Symbolic and Metaphorical Implication of Cactus, Cobweb and Crow in Sadequain’s Painting

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Abstract:
This paper precisely investigates the symbolic and metaphorical that the legendary Pakistani painter Sadequain implied in his painting with special focus on cactus, crow and nest; the most iconic of all. Syed Sadequain, is one of the most prolific and the most discussed painter of Pakistan, who with his unmatched talent, perseverance and untiring practice, earned unparalleled fame and respect. Sadequain has a deep interest in literature, especially poetry and was also well aware of the folk and mythological coding of various societies. He acknowledged the path of Malamatiyya in Sufism and painted under its inspirations and influences. This paper is not about all the aspects of Sadeqain’s painting but, will explore his main elements of painting; cactus, crow and nest that he used in a symbolic and metaphorical manner. The study will present a descriptive, comparative as well as analytical approach towards the visual language adopted by the artist. in between lines, Sadequain’s impact on the art in Pakistan, shall also be discussed. This study will also explore the extrinsic and intrinsic characteristics of the cactus, crow and nest. The research paper has been carried out using MLA style of research writing.
Introduction

Syed Sadequain (1924-1987) is often referred as a ‘Holy Sinner’ due to his interest in the Malamatiyya concept in Sufism. His art is inexhaustible, not only in number but also in terms of ideas. Other than this, Sadequain has keen interest in creating images out of history, religion, mythology, philosophy and psychology. He used a variety of symbols, based on these areas and created his visual diction that he kept on using repetitively. Although, these symbols, used metaphorically, are not new to the viewers’ eye at any part of the world as many famous painters earlier than Sadequain, have utilized these emblems in accordance with their culture and social patterns. But at the same time, Sadequian, being inexhaustible and creative at the same time, acculturated these well-known symbols with his own environment and settings. The cactus, cobweb or the crow are never a new commodity in the field of visual arts or literature. Since the ancient times, there are images of this type of visual language to express the myths or fables of those times.

Sadequain, as a painter with strong themes and concept at hand, has to create a visual language of his own which, would not only attract the local viewers but also advocate his ideals to the international spectators as well.

Figure 1. Portrait of Sadequain
Sadequain’s keen interest in literature, specifically in poetry, helped him in assimilating poetic imagery with the visuals of his frames. In his quest for quenching his creative thirst, he worked in diversified styles and techniques; ranging from pen and inks to oil-colours and from linear\(^2\) drawings to textured painterliness\(^3\).

However, in both the styles or techniques, the common factor is his observation of life at individual as well as collective levels. His canvas serves as a stage where he paints figures as the character of a play; often derived from religion, mythologies, history, literature of folk tales. He likes his viewer to travel along with him through history or into the mysteries of mythologies. Often he is found obsessed with his own character whom, he portrays as the heroes that the human history ever had. He comments on the very complicated ideals of self-identity and the difficult way of finding it. One my find deities, saints, scholars, warriors, scientists and other notable men from the collective past of the human beings.

On the other hand, Sadequain has a distinct feature of utilizing simple yet multifarious elements from everyday life as symbols to convey the hidden and untold meanings of life. Three of his most prominent symbols are cactus, crow and nest which serve his paintings to enhance the expression as well as the meanings. Sadequain, in general is found to be in search of truth and reality; the inner as well as the outer reality for which;

“How Sadequain’s art enacted the drama of malamat in its \textit{zahir}\(^4\) and \textit{batini}\(^5\) aspects—the coincidence and confusion of appearance and reality as awareness of truth in the definition of the self.” (Naqvi 370-71)

It is a very philosophical comment by Dr. Akbar Naqvi on Sadequain’s art but, this is how his art emerges to effect the conscious and unconscious perception of the onlooker. Many critics of Sadequain criticize him of being rude and flat in his approach towards visual expression. He is not a colourist, he does not excite the human eye with curvilinear shapes of arouse emotions through exotic rendering of human body or skin. Rather,
he likes to present what he perceives, his paintings are not beautified canvases to match the interior of the bedroom or drawing-room. On the contrary, his paintings are narratives of his perception of reality and its understanding at a very individual level what he always wants to share with others. Throughout his paintings, his focus remains on the difference between reality and illusion.

“He dealt with truth and illusion at more than an aesthetic level; he remained engaged, throughout his life, in pain and in sickness.” (Naqvi 365)

1. Symbols in Sadequain’s Painting

All the symbols he uses are actually to define and elaborate appearance and the actual reality. His symbol of cactus advocates the apparent thorny exterior of the desert plant but what he tries to portray is the softness inside it. The crow or raven, ostensibly carries the dark black colour, but a symbolic representation, the scarecrow is a symbol of captivation, horror and homelessness. The same, has been explored with the cobweb as the symbol of entrancing captivism. Sadequain, serves the needs of texture and linearity by rendering intersecting and intricate lines a cobweb, but when he puts it on or around the human figures, the meaning of losing control of ordinary things becoming idle in connection with life, start yelling at the spectator.

