“Sci-Fi Islamica: American Empire and the Fantasy of Pakistan”

Junaid Rana
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA
jrana@illinois.edu

In the decade long global War on Terror, Pakistan has emerged in US popular culture through myth, fantasy, and the ideological construction of foreign policy. Such a conjuring reflects the fragile nature of the US-Pakistan relationship in which war is commonplace, geographies of the Middle East and South Asia are mangled, and the march of neoliberal capitalism is enacted as a normalized system. Drawing on the work of Pakistani artist Huma Bhabha, I reflect on how the aesthetics of her sculptures and photo-drawings reflect a critique of this relationship. Bhabha’s work uses fantasy and the divine as sources from which to juxtapose the ordinary with the extraordinary to create images of a futuristic present. As I argue, such artistic practices index the fraught US-Pakistan alliance through such contemporary and historical moments as the US military presence in the region renamed Afpak, and the client-state role of Pakistan that serves the interests of American empire. Bhabha, known mostly for her sculptures, offers a political critique of global politics, war, environmental catastrophes, and the effects of rampant capitalism. More recently, Bhabha has created photo-drawings that imbue the banal desert landscapes of Pakistan with references to ancient civilization, contemporary global popular culture, horror films, and sci-fi. For Bhabha, this aesthetic repertoire creates a critical space from which to comment on how the war on terror is related to the late modernism of neoliberal capitalism that accelerates decay, ecological disasters, genocide, and the disfigurement of everyday life. The result is a vision that is cinematic and monumental, as much as it is prophetic and allegorical. This paper follows Bhabha’s aesthetic depictions to offer a critical analysis of the US-Pakistan relationship and how Pakistan has emerged as an object of circulation within American popular culture.