

Sumera Jawad\* Nadeem Alam\*\*

***An Application of the Theory of Deconstruction by Derrida on Talism-e Hoshruha: a Famous Painting by Ustad Allah Bakhsh***

Abstract

*The term Deconstruction by the French theoretician Jacques Derrida has gained enormous attraction in the field of literary criticism. This revolutionary theory has challenged many clichéd ideals in criticism, be it literary or artistic criticism, in the twentieth century. Like literature, Deconstruction confronts the already established rules and standards associated with the meaning, understanding and discussion of and about art. Application of theory of Deconstruction on the western art is relatively a new concept adopted precisely in the latter half of twentieth century. Art produced by South Asian artists, has gone through many established sets of rules, that have been highlighted by many local and foreign critics and historians, time and again. However, application of theory of Deconstruction on a painting by a Pakistani artist is something new in art criticism. This study investigates and explores one of the famous figurative paintings, Talism-e Hoshruha, (magic that can blow senses away) by Ustad Allah Bakhsh. This study looks on to this artwork in connection with binary opposites as proposed by Derrida, and might have been practiced, intentionally or unintentionally, by the painter. This painting was rendered in 1935, and this investigation aims not only at the visual connotations implied in the painting, but also tries to unfold the ideological and cultural approach of the artist, concerning mythological beliefs of his surroundings.*

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\* Sumera Jawad, Professor, Principal, College of Art and Design, university of the Punjab, Lahore

\*\* Nadeem Alam, Lecturer, Art History, College of Art and Design, university of the Punjab, Lahore

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Figure 1 "*Talism-e Hoshruha*" (1935)  
By Ustad Allah Bakhsh  
Oil on canvas. 60x73.7 Inch  
Collection of Lahore Museum, Pakistan

#### An Introduction to Twentieth Century Art and the Painting Style of Allah Bakhsh

Art is considered as a reflection of society and its collective thoughts. Every form of art, directly interpret the social, political, economic, anthropological and above all, the psychological state of the individual, as well as the society around, in an elaborated way.

“Art and society are two interrelating, yet opposing collective entities, which cannot operate independently of one another.”  
(Anushirvani and Foroozani 89)

The artist, naturally reacts to the social and psychological demands of his or her surroundings and, at the same time, to the calling of self-satisfying need for expression. Therefore, when an art piece is analyzed, it cannot be studied at its own. In the traditional art forms, if we investigate painting only; the religious and the anarchist subject matter have been prevalent for artists to communicate through; instead of the natural thinking and personal ideals.

However, with the advent of twentieth-century ideals based on new psychological findings significantly by Sigmund Freud, the individual and personal approach received much-deserved acceptance in all forms of expression and arts, including painting. That is why the early decades of western painting are characterized by contemporary trends like

Cubism, Dadaism, Expressionism and Surrealism; These modern approaches in art, deconstructed the traditional methods, techniques and ideals towards painting or art.

For example, the perception of reality was challenged by the Cubist artists, in particular, Pablo Picasso. The Cubists style painting the method of presenting objects was changed under the concept of seeing anything from diverse view-points.

“To the naive observer, Cubist paintings contain geometrical forms in which familiar objects are hardly recognizable, even in the presence of a meaningful title. In Cubist artworks, objects are broken up, analyzed, and reassembled to produce abstracted forms, which often depict the same objects from different viewing points.”  
(Shamimura and Palmer 348)

On the other hand, the Dadaists reacted to the killings of World War-I and expanded the parameters of art; stretching from the optical values concerning principles of beauty to the pivotal significance of idea or concept. There, for the first time, a Urinal Pot was labelled and exhibited as ‘Fountain’<sup>1</sup>.

The following few years marked the significance of purity of expression and compromised the form for spontaneity and dynamism. The individualism, with the advent of the twentieth century, challenged the traditional painting style. After Cubism and Dadaism, emerged Expressionism where one could clearly feel the visual presence of binary opposites, specifically if compared with the realistic canon of the 19<sup>th</sup> century western art.

