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### Stylistic Analysis of Shakir Ali's Symbolic Imagery

#### Abstract

*The significance of this study is to identify the invisible realities of Shakir Ali's symbolic imagery and to establish precise meanings of symbols used by the artist. Shakir grasped the visual essentials of his new style with its aesthetic and philosophical implications. The research employed formal and contextual analysis of Shakir's symbolic imagery using both intrinsic and extrinsic information. The development of his symbols will be analyzed on the basis of formal analysis conducting through personal interpretations. The contextual analysis is based on the work of few selected authors. Symbols in his paintings are the metaphors of his desires. Shakir Ali's art has multiple dimensions and focus of this study is to place his work in a more informed perspective. His paintings are conceived romantically and these romantic constructions lead to the mystical interpretations. The symbolic notions and visual vocabulary of his female nudes have given rise to mystical dimensions.*

#### Introduction

Shakir's work is an expression of conceptual considerations that are best articulated through symbols. Symbolism played a great role in the expression of his ideas and his psyche. This research focused on the work of Shakir Ali and use of symbols in his paintings. In order to identify inner meanings of his symbols intrinsic analysis was conducted through formal analysis of his paintings. His painting are discussed in context of extrinsic study as circumstances of his life played a major role in the development of his style. The elements of visual arts present in Shakir's paintings were analyzed; such as construction of lines, development of form, application of colours and play of light and darks. Principals of organization like harmony, rhythm, balance, unity of composition are also discussed. Shakir Ali is significant and important painter of Pakistan. He is one of the modern painters who contributed important additions to the abstract art in Pakistan. Shakir Ali appeared on the horizon of newly born nation, Pakistan, and became a source of inspiration for the young artists. Shakir Ali's art is an amalgamation of east and west. He lived in primitive and Modern times simultaneously. He got inspiration from ancient civilizations and practiced them in modern times. His paintings are his personal feelings and thoughts scattered on the canvas in the form of colours and lines. What is modern in his art is his approach to subject, his selection of colours and his abstract forms. His art is his synthesis of present and past cultures. His paintings are romantically conceived. Shakir Ali did not describe his subject directly but used symbolic connotation to something other than the apparent subject. Shakir Ali has always got inspiration from history but his personal experiences and interest in literature developed his own language of symbols. Life of the artist and his individual circumstances played a major role in the development of his style. Output is simple or sometimes a complex reaction. In case of Shakir Ali it is simple in visual and intense and complex in meaning. He wanted to create a piece of art which emerged from the recreation of personal emotional experiences in terms of line, colour, and composition. In the work of art, Symbolism signifies a synthesis of form and emotion, the artist's personal subjectivity and of reality.

### Stylistic Analysis of Shakir Ali's Symbolic Imagery

Shakir played a major role in developing the succeeding aesthetic attitudes. To understand his aesthetics and other formal means it is important to look into his contemporary trends through historical, social and cultural perspective. Shakir Ali was born in India, Rampur. He studied painting in New Delhi, at the Ukil brothers. Abanindranath Tagore taught Ukil brothers in Calcutta, therefore his influence on the work of Shakir was profound. In 1938 Shakir joined J. J. School of Arts in Bombay. There he studied under Charles Gerraed, an impressionist painter who exposed Shakir to the European movements. He got acquaintance with Jamini Roy and Amrita Sher Gill. He was also interested in wall paintings of Ajanta Caves and local Indian miniature schools, his favorite school was Kangra School of miniature painting. Kangra School flourished under Hindu Rajput's from the Punjab hill

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states showed an amalgamation of northern India and that of the Mughal style of painting. Pahari painting flourished with the support of their rulers and with a powerful influence of Mughal School of painting. The output of these schools were artists of different beliefs, cultures and ethnic backgrounds at one platform (Sirhandi 43). These schools of diverse temperament in the subcontinent helped in the development of his very personal style. In the later works of Shakir Ali the use of solid backgrounds of bright colours like red, yellow, and blue appear to be inspired by Kangra School of miniature painting.

