

Artistic portrayal of the rats of Shah-Daula in Pakistan: a visual analysis through portrait painting

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Abstract

This research aims to explore microcephaly disorder which is an abnormality that is treated as a taboo in Gujrat, a city in Punjab province in Pakistan. The making of Shah Daula rats is a Taboo in which new-born babies are abused with an iron cap placed on their heads to stop their natural development. Their physical growth is manipulated, and they are unable to spend life like a normal person. All of this is done for the purpose of begging, and this ritual abuse in Pakistan has humiliated humanity for ages and is still practiced under the name of religion. This research is descriptive and qualitative in its nature. The study investigates the survival strategies as well as the living conditions of Shah Daula. The findings of the study show that microcephalic children suffer from alienation, child abuse, lack of fundamental rights, self-respect, and various disappointments. The study concludes that Shah Daula, in Pakistani society, is compelled to live as an abnormal human being.

Keywords: Shah Daula, visual, microcephaly, microcephaly disorder, peer, shrine, abnormally, rat, ritual abuse.

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1. Introduction

The condition in which a baby's head is small in comparison to the expectations is called microcephaly. This disease occurs when the baby's brain fails to develop completely or stops growing resulting in a small head size. Microcephaly can occur in isolation or in combination with different birth issues. The people who suffer from this condition are not exactly like rats, but their forehead and eyes signify their undignified name. These children are called as rats in our community. They are usually found at shrine of saints, particularly, Shah Daula in Pakistan. (Ghilzai & Ijaz, 2016, p. 76).

Shah Daula lived in the reigns of different Mughal kings: Akbar, Jehangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb. Shah Daula was ninety-five when he died. He was a philanthropist and gave respect to people irrespective of their caste. He was involved in teaching, counselling and charitable works. One of his disciples was Hindu Raja, Chattar Singh. He was very kind to all the animals especially dumb ones. In addition, he was good to birds and deer. He built many buildings in areas nearby Chenab. This saved many lives because flood was frequent at that time. A number of miracles have been associated with him (Patch, 1928, p. 297). Shah Daula was said to have cared for wild creatures. Moreover, the shrine of Shah Daula was also known for supplying kids to women who are barren (Patch, 1928, p. 297). Women seeking a treatment for infertility would come to the shrine of Shah Daula in Gujrat with the hope that praying at the shrine of Shah Daula would help them conceive.

Contrary to the expectations, innocent children were abused in the name of magical fertility as there is a myth that women who conceive at the shrine were said to donate their first child to the shrine which would also prevent abnormalities appearing in the rest of her children. Mostly people belonging to lower class were the one who believe in such myths. Villagers who were unable to conceive visit the shrine, prayed and left their new-born babies at the shrine to ensure health of rest of children. These people strongly believed that giving first born at the shrine saved disability of rest of children.

These donated children are used as source of income. Many of these children are sent to beg around the shrine and neighbouring cities. Often Mafias hires them from shrine on a contract to beg and work for them. They are sent in villages and shrine. Every patient suffering from microcephaly (rat) has same visual appearance which draws more attention towards them, and people give out donation in sympathy. Each Shah Daula has a person with them who assist them and collect donations given by people. As due to their disability they are bound to depend on others. The eastern imagination has called microcephalic patients as "*Chuhas*" but the similarity between microcephalic patients and lower animals has been drawn by western community (Patch, 1928, p. 298).

An established view that *chuhas* are produced artificially through the priests is validated based on the reality that in districts of Pakistan like Punjab and Sindh the young children's heads are reshaped so that their heads are formed following some standards of beauty and perfection. The foreheads of Sandhi women are protruded due to pressure that is imposed on cranium. The western areas of province such as Muzaffargarh and Multan value a compressed occiput so the mother lays the baby for several months and sometimes the limbs of babies are tied. By doing this, pressure is applied to the back of a baby's head to achieve the results. Consequently, any

man from Multan removes his pagri to display his occiput as a symbol of beauty and perfection. These skulls are brachycephalic.

