

Aqsa Malik*

An Analysis of the Components of Self-Realization in Sadequain's Poetry and Paintings

Abstract

Self-realization has been an age old conceptual paradigm and echoes in almost all of the major religions mystical traditions and philosophical ideas. In an attempt to integrate man with the larger reality, the paradigm endorses an uplifting of self from a personal dimension of life towards an impersonal one. Sadequain has been one of the few painters who combined the art of painting with a vision to change man. A closer analysis of his works reveals that his intent has been to induce self-realization in the viewer. This paper explores into the theme of self-realization as used by Sadequain. It suggests that Sadequain introduced this theme in three components. The first component established a critique of morally bankrupt man, the second, provided a vision to be actualized and third defined the nature of human strength required for achieving the goal. These components are observable in his poetry and paintings and together they define the mechanism of self-realization.

Introduction

Sadequain has a distinct identity as an artist which owes to both his content and style. His art can be clearly seen as a real-time manifestation of what he thought and felt in relation to life and its adversities. We observe that he combined ideas from philosophy, mysticism and religion and then rephrased their essence in a visual form. According to Faiz Ahmad Faiz, in Sadequain's work 'one finds the elements of evolutionary philosophy put forth by modern intellectuals but the way he articulated these is a creative act of his own mind similar in spirit to life itself; untiring and continuous'.¹

The available literature briefly documents Sadequain's life and analyzes his work, however, his work has not been analyzed from a macro perspective. It is true that he has been one of the most productive painters of Pakistan but the subject matter he dealt with assigns him an incomparable identity. His themes include showing the existing man in a spiritual crisis. He showed man in a state that can be seen as a distortion of being and a lack of being. He brought to light the inner inertia of individual and society and depicted its ugliness with a sensitive eye. But then, as

* Aqsa Malik, Lecturer, College of Art & Design, University of the Punjab, Lahore.

we shall see, he also suggested a way out. His themes went on to include the success stories of man, his discoveries, his reach and his character the fullest positive sense. To bridge the contrast that he creates by showing the potential and actual reality of man, he introduced a particular kind of strength by using the cactus symbol. He communicated to the viewer that an ability to stand harsh realities, a consistent motivation is an emotional requirement to translate the human potential. The strength is then coupled with intelligence and doing, which seems to be the solution for the misery of man and society. The following text explores the components of self-realization in Sadequain's poetry and paintings.

Components of Self-Realization in Sadequain's Poetry

The theme of self-realization is clearly observable in some of his poetry. He introduces this theme in three ways. One is through a critique of man's acquired self, which speaks of his material greed and emotional bankruptcy. The second way is to make the reader realize that there is a higher degree of selfhood towards which man should strive. To communicate this, he uses philosophical ideals of progress and celebrates the strength that a human being possesses to endure a hostile environment. The three ways can be observed in his poetry. For instance, the following *rubai*:

In what situation, I am in

A terrible situation that I am in

In what contraption caught, is my heart?

In whose custody I am in?²

The *rubai* puts fourth three questions. The first two phrases establish that the human being is going through a crisis. It refers to an internal conflict that has grown to an extent that one cannot but complain. The reference to an internal conflict become clear by the second two phrases, wherein, he questions the self and its emotional process both in terms of habits and control. The villain for Sadequain is the man who is living a luxurious life with a decadent soul, and for whom his work is a mirror. He stated that the root causes of the social evils 'are the hypocritical pretensions at the foundations of our cultural milieu. We are devout of common decency because our social structure is akin to a building with a fake and fancy façade of hypocritical white wash but underneath this ostentatious façade, there stands a hollowed structure on false foundations' (Ahmad 225). In another *rubai*, he describes this situation frightful.

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

Oh, how frightful was the scene, ask not³

The above *rubai* clearly portrays the ability of an individual to see himself from the outside, which is the first requirement of self-realization and then the adjective 'frightful' implies that the observer has a higher consciousness than the observed. Sadequain therefore suggests that the existing self of the man caught in the shackles of society is not the real self and one is capable of observing the ugliness of the existing self.

The capability of the mind to observe itself and furnish a critique also suggests another reality and that is that the 'observing mind' possesses a superior parameter of what a man should be. But then he also seems to realize the difficulties involved in changing self.

How shall I alter the demands of my heart,

Whatever is in my nature, how shall I change?

