

The Innovative Use of Symbols by Abdul Rahim Nagori

Aqsa Malik / Amjad Parvez

ABSTRACT:

The use of symbols to communicate powerful ideas has a long history in literature, poetry and arts. Symbol has a loaded meaning and is an indirect way to express opinions and ideas. Due to this qualification, politically charged art has often relied on the device of symbol. The paper discusses the use of symbols by Abdul Rahim Nagori, a Pakistani artist known for his art works with serious political connotations in his paintings. The study suggests that Nagori gave new meanings to symbol through juxtaposing them to political and social events in the country and in doing so he gave a new meaning to symbols. The paper analyzes a few of his works in the context in which they were produced and interprets the symbols he used to communicate his ideological standpoint.

Introduction

Artists belong to a very sensitive faction of society. They have a highly responsive emotional process, an ideological stance and a skill to communicate subtle ideas. Being sensitive they absorb the reality around them and then respond to it through their works. An art work therefore expresses an ideological position, an emotional preference and a stylistic identity owing their character to the sensibility of the artist. Throughout history, it has been observed that the conventions that artists followed or invented to express their ideas evolved with time. The use of symbols to communicate ideas has a long history. Initially, it became a necessary device in art works that expressed religious ideas and then we also

observe that symbolism became a useful convention to convey an idea that cannot be communicated directly. For instance, the political stances or anti-establishment content in art had to be codified in order to deal with censorship policies. In both cases a symbol has been proved as a powerful device. The reason is that a loaded meaning of a symbol provides a sufficient probability of accurate interpretation. Bernard Lazare argued that symbol "is not solely an end of a process but the commencement of another; it lives its own specific life and contains a thousand lives".¹ The symbol has a shared meaning amongst people and therefore it recalls the association for which it speaks for. In sociopolitical situations where a government imposed strict measures on freedom of expression, artists used symbolism to express their opinion.

In our own country, the Martial Law regimes particularly that of General Zia-ul-Haq banned art works with explicit political connotations. However, the artists such as Ijazul Hassan and Abdul Rahim Nagori continued to express their opinions. Both of them used symbolism in their art works. Ijazul Hassan relied more on the metaphors of local literature and poetry while Nagori personalized more general symbols in a unique way. This paper focuses on the personalized usage of symbols in Nagori's art works. A few examples have been analyzed to see how the artist has used symbols to communicate politically charged ideas. The paper suggests that his compositions gave new meanings to symbols. He created a context within the painting that helped in determining what he actually meant by using a symbol. The paper concludes that a symbol loses its cross-cultural identity in the art works of Nagori and assumes a new and powerful meaning, which is totally relevant to its time and is potentially revolutionary. The use of symbols by Nagori was innovative and furnished a distinct way of communication for generations of artists to come.

¹George Lachmann Mosse et al., *Political Symbolism in Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of George L. Mosse Prox 310P* (Transaction Publishers, n.d.), 209.

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Figure 1. Abdul Rahim Nagori, Bounded Girls, Oil on canvas

Nagori has used the symbol of waist belt in his painting entitled *Bounded Girls*. In the upper right half of the painting, one can observe the faces of three women shown tied up with a waist belt. The lower half of the painting depicts a *thari* woman in sitting posture giving an identity to the tied faces. In common parlance, a waist belt is interpreted as something that ties, which implies connectivity and strength, however, this has not been Nagori's intent. In a telephonic conversation, he defined the waist belt as a symbol for separation; it separates the lower half of the dress from the upper half, it's a dividing line. The symbol of waist belt therefore acquires a personalized meaning. And, this interpretation becomes clear by looking at the rest of the painting. The *thari* women represent a far removed faction of Pakistani society. A faction that struggles for the basic necessities of life and remains suppressed by their male counterparts. It's a satire on the feudal system that is prevalent in interior Sindh.

The painting also shows other symbols that point towards the harsh reality of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed. Robert Goldwater while commenting on symbolist paintings stated that "one of the chief characteristics of symbolist painting (and its graphic derivatives) is the stress it puts upon the pictorial surface and its

organization".² This holds true in the case of Nagori's painting. He designs a pictorial surface using the hand stitched *Rallipattern*, which is a traditional patchwork abundantly found in interior Sindh. The patchwork represents the culture of the region and it is represented as a backdrop. Like the *Ralli* pattern, the life of women in interior Sindh is also hand stitched, each color is a result of meticulous labor. Like the portrayal of oppressed, Nagori also symbolizes the oppressor. He has used symbols that refer to the typical feudal man. The turban, the *khussa*, the *hukka* and the *mustache*, all point toward the dominant presence and control of the male counterpart. Nagori through a simple but yet powerful symbolism draws us to look beneath the surface. The waist belt being the divide suggests that it is the socio-cultural segregation that feeds the turmoil of *thari* women. The painting engages the viewer to think about the divide that exists in the society and contemplate the difficulties that *thari* women face being oppressed.

