

## The Evolution of Mankind: A Gigantic Mural by Sadequain

Rabia Chishti, Salma Naz, Zile Huma Mujeeb & Imrana Seemi

**Abstract:** The present paper aims to study the figurative language of the gigantic mural '*The Evolution of Mankind*' painted by the great modern painter Sadequain Ahmed Naqvi at Lahore Museum, Lahore. The paper analyzes the distinctive features of the mural that are specific to Sadequain's own style and thus provide a background to understand his ideology and metamorphosed images.

**Keywords:** Sadequain, evolution of mankind, Lahore Museum,

### Introduction

Sadequain Ahmed Naqvi was a great modern painter of Pakistan. He was not only responsible for the revival of Islamic calligraphy but he also introduced magnificent mural paintings to the country (Ahmed 2014; Chishti, Naeem, Mujeeb & Seemi, 2016; Dadi, 2011). He painted gigantic murals that were full of activity with concepts and themes and that could be "read like an unfolding story" (Ahmed, 2013). In a very short period of time, Sadequain became the most prolific mural painter of the country. In most of his murals he depicted the heroic image of man as envisioned by the great poet Iqbal in his poetry (Farrukh, 2004; Naqvi, 1999). Sadequain created thousands of paintings and drawings but the most challenging and inspiring of them were the gigantic wall and ceiling murals (Ahmed, 2014). His work was conceptual and thematic based on different social issues (Naqvi, 1999). He was a man of integrity and courage. He was a social analyst who used his brush to illustrate the endless quest of mankind to discover and develop his potential (Dadi, 2011).

### Background

Sadequain painted more than 35 large murals. Unfortunately many of them have disappeared (Ahmed, 2014). Among his existing murals the most famous are the "Quest of Knowledge" housed at Punjab University Library; Treasurers of Time at State Bank of Pakistan; "Arz-o-

Samawat" (Heavens and earths) at Karachi Frere Hall; The Evolution of Mankind at Lahore Museum and "Saga of Labor" at Mangla Dam. Other buildings that are adorned with his murals are the Aligarh Muslim University, Banaras Hindu University, Indian Institute of Geological Sciences, Islamic Institute in Delhi, and Abu Dhabi Power House (Chishti, et al, 2016; Nadeem, 2011).

### Aims and Purpose

The present paper aims to examine the figurative language of Sadequain used in one of his best-known gigantic ceiling murals '*The Evolution of Mankind*' mounted on the ceiling of Lahore museum in 1973. The paper analyzes the distinctive features of the mural that are consistent in Sadequain's work and thus provide a background to understand the ideology behind his metamorphosed images. For this purpose, the specific images and patterns of selected mural were studied in accordance with their significance, first, with the reference of poet Iqbals' ideology and second, with Sadequain's own ideology as the theme of this mural is based on the Iqbal's poetry.

The purpose of selecting this mural is that it is the only completed ceiling mural of Sadequain. Moreover, painting a ceiling mural is a more challenging and exhaustive task to accomplish because the muralist paints the images while

lying on his back for hours. The other ceiling mural titled 'Arz-o-Samawat' fixed on the ceiling of Frere Hall Karachi was his last painting and due to the death of the artist could not be completed (Ahmed, 2014). The latter mural is now damaged and needs restoration.

### Method

Four high resolution pictures of the mural were selected from secondary data. Later these were zoomed in for detailed analysis of the images and their pattern. The purpose of using secondary data was that the restoration of the mural was started by the Government of Punjab in 2012. Since then the mural has been brought down from the ceiling. One of the authors visited the museum in March 2016 and requested to view the mural but was not allowed by the Museum administration to visit the restoration site. Therefore, the analysis was made according to the available secondary data.