I am chained to my habits,

How can I break the chain of my habits (Anwar 105)

But then Sadequain also defines man in an encouraging way and informs the reader that what man is actually capable of. In the following *rubai* he reiterates the worth of man in the cosmic order:

I am the line that shall adorn every page

I am the word etched deep into every stone

The mystery Nature has endowed me with

The secret shall I fully reveal to you⁴

There are certain views which describe Sadequain's principal motivation but the best comes from his own writing where he states his position vis-à-vis the elite of society:

Against all odds, but with determination, I am at war with dark characters of society. The struggle is not easy, but the fight goes on against the pervasive

hypocrisy that surrounds us. You may laugh at my vision, but so what, I laugh at even the lords. I dance naked in the street and I dance naked in the city square and risk ignominy. I am the embodiment of selfish needs, I am the face of evil deeds. And, when I hang at the end of the rope, still I do not give up the hope. My choked breath shakes the cross, and it opens up the mountain pass. The river of truth runs through the valley.⁵

One can infer that Sadequain includes himself as well in his critique but he adds that he realizes the ugliness and does not lose hope for a better future of man. In this respect Sadequain seems to engage the viewer on three grounds. One is to realize the weaknesses of the present self, the second is to know the ideals towards which he should survive and then third to recognize his strength and struggling nature. These three grounds build a mechanism of self-realization. Let us now examine how Sadequain achieves this in painting.

Components of Self-Realization in Sadequain's Paintings

The analysis of a painting demands an awareness about the actual circumstances in which a certain work was created.⁶ However, Sadequain was a different kind of artist. He was more inclined towards expressing the world as it appeared before his consciousness. In other words, he had a distinct emotional and intellectual disposition that gave new meanings to what he observed. Given this, an analysis of his work demands a greater understanding of his subjective disposition and appreciating a work by Sadequain means understanding the work in terms of its message. Shymala Gupta stated that 'the proper way of evaluating art is to cognize the intentions and functions of art and admire it as something meaningful.' She further said that the value of artistic creations 'lies not exclusively in their formal qualities, but essentially in their capacity to represent some visions of life, express emotions, convey messages, etc.'⁷ And, after all, 'art is an expression of the artist's emotions in the sense that it is the elucidation and articulation of the artist's emotional state'.⁸

The above discussion on his poetry reveals that the theme of self-realization consists of three components, 1) the critique of man, 2) the vision of a better man, 3) the requisite strength to achieve the vision. It is the blend of the three components that enables him to communicate his subjective disposition which demands a greater self-realization from a human being. Each component of self-realization has been focused by Sadequain.

The Critique

The following image from his Scarecrow series shows the crow nesting on the head of a man and laying eggs is a clear expression of Sadequain's approach depicting intellectual inertia.



Figure 1. Sadequain, Artist Crowned with Crow's Nest, 1968, Pen and Ink

The above painting portrays the condition of the human self of which Sadequain is a staunch critic. However, since he includes himself as well therefore he came up with this disturbing self-portrait. Sadequain presents himself as an individual whose head is the nest of a crow and hence endorses the fact that if a mind stops thinking, it becomes static to the extent that a crow can lay eggs on the head. He himself stated that such 'images convey a sense of rampant stagnation and extreme deprivation'.⁹

The crow is regarded as a symbol of death, cleverness and deception. Its nest on the head means that the mind has abandoned its natural development and has become home to deception. The eggs symbolize that the negative course of action adopted by the mind will breed new kinds of deception and hence it is in a crisis. Sadequain points out the intellectual inertia that he observed in the society and focusing on this trait is essential if one wants to communicate the need of self-realization. It is through the intellectual process that we understand reality as it is. A lack of serious thinking means that we can build our own reality which can be far removed from actual state of affairs. Moreover, the lack of serious thinking also means a lack of the power of analysis. An individual who cannot analyze cannot possibly change himself or even recognize the need to change. This amounts to a situation in which an individual is ignorant and is also unaware of the fact that he is ignorant, which means that an individual is ignorant about his ignorance. This composite ignorance is what Sadequain implies. Hassan commented on the crow series that it depicts men who have lost their spiritual vision'.¹⁰



Figure 2. Sadequain, Scarecrow Series, Oil on canvas, 1968

The scarecrow series that Sadequain painted in late 1960s can also be seen as a satire on individual. One of the paintings from the series depicts a man prostrate before a scarecrow, while, crows descending upon him nibble at the flesh. Sadequain shows that occupied with greed and lust, man is worshipping false gods, he has lost the sense of his original identity and is disconnected from reality. The posture of man portrayed shows his spiritual and moral weakness, while the crows symbolize the adversities that flow from such weakness. The man is shown oblivious of the fact that the very self for whose protection and pleasure he opted false ways is being severed.