Lyons and Waddell in "Medical Jurisprudence for India " provide the estimated size of cephalic index of a Balochi to be 88-0. It happens in North American Indians and certain tribes of the African continent. Delisle mentions the babies' heads are reshaped in a district of France, Toulouse. He focuses the point that this process of head moulding does not produce mental impairment and obviously cannot be associated with this practice in Multan, Pakistan. The pressure applied in Sindh is local and it does not have a universal application which means it is not applied on the entire cranium. The primary impact of this process is enlargement of those areas of skull that are not under pressure so in case of Sindh women the forehead gets protruded and in matter of Multan the skull increases in the width that increases the size of head. The skull is still a tight envelope for the brain and its size is equal to the size of whole brain. This pressure in the first few months turns into alternation in the morphology of head but it cannot reduce the capacity of cranium.

The force which is applied to any part of cranium during infancy results in the deformation of body prominences and marks in the part where pressure is applied. Individuals from Multan and nearby areas don't have prominent occipital protuberances. The scalps of these microcephalic infants are thick with furrows (Patch, 1928, p. 299-300). This is an antisocial culture and against human rights. Humans are dignified creatures, and this act of abuse is not justified. A human is called as an animal because of the deformed cerebral form which is natural but artificially induced. This abuse of Shah Daula is still going on because mafias use these innocent souls as their source of income. The use of these children for source is not a socially and ethically acceptable act. Every month hundreds of new-born babies are left at the Darbar to become rats of Shah Daula. This is a shameful practice which still takes place and is an example of Human rights abuse under the name of religion.

2. Literature review

It is necessary aspect of research to have a thorough awareness of the examination of the disease, microcephaly and rats of Shah Daula features existing in the community in our society. Rats of Shah Daula is the term used for these special children who find refuge at the shrine of Shah Daula in Gujrat, Pakistan. These children are characterized by abnormally small heads, disfigure foreheads, protruding noses and round jaws. One of the perspectives regarding development of Shah Daulais that they are abused as an iron cap is placed on their heads to stop their natural development. Their physical growth is manipulated which hinders their ability to live a normal life.

This ritual abuse has exploited children since long for the sake of begging. They visually appear wearing a long green robe with a lots of prayer beads (*Tasbih*) hanging around their necks and their heads are shaved which clearly shows their deformed heads. The exploitation of Shah Daula has a direct link with *Peer* (saint) Shah Daula who was a saint settled in Gujrat. Shah Daula. The medical papers give different perspectives regarding development of these *chauhas*. One belief which is universal in the province is that an iron cap was placed by priests to compress the heads of children to reduce size of their head. Another belief is that microcephalic imbecile results from the mating of a barren mother with *chuha* during the period she spent at

the shrine. Another surmise is that a pregnant woman gets a shock which causes this disease in the *chauha*. (Patch, 1928, p. 298).

Patients of microcephaly are found in different parts of the world who cannot be differentiated from *chuhās* of Gujrat, A skull which has a circumference less than four or five inches less than normal is called microcephalic. That is why in Europe, a skull of 17 inches is called as microcephalic. Man is different from lower animals in terms of size of cranium and face. In case of any physical impairment which increases the size of an individual's face like prognathism, or which affect the size of cranium by decreasing give the individual appearance of an animal. Microcephaly further gives the impact of animalism due to difference between normal and affected skull in terms of size and shape.

According to Shuttleworth and Potts, these heads have vertex which is pointed; an occiput with flat appearance so distinct angles are shown at the forehead and vertex. This is a constant feature which needs to be present in a skull to be called as microcephaly. Tredgold further elaborates that typical microcephalic are present with cranial circumference of nineteen inches. He diagnosed the condition of skull to be twenty-one inches and added that "The actual brain capacity is less than a mere circumferential measurement would suggest, by reason of the deficiency being chiefly in the upper parts of the skull" (Patch, 1928, p. 298).

In order to fully and deeply understand the central problem of the research, it is required for a number of terms to be critically analysed for this goal. Some of the pertinent concepts connected to the topic and comprehension of the study are explained below while taking into consideration the theoretical and analytical area of the current research work. Peer Shah Daula was of kind nature as he loved not only humans but animals as well. Due to this kind behaviour, he was fond of putting caps on mentally disabled children for their beautification. In view of the reports, the same tradition is relevant till this day. It was believed by Shah Daula that the rat child is special human being with disability. The article also describes that the practice of putting cap on disabled child by Shah Daula saint changed into a taboo. According to the author, the cranial deformity in the healthy children who were born at the shrine was later caused by placing iron rods around their heads (OpIndia - Latest India News, Updates, Analysis, Opinions, Social Media news, *n.d.*).