“Early modern art, particularly abstraction and expressionism, had been successfully utilised by both left-, and right-wing regimes to represent alternately idealistic or degenerate art.”  
(Meecham and Sheldon 149)

This approach, further explored the unintentional imagination and, a more complicated version of reality that might reveal in dreams; a more psychological connotation of subjective reality addressed by the Surrealists. However, these short-lived styles or movements could only survive until the next great conflict, the World War-II. After which, the new concepts of visuals were intermingled by the dynamism of pop-art, op art and word-art.

The influence of western theories affected the South Asian art scenario through the Colonial period artists, and also by the Anglo-vernacular education system implied by the British Raj, here in this part of the world.

Ustad Allah Bakhsh, before being established as an artist of importance, used to copy the works of the western master painters. Many of his early paintings are found as mimicry of notable European painters such as Eugene Delacroix. This practice in the long run, proved quite beneficial for Allah Bakhsh as he overcame the issues like implying naturalistic colours and composing formidable frames. It also helped the master to specialize in the challenging art of rendering human figures with accurate anatomy and detailed fauna and flora as the backdrop.

At the same time, the rehearsal, or the repetition of replicating the famous European paintings, intentionally or unintentionally, introduced western techniques and style to the local Ustad<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, his working experience with some theatrical companies in Mumbai and the commissioned work for religious Hindu community, drove him to explore mythological figures associated with the Hindu and Jain beliefs.

“So. in 1914 he [Allah Bakhsh] left for Bombay and there he was able to get a chance to work with an artist Muhammad Rafi, who was running an art studio with some apprentices in the employment of Hindu businessman, Lala Ram Lal.

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<sup>1</sup> Fountain is a readymade sculpture by Marcel Duchamp exhibited in 1917, consisting of a porcelain urinal signed as "R. Mutt".

<sup>2</sup> The Urdu synonym for the Master

They were engaged in painting Hindu religious and mythological pictures mostly of Krishna. He also worked there as photographer, retoucher, portrait and landscape painter.”  
(Chaudhry 248)

Western influences in technique, and exposure to the mythological figures proved a supreme blend for Allah Bukhsh to practice modernism in his paintings. His landscape paintings are a great example of modern and realistic rendering but his figurative paintings also advocate the same approach, even on a higher level. The folk topics and pastoral life have been a favoured topic for Ustad Allah Baksh. Heer Ranjha<sup>3</sup> and Sohni<sup>4</sup> are few of his masterpieces.

As mentioned earlier, Allah Bakhsh’s stay at Bombay and interaction with the Hindu Mythology, exposed his talent to capture the colours and shades of a mysterious atmosphere. *Talism-e Hoshruha* is an unparalleled piece of work by the great master. This one painting alone, could be discussed and analyzed in numerous ways. Earlier, it has been examined but not in any methodical way. This research tries to investigate the apparent and concealed elements and visual characteristics of this painting under the alienated approach of binary opposites associated to the Deconstruction theory by Derrida.

*Talism-e Hoshruha* (1935), by Ustad Allah Baksh

This painting by Allah Bakhsh, as the name suggests, presents a fairytale-like scene composed in a circular setting with enchanting images of gods, goddesses, demons, devils and humans, clustered at an imaginary and mythological space somewhere not on this earth. The red, purple, blue and green colours have been used to create a non-existing atmosphere suitable for the subject.

*Talism-e Hoshruha* is a magical fantasy written in Urdu language by Muhammad Hussain Jah in 1880-90. This Urdu version is actually a translation of an Arabic legendary tale *Amir Hamza-e Sahibqaran*, about the mysterious and mythical adventures of Amir Hamza. Historically, Amir Hamza was the youngest uncle of the prophet Muhammad, who was martyred in the battle of *Uhd*, by a black assassin hired by Hinda, the wife of Umayyad chief Abu Sufiyan.