During 1945 and 1946 he visited South India and in 1946 he joined Slade School of Art in London. He completed his diploma in fine arts and then joined the studio of Andre Lhote in Southern France. His study at the studio of Lhote was a decisive turn in his career as he got in touch with the cubist trends of France. Cubism was very influential art movement of Europe, during early twentieth century. They experimented new forms, created new techniques and put forward art theories that had profound impact on the ideas, function and value of art. After completing his diploma he enrolled at Prague with a scholarship with the help of Education Ministry, Czech. After completing his studies in textile designing in 1952, he returned Pakistan with an extensive learning in art. At Lahore, Shakir joined Mayo School of Arts as head of Art department. He was appointed principal of the National college of Arts, Lahore in 1961 (Sirhandi 43).

His work developed and matured with the passage of time. Shakir's early style of painting was cubist with heavy out lines clearly showed his influences of French cubist painters Picasso, George Braque and his teacher Lhote. His early subject matter was still life, bulls, etc. like *Still Life with Scroll*, *Still Life with Pineapple and Apple* and, *Still Life with Bottle on Table*. In late fifties his style marked a change and he started using local motifs e.g., *Figure with Cattle*, *Woman and Bull*. During 1960's he developed a mature style using abstract nudes, flowers and birds as his symbols on his canvas with bright colour background (Sirhandi 43).

An artist should be judged on the ground of the work he has produced. Shakir Ali's paintings of different phases are the "records of the development of modern painting in Pakistan" (Naqvi 74). Whatever Shakir created was a result of his ideas and intentions. He was always open to innovative thoughts. Shakir developed his style with relish and enthusiasm. He tried to explain his more personal method. He painted his pictures from his imagination and distorted his figures to reflect his emotions.

He was a modern painter of immense greatness, as modern is described as "modern is something new" (Manzoor 9), his logic and approaches were novel and self-driven. He captured the beauty and "strangeness of modern art" (Naqvi 74). He believed that modern art is the primitive of all the arts and one has to go back in time to touch its very roots. Modern artist should try to restructure a new past. "Art is not a competitive activity and questions of promotion and relegation are hardly relevant to enjoyment" (Mackintosh 60). Different artists have worked in different styles and few artists are considered better because they constantly produced work with complex ideas and intense emotions, but it is not necessary that one style is better than other.

Shakir Ali did not describe his subject directly but used symbolic connotation to something other than the apparent subject. According to Albert Aurier 'the purpose of Symbolism was "to clothe the idea in a form perceptible to the senses" or, in other words, to represent abstract and general ideas such love, hate, fear, God, in a form that could be apprehended by the senses' (Myers 464). J. E. Cirlot wrote in the introduction of his book *Dictionary of Symbols*, "Symbols are independent ideas which have existence of its own. In symbolism, everything has some meaning, everything has a purpose which at times is obvious, and at others less so, and everything leaves some trace or 'signature' which is open to investigation and interpretation (intro). For Shakir Ali image of the Altamira bison was more than a visual inference. In animal shape it was an idea of primitive brutality. Akbar Naqvi wrote in his book about Herbert Read's comment on Wilhelm Worringer's book, *Abstraction und Einfühlung* (Abstraction and Empathy) written in 1906 and published in 1908, the naturalism of primitive art is not borrowed from nature but the law conceptualized from it. In his opinion the primitive artist first conceptualized the abstract figure of the animal from which emerged the image of power and brutality of the animal. In other words, the natural form comes after the idea either abstract or decorative. In this way Worringer believed that the abstract image not only represent the strength and brutality but at the same time it is older than the Altamira caves (75). Shakir Ali painted bulls and horses to prove the force of ideas for example *Woman and Bull* and *Figures with Cattle*. Bulls, nudes and horses painted by Shakir represented "circus of Cretan origin" (Naqvi 75).

Shakir moved from cubism to Symbolism and used symbol of birds like *Women with Birds and Flowers* (Figure 1), which marked a significant turning point in his work and his work jumped into a space which became mystical and esthetic vehicle of his art and soul. "He no longer painted fearsome pictures of the bull nor did he build up his imagery with harsh geometric straight lines, arcs, and circles, but used the soft natural contours of the human figure" (Ali 118). In painting abstract design element is dominating and the body is defined with very few lines. Female figure is elongated with proportionately small head, featureless face, and tapering legs.

