The Expression of Self-Awareness in Pakistani Paintings: Hegelian Perspective (1947-1977)

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ABSTRACT

A lot has been produced about the history of fine art in Pakistan but there is no academic literature exploring the historic development and evolution in the country's fine art mainly from the aspect of self-expression. This study tries to inquire transition of the history of art in Pakistan between 1947 to 1977. During all this period of development the transition from one kind of self-awareness to another is going on. The study uses theoretical paradigms that explore the development of self-consciousness in art in the ‘End of Art’ thesis proposed by Hegel and developed by Theodore Adorno. This model is used in the current study to figure out if there is a development in Pakistani art purely in terms of the degree of self-awareness. This objective is worth pursuing as history, especially History of Art, can be seen as a development of an ever-expanding and enlarging perimeter of consciousness. Development and cultivation of the mental abilities of intellect and imagination, two important fountains of human development, are more important than anything else. This paper is an attempt to look at the history of Pakistani painting as an evolving expression of Self-awareness. The study maintains that the peculiar circumstances of the Partition necessitated a search for a new cultural and national identity and therefore the first few decades of art in Pakistan (1947-1977) were devoted to consolidating self-awareness which contributed directly or indirectly to a national identity formation as well.

1 Introduction

Art is a complex expression in the sense that it is structured with layers of meaning. These layers come into being in the subjective world of the artist and are, in turn, perceived and interpreted in the subjective world of the listener or viewer. Subtract the artist and the viewer from the artwork, and what remains is just some lines, forms and colours on the canvas. Carl Jung, one of the pioneers of modern Psychology once said:

Life does not come from events, but from us. Everything that happens outside has already been. Therefore, whoever considers the event from the outside always sees only that it already was, and that it is always the same. But whoever looks from the inside, knows that everything is new. The events that happen are always the same. But the creative depths of man are not always the same. Events signify nothing, they signify only us. We create the meaning of events. The meaning is and always was artificial. We make it. Because of this, we seek in ourselves the meaning of events, so that the way of what is to come becomes apparent and our life can flow again.1

The significance of artwork, therefore, lies in the meaning it entails, which in other words, is the quality of the idea and aesthetic that gone into its making. The expression theories of art have consistently explored the nature of the significance by elaborating on what is expressed in art. Emotion and thought have been the most discussed content of art but some theorists have argued that art must be seen as an expression of an artist’s mind in its totality. That is, a work of art expresses not only an emotion, feeling, or idea, but the entire state of an artist’s mind. Still, it is debated whether the state of mind expressed in an artwork is the state at the moment of production or something more profound.

It goes without question that the state of mind of any individual, at a particular moment in time, is not something disconnected from an individual’s mental history. It is certainly a part and parcel of the experience of life lived, thought, and felt. However, the historical dimension of experience is filtered at the moment depending upon

the issue at focus. The same political situation can be expressed by two artists, living in the same country and going through similar circumstances, in entirely different ways. There can be different emotions at work, there can be different points of emphasis and by the same token different structures of meaning. So, there is an undeniable individuality of the artist, a mental disposition that is unique to every artist. This refers to the way he or she perceives an event or an object, imparts significance through specialized treatment and expresses his or her point of view through a work of art. This also means that in each artist’s case ideas and emotions, about a certain issue, exist in certain configurations. These configurations can be seen as a product of various mental capabilities of an artist such as intelligence, sensitivity, and awareness. Awareness seems to be more fundamental than intelligence and sensitivity. The reason is that it is the awareness of a need that compels the capability of intelligence to solve a problem, and it is the awareness that makes an individual sensitive or concerned about an issue. Can an artwork, therefore, be seen as a product of awareness?

Self-consciousness or self-awareness, in common parlance, means a certain degree of understanding that a person possesses about his or her mental life in the present. One can have a certain understanding about oneself concerning the past, that is, how one has lived a life, what were his beliefs, emotional positions, temperament, nature of intelligence, fears, pleasures, taste, etc., or one can project a future that how one wants to be in life. Both kinds of knowledge contribute to self-consciousness as the past describes the lived identity and the future informs about a projected identity but the most operational reality is undoubtedly the degree of self-consciousness in the present. Since self-consciousness is a kind of understanding in the cognitive domain and correspondingly a sensitivity in the emotional domain, therefore, there have to be degrees of self-consciousness. It is to say that an individual at any given moment in time possesses a certain degree of self-consciousness.