This long story has many unbelievable scenes, adventures and characters including the all famous Umru Ayyar<sup>5</sup>. The painting by Allah Bakhsh is an adaptation of that story.

Being an adapted or illustrated work, to explain the already established scene, this painting is a carrier of some images that have been previously defined and crafted through text or language. As a written and narrated story, the *Talism-e Hoshruha* scenes have been created through various words; metaphors and similes.

Derrida’s Theory of Deconstruction and the Painting *Talism-e Hoshruha*

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) is a French philosopher best known for his approach of Deconstruction to understand the relationship between text and meaning. Primarily, this approach deals with written text, comprised of words, and the meanings carried by the text. However, the system of binary opposites that Derrida uses for the text, commonly known as Deconstruction, can also be applied on visuals or the visual language.

Keeping in view the linkage between the text-language and the visual-language, one could find common elements to deconstruct a painting in terms of its colours, lines, presented characters, encompassed concepts and even the frame or composition. Since, the quest, or the inability of finding truth through words or text has been analyzed through a

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<sup>3</sup> A famous folk love-story of Punjab

<sup>4</sup> Sohni Mahiwal, another folk love-story of Punjab

<sup>5</sup> A mischievous character popular in stories for children

system of binary opposites within the text, the same could be utilized by applying the identical method on any piece of art. The comparison of colours, figures, characters, and the depicted elements could be evaluated pictorially.

“...there is no more reason to attribute such a view to Derrida. The opposition between the two poles of Deconstruction is between the affirmative and the negative; the saddened and the joyous; guilt and innocence. Both rest on the collapse of immediacy, the impossibility of finding truth.”  
(Stocke)

In this particular case, Allah Bakhsh, at first place, might have deconstructed the verbal imagery into the visual one. However, here if one could apply the Derrida’s theory of Deconstruction, the meaning of art and the placement of a piece of art, like painting, can also be challenged. Since Deconstruction focuses on the indeterminacy of a word to carry the actual and absolute meaning of anything, and in language opposite meaning words or technically speaking the binary opposites, always creating a comparison to communicate certain meaning that the writer assumes.

“We assume, by the miracle of art, the ‘presence of the word’ is equivalent to the presence of meaning. But the opposite can also be urged, that the word carries with it a certain absence or indeterminacy of meaning.” (Hartman vii)

If this is the case, then the painting *Talism-e Hoshruha*, is a result of the individual perception of the artist (Allah Bakhsh), caused by the story-telling skills of the author of the story (Muhammad Hussain Jah).

Therefore, the meaning of a certain scene, in this case a mythological scene painted by Allah Baksh, reached the mind of the painter through narrated words. Hence, according to Jacques Derrida’s concept of Deconstruction, words are not ultimate carriers of absolute meanings, the imagery that intrigued Allah Baksh’s imagination would be very personal, individual and subjective.

If another artist listened to or read about the very same scene of this story, and then he or she would try to recreate the image through a painting, that painting or its symbols might well be on a different scale and frequency.

Let us now examine this painting directly under the Deconstruction theory without caring about its inspiration or literary influences or adaptations.

#### Deconstruction of the Colour Palette

The painting seems a picturesque surface with red, blue, purples and green tinges covering a very balanced and semi-circular composition. The most obvious binary opposites are traced as red opposite to blue and green to yellow.

Where, the red colour represents the dynamism created by or through energy and emotional value. On the other hand, red colour is always visible among other shades and creates a shimmering effect of movement within the frame. Moreover, in the South Asian traditions and associated myths, red colour advocates; sentiments and emotional linkage being the colour of earth. That is one reason, the bridal dress in the sub-continent, still bear red shades or tinges.

The blue, on the other side, is the colour of vastness. Nevertheless, Lord Krishna, in the visual history of the subcontinent, has consistently been presented in blue colour. The Rajput as well as the Pahari miniature traditions have always attributed blue colour to the spiritual vast and encompassment of the lord Krishna.