Shakir was a well-educated and a man of diverse exposures but was primitive and his thoughts were deeply rooted in his own culture which can be witnessed in his writings. He wrote six articles in Urdu between 1953 and 1975. It gave him the opportunity to communicate his views with his auditor. He delivered important messages at the meeting, which were recapped in an essay, *Mera Fun* published in April 1975 in *Sawera* monthly of Lahore. "Each one of us is born with a bird in him, free and unfettered, reaching out for the infinite. But owing to the prejudices of our civilization, the customs of our families and social conventions, that bird is caged and loses its notes of freedom. I am trying to find that bird" (Naqvi 75). These words indicate artist's spiritual behavior towards his work. Colours and images are imbued with symbolic connotations.

Shakir developed a mature style in 60's. His work became simple in execution and stylistic in rendering like his painting *Women with bird in cage* (Figure 2), painted in 1968, is his most celebrated and reproduced painting. Birds, flowers, and nudes were his frequently used symbols which occupy his subjective space like his *Leda and Swan I and II*, *Woman with Birds and Flowers* (Figure 1), *Yellow Woman* (Figure 3) and, *Seated Nude in Blue* (Figure 4). They are knitted together with the construction of elements of design. Akbar Naqvi recorded Shima Majid's quote "A bird sang to Shakir of the freedom of the air and sky, and he wanted to share the experience with others" (80).

This work of art, by Shakir represents the manifestation of an idea in a pure subjective way rather than its naturalistic depiction. Symbolist painters wanted to create an art which represent an emotion or idea instead of natural world in the scientific and objective manner which was embodied by Realists and Impressionists of late nineteenth century. The symbolic implication and value for the painter is his personal expression "based on the notion that the prime concern of art was not to depict, but that ideas were to be suggested by symbols, thus rejecting objectivity in favor of the subjective" (Read 316). Symbolism in a painting is as an aesthetic experience of the artist. It describes the subjective vision of painter through simple and non-representational style. In Symbolic art the images suggest the pervasive themes like affection, fear, pain, loss, sensual desires, and unanswered wishes. To express these emotions Shakir Ali used the Symbol of female, the preferred one appearing as contemplative virgins. In order to escape from reality, the Symbolists used color, form, and composition to express their subjective visions and dreams. Shakir used simple forms to express his abstract ideas. His colours are usually flat and unmodulated. His colour palette and abstract treatment of forms had a great influence on a young generation of artists, with enthusiasm to blend emotional or mystical experience with abstract forms. Here, Shakir used heavy outline and combined with simple shapes using solid areas of rich colors, "colours gained a more positive value in large flat areas than when broken up" (Gaunt 27). There is a specific sensation of pleasure, happiness and free will.

Shakir Ali always got inspiration from history but his personal experiences and interest in literature developed his own language of symbols. An art critic Hameed Zaman mentioned that Shakir was inspired by the German poet Rilke and Czech writer Fucik. Fucik's book *Report from the Gallows* had a deep influence on Shakir. Marcella Sirhandi wrote in her book about a comment of Hameed Zaman published in *Shakir Ali: Passion for Purity* that "he straight away borrowed Fucik's symbols as his own, the birds, flowers and the sun" (Sirhandi 44). Fucik's love for freedom, struggle for life, and commitment for his nation were all inspiring for Shakir. He was surprised by Fucik's strength of being able to write about birds, flowers and sun even when he was vulnerable to death sentence. Shakir believed that "these are all motives which I have liked best ever since I can remember" (Marek 113).

His later style is more distorted and exaggerated. The painting *Women with bird in cage* (Figure 2) is a square composition. A female nude standing in the center holding a yellow apple. There are two birds one sitting on the left shoulder of female is of blue colour and other in a cage with no bars is yellow. A bunch of yellow flowers is on the top left corner of the painting. He used symbols of women, bird, cage, and flower in his paintings "birds were becoming his restful mnemonic symbols along with flowers, leaves, and nudes-all of them free agents of his subjective space" (Naqvi 90). These are Shakir's symbols and knitted together in a certain design to occupy space. His nude is a type rather than an individual depicting linear rhythm and harmonious style. Line is very simple but of fundamental importance "the standing figure was like an Egyptian hieroglyph" (Naqvi 91). The birds are also delineated by the use of simple line. The figure is treated in a simple manner and there is a dramatic appearance and subtle representation, the evocative modeling conveyed the sense of roundness. The composition is vigorous and molded to express moods. The aesthetically appealing tones are used to stimulate the feelings through carefully calculated colours.