The symbolic representation of common and ordinary elements or birds has been in fashion in western as well as eastern tradition of painting. However, these ordinary elements coupled with their environment and cultural tradition, express different meanings in different societies. Sadequain did not import any system of symbols from popular visual culture of the west but, his emphasis is on the indigenous culture, tradition, mythologies, religions, philosophies and literature. That is why he, in many of his paintings, renders Hindu god and goddesses. Nevertheless, when he composes ordinary and everyday life elements, symbolically in his paintings, he addresses the very humanistic issues.
1.1. Cactus

For Sadequain, the cactus is a symbol for rough exterior behavior and delicate inner-self. At the same time, the cactus is a metaphor for self-centeredness and individuality with ample space for thorns of ego. During the 1960’s Sadequain seemed more obsessed with the Cactus plant.

The cactus has the quality of bearing the most unfavourable atmosphere and circumstances and keeping its shape even in the scorching heat. For Sadequain, this plant is an ideal image of sustainability and composure. People do not like, or consider, cactus as beautiful as other plants are. Same is the case with the artist’s own personality, being alone, single and issueless, he kept his composure and shape in this cruel world just like a cactus do in the vast and unpleasant desert. Surviving without water in a hostile environment and always pointing upwards, are the characteristics of cacti which Sadequain gropes in a Sufi as well.

Sadequain is inspired by the grotesque or *Malamatiyya* concept of Sufism, where apparent equanimity or beauty is sacrificed for the sake of inner purification. The cactus in Sadequain’s paintings is a true depiction of this approach where its leaves wore thorns and are in unattractive shape, but kept alive the soft and delicate inner part. This plant does not receive common attention of the populace but is very beneficial for them. The individual, in Sadequain’s symbolic expression, should be of this character. Whether he or she is accepted in the society or not, whether he or she is admired or not; the true human is who is always beneficial and harmless towards others. The endurance capacity of the cactus is more than any other leafy plant to face any weather condition, the true human being should be able to face any circumstances, advocates Sadeqain’s paintings with cactus. (Fig. 2)
The specific anatomy of Sadequain’s figures could be seen inspired by the coarse, thorny and pointed shape of the cacti leaves. As he often described it as “the triumph of life over environment.”

1.2. Cobweb

One of Sadequain’s repeated symbol is the cobweb which he implied for the stagnancy of time and worldly restrictions. As man is not free in this world, neither in the afterworld, he has been chained in unseen restraints. The whole life of an individual is actually a struggle against these margins which never let him or her think or act freely. Right from the times of birth, a man finds himself imprisoned in social, religious, cultural and ideological manacles. Sadequain’s rendering of the cobweb entirely around, or partially engaging, the human body advocate these inevitable shackles. In reaction to these restrictions, Sadequain himself lived a life of a rebellious and preferred the independence of a free wanderer over the obligations of a ruler or emperor. That is why he is also title as The King and the Fakir.

When the painter suggests the web as ubiquitous, he actually comments on the collective condition of the mankind; regardless of
gender, social condition and age. At the same time, the painter uses the symbol of the cobweb as a social realist artist who wants his people understand the malice of these unseen yet powerful strings. People in disbelief or in incredulous situation, start to give up struggle and hope, leaving themselves unmoved, physically and mentally, and even losing the wish to be liberated. The religious, social, cultural, philosophical and ethical restrictions, act like a web and in the end, the captive became partially or completely paralyzed.

Sadequain often, did not sign his paintings or drawings which also show his free and indifferent nature. However, in the art world of Pakistan, especially after his death, many fake art works have been sold in the name of Sadequain.

Figure 3. “The Webbed” (1960s) By Sadequain, Pen & Ink on Paper

1.3. Scarecrow

The crow has a significant value in myths and anthropology across the world. In fables, folk tales, mythological stories and literature, the crow has remained a symbol of various traits. In the folk literature of the Subcontinent, the Kaga⁷, in Saraiki the Kaag⁸, in Punjabi the Kaan⁹; all have been the lingual variations for the
crow in this part of the world. The Sufi poetry with Kaag, the Bhagti poetry with Kaga and the popular Punjabi poetry with Kaan has always been very expressive and suggestive.