Another personalized symbol that we find in Nagori's repertoire is the thirsty crow. Crow is seen as a great civilizer and the creator of the visible world.³ The thirsty crow in literature symbolizes problem-solving and persistence. However, in Nagori's usage the thirsty crow acquires a new meaning as it comes to symbolize the *thari* woman. In the painting entitled *Thirsty Thari Bird*, we observe a *thari* woman walking the field with her pitcher under blazing sun. The upper body of the woman has transformed into a crow, looking upward with its beak open, it makes us focus on the thirst. Nagori uses the symbolism in two respects, one is, the crow as a civilizer, which draws our attention to the potential of a woman, and then the transformed upper part points us to register the stark reality of the life of the *thari* woman, which is deprived of basic necessities. The woman under the heat of the sun, and on a barren land is walking miles and miles in search of water.

²Robert Goldwater, *Symbolism* (New York: Westview Press, 1980), 18.

³J. C. Cirlot, *Dictionary of Symbols* (Routledge, 2006), 71.



Figure 2. Abdul Rahim, Nagori, Thari Bird, Oil on canvas

The poverty of the rural life coupled with scarcity of resources is an eye opener for those individuals of society, who are bestowed with luxuries of life. In another layer of meaning, the crow also becomes a symbol of endurance. The thirst is sustained in the life of these woman and has made them more resilient. Nietzsche once said that which does not kill us makes us stronger.⁴ Through Nagori's lens we look at the harsh reality. We witness the strength of the woman, her struggle to maintain life but at the same time we also become aware of the injustice that characterizes the attitude of oppressor. The simultaneity of positive and negative in one character is a powerful technique of communication. On one hand we register something that makes us realize the strength of a woman and on the other we look at the harsh cultural reality where human life has been reduced to bare minimum. In the words of Ted Huges, 'the crow is the indestructible bird who suffers everything, suffers

⁴Tracy B. Strong, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration* (University of Illinois Press, 2000), xxvii.

nothing'.⁵ In the same spirit, Nagori shows the crow as an enduring and resilient specie capable of much more than suffering. The pitcher in the painting is also symbolic, it acquires an entirely new meaning in this composition. The symbol draws its substance from the Sufi use. According to Sufi doctrines, the pitcher symbolizes the heart.⁶The empty pitcher refers to the deprivation of thari woman; the barren heart whose desires are lost in the dust. Nagori said 'this pitcher in this painting not only carries water but the unfulfilled wishes and the needs of these woman, who do not know any kind of life other than this laborious one'.⁷The struggle of women to fetch water in the barren land is also the struggle of the heart to find meaning in life, to look for fulfilment. The thirsty crow and the empty pitcher tell us a new story. It gives us a powerful jolt, we look at a reality that we have long ignored, we experience the contrast, the tragedy and the bitterness. The symbol of thirsty crow and the empty pitcher under blazing sun and on a barren land make us feel the pain that is a continuous feature of life for the *thari* woman. The blazing sun highlights the harshness, the barren land shows the impossibility, the thirsty crow reflects the need and the pitcher symbolizes the heart. In a simple composition and with a few symbols, Nagori communicates a painful message.

The recognition of Nagori as a prolific painter has been overshadowed by his repute of being a political activist for the simple reason that the themes he used and the symbolism he devised often took into account the political currents of his time. In doing so, he has been bold, vocal and brave. During Zia-ul-Haq's Martial Law regime, he spread his anti-government point of view through a powerful symbolism. His political awareness came from his concern for the masses, he himself said, "I paint the suffering of masses and it is as if I am suffering from a disease which forces me to create a voice against the injustice surrounding me. Nobody cares if I am a persona non grata for the establishment".⁸

⁵Ken Lauter, *Songs from Walnut Canyon* (Xlibris Corporation, 2010), 51.

⁶Fethullah Gülen, *Key Concepts in the Practice of Sufism: Emerald Hills of the Heart* (Tughra Books, 2004), 254.

⁷Nagori, Abdul Rahim. Interview by Aqsa Malik, E-mail correspondence, Lahore, January 2005.

⁸Nagori, Abdul Rahim. Interview by Aqsa Malik, Karachi, October 2010.

