**[Poetry at the presidency](https://www.dawn.com/news/1693578/poetry-at-the-presidency)**

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IN 2009, President Barack Obama hosted a poetry night at the White House. A little-known artist walked on stage and told the crowd that he’d like to perform something from a concept album he was working on. It was about the life and story of someone he felt embodied hip-hop and the American dream — former US Treasury secretary Alexander Hamilton.

The crowd bursts into laughter. It’s a bizarre pitch. Hamilton was till then a dull side character from American history books; a founding father whose most memorable characteristic was his face on the 10-dollar bill. But the artist persists, painting Hamilton’s story as one so inspiring it deserved to be told. What ensues is a strikingly original, expertly crafted performance on the pain and perseverance in this historical figure’s life that ends with the crowd rising in applause.

This performance would be the first song in a Broadway musical. Hamilton became a global phenomenon, sold a billion dollars’ worth of tickets, and won every major prize for theatre (including the Pulitzer). A bizarre pitch, an unconvinced audience, and a politician who gave the little guy a chance, turned the artist, Lin Manuel Miranda, into a star.

In 2022, President Joe Biden invited an­­other artist to perform poetry at the White House. This one had already reached massive success (she won a Grammy this year), but still seems to just be getting started. Arooj Aftab is Pakistani. She grew up in Lahore. Her music is almost entirely in Urdu.

Uplifting your own should be an obvious choice.

Yet she reached global success not because of her country, but in spite of it. She moved to the US at 19 and reached wider audiences when Obama shared her cover of the ghazal Mohabat Karne Wale in a list of his favourite songs of summer, 2021. This begs the question: if foreign leaders can see enough value in our artists to uplift them, why can’t our own?

That might sound far too idealistic to hope for. After all, when was the last time Pakistan promoted an entertainment product at the highest level? Well, you guessed it. Cue the string ensemble. Tun tuna tun tuna tun. In comes our hero Ertugrul on horseback, here to liberate our hearts, minds, and identity crises with perpetual visuals of grand Muslim victory.

Love it or hate it, that show made waves. After receiving the then PM’s glowing endorsement, it had a cultural impact perhaps unprecedented across the Pakistani populace. But it wasn’t ours to own. It was Turkish.

The information ministry was quick to express its envy, declaring its intent to produce high-quality shows on figures like Salahuddin Ayubi to awaken similar nationalistic euphoria with home-grown content. But of course, this hasn’t yet come into existence, let alone recreated Ertugrul’s magic.

That’s because it’s missing a point that should be obvious — the state can’t force art. At best, it can create a conducive environment for it. Ertugrul was the product of a vibrant television industry, free to take risks and unburdened by a trigger-happy Pemra itching to kill years of hard work in seconds lest it offends some angry old man with too much free time.

Uplifting your own should be an obvious choice. But since the folks making the decisions on this aren’t known for their appreciation of the arts, remember this too: while Obama was winning hearts with poetry nights, his drones were raining hell on Pakistan. Hamilton’s story was ‘the story of America’, and a perfectly desirable one to show to the world. This ‘soft image’ is a concept the Pakistani state spends money chasing every year, through songs and dramas advancing its narrative. Clearly, that has­n’t been too effective.

South Korea is an economic juggernaut, once often compared to Pakistan. Today, while we approach the IMF for $1-2 billion at a time, their music industry (K-Pop) alone contributes $10bn a year to the South Korean economy. Film and television are among their greatest exports, and send tourists flocking to their shores.

The world seems to understand the value of soft power, and the economic incentive to the state of a vibrant cultural scene. One would refuse to believe that our artists are any less talented than the American, Turkish or South Korean. Ali Sethi’s Pasoori featuring Shae Gill recently reached number one on global streaming charts. Artists like Hasan Raheem, Young Stunners, Abdullah Siddiqui, Arooj Aftab, and so many more are reaching international success. A success that warrants state recognition, not indifference.

You might still want to steer clear of this idea for optics’ sake. Politics is heated, the economy is a mess, and devoting a single brain cell to the arts in times like these might seem reminiscent of Nero playing the fiddle while Rome burned. But here’s a thought to consider — what if the fiddle can help put out the flames?

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