In Shakir's painting *Woman with bird in a cage* a dominant colour, red is used to convey the internalized perception of idea of loneliness. Marcella wrote in his book about Shakir that many articles have been written about him which suggest that his mother died when he was young and had a deep influence on him and pushing him into isolation and loneliness. Shakir had not one, but two failed marriages, no children, and was a victim of reproach by trusted friends (45). Shakir's use of colour dematerialize the art object and created an impressive, sensational abstraction with a vague spatial complexity. Beauty exists in the brilliance of form. Beauty lies in the harmonious elements of parts such as proportion. Pure Red colour which is also a primary colour indicates simplicity and purity. Shadows and shading is avoided. A colour seems to shine. Things are called beautiful when they are brightly coloured (medieval concept of beauty). Shakir has his own visual vocabulary.

The art of Twentieth century was abstract in nature having multiplicity in meaning, use of symbols or representative forms were criticized by the public. The traditional way of evaluating the art, in past, was on the basis of composition with appropriate placement of elements. The realistic representations with the placement of these elements with an addition of symbols were appreciated. Lines, colours and shapes were carefully composed to create an art work. "First you perceive the formal elements, then you come to love them, and then you recognize beauty because you have become capable of reasoning" (Alexandrakis 233). Beauty, the unity of the whole, is achieved through the symmetrical and rhythmical division of elements. The result is a harmonious whole.

Shakir's art expressed his lonely personality. His subject matter from life holds a pure and distilled feature of brooding in loneliness which is converted into the elements of line, colour, and form. His approach is virtuoso towards his work. His treatment of line is highly personal, not only a matter of measure. He used contrasting tones to possess weight and colour as quality. His use of basic elements of design is to construct new order in form which eventually became his subject. In the work of painters like Shakir Ali who used symbols excessively, the abstract appearance of the object could create confusion among the viewers. The recognizable objects have an existence of their own in the organic world, which a viewer could recognize, but when artist is painting it may or may not be there in his mind. He wanted to create a new order in line, colour, shape and, form and open perceptions in new dimensions.

Mystical ideas can be recognized as a major feature of modern art. Mysticism is a "metaphysical experience" (Hassan 57) of mystical or spiritual union with ultimate reality which is also known as Divine. Mysticism has a background in the ideology of east and west. It is based on the personal experience of transcendence of individual. From Symbolism to Surrealism the mystical ideas played important role. Symbolism and Mysticism both help to explore the inner reality of the self and world but there is a significant difference between the two approaches, as symbolists used symbols as their personally driven entities and Surrealists painted their daydreams and symbols to represent their subconscious mind. Paul Gauguin, the third Post-Impressionist, stimulated the modern imagination and developed "a more vigorous simplicity of style" (Gaunt 22). Gauguin was described as "Symbolist" (Gaunt 23). He evolved his individual style using strongly outlined forms and pure colours. "Another term was "Synthetism", which implied a simplification and emphasis by which the artist retained only those aspects of nature which corresponded to his own thought" (Gaunt 23).

In his painting *Yellow Woman* the nude is painted in his subjective style which is a noteworthy feature of this painting (Figure 3). Shakir's nude females are faceless with no detail of features and eventually they become his ideal references for his female representations. Although his nudes are tall and thin but rendered with sensuousness depicting their productive and fertile figures. Yellow colour of the female nude against the dark red colour background with complementary purple shadows is mystical in feeling. Ijazul Hassan in his book *Painting in Pakistan* writes about Shakir's use of symbols and forms as it possess "a mystical, devotional quality" (67). Shakir's work reveal a Neoplatonic approach in idea and form in this philosophy "the human soul reaches, up to God, not through thought, but by means of mystical inner illumination and revelation that transcends thought" (Stace 371). The Neoplatonism is a philosophical school of thought that first developed and flourished in the Greco-Roman world of late antiquity, i.e., the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup> century (Wildberg). This is also visible in his use of visual symbols of human life and subject matter. In nature, the unseen beauty is revealed through his innovative spirit. The ethereal quality of movement and passage of time, the transitory, is captured by Shakir which reveal the intangible soul. Shakir's nude has a potential to rest and ready to move, which symbolized "Aristotle's concept of potentiality which is associated with matter" (Lawhead 94). His nude is eternal and beautiful. Her soul infuses physical existence.