Probably the most powerful of his works has been the *Series of Symbolic Alphabets* that he produced in the prime of Zia-ul-Haq's Martial Law regime. With his paintings, he expressed his opinion on the injustices inflicted by the military dictatorship. The Martial imposed by Zia-ul-Haq was one of its kind as it had a self-proclaimed religious slant that would suit the political interest of the dictator. The religion was used as a tool to suppress the human right of free speech and personal opinion. The worst part was that the sanctions were aggressive and the use of force to implement policies was considered a norm. Nagori came up with the remarkable idea of symbolic alphabets. The series was a satire, which expressed the position that under Martial Law the basic rules of the game get changed. In order to teach children, the alphabets, the books contain names of different objects that begin with a certain alphabet. Nagori, through the series, informs us that under military dictatorship, there are certain socio-political features that define it. Through alphabets, he points out those features in order to express the position that military regimes offer and impose a new social curriculum. As we shall observe, the use of alphabets is symbolic and the use is highly personalized. In the new scheme of things, introduced by Nagori, B would stand for Bomb instead of Butterfly, C would be used for Crime instead of Cat, and K would refer to Kalashnikov and not Kite. The alphabets acquired a new association in the hands of Nagori and his works became a powerful political statement through the symbolic use of alphabets.

For instance, in the painting entitled '*W for War*', Nagori points out the sectarian violence that furthered under the biased support of the government for a specific interpretation of Islam. It also refers to the conflicts that emerged due to contradiction in the ideologies of the Left and the Right or between Oppression and freedom. We can interpret it as a reference to the conflicts that ensued due to a lopsided political and ideological stance of the military regime that was using Islam for its political sustenance and authority.



Figure 3. Abdul Rahim Nagori, W for War, Oil on canvas

For example, the implementation of the Blasphemy Law under the military regime was an action that was taken for the sake of targeting minorities. The law was approved under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government but under the military regime it was implemented in a specific way that would suit the conservative factions of Islam who supported the dictator. The result was devastating. It gave rise to injustice, and sectarian violence. Massive riots broke out and it turned Muslims against Muslims within one nation and country. Behind this violence there were political interests and there were personal who gained benefits. The painting by Nagori shows the actual reality of the beneficiaries. He shows them as 'pigs'. Pig is considered as a symbol of wealth and prosperity in various cultures, but in Pakistani and Islamic culture, it is associated to disgust. Nagori uses this meaning to express his disgust for War. The painting also depicts a female sign in the upper part but it appears with a cross emphasizing the brutality of War that has affected the whole of nation. Here again, Nagori personalizes the female

sign by using it along with the symbol of peace. The female sign can also be interpreted as referring to the injustice that affected the female activists of the country. As a matter of fact, the suppression of the military regime disguised in the teachings of Islam snubbed the women to the extent of physical abuse. The journalists, artists and writers were treated in accordance to the gender and not as human beings. Under the military dictatorship, the whole situation was that of War. The Kalashnikov culture that came to Pakistan with the dictator's assistance of the US in Afghan War fueled the sectarian violence. The political victims were countless starting with Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. Mian Ijazul Hassan, who was a political activist and painter was put to solitary confinement due to his views and anti-dictatorship stance. Nagori portrays the whole situation by informing us that the alphabet of 'W' had a different meaning under dictatorship.



Figure 4. Abdul Rahim Nagori, Z for Zindabad, Oil on canvas

In *Z for Zindabad*, Nagori becomes more direct and uses symbolism as a principal device of communication and exposing the underlying reality. He directly paints Zia-ul-Haq whose name also starts with the same alphabet. It is actually Zia Zindabad since the crown shown on his head depicts his status of a king. However, instead of king sitting on the throne, Nagori puts him over a pile of missiles. The political statement that this painting expresses shows the role of Zia-ul-Haq as an ally of the US in its war against Russia. The military aid that came from the US along with millions of dollars actually was responsible for making

Zia-ul-Haq the king who would use his authority wherever he liked. He was not bound to give a rational justification of his actions. The dictator is sitting with his military uniform. The missiles have a flag signature of the US. The painting also shows a handshake which obviously is a satirical comment on the friendship between the US and Pakistan. In fact, the political changes from top to bottom were policies of the US government, who wanted to emphasize the narrative of Jihad for the sake of political interest to defeat and break Russia, a competing superpower. The painting shows that the dictator is a puppet at the hands of US. The word *Zindabad* has a positive connotation but with his negative portrayal it assumes a negative meaning. It is also a comment on the greed of power that is associated to the dictator. The color scheme of the painting using red and green is also symbolic, red is used to refer to destruction while green symbolizes the Muslim majority of the country. The painting clearly shows the underlying factors that made Zia-ul-Haq a preferred choice for the US. With a meaningful use of the alphabet Z, Nagori shows the absolute monarchy and power of the dictator.