In these paintings, the love of Radha<sup>6</sup>, Meera<sup>7</sup> or other *gopis*<sup>8</sup>, is often epitomized through their red dresses opposite to the blue-skin Krishna. In this socio-religious context, the red and the blue colours could well be referred as

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<sup>6</sup> The ever-loving mythological courtesan of lord Krishna

<sup>7</sup> The other beloved of lord Krishna, believed to be a real and historical character

emotional, sensuous, mythical as well as the spiritual subsequently. However, if the geographical context is removed or changed, would the connotation by red and blue colour be the same? The answer in this case is no.

Every colour or shade, furthermore, the symbols or visual connotations, contextualize or advocate certain thoughts, which are strongly enrooted in those lands, traditions, religious practices, mythological characters and the centuries old personal and collective psychology.

Therefore, the colour pallet of the painting *Talim-e Hshrubā*, could be decoded in a different way in diverse cultures, or geographical entities. Thus, the theory of Deconstruction, when applied on it speaks off assorted elements, rather than a universal or absolute meaning.

Ustad Allah Bakhsh is known for a naturalistic and indigenous colour pallet in his landscape paintings. However, this particular painting is much more dynamic and luminescent in its range of colours and shades.

#### Binary Opposites: Gods, Goddesses and the Demons

After the analysis of colour pallet, the binary opposites of the Deconstruction theory could be found in this painting by looking at the various groups of characters. The right side of the frame has been clustered by the good spirited gods, goddesses and their noble-looking followers.

The goddess in the center of the composition has been portrayed as the central and pivotal figure with a large halo of light behind. The goddess is holding the head of an executed demon in right hand and a sword in the left one. The right hand and the left hand are the binary opposites themselves and further, the demon's head and a kind of righteous sword are the other set of binary opposites.

Moreover, the goddess and the group of righteous people represent the good, opposing the ludicrous looking group of evil characters, led by a large-faced demon. This group of gross-looking characters, is another connotation of presenting a contrast of good and bad. This is another example of binary opposites in Derrida's point of view.

In addition to that, the characters on the right side of the frame have been rendered with an upright and more stable standing or sitting postures as compared to that of the characters on the left side. The characters on the left side, seem submissive and disappointed by the grimy and saddened kinesics and facial expressions.

#### CONCLUSION

As theory of Deconstruction by Jacques Derrida observes various phenomena in binary opposition. Basically, this theory deals with the text and relevant meanings and associated conflicts. However, the visual language does carry binary opposites as part of a frame collectively.

By applying the method of Deconstruction theory, one can decipher the covered, folded or metaphorically concealed meanings. The painting *Talim-e Hoshrubā*, by Ustad Allah Bakhsh has been interpreted in a relatively different manner by applying the theory of Deconstruction.

There are two groups of supernatural characters in the above-mentioned painting, one is good and decent while the other one is wicked and bad, representing simultaneously the noble and evil shades of this world.

On the other hand, there are binary opposites of colours as well, such as red and blue. Red not only represents emotions and feelings but as well as the colour of earth. Blue, on the other hand, is the colour of tranquility and serenity. Moreover, it signifies the sky. Earth and sky could be considered as binary opposites.

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<sup>8</sup> Literally meaning the milkmaids, courtesans of lord Krishna in his youth period

*Talism-e Hoshruha* (1935), by Ustad Allah Baksh depicts gods, goddesses and demons. Together with the Hindu mythology, one can infer these as Greek mythological characters as well. Where noble gods represent an abstract virtue while, on the other hand, evil demons signify vices. As these vices and virtues are prevalent in our society, and we worship god of wealth, and goddess of beauty. Every person adores such unseen gods and goddesses in their lives. Following Age of Renaissance, there is lust for power, wealth, beauty and knowledge. On these lines, this painting present social, anthropological and psychological contrast as well; the binary opposites discussed and mentioned by Jacques Derrida.

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