On the other side, in the western world, the crow or raven has been mentioned in the ancient mythologies. The Greek myths suggest an associations of the raven (dark black crow) with Appolo, the god of prophecy. In Egyptian mythology, Nephtys is a known crow-goddess with many crow-gods as well. The raven is also narrated as the guardian of the dead. The irish Celtic mythology personify a Crow-goddess named as Morrigan. Same is the case with the Hindu mythology where Dhumavati the goddess of death, often related with the cremation of human bodies, is portrayed as the rider of ravens.

In the modern world, the crow carries the mysterious and horrifying enigma that many painters, filmmakers and writers have implied. the famous novel by Bapsi Sidhwa is titled as The Crow Eaters (1978), whereas, Vincent Van Gogh painted many of his canvases with crows. On a horrifying level, the famous director Alfred Hitchcock produced a horror-thriller movie The Birds (1963) with crows attacking the humans.

Sadequain, for most of the reasons mentioned above, adopted and implied the Crow as a main symbol and metaphor for his paintings, specifically during the 1960s. He actually produced a whole series of crows with personification and description of associated human characteristics.
The crow series of Sadequain is a reinforcement of the message conveyed through the Cobweb series. The human restriction portrayed in the Cobweb series, is further enhanced as an immobilization of a level where the crows started nesting, and hatching eggs at their heads. (Fig. 4).

In other words, when the human beings stop moving around (Physically or mentally), and come to a saturated point of stagnancy, the evil forces start to nest in their heads; a symbol of total submission to the foreign ideology. This sense of captivity is the same concept that Sadequain has always been a rebellion of. The spineless figures portraying human beings suggest the absence of self-realization and identity; a popular concept of modern psychology that Sigmund Freud presented in the early 20th century. In this wake, the scarecrows are painted as the captivating creatures whom the captives (Humans), start worshipping after a complete submission.
Conclusion

The symbolic and metaphorical implication of mythological elements and animals is a significant character of Sadequain’s painting; specifically, in his early period art of the 1960s. Sadequain’s paintings always carry a social, philosophical or social message as for him the painting is a way of communication rather than a mere tool of creating beauty.

One can assume Sadequain as a socio-realist painter with a strong urge to resolve human issues regarding the society he or she is living. Although Sadequain’s painting cover multifarious and multi-dimension latitudes covering literature, religion, mythology, philosophy, psychology and history etc. However, his visual language, in all of his work, is based on his skillful and scholarly use of symbols and metaphors.

Although, Sadequain has not invented any new visual symbols for his painting and mostly relied upon the clichéd emblems like cactus, cobweb, crow, nest and self-destructions, but he related all these codes to narrate the stories of people living around him. Many relate this approach of the artist with the modern artists of the 20th century who were emotionally charged and wanted to express the frenzy that they were living their life through. The mental instability and agitation and rebelliousness against the so called norms and values of society.

“Sadequain’s focus on the psychological and the emotional is a testament to the creative freedom that fashioned his mind during his illustrious lifetime. It was his mental and artistic autonomy from any creed and dogma that enabled him to create and conjure an aesthetic atmosphere akin to the one created by Van Gogh or Henri Matisse before him.” (Punj 35)

Sadequain’s paintings are the manifestation of his unrest and freedom of thought that he exercised throughout his life. The symbols discussed in this paper are only a few but strong in their literal and conceived meanings. The visual language communicate through images as symbols and metaphors as carriers of the unspoken and hidden thoughts and ideals. In a society where restrictions are imposed on expression, the symbolic approach of
artists and writers, along with imagination, start getting strong and enhanced. Sadequain lived his life in Pakistan and the years were full of turmoil and unrest with the unstable socio-economic and socio-political environment of Pakistan during the 1960s and 1970s up till the regime of Zia ul Haq in 1980s. Sadequain died in 1987, but till his last breath he painted prolifically. Although during the Zia’s regime, he more focused on the calligraphy, but his figures have remained alive even in this form of painting which was a result of the Islamization theory of Gen. Zia ul Haq. Conclusively speaking, the symbols and metaphors that Sadequain implied in his painting, mainly cover and address the human condition and the related psychological issues.

References

1. A book has been published by the title as ‘The Holy Sinner’ by the Mohatta Palace Karachi, on the life and works of Sadequain
2. Having line quality by the use of pointed mediums for drawing like pencil, pen or pointed colour brush
3. Painterliness is defined as non-linear style by Wolflin in his famous book ‘Renaissance and Baroque’. A quality of painting opposite to linear with broad brush strokes
4. External
5. Internal
7. The crow in the ancient Sanskrit language of India or the Subcontinent
8. The crow in the Saraiki language in the Southern Punjab
9. The crow in the Punjabi language in the Northern and Central parts of the Punjab
10. National painter of Netherland and a pioneering artist of the Post-impressionism who influenced the Expressionists in the 20th century
Bibliography


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