Figure 5. Abdul Rahim Nagori, Perched Bureaucracy, Oil on canvas

The relatively softer Martial Law regime under General Parvez Musharraf was also not acceptable to Nagori's sensitivities. He was not only against the military rule but he also criticized the role bureaucracy under military government. Particularly, he was at tangent with their role in which they just obeyed the orders without considering the merit and consequences. In *Perched Bureaucracy*, Nagori paints a night scene, a tree with six owls sitting on it is the main composition with moon and Faisal Mosque shown in the background. In the foreground, a woman with a

child is shown lying on the ground. The whole painting is symbolic. The owl, which is considered the symbol of wisdom in Western cultures has been personalized by Nagori to give a new meaning. It is shown as a symbol of ignorance in this case. The bureaucracy under military regime is as dysfunctional as the owl is. The dark scene of the night refers to the dark times through which Pakistan was going. The branches of the tree symbolize the bureaucratic structure of the country. The Faisal Mosque is a reference to Islamabad, the Capital of Pakistan where the decisions are being taken and policies made. The woman and child on the foreground shown the suffering of the nation as a snake is haunting them. The fragile health of the woman and child is symbolic of the social life of the country. The symbol of owl was a deliberate appropriation by the artist since it appeared in Quetta Staff College's monogram between 1905 and 1979. The painting depicts the reasons why a military government sustains its power. The reason is the assisting bureaucracy. For Nagori such works were a relief from pain, it was his catharsis that he was not sitting idle but contributing to the society by highlighting political injustice.⁹

In another painting entitled *Supreme Sacrifice*, Nagori shows us an atrocity with an important institution of the country. In 2007, Musharraf suspended Pakistani constitution and dismissed the Chief Justice of Pakistan. The lawyers responded the situation through nationwide protests and many of them were arrested. Nagori in his painting shows a lawyer being beaten by a policeman. In the background, the Supreme Court of Pakistan and the Faisal Mosque can be seen. The title of the painting 'Supreme Sacrifice' refers to the sacrifice of Supreme Court implemented using one of the state institutes. The police is accompanying the dictatorial measure and therefore the policeman is shown with the face of a dog. The dog does symbolize faithfulness but it is in favor of the military government.

⁹Nagori, Abdul Rahim. Interview by Aqsa Malik, Karachi, October 2010.



Figure 6. Abdul Rahim Nagori, Supreme Sacrifice, Oil on canvas

The irony of the painting lies in the fact that it represents a conflict between state institutions. The police who is supposed to protect the rights of the people is beating them on the grounds on which it pledged to save them. The Supreme Court of Pakistan is an institute where highest order of justice is served. It is a sacred place but its sanctity has been humiliated for the sake of holding up the power. It was the time when Musharraf's dual role as a military head and the President of Pakistan was being questioned by the court. Nagori shows that the sacrifice made by the government was also serving a supreme authority; the absolute monarchy of a dictator. The Faisal Mosque in the background is also a pertinent symbol that Nagori has frequently used. It refers to Islamabad, the locus of power structure. The conflict between the originator and provider of the law is what is referred to as supreme sacrifice. The painting in first appearance seems to depict an event but it was Nagori's forte to enhance the meaning of the event and its implications by juxtaposing elements that play the key roles. In this case the police force is secondary as the role assigned to it is by the military government, the dog face clarifies the position. Nagori engages his viewer into contemplation as one looks at the court of justice and the act of injustice together. The new meaning of symbols comes from Nagori's juxtaposition of elements, the overall impact of composition and the choice of subject matter. Through these paintings Nagori plays the role of a sensitive citizen of time. He has a clear understanding of the political reality and at the same time he is aware of the injustices that power dynamic unleashes.

The most remarkable were his strength and sustained political position that throughout his career characterized his conscience.

Conclusion:

Changing the perspectives and paradigms on the scale of masses is a complex process and involves contribution of various factors. An artist through subtle communication targets the core of human subjectivity and changes the way we feel and in consequence alters our perception and thinking. Abdul Rahim Nagori was certainly aware of this psychological route. The works discussed in the paper suggest that his effort to change the perspectives and paradigms of masses involved three fronts. One was the identification of social injustice for which he chose the subject matter of *thari* woman and used the cultural as well as cross-cultural symbols to show how a faction of society is being oppressed. The second front was political, where we find him a powerful voice against dictatorship. The third front which is quite relevant till this day was his take on the political dynamics where institutions of state are routed into devastating oppositions by power players. It also focuses on the impotence of bureaucracy as an institution in times of political unrest and turmoil. On these fronts Nagori used symbols in a unique way, through a blend of contextual aspects and formal elements of composition. Through his irrepressible strength, he gave a new meaning to symbols that made them more relevant and pointed serving his cause of revolutionizing the spirit of people. With Nagori we find a unique use of symbols informed by his political awareness and the pain he felt for the oppressed.

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