Figure 3. Sadequain, Cobweb Series, Oil on canvas, 1969

In one of the paintings from Cobweb series Sadequain shows a man entangled in a cobweb. The cobweb can be symbolic of the various negative social trends or the internal habitual processes and desires that keep man entangled in the pursuit of limited subjective agendas. The awkward posture of the man suggests that his mode of life is painful and he is being controlled by forces he cannot understand.

The Vision

Sadequain's vision about the future of mankind revolves around enabling man to conquer the universe. This vision requires a man to upgrade himself both intellectually and emotionally. On the intellectual part he seems to value discovery and rational thinking, which enables man to conquer natural processes. On the emotional plane, it involves a transition from personal to impersonal dimension.

Historically, from the initial awareness of a cave man to the developing consciousness of man in the civilized world, rational thinking and later on scientific understanding have enabled man to understand the reality of the universe and intervene in it. Similarly, the awareness about self has also underwent many qualitative changes. Man started thinking himself more than flesh and blood and we observe a flowering of emotional needs, clearly manifest in art and aesthetic traditions. The rise of philosophy, religion and mystic thought in the early period of civilization was a result of developing consciousness about the self. Sadequain

valued the human progress and endorsed it in some of his works. For instance, in the mural *Treasures of Time*, he features various notable philosophers, poets and scientists as they are representative of emotional and intellectual progress.¹¹ All these people had one thing in common, they were not self-centered but nature-centered. Their emotional preferences were for the betterment of mankind and not for limited personal benefit. They possessed emotions that went beyond blood and flesh and embraced the whole of nature at a higher plane. They were in this sense truly free people who benefited mankind with their rational thinking, discoveries and by setting up examples of human character.

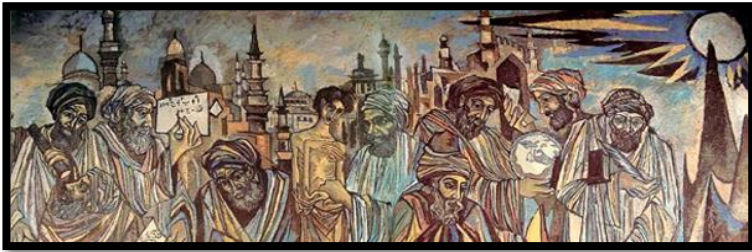


Figure 4. Sadequain, Section of the mural *Treasures of Time*, Oil on canvas, 1961

The mural shows that Sadequain had assimilated a vast knowledge fund and the diversity of characters featured shows that he selected people of wisdom without any bias of religion, creed or culture. Attaching importance to all these people means that he is looking for the common factor in these individuals, which is a higher self-consciousness.

Sadequain also, in the spirit of Allama Iqbal, assigns a central role to man in the cosmic scheme of things. In the following painting he shows a *dervish* riding the horse of time within the swirling pool of galaxies. Iqbal's couplet that occupies the lower left corner translates, 'A dervish holds the reins of time like steed, he brings sun, stars and moon to book with speed!'. Sadequain suggests to the viewer that a man of wisdom can surely intervene in the fundamental reality of the universe and alter it according to his will. This position is quite similar to the concept of *Khudi* as proposed by Allama Iqbal who said in one of his couplets that heighten your individuality to such a majesty that God himself may ask you what is your preference?