Self-consciousness or self-awareness refers to the degree of exposure not only in terms of data or information but also and more importantly to how the information is relevant to the self. The terms such as self-awareness and self-consciousness involve a certain degree of sensitivity in addition to knowledge. For instance, we can be aware of the piles of trash in the neighborhood but at the same time insensitive about it. This means that we are aware but not self-aware. Self-awareness would mean that we are also aware of how the pile of trash is a health hazard for a human being. Self-awareness can be seen as the extent to which a human being is aware of his needs, likes and dislikes and potentials.

Chughtai

Chughtai was a mature and well-accomplished artist at the time of Partition. He was born in Lahore to a family of artists and was largely self-taught. He briefly taught at the Mayo School of Arts after learning the basic techniques from his uncle Baba Miran Bakhsh, an expert in Mughal architectural ornamentation. Between 1920 and 1924, Chughtai participated in almost eleven exhibitions winning several awards. Before the Partition, Chughtai had produced notable works exhibiting Mughal and Muslim themes along with Hindu mythology. In 1928, the publication of Murqqa-e-Chughtai established him as a painter who was inspired by the work of Urdu literary giants. His belief that Muslims have contributed more to art than any other nation seems to underlie his emphasis on developing a visual idiom of Muslim heritage in a contemporary outlook. The term Murqqa itself came from the Persian tradition and Mughal India. The next monumental work Amil-e-Chughtai coincided with the need to declare a separate Muslim national identity. Chughtai’s work was a reclamation of the Islamic art heritage and therefore it became an expression of Muslim identity in the newly created Pakistan.

Chughtai’s art was received by critics as a substantial contribution to Islamic art. Yaqub Zaki wrote that Chughtai’s art evokes a complete civilization. Commenting on the aesthetics Tamara Talbot Rice noted, “Chughtai portrays the melancholy beauties of courtly life, who are saturated with a pervasive atmosphere of self-absorption...emotion is frequently expressed in Chughtai by the unruly line of the dress, whereas the face is stony and impassive”. Salim Akhtar commented that Chughtai’s woman was not someone from everyday life but a representation of the idealized beloved in Urdu ghazal. In light of these interpretations, Chughtai was seen as producing work expressive of Islamic and Persian aesthetics, Mughal nostalgia, Urdu poetic symbolism and an idealized dream world of beauty. Chughtai was exposed to Western art but he deliberately distanced himself from Western artistic conventions. He wrote, “centuries of slavery have produced such a sense of inferiority in us, that there appears to be no way out, expect to become entangled in the scandals and the accelerating progress of Europe.” He commented on the impact of the West on the East in the following words, that the West, “not only have soiled our civilization and heritage but burnt it to ashes in such a manner that, now being crippled and helpless, it has no recourse except to worship the West and imagine that only by imitation will it be able to find a way out”.

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The above-mentioned statements by Chughtai provide us with a glimpse into his self-awareness. He had a conscience strong enough that it was not dictated by colonialism. He acted as a revolutionary through his artwork. Whether it was the choice of subject matter or stylistic preferences, he seems to have continuously focused on developing an indigenous sensibility promoting Islamic, Persian and Mughal aesthetic values. His fascination with Omar Khayyam, Ghalib and later on with Iqbal all point towards the kind of awareness he had. It was principally directed to reclaim the lost past not by transforming the future backward but by directing the present forward in the light of indigenous sensibility and visual heritage. Understandably, Chughtai's disposition as an artist made him a perfect inspiration for the political direction of developing a national identity distinct from the Hindu and Colonial past.

While Chughtai's initiative was expected to draw inspiration from Western modernism, it was projected to be grounded in the discovery and revitalization of his cultural legacy. In a period of nationalism, capitalism, and decolonization, the audience and patronage were in flux at the time of Chughtai's work. Self-conscious optimism permeated the majority of his writing, which dealt with the complexities of decolonization and minority status faced by South Asian Muslims. However, it should be noted that Chughtai's entire perspective on reinventing the Muslim and Persian Past was his disposition, it coincided with the political vision for identity that ensued with the birth of Pakistan. In Chughtai we observe a passionate individual seeking an identity that links the present with a distant past, takes the aesthetically relevant components from the literary tradition of his time and evolves a body of art that is modern in the sense that it expresses an individual's take on life and classical in a peculiar way that it borrows artistic conventions from Persian and Mughal miniature.

Most of Chughtai's works included the central female character, a personification of the idealized beauty as it appears in ghazal, for instance in the following work.