According to the article "A Study of Mystery and Misconceptions about Children having Microcephaly", the author elaborated that some time many young and infertile ladies visited peer Shah Daula's shrine in Gujrat in hope that holy man (peer) might offer prayer for them. There was also a myth that the first new-born baby after the prayer of holy man was left at shrine permanently (Ghilazi, 2016, p. 76). Contrary to the beliefs, one of the most famous genetic scientists, Qasim Mehdi claimed about medical impossibility regarding birth of Shah Daula this way. It was rather proved by the scientist to be a genetic disease carried through family and passed through the father and mother of rat child. He further added that the forced wearing of caps by all the children at the shrine is constraining normal head growth (Shaffer, 2012, p. 47).

Harvey describes in his book "The pursuit of manhood doesn't change once a boy is grown. In fact, it's only magnified. His focus has always been on, and will remain on, who he is, what he does, and how much he makes until he feels like he's achieved his mission" (Harvey, S. 2009 P.12). Majid Bashir opines that "The issue of rat children is a symbol of disgrace in our nation

that is affluent and more child-focused than before in history. In light of the constitution, internal legislation, and international conventions, it is important to reevaluate our own social conduct toward Rat children" To address this threat of ritual abuses, Pakistan must pass further laws and effectively deploy its enforcement institution" (Bashir, 2016, p. 9).

Stevens in his most influential book chapter mentions that the term ‘gap of the society’ is used to refer to the people who are, not physically but figuratively, living on the edge where they are not getting their fundamental rights as compared to the other people of the same society (Stevens, 2003, p. 28). The microcephalic people or rats of Shah Daula in the society are considered as the outsider because they are compelled by the other members of the same society to live outside in terms of social and cultural accepted norms (Stevens, 2003).

3. Material and methods

The sources, tools, material and methods in every research project play a vital role in terms of the reliability as well as validity of the data within the analytical domains of the topic. The present research study design is based on qualitative views. According to Sarah Pink, the development of visual research or anthropological research engages the present-day issues and challenges the interdisciplinary projects. (Pink, 2019, p.1) This is the reason due to which the researcher has taken into account the qualitative research method. The examination of the portrait painting has been carried in terms of qualitative research.

Furthermore, the collected data has been interpreted theoretically and practically in artwork. The data regarding Shah Daula from observational and interview studies have been depicted through artwork. Interviews and observation schemes are frequently used in context of qualitative research that is why both of these techniques have been opted in this research (Ryanetal, 2009; Ciesielska, 2018). In context of visual arts, the materials used for painting are oil paints, acrylics and coloured inks. The portrayed artwork is life size and style of the artwork is semi abstract, realistic with 3d form.

4. Discussion

Rumours regarding Shah Daula have been going around since ages. Different views and perspectives have been proposed over these years. One of the views is that “Hazarat Shah Daula” also known as “Saint of shrine” used them for begging around the *darbar*. Many people opine that couple with no children used to visit the shrine and prayed for a child, but in return paid price which is that the first born after praying at the shrine must be given to the shrine to save deformity of rest of children. Another reference from the story of the famous writer Sadat Hassan Manto mentions that when the mother refused to give away her child to the *mazaar*, she used to see the peer “Shah Daula” in her dreams asking for her child and that the child belonged to him not her. Other people say that these children are not born with a small head but instead they are tortured by putting an iron helmet/cap on their head when they are just babies to suppress the growth of their brain and head which makes them mentally disable for the rest of their life.

A medical condition named “Microcephaly” is a birth defect and a rare neurological order in which the infant’s head is much smaller than expected and growth of its brain is prevented. This can happen due to exposure of drugs and alcohol in the mother’s womb or due to rubella,

chickenpox and zika virus. Microcephaly can take place, but it only happens to 1-12 in 10,000 which is equivalent to less than 1% so it is very hard to be believed by the researchers that a shrine could have such a number of patients with microcephaly. As the percentage of the disease is very rare in comparison to the actual number of individuals known as rats so it is essential to investigate the truth behind this myth.

