or say a non-artist) in the everyday. But this is not to say that common Muslims are somehow naturally handicapped to understand art well. We can find examples of misunderstanding of art by common people in the West as well. For example, when the German artist Karlheinz Stockhausen remarked about 9/11 attacks that those were ‘the greatest work of art ever’ his words were taken wrong in Germany and America. Some of his music concerts were immediately cancelled in Hamburg and New York. Many people called for an apology. Stockhausen later tried to clarify: “Not for a moment have I thought or felt the way my words are now being interpreted in the press” (Wolfson 2001). However, this clarification couldn’t save his position. The point here for us is that the reception of art and remarks about artwork often involve risk in their consumption in the everyday life and by the common man, no matter whether it is in the West (which is normally thought as art savvy) or in the Muslim World. Stockhausen’s remark might have made sense to other artists, but not to common people in the West.

Similarly, common people in the East (the Muslim World) felt insulted by the film (rather than they took it as a piece of overblown art). However, this is not the first time that an artwork has been perversely developed to mock Islamic culture and religion. In late 1980s when Salman Rushdie published his fictional novel “Satanic Verses” it ignited tremendous outcry in the Muslim World. Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, gave an edict against Rushdie. Iran broke its diplomatic relations with the UK. Muslims in the UK piled up copies of *Satanic Verses* and burnt them. Rushdie’s personal safety was threatened. Unlike Van Gogh he went into hiding. The novel, *Satanic Verses*, was banned in almost all Muslim countries. In Pakistan anyone found with an illegal copy of the novel risked getting arrested and endangering his life. As a response to *Satanic Verses*, a film “*International Gorillay*” (*International Guerrillas*) was produced in Pakistan 1990. Interestingly, while Muslims were in a state of shock, Rushdie was awarded Whitbread Award for his work in the West. Later in 2007, the British Queen conferred knighthood on him. These awards could be taken as an acknowledgement of his creative art writing, but in the Muslim World the projection of his work was thought as an attempt to debase teachings of Islam.

An edifying aspect of the Rushdie episode was that it made Muslims, especially those in the West, realize that over-reaction, like the burning of anti-Islamic literature, imposing bans, and issuing edicts, only went against their own larger interests and also against the message of peace in Islamic teachings. Later this realization helped them in the case of Anwar Shaikh. Shaikh lived in Cardiff, the UK. In early 1990s he began to write short historical and theological works on Islam. He published his first book "Eternity" in March 1994. Like Mu'tazilites of the ninth century Shaikh questioned the validity of Revelation. This questioning of Revelation logically meant that he challenged the divinity of the Holy Quran. Although Shaikh's work shocked Muslims in Europe and in the East, their plea however was to give an intellectual and academic response rather than proclaim death sentence on Shaikh. For instance, one letter to the editor in the Daily Jang, a widely read Urdu daily in Europe, pleaded:

Several letters have been published in Jang about Anwar Shaikh's book: 'Islam, the Arab National Movement'. Ordinary muslims have been begging their scholars to give crushing answers to the contents of this book, but surprisingly they have remained silent. Is there not a single Muslim scholar in Britain who can rebut Anwar Shaikh's criticism of Islam?

Our scholars must note that the time to frighten the Islam-bashers with fatwas is over. In modern times, public opinion will only be satisfied with arguments. Another reason for writing this letter is that my post-graduate son, who was recently a pious Muslim, no longer cares about Islam. I have learnt that a Christian missionary gave him Anwar Shaikh's book. It is the study of this book, which has turned him against Islam...

The truth is that we, the Muslims, protested against the accursed Rushdie's book foolishly because Rushdie is nothing compared to Anwar Shaikh. Rushdie forged untruths to make his novel attractive and we were able to satisfy our children on this ground. Anwar Shaikh, by contrast, has founded his work on quotations from the Holy

Koran and the hadiths, which are the cornerstone of our faith. (Quoted in T. Ali 2002, 158)

The larger plea of Muslims was for redeeming the authenticity of Islam. They did not wish the proclamation for fatwas (edicts). Rather they wished for authoritative rebuttal by Islamic scholars. While not much intellectual rebuttal came from Islamic scholars, but at least the European Muslim community did not overreact and demonstrated their peaceful co-existence with other communities. An influential Muslim scholar and social figure in England Qari Sayyad Hussain Ahmed argued:

We have been deceived once. The satan Rushdie was an obscure person. We issued a fatwa and fixed a reward for his head. Had we not done so, Rushdie would have reached the end of his tether. As a result, his type of madman could not even have thought of insulting the Prophet. Rushdie and Shaikh belong to the same tribe. People should not organize protests lest Anwar Shaikh receives international fame. (Quoted in T. Ali 2002, 159)