Plotinus believed that "beauty is found in, and springs out of the soul" (Alexandrakis). Beauty lies inside and the ability to look within oneself could make one appreciate beauty and spirituality. He believed that artist had access to the intelligible world for his process of creation. He considered this a process of learning. Plotinus believed that artist's connection with the intelligible world leads him to creativity "The true function of art is 'heuristic'; through the work of art we discover, or 'invent,' the eternal model, the idea of which sensible reality is a mere image" (Alexandrakis 233). There must be a relation of art with the eternal models of the understandable visual reality which is already there in human thought (Alexandrakis 233). Art is an inward journey, to soul and to mind, "real beauty is soul in contrast to the beauty of the sense world and the beauty of intellect and form is purer and more real" (Stern-Gillet 42).

During the course of purification the reason is neglected. The soul is at the peak of purity of spiritual level when it comes to the fundamental principles. Same is the case with the process of artistic creativity. In the process of contemplation the artists like Shakir, having Neoplatonic views, perceive the meaning of beauty in his purified soul and finds the beauty contained in himself. According to Plotinus when artist reaches this stage he is able to embody, to create a visual form to his abstract idea. Now through the process of creativity artist can convert his medium into his contemplated image. The nous created the idea and when artist completed his work, he and his creation turn out to be one and his soul experiences the light of divine. Eventually during the process of creation the artist unites with the eternal Idea or divine image. Thus according to Plotinus, the perception of art is not only a body of work but a process of the purification

of the soul. The visual world is also important for the process of creation for the artist as it is reminiscent of the prevailing spiritual world.

In art, Neoplatonic ideas have consistently prevailed. The mysticism of Neoplatonic thought is there in medieval art and their traces can be found in High Renaissance. The work of Botticelli and later period of Michael Angelo are good examples of Neoplatonic theory of transcendental entity. Mannerist of early sixteenth century also established their ideas especially in the work of Tintoretto. The mysticism of Neoplatonic is itself an abstract entity so can easily be identified as an important character of modern art. Shakir's nude females like *Yellow Woman* (Figure 3) and *Seated Nude in Blue* (Figure 4) are reminiscent of Botticelli's *Primavera*, *Birth of Venus* and Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love*. Nudes in these paintings are the presentation of purity without worldly outfits. Purity is inner beauty and inner beauty in Neoplatonic thought is divine.

Another compatibility with Neoplatonic ideas is non symmetrical composition. The important thing is the copy of the idea in the mind of the artist. So according to Plotinus important thing is that artist is not coping what he sees in nature but interested in the principle from where nature derived its form. Therefore nous became the artistic beauty as he believed that soul has a rational principle which is more beautiful than in nature (Alexandrakis 236).

### Conclusion

This research focused on the work of the Shakir Ali and use of symbols in his paintings. He frequently used female nudes, flowers and birds as his symbolic images. Shakir's nudes emerged out of his inner loneliness through the process of contemplation. Faceless nudes are not worldly but abstract images of the idea in the mind of the artist. Shakir's nudes are mystical union of idea and form. Apart from abstraction and symbolic significance there is a certain feeling of joy, happiness and freedom in the work of Shakir. The bird in the cage is free to fly but at the same time bound by the social restrictions. In modern art, abstractly applied lines or patches of colours may appear to common viewers as only feelings or emotions of the artist. But in fact these images are rational and intelligently perceived entities in the mind of the artist while he is trying to depict a specific style impressionist, cubist, etc., thus aesthetic purpose or beauty is not determined by the style of work but cognitive process of thinking and creating a form or idea of the image. Plotinus thinks that form is perceived as an idea which is abstract. This abstract idea has a certain structure because without structure it would not be possible to conceive an idea in terms of form. A work of art is an outcome of an idea in the mind of the artist and is expressed without copying the visual world. The thing which is important is idea not the subject. There is a relation in modern art and Neoplatonic thought of Plotinus, which is skillfully measured by Shakir Ali no matter the work of art may look abstract or realistic to the viewer. Thus a work of art should be a representation of the eternal model. Therefore artist should not copy the visual world but his eternal idea. In case of Shakir, he contemplated and explored himself, his soul and his mysticism, during the process of producing his idea. This process made him realize that beauty resided in his soul.



Figure 1. Women with Birds and Flowers.



Figure 2. Woman with Bird in a Cage



Figure 3. Yellow Woman



Figure 4. Seated Nude in Blue



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