![Figure 1. Abdur Rehman Chughtai, Untitled, Oil on canvas, the 1950s.](image)

This was a feat that he achieved with the remarkable use of imagination. The mere selection of subject matter and the lyricism in representing the female form through a rich use of imagination and skill at once communicates a realm long forgotten by the viewer. The quantity of work produced by Chughtai always invoking the imaginary realm of an idealized Muslim aesthetic became a statement made by the artist. It was indeed an expression of the Sense of Life the artist had in which he saw the present on a path disconnected from the Past. Through his paintings, he brought to light a visual repertoire of poetic imagery and hence impacted viewers' consciousness by introducing them to the past in a contemporary way.

Chughtai's work can also be viewed as an expression of metaphysical judgments. His deliberate distance from the West and his preference for Persian, Muslim and Mughal heritage were attempted to channel the social and psychological life of the Muslims of the Subcontinent. The powerful sentiment of nostalgia and the utter aesthetic beauty of the female form introduced a past that was not always characterized by wars and bloodshed. The symbol
of the female form, on a deeper note, promoted the love for subtle shades of beauty and harmony. He used his imagination to capture the imagination of the viewer and by providing him a window into a beautiful past, he created a counter-narrative addressing Hindu dominance and colonial atrocities. The mere fact that he illustrated the poetry of Iqbal means that he wanted to communicate the content of poetry through visual depiction. And since Iqbal also sought an identity for the Muslims, Chughtai’s disposition as an artist who would change the mindset of the viewer by introducing a historical consciousness of identity is indisputable. Chughtai represents a quite mature form of self-awareness, where the identity of an individual is seen as a historically developing phenomenon with a powerful emphasis on beauty and harmony. In this context, his effort can also be interpreted as morally uplifting, particularly regarding the prescribed response.

Ustad Allah Bukhsh

Like Chughtai, Ustad Allah Bukhsh also developed as an artist during a process of historical transition. His formative years witnessed the search for a Muslim identity but unlike Chughtai who became affiliated with the Mayo School of Arts, Ustad Allah Bukhsh was a product of the guild system of teaching that ran parallel to academic tradition. The guild system was basically a tradition of training in which the family played the role of an institution. This tradition was well-established at the end of the nineteenth century. It usually trained artisans, craftsmen and masons with varying degrees of expertise. One of the reasons why the guild system survived was that “the arrival of the British and the change of the official language from Persian to English discouraged the local Muslims to the extent that they preferred to train their children in their family profession at home instead of sending them to British educational institutions” (Khalid 2015).

Born in 1885, Ustad Allah Bukhsh became an apprentice to Muhammad Abdullah at the age of 5. The learning curve of Ustad Allah Bukhsh shows that he started by copying miniature paintings of the Mughal era and then he joined the theatre company of Agha Hashar Kashmiri at the age of 20. The theatre company exposed him to Shakespearean plays and Persian theatre. He became acquainted with Urdu literature as the company produced many Urdu adaptations. Moreover, the folk stories of Punjab were also the focus of the theatre company.

Allah Bukhsh would paint the backdrops of the plays which often required dramatic visuals and landscapes. The nature of the work demanded a fair use of imagination to produce romanticized visuals of nature. Allah Bukhsh then moved to Bombay, where he worked at a photography studio under Roop Narain for five years. Another influence that impacted Ustad Allah Bukhsh was Herman Muller, A German painter who lived in India and was a realist painter. The forte of using memory and imagination that defined the work of Allah Bakhsh received a realist impetus from Herman Muller. By that time, the sentiment for a separate Muslim identity was also in vogue.

The body of work that Ustad Allah Bukhsh produced had two distinct genres. One was the romantic landscape painting that was comparable to romantic landscape artists of the West and the other was realistic depictions of folklore from the region of Punjab with characters often depicted in a landscape compositional second. This blending became associated with the sentiment of searching for a national identity as it emphasized the identity of the land in a peculiar way.