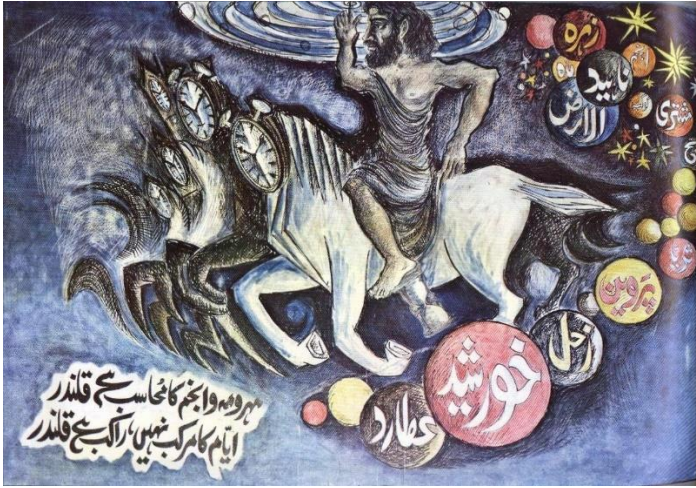


Figure 5. Sadequain, Illustration, Oil on canvas

Sadequain assigns this purpose to man but then he also informs man about the method that he must adopt to translate the vision into reality. The ceiling of Frere Hall in Karachi holds the key to the required method. In the center of the ceiling painted by Sadequain as the last major work, there appears two words '*Fikr-o-amal*'. These words endorse rational thinking and doing. Sadequain suggests that the destiny can be achieved through a combination of true knowledge and doing. He seems to imply that man needs not only a spiritual consciousness but also a practical consciousness to deal with the matters of life and modify life according to the vision.



Figure 6. Sadequain, Mural: Ceiling of Frere Hall, 1987

The Requisite Strength

The third component of self-realization involves an awareness of the strength that a human being possesses and Sadequain embodies this message in various ways. For instance, Sadequain illustrated Faiz's poem "Bol" that encourages man to speak for his rights and freedom. In the painting he has shown man in chains but holding an inkpot and pen in his hands. His mouth is open to speak but inside there is a cobweb. Crows are sitting on his fragile body. The left side of the painting features a poem by Faiz Ahmad Faiz that translates:

Speak out!
Your words are free.
Speak up!
Your tongue is still your own.
Your body remains yours
ramrod, erect.
Speak out!
Your life is still your own.

Look!
How in your smithy's forge
flames soar;
iron glows red.
How the locks
have opened yaws
and every chain
spreads out, unlinked.

The short time left to you
is still enough. Speak up!
Before the body
and its tongue give out.
Speak out!
For truth still survives
Speak out!
Say whatever you have to say!

Sadequain encourages man to speak for himself, for his greater self. He juxtaposes the existing makeup of the self with what it can become and therefore delivers a message to the viewer that even within this state of spiritual weakness, he can reclaim himself.



Figure 7. Sadequain, Illustration, Ink and water color on paper

Sadequain points out a conflict within man that arises due to the tussle between his potential and actual reality. He seems to suggest that the potential needs to be unleashed and restricting has only weakened man. The real strength lies in man's ability to claim his rights. The act of speaking for both Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Sadequain is not speaking per se but the courage that enables man to conquer the whole universe and stand against all kinds of evil. In this sense, he is suggesting an emotional revolution in man giving him an active and central role in life in which he removes obstacles of ignorance and move towards a greater realization of self.¹² The poem by Faiz is a powerful emotional communication and so is the illustration.

The theme of strength is most manifest in Sadequain's work in his symbolism of cactus. Sadequain's inspiration from cactus grew in the deserts of Sindh in 1960s. He actually developed a distinct pictorial vocabulary in which he exemplified the character of human strength. The cactus appeared to him an ideal metaphor for human spirit, which under all difficulties and against the harshest conditions of life managed to grow and come into its own. 'To Sadequain, survival of the cactus in the desert, in defiance of the harshest of conditions, is synonymous to man's struggle for life by overcoming the obstacles through his sheer determination'.¹³

In the following image, Sadequain exemplifies the strength and endurance of man by showing a metamorphoses in which a man is turning into a cactus. For

Sadequain a man starts living as soon as he recognizes himself and grows against the gravity of circumstances. The concept can be clearly found in Quran:

The one who causes this (self) to grow in purity has indeed attained success; and the one who is negligent of this (self) has indeed utterly failed.¹⁴



Figure 8. Sadequain, Metamorphosis of a Cactus, Oil on Canvas, 1976

Conclusion

The process of self-realization is a step by step discovery of human potential. It is a journey in which an individual experiences higher planes of meaning and satisfaction.¹⁵ Historically, man has grown from a crude emotional state to delicate aesthetic tastes and vision but during this process man had to cross various obstacles imposed from within and from without. In Sadequain's case we observe a reactionary stance against the obstacles imposed by social systems.¹⁶ But, he does not stop there, he further goes into the depth of self and identifies ignorance and greed as habitual processes that made man spiritually weak and devoid of vision.

