

Sadequain: Conceptions and Misconceptions

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Abstract

Syed Sadequain Ahmed Naqvi (1930-1987) is considered one of the greatest artists of Pakistan. His multifaceted art remains unsurpassed in the first decade of the twenty-first century. He was a fine draftsman, a prolific calligrapher, a passionate painter and a veritable poet. In all these genres, he searched for a hidden truth, which he called reality of life. Many writers and historians have attempted to understand his concept of reality and his position as a fine artist, however, there is a need to analyze and develop a clear understanding of conceptions and misconceptions.

This study explores some of the common conceptions and misconceptions about the art of Sadequain. It will also interpret Sadequain's artistic style through formal and contextual analysis, so that a clear understanding of his art can be developed.

The term conception and misconception is being used here hypothetically. It suggests the way people take and understand it in their day to day life. I am deriving these terms from the word "concept," which means definitions one holds about him or others.

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Basically it suggests a general system of thoughts and concepts through which one develops his or her thoughts and conceptions. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, the general system of concepts refers to “the outstanding elements of our everyday conceptual scheme include spatial and temporal relations between events and enduring objects, causal relations, other persons, meaning bearing, utterances of others and so on.” It further states, “to see the world as containing such things is to share this much of our conceptual scheme.”(1)

Focusing mainly on the concepts and misconceptions which have been developed over the years about the artist and his art, the study aims at to explore those concepts which are usually assimilated with Sadequain and his artistic style in its entirety. In several articles or public speeches, Pakistani artists, art historians, critics, writers, political activists and government authorities have shared their concepts about Sadequain and his art. There are three major conceptions which are being dealt here: 1) Sadequain’s status as a national artist, 2) Sadequain’s mystic approach towards his artworks 3) and traces of Expressionism in the art of Sadequain.

Sadequain was born in Amroha (Uttar Pradesh) India. He gained most of his education in India, focusing mainly on languages and Islamic education. His formal training in the field of fine arts is uncertain. It is believed that he was a self-taught artist and had no formal training. (2)

After conducting an interview with Sadequain's nephew, Salman Ahamad Naqvi, Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali maintains:

“While the nature of early visual arts training remains uncertain, Sadequain's upbringing within the cultural world of UP *ashraaf*, where he probably received an education in the Quranic tradition, Urdu literature, and possibly also in some Persian and Arabic....”(3)

Marcella Nesom Sirhandi also comments his family background, maintaining that Sadequain adopted his family profession to scribe Quran and had been copyist for All India Radio. She also mentions another source of Sadequain's income, to paint Anti-British slogans on the walls, draw maps and illustrate books in his leisure time. (4) This information is very important to understand Sadequain's attitude towards art, it sheds light on his sense of freedom from the British dictatorship and it provides him an artistic path to work on his remaining life. This exercise was also ideal and fundamental to establish him a deep thinker and prolific artist. He learned to remain close to the realities of life and condemned the overpowering elements of his society and culture. Unfortunately, the realities of life, which Sadequain encountered, were quite bitter. The dictatorship of British and Hindus produced a humiliated person, growing out of the pessimism of his surroundings. Sadequain grew as a bleeding and traumatized artist, who tried to explore the darkness of his inner-self and found it crumbling all around his society. The personality of the artist

developed out of such realities which were painful and throbbing. His anguish spread over large size canvases and walls generating enormous amount of work, one could hardly think of.

In 1950 Sadequain came to Karachi from India. At the age of twenty he gradually started painting in a naturalistic manner; *Hard Earned Rest* and *The worker* (1953) are the best examples of this early period. He was a passionate artist, who worked day and night, which eventually produced an enormous amount of work. Even in his early years of professional life, he exhibited several one-man shows, including a show at the Prime Minister's residence at Quetta, Frere Hall, Karachi and Mangla Dam. It was his strong passion and unrest desire to draw and paint that he started to be known as one of the greatest artists of Pakistan. With the tremendous support from the Prime Minister of Pakistan, S. H. Suhrawardy, Sadequain's popularity grew in government institutions as well as in the bureaucracy. Ultimately, his dedication and perseverance honored him with one of the most privileged awards, "Tamgha-I Imtiaz," by the president of Pakistan, Ayub Khan, and another award "Pride of Performance" (1962). President Field Marshal Ayub Khan looked at his art as a proclamation of hope and promise, a kind of enterprise which endures hope for good future and promise for modern revolution in the country.(5)