The romantic landscape titled The Storm is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable portrayals of the land of Punjab. We observe a powerful use of imagination with a compositional division that is characteristic of realistic painters. The one-third of the vertical division of the painting is the foreground. The way light and wind are depicted contributes to the romantic character of the painting in which the viewer can see an expression of the Sublime. Another painting The Mountain is again a powerful use of imagination with quite a unique colour profile. The magnificence of nature seems to be the theme of the painting. The snow caped mountain with a distant horizon expresses depth in breath taking realism.
The rural environment of Punjab as depicted by Ustad Allah Bukhsh in realistic detail and the characterization of Heer Ranjha and Sohni Mahinwal is a subject matter that contributed to the regional identity of the Muslims.
The choice of subject matter tells a lot about what kind of awareness can be inferred from his paintings. On the one hand, he seems to be at par with British standards of romantic painting and on the other, he is totally absorbed in indigenous sensibility. His preference for the folklore tells us about what was important to him as heritage. His exposure to the theatre would have furnished the way for selecting a subject matter that carried not only the cultural heritage of Punjab but most importantly the spiritual backdrop for which epic lover stories were a metaphor. It would not be an exaggeration to state that the beauty of the Punjab at both visual and spiritual levels was aptly portrayed by Ustad Allah Bukhsh. His paintings create a romantic appeal to the land that the viewer can easily experience. It is no surprise that his art was well received as a symbol of the national identity of Pakistan.

With Ustad Allah Bukhsh and Chughtai, we find two distinct manifestations of self-awareness. Chughtai explored the foundations of Muslim identity in the distant past, and Allah Bukhsh concentrated on the culture of the present. In Allah Bukhsh’s case the contemporary expression of Muslim identity and national identity after the emergence of Pakistan was something that emerged from the land and was connected to the cultural repertoire of the Punjabi people. The viewer could get hold of both but with a difference. In the case of Chughtai, a priori knowledge of the Muslim tradition of art is mandatory, and an inclination to appreciate the idea of the beloved in ghazal also becomes necessary. Allah Bukhsh is more direct and a greater viewership is addressed as he appealed to a consciousness that people already had due to cultural association with the land. It can be said that Ustad Allah Bukhsh appealed to the present mind-set as it was in his time and emphasized the love for land through a beautiful and romantic depiction of the land and its people.

Chughtai and Allah Bukhsh were in the final phases of their artistic journey when Pakistan came into being. In the case of Chughtai, it was not Pakistan’s birth that compelled the artist to produce works affirming a new national identity, in fact, his take on Muslim identity was adopted by ideological circles of Pakistan as a means to connect with the Muslim past and trace identity to non-Indian origins. Ustad Allah Bukhsh who was a landscape painter inspired by European tradition connected his work to issues of identity by using the folklores of Punjab as subject matter. The next generation of the artists had a different journey altogether as most of them trained in Western institutions and had to find a suitable idiom that could connect their stylistic repertoire learned from the West with indigenous sensibility.
Shakir Ali
Shakir Ali is perhaps the prime example of this transition. Akbar Naqvi notes that “with his forays into modern art Shakir Ali first distanced himself from the artistic culture of his land, Indo-Persian as well as Euro-Indian”. He also mentions that “current political and social issues did not interest Shakir Ali, even though he acknowledged that artist was a responsible being”. Shakir Ali's initial works in the 1950s were explorations into cubism, his essential approach towards art was driven by his fascination with the pictorial plane, the formal features and the compositional divisions. But he was quite aware that whatever the new visual language he is exploring must be connected to his people. He wrote that modern painters speak for the time and environment of the present.

The cubist philosophy and cubist language could connect to the changing circumstances of the Subcontinent. The 1950s were all about absorbing the aftershocks of Partition and creating a new reality. This dimension of social change was consistent with the central idea of cubism, which was to break the conventional paradigms of art and create a new reality on the canvas. The artists like Picasso showed in their works how the same phenomenon can be looked at simultaneously from several viewpoints. Shakir Ali’s inspiration of cubism coincided with the need of establishing a new identity in Pakistan. In the 1960s, his work, remaining in the sphere of modern art, started taking into consideration the social reality of the land. We observe the application and expression of a new consciousness in Shakir Ali. By mid-1960s, Shakir Ali produced powerful paintings in pro-cubist manner and with deep symbolic quality. One of his paintings titled The Dark Moon is a lament coming from artist’s social consciousness in the aftermath of 1965 war.

Figure 5. Shakir Ali, Dark Moon, Oil on canvas, the 1960s.