Like Hirsi Ali, who had undergone the trauma of a forced marriage, Shaikh had undergone a trauma of killing three non-Muslims, which he later blamed on what he saw as absurd teachings of Islam. In mid-August 1947, the year of independence and partition of colonial India, Shaikh was only nineteen years old. He worked as an accounts clerk at Lahore railway station. At the railway station he received trains of Muslim refugees from the Indian side of the border. Mass communal violence was going on at the time on both sides of the newly drawn border. Many trains brought only dead and mutilated corpses. Shaikh in an interview recalled, "Trains were arriving at Lahore station from India every day. I used to hear people waiting for the trains on the platform screaming. They were heart-rending screams, I would rush out and there was the train, full of corpses" (T. Ali 2002, 162). Shaikh was enraged and the erstwhile call for jihad only confirmed his conviction to avenge the honor of Muslims. He recalled, "You know a madness gripped us in 1947. A madness. I was part of it. When I was killing them all I could think of was revenge. I was not frightened of being caught and killed in return" (T. Ali 2002, 162). Although he was never apprehended and punished, soon "torment and regret

began to eat his soul” (T. Ali 2002, 163). Shaikh later immigrated to Cardiff in 1956, married a Welsh woman and began to study at the Institute of Transport in London. He settled into his new life, but could not avoid the memories of 1947 coming back and haunting him. On the other hand he was reading Spinoza, Freud, Marx and Enlightenment philosophers. Kemal Ataturk became one of his ideals as he recalled: “For too long we Muslims have taken cover underneath a veil of ignorance. It has held us back for some centuries. Kemal Ataturk understood this when he sought to modernize Turkey, but he did so without the ideological basis for secularizing our culture. That is all I wish to do” (T. Ali 2002, 164). Shaikh wrote another controversial book “Islam: Sex and Violence” (Shaikh 1999). In this book he critiqued the relationship between sexuality and militarism in Islam.

On the other hand, we see that Hirsi Ali in Amsterdam, a self-proclaimed women rights activist supported by the Liberal Left wing party, also debated the theme of sexuality and militarism. Along with Van Gogh, her film also depicted this theme in controversial light. Next year in September 2005, a Denmark daily Jylland-Posten published a dozen cartoons of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) depicting similar themes of sexuality and militarism. These portrayals were blasphemous for Muslims and they caused much reaction in different Muslim countries.

At this stage we need to raise our primary concern: what is problematic in the above-mentioned incidents and controversies? Any considerate answer to this question would be complex and would involve various factors. Given the limited space in this essay, we would highlight few immediate ones. First, there is a growing body of amateur, pseudo-art, which creates plainly provocative representations. Second there is wrong focus of this art: instead of critiquing the contemporary attitudes (or say hypocrisy) of certain self-proclaimed individual Muslims or clergymen, amateur artists direct their criticism on Islam and its teachings. Third amateur artists have a tendency to presume that since they are artists they have license to take up just any issue and make it subject of their artistic ventures. Moreover, because art academies and exhibitions are increasing in present time, amateur art gets room for representation. On the top of that because of Internet and social media artwork spreads considerably fast around the world.

On the other hand there is dearth of critical literature in Islamic Studies produced by Muslim scholar. Due to this dearth a general attitude has developed in Muslim societies regarding prohibition of questioning of Islamic precepts, values and traditions. Often time clergy would suspect questioning even when questions are raised for constructive purposes. This prohibitive tendency becomes one of the targets of contemporary liberal artists. However some artists deal with it crudely. Interestingly if we read the history of Europe, we notice that there were also prohibitions and taboos in Christian societies. These taboos were also broken, and often time violently. For instance, the Netherlands has a long history of slow and painful change from religious society to a liberal society. This change began with the Calvinist rectitude, and the iconoclastic smashing of catholic icons in cathedrals of Flanders in the sixteenth century. Although we don't see such violent movement of iconoclasm in contemporary Muslim countries, there is however need to address the challenge of art by producing scholarly literature.

V: Contemporary Amateur Art and Political Sensibility

Let us take up an example from contemporary amateur art and see how it comes to conflict with the sensibility of Muslims. Rana Rashid, for instance, has drawn a series of photographic collages of a Muslim woman clad burqa (veil) by putting together thousands pornographic photos collected from Internet. These images are first reduced to miniatures images and then carefully arranged to make a larger image. The larger image gives an impression of a burqa-clad woman. As we zoom in on the image it shows those miniature pornographic photographs. Now the obvious idea that this collage or image of the burqa clad Muslim woman creates, especially to the common man, is one of sexuality—sexual exploitation and promiscuity. In our dialogue with common people in Pakistan on Rashid's collages/images, we got predominant response that those images present the tale of oppressed Muslim women, especially tribal women in North-Western Pakistan and Afghanistan. On the other hand, in our dialogues with common people in northwestern Pakistan, we got the response that those images were misrepresentation and rather humiliation of tribal women.