Sadquain continued working hard and exhibiting his work wherever he found scope. He secured first prize in All Pakistan

Exhibition of Painting. All such achievements secured honor, recognition and popularity of the artist in the country. It was the high time to decide to expand recognition abroad at international level. Sadequain left for Paris and exhibited his work there. In Paris, at the French Biennale, Sadequain was recognized as the *Laureate* winner for the artists under thirty-five. It was considered an important acknowledgement of a Pakistani artist. He also visited several other European countries and exhibited his artworks there. In 1963, he visited USA and boosted his artistic vision with fresh inspiration, as it was the time when New York artists were experimenting with new techniques and ideas and had gained privileged position in the international art scene. Sadequain restated many western themes in his art, such as *The Last Supper*, *Crucifixion*, *Europa* and *Bull* and *The Ecstasy* etc.

Along with such western themes, Sadequain worked on a variety of local subjects as well. A large amount of his works explored the troubles and evils of the society. His sensitivity grew much stronger when he stayed at Gadani beach near Karachi. Sadequain evolved some very personal symbols here, which he has repeatedly used in his paintings. Meditating the thorny wild cactus he discovered the secret of human miseries. According to Sirhandi, “his pictorial style, personal symbols and content were a cumulative evolution that had begun in 1958, when he had retreated to Gadani, where he lived alone for months, painting sea shore and cacti...intrigued by the effects of light and moving shadows, he visualized and painted imaginary roots shooting up to the sky and depicted them as beams giving off and taking in energy.”(6)

Sirhandi interprets that Sadequain developed his personal philosophy out of this cactus land, saying that these cacti “symbolizes the triumph of life over the environment,”(7) therefore, “I used to identify it with my own self. Then I started identifying with the whole community.”(8)

His fascination to this cactus imagery grew so much that he started to apply it to calligraphy and many other figure compositions. Not only this he also took Kufic form and applied it to the calligraphy and to the figure compositions. While his cacti imagery was more complex, rough and jagged and to some extent anthropomorphic in its general outlook; his Kufic inspiration produced more geometric and abstract art which was mainly based on shapes coupled with sharp angular lines.

Another interesting imagery he integrated in his paintings and drawings was the use of crow. He executed a series of drawings and paintings representing crows and their nests sitting on the heads of a man or a women. S. Amjad Ali suggests that by using this symbol, “he expressed his deep sorrow at the decadence and degeneration of life in his country.”(9) Akbar Naqvi takes another angle of this imagery stating that “this simple emblematic device enabled Sadequain to express what man’s mind can hatch.”(10) His scarecrow series embodies completely different meaning. Here man is shown worshipping these scarecrows. Representation of crows in such drawings is crows are shown here as the protector of mankind or in other words guardian of humankind. The connotations are again negative, suggesting a paradox between a

real and arbitrary guardian. For Sadequain man's struggle is no more different than a cobweb. He made another series of drawings and paintings revolving around this imagery, in which a man or group of people is shown surrendered and relinquished within a complicated cobweb.

Sadequain is best known for his large scale murals. His *War and Peace* at Karachi, *The Saga of Labor*, at Mangla Dam and *Quest for Knowledge*, are amongst the most excellent murals. His murals clearly convey some sort of moral message, pain and miseries of the artist and his society. Sadequain's art works clearly embody some of the social problem of his society. He worked restlessly to create hundreds of artworks, which are good enough to confirm his national identity. Unfortunately, national artist of Pakistan, as suggested by some writers, is very little known as a national artist.

Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali takes the issue of Sadequain's national identity in her article entitled Sadequain: "The Making and Unmaking of the National Artist." In one of the opening statements of this article Fazila-Yacooali maintains:

Thus, when I speak of the 'national,' I do not simply mean his receiving of state sponsored national awards like Tamgha-e-Intiaz, or of being institutionalized as such through state-funded galleries dedicated to him in Karachi (Frere Hall), Lahore (Lahore Museum) and Islamabad (National

Art Gallery). While they have certainly contributed status amongst visual artists in Pakistan, they conceal Sadequain's wider appeal, as well as his ability to represent the contested and troubled nature of what ought to be considered as 'national' in Pakistan. (11)

Defending Sadequain's status as a national artist, she further states that she is going "to examine the contours of this controversy..."(12) This statement alludes to a controversy which actually exists. A survey conducted in 2006 showed that hardly five percent people of the educated community knew about Sadequain and only one or even less than one percent of them have clear understanding of his art.(13) There were quite a few people who were willing to accept him as a national artist. However, many of them accepted him a modern artist. The results showed that Sadequain is best known for his calligraphy rather than paintings and drawings, and he is better known in the art circle rather than amongst the people for whom Sadequain thought he lived, and felt their pains and sufferings. Sadequain's pessimistic approach was not welcomed by the people. They disliked his cactus, crows, cobweb and headless figures. They found these images divorced from their own reality, which were throbbing endlessly in the mind of the artist, instigating extreme pain. Generally, it is believed that he is not the one who can be considered a national artist because he failed to depict his own

culture and society. His nude figures were another deviation from the mind's setup of people.

Sadequain's art imposes a sense of anguish in the evolution of physical stature of the subject. His figures seem to be filled with gluttony due to their feeble and distorted pouches of fat and swollen limbs. His corrupted and despoiled reality could not make its way in the heart of the people and national artist of Pakistan remained remote to his nationals. National artist Sadequain spoke a language which was not much communicable to his people. There is another obstacle in his communication and that is the emphasis on the darker side of his art. He always looked at pains and miseries, ignoring the element of hope. A nation will die if it no longer holds a strong sense of hope and is not optimistic about its future.

Another concept which is variously applied to the art of Sadequain is his mystic approach. Since the notion of mysticism is one of the most difficult concepts, and could be understood variously, therefore, each writer has adopted different views to understand the mysticism in the art of Sadequain. He himself called his art "mystic" which encapsulates man's struggle against evil forces. Sirhandi relates Sadequain's mystic approach with the Hindu concept of Maya, "the veil of illusion that deceives one's perception of the world."(14)

That means what is being represented in the art of Sadequain is not the truth itself but the truth is actually hidden underneath the surface, in other words Maya points to the disguised reality and truth. Akbar Naqvi in his "Image and Identity" suggests that

Sadequain “painted and spoke on his art from within its traditional poetic and Sufi tradition.”(15)

Elaborating on the Sufism of Sadequain, Naqvi maintains: He was principally interested in himself and his responsibility to his ego.(16) With all the signs of *Tasawwuf*, in his words, speech, and way of life, he did not forsake his ego for the self—an adventure a Sufi knows to be the only path of Divine Love. He did not seek the space and light of the transcendent. On the contrary, he looked for enlightenment in this very world and its darkness. Masks were as much truths as lies about his self: which was the veil and which reality? (17)

Naqvi derives Sadequain’s mysticism out of his Sufism. He also looks at the egoistic approach towards art by saying that “the charade played by the mystics between appearance and reality was also played out in Sadequain’s art as manifestation of his ego. He dealt with truth and illusion at more than an aesthetic level; he remained engaged, throughout his life in pain and in sickness with this mystery.” (18) In this statement he talks about Sadequain’s mysticism, which he suggests derived from his egoism rather than aesthetic sensibilities of artistic skills. Here he seems to be very much concerned with the psychological perspective of the artist, which helps him to organize his experiences from the depths of his inner self. This is how Sadequain benefited from “the advantages and opportunities of individuation, which is strategy of making ‘contact with deeper layers of the unconscious.’ (19)

Laleh Bakhtiar further explicates this level of Sufism:

The Sufi, through creative expression, remembers and invokes the Divine order as it resides in a hidden state within all forms. To remember and to invoke, in this sense, are the same: to act on a form so that which is within may become known. The Sufi thus re-enacts the process of creation whereby the Divine came from to know itself. The receptacle in which the creation is reenacted may be an external form such as an artifact, or it may be life form of the mystic which is transformed. Here the very soul of the Sufi-to-be reaches towards the Divine center through the Mystic Quest. (20)