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3 Naqvi, 200.
It is interesting to note that in this painting the post-cubist style that Shakir Ali individualized had potentially much to offer in the conceptual domain. The art-work produced a realm on the canvas which was far removed from imitation and therefore had its own visual and conceptual language. The combination of cubism and symbolism provided a much greater room for cognitive engagement, deliberation and interpretation. The first impression of the painting is the stark red colour used as a backdrop. The red is used in two tones; the two-thirds of the horizontal is painted in fresh and shiny red whereas one-third is painted in a darker red tone. The difference in tones divides the pictorial space and right at the division, in the upper half of the composition, a dark blue circle symbolizes the moon. The painting was an interpretation of the 1965 war. The division created by red tones probably symbolizes Partition, the red colour stands for the bloodshed and the dark moon is a metaphor from literature suggesting a dark time. A strip of dark blue brush strokes in the lower half refers to the land beneath the dark moon. In the abstract representation of an event that is undesirable for mankind, Shakir Ali communicates the intensity of destruction, the horror of war and the nature of the crisis at hand. Shakir Ali creates a remarkable synthesis of abstract and concrete in a symbolic language. The painting represents two kinds of awareness. One is the awareness of symbolic forms and expressive qualities achieved by a sensitive and meaningful use of colour, form and composition. The other is a powerful preference for peace and harmony which is negated by war. Shakir Ali communicates how the war and its destruction is felt. The viewer is provided a window into the feeling of the artist, which has been delivered through canvas in an ampliative expression consistent with Whistler’s viewpoint. It also represents Susan Langer’s disposition that an artist expresses the inner world through symbolic forms. It can be said that this work is expressive of the social consciousness of the artist and represents his emotional standpoint against destruction and injustice.

In another painting, Man, the viewer is introduced to a deeper layer of self-awareness. In this painting, Shakir Ali shows a faceless man with arms lifted in the air. The body posture is a combination of despair and helplessness.

![Figure 6. Shakir Ali, Man with the Sun, Oil on canvas, 1960s.](image)

On the top of the painting, a white circular shape represents the sun. The painting uses yellow, dirty white and dull red tones creating divisions of planes on the canvas further emphasized by the use of cross-hatching. The
subject matter of the painting is man, which according to Akbar Naqvi is Shakir Ali’s existential man beaten by life and circumstances but tenaciously alive. On the right-hand border of the painting Shakir Ali wrote from Rilke: “Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic order and even if one of them suddenly pressed me against his heart, I should fade in the strength of his stronger existence”. The statement portrays the dimension in which Shakir Ali thought of a man in its entirety. The painting expresses a deep self-awareness, where the being of man is contrasted with that of the angels in order to express the finitude of life in the infinity of nature. This painting clearly portrays Rand’s expression theory in which an artist expresses metaphysical judgments or more importantly the Sense of Life. Since, it is an abstract painting, therefore, the viewer is compelled to just focus on the single idea that—what is the purpose of existence—. This question is the cognitive output of the painting since the man represented in the painting is not a particular individual but every individual, the human being caught in the cycle of birth and death, opposing the fate in a helpless state. The cognitive output of the painting involves an intellectual engagement with the bigger questions of life, a re-examination of beliefs about the significance of self and life. In this way, the painting promotes an inquiry into the nature of self and hence furnishes a way to greater self-awareness.

Ahmed Parvez

Ahmed Parvez is considered one of the trailblazers of modern art alongside Shakir Ali. He evolved his own style and is known for his subtle content and complexity of form. It is well documented that he had a traumatic childhood and it was the childhood experience that became the driving force of his engagement with art. Shakir Ali described him as “a broken man who is trying to put himself together”. Ahmed Parvez dealt with the dichotomy of human-self at a profound level, and his work expressed the inner conflicts of the self in multiple ways. Akbar Naqvi noted:

Art helped Ahmed Parvez escape judgment, and in this sense, it was beyond good and evil. What it drew upon was the dialectical inclusivity of good and evil in the human-kind, conceived from filth and yet noble enough to be the Khilafah of God on earth. Between the reality of nature and humanity, the dynamics of self-realization became for Parvez an aesthetic adventure.

The above two quotes provide us a glimpse into his personality. Akbar Naqvi also mentions the way Ahmed Parvez would paint. He states, “he was directed to his work by some power within him which was like a stranger. He saw what he has painted only when he had finished the work partially or wholly”. If we recall expression theory of Collingwood, he exactly fits into the frame. Most of the work produced by Ahmed Parvez has its own stylistic language, which would require a meticulous exploration into the formal aspects, however, the kind of self-awareness he possessed is probably most manifest in a self-portrait that he made in 1974. It was a self-portrait that he made after he broke relationship with his third wife. He portrays himself as a well-dressed wolf man. Although it was a reaction to a troubling event of life, in fact, it was a statement on the nature of self in general. He portrays the animal within and hence expresses a peculiar form of self-awareness that comes from the experience of internal conflicts.