Art relates to our political sensibilities and causes sensational affect. However, without training in reading a work of art, the

common man—let alone the conservative sections of both Western and Eastern societies—will most often see the obvious. On the other hand, due to increased availability of Internet, works of art are not limited to art galleries for consumption of art connoisseurs, but are now available freely for the consumption of millions of common people or art amateurs. As we noticed above, amateur art often targets sensitive social issues with direct, that is ready to consume, representations. Due to commercialization a large body of amateur art projects ponder to political vested interests. They are intended for easy consumption and at times cause provocation.

Van Gogh was not a first class artist even though he belonged to a famous artist family of the Netherlands. His partner Hirsi Ali was also not an artist, rather a politician. Van Gogh “public persona was that of a fat, abusive, witty, politically incorrect buffoon—the self-proclaimed ‘dorpsgek’ (village idiot)” (Steinglass 2006). In fact his murder was an irony for the people: “that such a character should become a victim of international jihad seemed an absurd joke or category error” (Steinglass 2006). In 1990s he was at the low ebb of his career. His TV series—*It’s Terribly Nice Here*—was on the air. The show involved sort of ridiculing and mocking people engaged in everyday recreational activities. With the same attitude he later did the project of making the film “*Submission*.” The problem was that he and his colleagues engaged in the sensitive task of critiquing Islamic views on the rights of women without giving historical and factual evidence. Hirsi Ali, for instance, would said that nothing short of dragging Islam out of the self-imposed veil would suffice to change it (See A. H. Ali 2006). Similarly Anwar Shaikh once said Islam needed rational, secular and scientific treatment (See, T. Ali 2002, 158–165).

Jylland-Posten’s cartoons instead of representing contemporary terrorist figures made projections of the Holy Prophet (SAW) of Islam. The controversial projections depicted a male figure carrying bombs in the turban, while burqa clad women stood by his side. This imagery is evidently of contemporary terrorist figures, and partly of the conservative culture under the Taliban. In fact, burqa is a relatively recent dress code. In Pakistan-Afghanistan region, it is very much connected to the 1980s Cold War jihad and Islamization in Pakistan. Pakistan during 1950s and 1960s was a moderate if not liberal society. Burqa was propagated through official discourse as

morally accepted Islamic dress code in the 1980s. During this decade, it also served a political purpose of shutting out ladies of Bhutto family who posed potential political challenge to the military regime. Certain religious parties joined in the military regime for their own political interests and supported official discourse on dress code. The Jylland-Posten's cartoons failed to present this temporal and spatial context to their imagery.

VI: Conclusion

Amateur artists are struggling with creating balanced and politically disinterested representations. Some of them don't place their artwork in its proper historical and cultural context. They engage in crude critique of religious figures, teachings, or prohibitions (Hudood). For them such critique is warranted on the basis of rationality and Enlightenment principles. However, it is well known that the history of Europe and European expansionism in the world demonstrates how flawed was their use of rationalism and Enlightenment values on the basis of which they thought they were creating a 'civilization.' But actually they were involved in a political project of colonization and imperialism that led to so much damage in Africa, Asia and America. Indigenous peoples were thought inferior and their culture superstitious. The imperialist policy was to bring them out of their perceived backwardness and superstitions. While many western scholars have recently mitigated the use of or abuse of this so-called civilizing approach in art and literature (for example those in critical theory, post-colonial, cultural theory, and Orientalism) new amateur artists still continue to engage it in provocative and abusive art.

It is clear that Van Gogh's murder created communal tension in Amsterdam. The society came unhinged. The question however was (and still is) whether the murder was an exception(-al), or singular act? We argued that it was not an exceptional or singular act. Just as Hegel says that man is willing to die for a cause of greater value to him than his life, we argued in this line of thought that committing a murder was not exceptional to Bouyeri or generally to a Muslim. Another recent thinker, Mahmood Mamdani, building on Hegel further adds that man is also willing to kill for such a cause (Mamdani 2003, 3-4). Murders have been committed in the name of religion both in the West and the East. Similarly, murders have also

been committed in the name of ethnicity, race, morals, politics, and business. An animal rights activist can also kill a person to protest against consumer goods made from animal body parts. In short, Van Gogh's murder was not an exceptional, singular act. It took place at the troubled margin of the relationship between art and religion. As we note elsewhere in the wake of Charlie Hebdo incident:

In our own time, with globalized communication networks and social media, this challenge often gets muddled, hyped, and misrepresented. Moreover, the debate that ensues overlooks or undermines both the logic of critique in art and the ability of religion to respond. In so doing, provocation and violence, both artistic and physical, become appealing modes of engagement. What is more worrisome is how the logic of violence draws, or has the appeal to draw, a large number of people to its calling...we live in a precarious time, where both art and religion are under threat, and we have to think new ways of defending both. (Raza 2015)

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