Here Bakhtiar speaks about process of creation, which is similar to the divine act and due to this reason, Mystic. If a Mystic quest of a Sufi is similar to a divine act then how can Sadequain's art or creative process can be considered Mystic and derivation of Sufi tradition? Not only this Sufi "recognize[s] both the immanence and the transcendent of God at once and the same time, and expresses this in [his doctrine]. At the same time as God is immanent, God is absolutely transcendent.... God is above every form, thought or thing in the universe...."(21) According to this statement the Mystic path can only be recognized through spiritual instincts and perceptions, which is result of profound dualities, such as, spiritual and intellectual, hidden and visible as well as known and unknown. A mystic path therefore is not only about the tortured realities, politics and corruptions of the society, which one sees in the art of Sadequain but also a self which gathers all the

multiplicities into unity, so that one “integrates all aspects of self into a centre.”(22) Bakhtiar draws upon the Sufi’s journey from being to becoming in these words: “the journey begins with withdrawal from the material world in which one is drowned. To go from multiplicity-in- unity to unity-in-multiplicity, one must first die to self: not a biological death but a spiritual one, where the soul dies, and by dying is transformed, and then return to this material world.”(23) This statement suggests that mysticism is achieved by maintaining a harmony between seen and unseen. It is this balance and harmony which is fundamental to everything, such as religion, society, moral and ethic. Sadequain on the contrary seeks mystic through immorality. He worked “with the knowledge of the self and awareness of physical and psychological inadequacies.” (24) He describes his art in these words, “I admit I am grotesque. I paint ugly things because in ugliness, in grotesqueness, in immorality, I seek truth. People ask why I don’t paint flowers and butterflies. I tell them that I am after reality. I am not a drawing-room artist. I am a painter of the dustbin, of the gutter.” (25) In another interview Sadquain repeated, “When I paint with grotesque forms, it is just a question of what inspires me. A beautiful porcelain vase on a lovely table is not my source of inspiration. But if I see someone who is struggling to find food in a dustbin, so that he can eat the sigh of relief when the man finds the morsel is my source of inspiration, in short I am not an artist of the drawing room but of the dustbin!”(26)

These statements suggest that Sadequain consciously avoided the mystic approach. His art captures a ceaseless clash between ones natural and rational aptitude. There is a conflict between nature and man which never resolves. In order to walk on a Sufi path, artists should be retired from his self and depart the world of senses and act impartially. As a matter of fact, mysticism does not allow one to divorce the dignity of self, therefore mystic art could represent something extremely painful but at the same time should not create an awareness of ones limitations of perceptual and conceptual abilities. On the contrary a mystic act should create a balance between the limits of ones imagination and at the same time limits of his/her power of apprehension.

In order to understand the mystic, there is a need to understand the balance between external and internal world, which is actually the balance between nature and the limitations of a human being. As a human being one is delighted in sensuously infinite powers of nature because it is possible to think in imagination which senses can no longer perceive and apprehend. Imagination as a supreme being enjoys the realm of appearances because it is simply a sensuous faculty. But when Sadequain thought about nature as something overpowering on his sensuous faculties, he let it command as a supreme power. He showed as if man is in the hands of nature and it is actually the nature which can grow grotesquely. In Sadequain's art nature is overwhelmingly controlling man's fate as well as his power of will.

Consequently, man seems to be controlled by the evil forces, even his will is imprisoned in the hands of vices. Desperately, power of vices is overwhelmingly controlling man and his will, which is obviously contrary to a mystic quest. In a mystic quest will stands free and boundless in order to unite with the absolute truth, i.e. divinity. According to Naqvi: “He [Sadequain] chose the pain and agony of growth into selfhood, diabolism in man rather than the beguiling beauty and sublimity of nature.... (27) A realm, which is grotesque, unpleasant and in many ways painful can not be comprehended as the mystic and sublime at its fullest. The sacred and profane art towards which Sadequain alluded clearly consumed the element of decline in national sense. The mysticism of Sadequain is usually viewed as a horrorism of distorted figurative art.