4 Naqvi, 232.
5 Naqvi, 304.
The painting expresses the idea of human self, the feeling of being an individual suffering from the eternal conflict between emotion and reason. Khalil Jibran has beautifully described this conflict in the following words:

Your reason and your passion are the rudder and the sails of your seafaring soul.  
If either your sails or your rudder be broken, you can but toss and drift, or else be held at a standstill in mid-seas.  
For reason, ruling alone, is a force confining and passion, unattended, is a flame that burns to its own destruction.  
Therefore let your soul exalt your reason to the height of passion, that it may sing;  
And let it direct your passion with reason, that your passion may live through its own daily resurrection and like the phoenix rise above its own ashes.

The realization of the conflict between emotion and reason is a certain degree of self-awareness. However, the focus of Ahmed Parvez is a specific kind of emotion, that is, destructive, negative and conflicting. There is a range of emotions that we all experience ranging from positive to negative depending upon what kind of objective is achieved by the act based on emotions. Ahmed Parvez personifies the emotional drive of the self as a wolf, which obviously symbolizes the destructive power of unattended emotions. He also seems to imply that this destructive potential is a deeper layer of the human self and is somehow camouflaged by the outward appearance of rational and civilized man. Through this work, he pulls out a hidden drive of the human self and portrays it in its actuality. For the viewer, this portrait is quite revealing. It necessitates a cogitation or reflection on the nature of the human self; the diametric opposition of raw emotion and refined thought. The destructive and self-serving nature of negative emotions overrides the rational process and man acts in regretful ways. In this context, the self-portrait contributes to the development of self-awareness in the viewer. The viewer is left with the choice that whether the conflict within the self should remain the way it is or whether there is a need to resolve this. Ahmed Parvez by adding a background of a dark house and moon implies that the destructive potential of human self is necessarily evil and ugly. The self-portrait functions as a mirror that shows a deeper reality of self and hence positions its viewer to develop a consciousness that can see within the mind.
From the artist’s perspective, the painting expresses a drive to portray the guilt that arose out of destructive and embarrassing behaviours. Guilt, in psychology, is described as a self-conscious emotion due to the fact that it arises by reflecting upon the actions that produced results never intended. Essentially, when we look at the self-portrait, we are simultaneously perceiving two modes of self. One is the mode which is portrayed on the canvas, while the other is who painted this or who wanted the world to see the monster within. Ahmed Parvez had a dichotomous personality. His daughter Noorie Parvez describes him in the following words:

Misunderstood, multi-faceted, often delusional, perplexing, as mad as a Hatter and utterly lost. He was a tragic drama waiting to unfold daily, often bringing chaos, pain and frustration to everyday life. On the other hand, in contrast, on a good day he was an extremely loving, lyrical, passionate, poetic, exceptionally creative, vibrant, charismatic man and an attentive, tactile Pappa.6

Additionally, the painting can be interpreted as conforming to the Understanding Claim of moral cognitivism. The artist contributes to deepening human understanding about the self by highlighting its moral character. The whole idea of morality actually came into being in wake of the realization that a man is capable of destruction and self-servitude; driving benefit on the expanse of others. In this context, the painting shows the dark destructive force of human self and re-ignites a thought process reflecting upon morality.

Sadequain

Sadequain has been the most consistent of the painters with themes that spoke of self-awareness and contributed to it. He is also a painter whose ideas other than as expressive in the painting are elaborate and accessible. He was also a poet and therefore it becomes easier to understand his disposition as a self-conscious human being. Moreover, he produced a huge body of work, probably greater than any other painter in the history of Pakistan and in all his figurative works the theme of critiquing the self is obvious. This was coupled with the fact that he embraced modern art within the context that his themes flow. He himself said:

People ask why I don’t paint flowers, butterflies and landscapes? I tell them that I seek the truth. I am not inspired by someone posing against the backdrop of roses in a vase or pink curtains. What inspires me is a person who has gone hungry for hours and is struggling for survival. The expression that lights his face at the end of the day when he has finally found some scraps, that is what touches me. I am a painter of the expression of reality.7

This is why Sadequain’s works are an expression of virtuosity and extreme productivity but more correctly they are expressions of mind that are seeking a social change; a change that was evolutionary. His works cannot be explained as mere narration but as a compelling visual argument catalyzing human progress. This motivation was so strong and consistent in Sadequain that all his life he had no interest in materialistic things. He would not sell his paintings but donate them to venues and people who made his works accessible to ordinary people.