Sadequain can surely be labelled as a revolutionary artist. The choice of subject matter makes him a link in the chain of great thinkers who spent their whole lives for the betterment of man and society. Sadequain understood and experienced the

ugliness of societal inertia and commented on it through his work.¹⁷ It can be proposed that a motivation to criticize social reality and eventually change it has its roots in the natural and creative process of evolution. The logic of passion is an expression of natural law of evolution; a creative force that is far greater than an individual's life span and therefore overwhelming and overpowering for the sensitive minds.¹⁸

Sadequain was not a painter of reality as we observe it, he had a subjective disposition which negated the existing trends of society and morally corrupt habits of individuals. This disposition made him to present reality in all its ugliness but then he, as a revolutionary, introduced a vision and encouraged man to pursue it with strength, intelligence and practical consciousness. He provided the components necessary for self-realization. The way he equated man with the cactus symbol came from the same sensitivity that registered the ugliness of human character in a false reality that he created out of his greed and ignorance. His approach by which he looked at man was a taunt on the societal injustice on one hand and a satire on the human condition on the other hand.¹⁹

The deep down motivation and belief in his vision is what made Sadequain a productive and consistent painter. His poetry speaks of his thought and emotions and his paintings, in their intent and implications, are reminders of a much required individual and social change. They are more than a narration as the components of self-realization, seen together, make them a strong visual argument promising man a brighter and happier future.

Bibliography

- Ahmad, Dr Salman. *The Saga of SADEQUAIN, Volume II*. San Diego: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015.
- Anwar, Ajaz. *Sadequain, the Missing Link: Art*. Lahore, Pakistan: Heritage of Pakistan, 2012.
- Cohen, Herb. *The Soul of Nature*. A Spiritual Evolution Press, 2009.
- Combs, Deidre. *The Way of Conflict: Elemental Wisdom for Resolving Disputes and Transcending Differences*. New World Library, 2011.
- Dadi, Iftikhar. *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*. Univ of North Carolina Press, 2010.
- Gupta, Shymala. *Art, Beauty and Creativity*. Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 1999.
- Hassan, Ijaz ul. *Painting in Pakistan*. Lahore: Ferozsons, 1991.
- Hofstadter, Albert, and Richard Kuhns. *Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger*. University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Robinson, Jenefer. *Deeper than Reason*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005.
- Šādiqain. *Sadequain: The Holy Sinner*. Mohatta Palace Museum in collaboration with Unilever Pakistan, 2003.
- Sirhandi, Marcella Nesom. *Contemporary Painting in Pakistan*. Lahore: Ferozsons Ltd ,Pakistan, 1992.

Zimmerman, Michael E. *Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity*. University of California Press, 1997.

Notes & References

¹ Şādiqain, *Sadequain: The Holy Sinner* (Mohatta Palace Museum in collaboration with Unilever Pakistan, 2003), 189.

² Ajaz Anwar, *Sadequain, the Missing Link: Art* (Lahore, Pakistan: Heritage of Pakistan, 2012), 55.

³ Anwar, 104.

⁴ Anwar, 102.

⁵ Dr Salman Ahmad, *The Saga of SADEQUAIN, Volume II* (San Diego: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), 183.

⁶ Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns, *Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 354.

⁷ Shymala Gupta, *Art, Beauty and Creativity* (Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 1999), 139.

⁸ Jenefer Robinson, *Deeper than Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 235.

⁹ Salman Ahmad, *The Saga of SADEQUAIN, Volume II* (San Diego: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), 196.

¹⁰ Ijaz ul Hassan, *Painting in Pakistan* (Lahore: Ferozsons, 1991), 81.

¹¹ The characters we find in the mural are Aristotle, Socrates, Plato, Archimedes, Herodotus, Sophocles, Confucius, Buddha, Galileo, Avicenna, Al-Khwarzmi, Ibn al-Hasam, Ibn al-Hayan, Farabi, Firdausi, Al-Kundi, Ibn-i Rushd, Rumi, Al-Idrees, Ibn-i Khaldun, Leonardo da Vinci, Newton, Goethe, Iqbal, Einstein, Tagore, Karl Marx, Walt Whiteman and Darwin.

¹² Deidre Combs, *The Way of Conflict: Elemental Wisdom for Resolving Disputes and Transcending Differences* (New World Library, 2011), 88.

¹³ Ahmad, *The Saga of SADEQUAIN, Volume II*, 67.

¹⁴ Al-Shams 91:9,10

¹⁵ Michael E. Zimmerman, *Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity* (University of California Press, 1997), 185.

¹⁶ Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 175.

¹⁷ Marcella Nesom Sirhandi, *Contemporary Painting in Pakistan* (Lahore: Ferozsons Ltd ,Pakistan, 1992), 59.

¹⁸ Herb Cohen, *The Soul of Nature* (A Spiritual Evolution Press, 2009), 39.

¹⁹ Şādiqain, *Sadequain*, 62.