The fact of the matter is, Sadequain’s national identity and mysticism is misunderstood and misinterpreted. These are the misconceptions about the art of Sadequain. The question then arises, if Sadequain is misunderstood as a national artist and his art does not qualify the codes of Mystic then how can one understand his art? The best way to understand Sadequain’s art is to analyze his statements carefully and interpret his art in the light of his own perception. His drawings, paintings, calligraphy and poetry are the reflections of the artist’s self. He had variously stated that “I don’t believe the purpose of art is to entertain.” (28) He proclaimed “the relationship between man and nature is one of action and reaction.

In this process man acquires greater control over the forces of nature and thus these hostile forces are being tamed by man.” (29) He sees an artist is very much alienated with his art and the range of stimulus scattered around him.. His men and women are representative of human desires and sufferings. They are not symbol of hope; therefore cannot be considered national heroes. They are corrupt and distorted people with annihilated will. Proclaiming that they are laborers, and hardworking people can not make them great heroes. It is basically the form which is hallmark of their condemned self.

His statements combined with his art works sheds light on some of the common characteristics Expressionist shared. The term Expressionism evolved out of the uniquely personal and strongly inner vision of the artist. (30) Expressionist artists entirely focused on their emotions and feelings disregarding the true or in other words realistic rendering of the empirical world. Expressionist revolted against the blind copy of outward appearances and listened to the inner voices and strong emotional reactions against the visual perception. According to *The Praeger Picture Encyclopedia of Art*, “ the greater the tension between an artists inner vision and the world around him, the stronger his emotional reaction against the thing seen and his desire to transmute it, the more easily ‘the way I see it’ will become ‘the way I experience it.’ At this point the creative activity will have been given a new purpose which is no longer concerned with recording external impressions but with giving expression to an

inner state of mind.” (31) Formal analysis of Sadequain’s art reflects that his art goes beyond process of seeing and enters in the process of experiencing. This experience appears as a self-expression of the artist. He is not portraying nature the way he sees but the way he experienced it. This particular approach of perceiving nature makes him an expressionist artist. A close analysis of Sadequain’s art clearly echo some of the expressionist characteristics.

Some of the most dominating Expressionistic characteristics in the art of Sadequain are:

- 1) **Revolt against anguish and tragedies of the people:** Like every Expressionist artist Sadequain revolted against the miseries of people. He believed that art can be used for moral purposes, he felt deeply therefore reacted deeply against the sufferings and pains of people.

- 2) **Distortion and Deformation:** In order to express himself fully he rejected the classical view of naturalism as well as their concept of beauty; Renaissance’s idea of verisimilitude; Baroque’s realism and their reliance on form as process; Romantics glorification of form for the sake of emotions and feelings and Impressionists blind trust on sensory and visual perception. Instead he distorted forms and created tortured figures. Deformation and distortion added pain and agony to the picture.

3) **Boldness of Innovation of Forms and Patterns:**

Sadequain's art is bold, innovative and rich in form. His formal elements are repeated in such a way that every time they create different meanings. Variation in composition and design is matchless with any of his contemporaries. An analysis of design elements in art of Sadequain's show that this is the strongest and one of the most resilient elements which made him one of the greatest artists of Pakistan.

4) **Rebelled against propriety and Common Sense:**

His creative power is awesome. A headless man, a crow snatching eyes, a series of men caught in a web are the images, which are strenuous to imagine and contemplate with the common sense. These are the images which do not fall in any traditional iconography. His figurative art was condemned by many and he was badly criticized by the critics and especially by the Public, who were not oriented to seeing such vulgarity in art. Much of the controversy flared up in 1976, when he exhibited his nude figures at the Punjab Arts Council, Lahore. Not only the public demonstrated furiously but also the media. A number of news papers published articles on the art of Sadequain under the heading "Serious Actions to Curb Nudity." (32)

5) **Agitation against authorities and conventions in art and life:**

Sadequain was also very sensitive to his people and society. His art was perceived as a melancholic image of the society. Sadequain's Mangla Dam's Mural

‘Saga of Labour’ is tribute to the labor and working class. Fazila-Yacoobali suggests that this large mural “also spoke to the political left that was directed against the martial law regime.” (33) He rejected to paint beauty and exquisiteness and painted those aspects of life which were usually avoided by the artists due to cultural restrains. In 1976, Punjab Arts Council took his *Bosa* series out, due to the controversy and rage among the audience. Eventually, the exhibition was interrupted by the furious, destroying many paintings.