The human self has been critiqued by Sadequain in three principle ways and each way contributes to the development of self-awareness in a peculiar way. The first critique is accomplished by showing the dark side of the human self; its intellectual inertia and emotional stagnation. The second critique is about the strength of an individual against the hardships and challenges of life. In this context, he used cactus as a symbol of a struggling man. The third critique highlights the triumph of man on the basis of his intellectual prowess and emotional wisdom.

What a crow’s nest on my head, ask not
What troops of pests on my body, ask not
When I got out of myself to have a look at my self

7 An excerpt from text on the website of Sadequain Foundation < http://www.sadequainfoundation.com/>
Oh, how frightful was the scene, ask not.\(^8\)

He himself stated, ‘The face of the man crowned with a nest of crows is my own image. While spider webs surround my body, rodents, lizards, and caterpillars crawl freely across. These images convey a sense of rampant stagnation and extreme deprivation’.

The main idea of the self-portrait is defining the decadent state of man. A crow’s nest on the head of a man symbolizes the intellectual inertia that cursed the man according to Sadequain. The work presents a powerful self-reflection that provides a jolt of self-awareness by highlighting the deprivation of man being caught in greed and lust. The faculty of the intellect developed in man was not a consequence to fulfil bodily needs, it was a capability that differentiates man from animals. The essential function of the intellect was to explore new horizons of knowledge and wisdom in order to harness nature. Intellect refers to the ability to reason but at the same time, it refines the emotional position. A functional and inwardly directed intellectual process is supposed to develop emotions to a level that a human being can conquer the universe. A crow’s nest points out that the essential function of the intellect is gone and the mind has become a ruin. It has become so stagnant and non-conscious that a crow can reside there hatching eggs.

![Figure 8. Sadequain, Artist Crowned with Crow’s Nest, 1968, Pen and Ink](image)

Again, as in the case of Ahmed Parvez, Sadequain portrays the dark side of the human mind. In the same way, the viewer is challenged to reflect and see the incapacity of the self that has resulted due to a lopsided development. The work functions as a revealing mirror to individuals and society. It brings to focus a reality that is functional but hidden from ordinary consciousness. Sadequain enables the viewer to see what lies beneath; the source of human misery and evil.

The painting can be interpreted as an expression of metaphysical judgments and a sense of life that the artist had. However, the essential view of the human state that Sadequain presents is more than a commentary on local culture. Its dimension is universal, the comment is at an evolutionary scale. The power of communication not only lies in the dark side of man presented to the viewer but in the ability to see that the darkness of the human soul, the deprivation and weakness of clear and educated thought. Like Ahmed Parvez’s self-portrait, this painting also

\(^8\) Ajaz Anwar, Sadequain, the Missing Link: Art (Lahore, Pakistan: Heritage of Pakistan, 2012), 104.
conforms to the Understanding Claim. It provides a viewpoint from where the underlying cause of human misery becomes more visible. It focuses the attention of the viewer on his cognitive domain, where ideas of good and bad and of right and wrong exist. It provides an opportunity to develop the sensitivity of reason in man.

The content of the painting not only focuses on intellectual inertia, it also shows the emotional loss that the individual suffers from. This becomes clear from the fact that Sadequain looks at man as a composite of reason and passion. The cactus symbol which he used to identify the struggle of man against harsh circumstances is a realization of the emotional strength that a human being has.

In the second kind of critique on the human self, the powerful emotional determination of human beings is the central idea. He identified himself with cactus and wrote:

I was once upon a time living in the cactus land. There were cacti all around me. To my east, west, north there were cacti. And to my south, there was just the Arabian sea…Living with cacti, I too became a cactus. I was in the cactus and the cactus was in me. Cactus grows in the most hostile of climates—sand, heat and salt, no rain. It doesn’t grow in the fertile soil. Yet it grows majestically as if its thorny branches are trying to catch the clouds. To me, it symbolizes the triumph of life over the environment. Once upon a time, I used to identify myself with it. Then it started identifying itself with the whole world.

The symbolization of the cactus is a powerful way to communicate an idea through painting. The metamorphosis refers to a process of gaining strength. Sadequain does not define human beings as a cactus, his emphasis is the process of growth and in that process, he particularly focuses on the drive of determination. It is a determination that provides strength against all opposing forces. The centrality of the process of growth in all conditions is the essential message of the painting and symbolization. Again we observe that Sadequain contributes to self-awareness by referring to the transformative power of human evolution. He defies the largely held assumption of fixed human nature, his idea of man is of a dynamic entity that continuously redefines itself in order to grow.