For the sake of present research, the researcher personally visited the shrine of Shah Daula and took interviews of different people, visitors and workers at the shrine. The common feature among all interviews was that majority of people somehow agreed that Shah Daula were made through artificial microcephaly for the purpose of begging. These interviews showed that the deformity in these individuals is not natural, but it is due to artificial means. Though it is a commonly accepted fact that microcephaly is a disease which can occur in individuals naturally but the data from interviews proved that most of *chuhars* in Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan are exploited for the sake of begging. Cruel gangs used to clamp children's head in infancy and turned them into *chuhars*. These gangs performed acts against common human rights for the sake of benefit. It was also found that only the children of poor parents were targeted as villagers would take these kids from their parents by offering them money and the parents due to helplessness and need of money give their children away. Such gangs knew the weakness of parents and destroyed the lives of children who were used a tool of gaining money. This exploitation of human life for financial gain is the cause of presence of many rats, *chuhars* in shrine of Shah Daula.

After getting the babies from the mothers, they used to deform their heads; shave their head and make them wear a green gown along with different ornaments like *taveez* and *tasbeeh*. This is a Taboo and torment children have to go through and suffer for the rest of their lives. This activity is fully controlled by mafias of beggars, whatever these morphed children earn goes back to the shrine administration. In different villages near Gujrat. they are sent to beg, and majority of people give them money because they are afraid of patients of microcephaly. The fear is because common people think if they would not give money to Shah Daula then it will bring wrath of God for them as these are blessed creatures. People don't know that these patients are not naturally born with this deformity and are made by gangs, so they are not blessed by nature in any way. This ignorance of people compels them to donate money to these *chuhars* which gives benefit to mafias, and they continue performing the same act on other children. If this culture is not stopped today or we don't educate our people, then this ritual will be passed down from generations to generations and innocent lives will keep suffering from these man-made deformities.

Art has always been a medium of representation of human life. The research also indicates how a piece of artwork can be helpful as a tool to create as well as understand a situation which convey a specific message. Art can be used as a weapon to fight against a social dilemma. Art is not only an expression of human feelings, but it is also a medium to educate humans to improve the society by evaluating and problematizing common sense notions. The artwork given in this research is based on critical theory as it deals with working on the aspect of society by which innocent humans are being oppressed by dominant people for the sake of money. This art is critical as well didactic because it not only highlights the problem of a society which is influencing life of innocent individuals negatively but also motivates people to view these poor rats with a different view. The art gives a critical lens to the readers to not only see the world on the surface level but try to find meanings behind the surface.



Portrait painting of Shah Daula Rat, 2022, (Rohail Rahat & Laiba Nadeem)

The work portrayed on the canvas narrates a story of a Taboo which has been carried out in Pakistan since a long time. The painting has crimson red background which develops whole mood of the painting and evokes a feeling of grief. The semi-realistic figures in the background in dark blue and black colour show anger, bruising and a feeling of separation. The painting is giving an overall dramatic effect and has a conceptual and realistic language.

The symbolic and thematic concerns of the artwork are also a part of the research. The realistic portrait of Shah Daula at the front shows the direct story of them to show people the reality of this taboo and educate them about this in-human practice which has been done in the name of religion. The portrait reflects fear and agony in the form of blood dripping on the portrait which delivers sad story of infants who have been tortured and turned into microcephalic children. At this point, it is important to mention that the work foregrounds stamp with unreadable texts at the bottom of the artwork to indicate that *chuhars* are unable to speak and deliver their message to the world. This lack of communication is not only due to defect in the rats of Shah Daula but also due to the lack of interest of our community in analysing the situations at a deeper level.

Art is the medium through which human beings reflect their world and the moment we see the piece of art its beauty creates a meaningful and strong impression in our mind because it is a true depiction of a story. This form of artwork is very comprehensive and compact as it delivers the message to the viewers completely. The artwork tries to depict the facts and aims to develop critical consciousness of the viewers by motivating them to analyse the problems of society and to find solutions.

Conclusion

After researching about these microcephalic children and the background of their development, the researchers concluded that these children are different human beings. They are unable to speak and convey their messages, they are mentally disable and are always in need of assistance. Every year hundreds of children are left at the shrine by their parents from different cities of Pakistan. These infants are tortured for years and are used by different gangs for their own personal interests and as a source of making money. Role of parents is disappointing as they gave up on their own blood so easily on the base of a “Mannat”. People just leave their children at the shrine to get away from responsibilities and never turnback. They do not even care for the betterment and safety of their child. Authorities remain silent and never pay attention to these on-going criminal activities. The main objective of this research is to act as a tool to enlighten people and spread awareness regarding this taboo. Moreover, it also educates humans to stop this practice of exploiting patients of microcephaly.

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