6) **Rejection of good taste:** Sadequain clearly stated that he is not an artist of drawing rooms but of dustbins. He was not inclined to paint beauty but agony. Despite the fact that he intentionally rejected beauty there is a sense and harmony, balance and rhythm in his paintings, specifically, in his calligraphic art. He achieves balance by repeating lines, shapes and occasionally through colors, because his paintings accumulate very little range of colors. Dominating among those are red, blue, grey, brown, brownish green and black.

7) **Rejected institution:** Sadequain did not believe on academic education. He was self taught. He got inspiration from his self and learned drawing and painting from his own instinct. Through his life, nature remained his mentor, which gave way to free expression and selfhood.

8) **Surrealistic approach:** Sadequain’s paintings adopted surrealistic approach in its technique and development of ideas. He painted a dream like vision. There is no representation of time and space in his

paintings. The time is nonlinear and space is distorted. Sometime he has adopted multiple angles which annihilate the sense of one point perspective. He has not even focused or have made any attempt to capture aerial perspective, because the focus is more on design element which appears flat in many instances. No attempt has been made to reveal a story in a linear fashion, adding chaos and fragmentation.

9) **Grotesque and Implausible:** Sadequain's paintings are grotesque in size and even in the rendering of figures and other objects. They grow overwhelmingly, occupying the whole space with multiple elements. There is nothing that can be called natural and life like. Sadequain represented objects larger than life size, which make them improbable and artificial for a common viewer. Figures seem to be growing just like crop grows in the fields.

10) **Disjunct and Confusing, through alienating effects:** He achieved improbability through the alienated effects. Figures are not known by the personalities of his society but are stereotype. Lacking human element, the figures do not represent any particular group, however they can be classified to some extent through the objects, emblems or symbols. It makes them abstract and sometime confusing. For instance, a headless figure acts as an artist. Such images decrease the sensitivity and emotional directness. The emphases on alienated effects

have given projection to the psychic situations. Such symbolic imagery demands seriousness to understand meanings and the content of a picture.

11) **Transformation of metaphors:** Sadequain's art is metaphorical. In many paintings the design element is so rich that it seems to transform one image into another. For instance a cactus plant may look like a man and a man may appear as a cactus. Similarly overwhelming growth of cactus filed metaphorically represent harshness and pain.

Sadequain's art is expressionist in its general outlook. It is symbolic and metaphorical and carries deeper meaning in it. Its expressiveness becomes much stronger due to the fact that its immediate appeal is visual rather than conceptual. So whatever is represented catches the attention of the viewer. Its design element is so strong that one is inclined to look at its composition first and then to the contents and meaning. The pointed spiky objects are irritating and strongly expressive. Sadequain's art combines visual expressionism of the artist's internal feelings. Strong reaction against his imagery and bold style can be taken empathetically because it is the voice of a bleeding heart, which is seeking divine truth. Sadequain's art can best be admired by understating his expressionistic devices and alienated effects. Although his art is symbolic and metaphorical at some point but it is the Expressionism which releases inner tensions and worries of the artists.

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- (3) Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali, "Sadequain: The Making and Unmaking of a National Artists," *The Holy Sinner*, 54.
- (4) Sirhandi, 57.
- (5) See Ayub Khan's speech, *The Pakistan Times* (Nov.24, 1967)
- (6) Sirhandi 57.
- (7) *Ibid*, 57. (8) *Ibid*, 57-58
- (9) S. Amjad Ali, *Painters of Pakistan*, Islamabad: National Book Foundation, 1995, 259.
- (10) Akbar Naqvi, *Image and Identity: Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998, 387.
- (11) Fazila-Yacoobali, 54., (12) *Ibid*, 54.
- (13) In the year 2006, under my supervision, a survey was conducted about Sadequain and his art, by the students of BCA session 2005-6, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi.
- (14) Sirhandi, 60.

- (15) Naqvi, 364.
- (16) Ego is being taken here as an active self.
- (17) Naqvi, 365.
- (18) Naqvi, 365. For further reading see, Aniela Jaff, *The Myths of Meaning*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1970. (19) Ibid, 368.
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- (26) Excerpts from an interview conducted by Hameed Haroon, *Evening Star*, Karachi, April 10, 1971.
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