Figure 9. Sadequain, Metamorphosis of a Cactus, Oil on Canvas, 1976.

Sadequain contributes to the self-awareness of the viewer by describing the true function of emotions, which is to drive the whole being towards higher realms of awareness. He posits that determination and strength of emotions is such that even if there is a scarcity of resources for growth, man is still capable of transformation and change. He refers to the life force that lies within every individual human being, and advocates its primacy and power that goes beyond every obstacle. The symbol of the cactus does not equate man with beauty, peace and harmony but with courage, strength and growth through overcoming conflicts that come from within and without.
His account is realistic instead of idealistic and hence calls upon the virtues of the human self. The extent of awareness about the human self encompasses the universal and evolutionary dimensions of growth. But where does this growth lead to, what lies in the future, or what should be the objective and purpose of man? These questions are answered in the third kind of critique that we find in Sadequain's paintings.

In the following painting, he uses Iqbal's poetry with powerful imagery emphasizing the curiosity of man leading him to conquer the universe. He invites man to look at the bigger picture, the whole of the universe, the entirety of human existence. And, from a macro perspective, he provides a purpose to human beings, that is, to think, inquire, discover and conquer the universe. This theme is quite revolutionary as far as self-awareness is concerned.

Figure 10. Sadequain, Kuliyaat-e-Iqbal, Oil on board, 1976.

The kind of self-awareness that Sadequain is promoting is not of an identity in the personal and limited sense. He refers to the identity as a universal process, he provokes the universal dimension in human beings as a counterpoint to the current understanding of the being. In this way, he expresses the highest form of self-awareness or self-consciousness that we find in philosophical and mystical traditions.

Rumi advances the story of man's evolution and Sadequain seems to suggest the same. The theme of Sadequain is self-realization in the highest possible sense. The painting invites man to discover his potential. The painting exemplifies the expression of metaphysical judgments, a sense of life, and self-awareness on multiple levels. There is a clearly communicated cognitive content in the work, there exists a deeper understanding of the self that redresses morality from an evolutionary perspective. Sadequain suggests man to view the expense and depth of nature and defines his role in the larger scheme of things. He furnishes the way to a new beginning for mankind.

The third critique by Sadequain becomes more understandable in the light of the first two critiques. By showing man his dark side, the misery, pain and ugliness, he moves to reveal the emotional strength that man has through the identification with cactus, and then attempts to also define the goal of mankind. For the viewer, these critiques provide sufficient material to rethink the purpose of life.

Sadequain is the only painter whose work is clearly expressive of cognitive content that can be defined as an expression of self-awareness at the universal scale. Art becomes a tool to communicate a deep realization that Sadequain had at an intellectual and emotional level. It might be the case that since Sadequain was not a product of any academic tradition, he was able to configure a philosophy of life through unique visual idioms and style that resonates till to date.

Sadequain's work is of paramount importance because of its relevance to the internal world of a human being. Through his themes, Sadequain stresses the evolution of self-consciousness as a remedy of insensitivity and societal inertia. His works bear a universal character and appeal for they can be helpful in a society where the ethical and moral decline has polluted human personality and where insensitivity has blinded the intellect. Sadequain stands
as a painter who speaks to mankind through his forms and colors and strives to produce a change in human society for a prosperous future. When a viewer looks at his works, he actually mirrors his mind and sees himself from Sadequain’s viewpoint. He looks at himself from the viewpoint of a mature self-consciousness. The struggle resulting from this event enables the viewer to actualize his potential of becoming more self-conscious. This event of observation paves the way for a synthesis since it presents the conflicts in the theatre of mind in their proper context.

2. Conclusion

This study used the model of theoretical paradigms proposed by Hegel and developed by Theodore Adorno to ascertain the development of self-consciousness in art in Pakistan. This model was used in the current study to figure out if there is a development in Pakistani art purely in terms of the degree of self-awareness. It is argued that history’s central subject is the growth of awareness. Therefore, development and cultivation of the mental abilities of intellect and imagination, two fountains of human greatness, are more important than anything else. This looked at the history of Pakistani painting as an evolving expression of Self-awareness and thus explored and analysed the paintings of Chughtai, Sadequain, Shakir Ali and others. The research verifies its hypothesis that the peculiar circumstances of the Partition necessitated a search for new cultural and national identity and therefore the first few decades of art in Pakistan from 1947 to 1977 were devoted to consolidating self-awareness and contributing to identity formation.