### General Background

#### *Gigantic mural of the ceiling of Lahore Museum*

*The Evolution of Mankind* mural adorns the ceiling of the entrance hall of Lahore Museum. To complete this mega project Sadequain spent almost six months in the museum, working day and night (Malik 2012). He painted 48 panels of 6x6 feet each during 1972 and 1973. Total area of the ceiling he painted on spreads over almost 100 x 35 feet (11 m). Sadequain loved to work on vast scale and never followed others. He simply followed his own ideas and forms. Whatever he observed, felt and loved, formed his style (Naqvi, 1999; Chishti et al, 2016). In an interview to Pakistan Television (1976) he once said, "I seek the truth and I am after reality". Interestingly, Sadequain painted reality with abstraction, using cubist-figurative forms that were original and invented by himself (Chishti et al, 2016; Dadi,

2011). In Sadequain's work, all letters and forms appear in his calligraphic style, which are characterized with his own perception, feelings, and personality (Naqvi, 1999).

#### *Theme of the Mural*

Theme of the selected mural is based on the great poet Allama Iqbal's famous Verse:

*"Sitaron sy agay jahan aur bhi hain"*

(Other worlds lie beyond the stars)

*"Abhi ishq k imtihan aur bhi hain"*

(Still more test of passion, love is remaining)

#### *Thematic Presentation*

Sadequain was inspired with the heroic character of Iqbal's *Mard-e-Momin*. In this mural Sadequain has illustrated the idea of Iqbal that the final destination of *Mard-e-Momin* is far beyond this physical world. In fact his destination is ahead of all the destinations. By recognizing his powers and potential he can triumph over odds, such as time, space and distance. The artist painted giant hands as a symbol of hard work, working tools as physical resources and Kufic letters as the attachment with one's origin and beliefs. His ideas complement with Iqbal's ideas that is why he frequently selected Iqbal's poetry as a subject of his murals.

To convey the message of Iqbal, the artist used figurative language in a manner that viewers can easily understand to unfold the story (Ahmed, 2014). Looking up at the ceiling of the museum, the painting reveals a universe comprising images of galaxies, orbits, suns and stars. Bright and vibrant color palette has been used. Orange, blue and grey are dominating among pale yellow and brown. The extensive use of different shades of blue illustrates the wideness of sky taking the viewers' eyes far beyond our planet wandering the universe.

### **Distinctive Features**

Three distinctive features of Sadequain style are prominent in the mural. First: figurative iconography - *calligraphic representation of the figures*; second: the giant hands growing like cactus-*depicting endurance*; third: working tools-*symbolic of physical resources*. These features can also be seen in his other famous paintings, for example *Aftab-e-Taza*, *Saga of Labor and Treasurer of Time*.

### **Central Panels of the Mural**

The central panels contain images of spiraling galaxies, stars, orbits and cosmos. Among these the eye-catching images are of the large and small discs adorned with figurative iconography resembling with Kufic letters in brown and yellow (fig. 1). The focus rests on their beautiful calligraphic representation of figures. The artist illustrated large discs as a “kinetic mass that open up in a spiral of waves” (Furrukh, 2004). All the images, patterns and their placement is so precise that the space between these images gives a real feeling of cosmos and the space also provides the viewer's eye a place to rest.

### **Characters in the Mural**

Sadequain has painted two human characters in the mural, Adam and Eve, who are curled in a covering like embryos depicting the moment of their creation (Furrukh, 2007). These characters represent the mankind and his status in this universe.

### **Vertical Boarder Panels**

The images of a vertical boarder represent two giant hands holding working tools (hammer & wrench) that form a shape of the Urdu letter ‘Aaj’ (fig 2). The artist has painted a sun in the background of letter ‘Aaj’ which is crowned by calligraphic figures or cubism forms in a circular shape. The sun in the mural and in his other paintings is “the ball of angry fire” to make it

appear as Judgement Day. (Naqvi, 1999: 413). Two other hands approaching stars in the universe have been painted on extreme left and right edges of these boarders. The artist has used metamorphosed images to illustrate that by identifying his powers and potential man can reach new statures and destinations. The images depict the idea of Iqbal that the ‘secret to success is hidden in hard work and continuous struggle’. Man requires to do hard work and he needs to make continuous struggle not only to be gifted with the physical resources but he needs to sublet his today and surrender his self or ego for the Judgment Day.

### **Sadequain’s Ideology**

Sadequain was a man of the soil. He was among the pioneers of modern art in the country however, he loved to be in touch with his origin and memories (Naqvi, 1999: 364). He kept wearing the mask of a traditional man holding strong values. He always remained at the forefront of his canvas. Therefore, whatever conventions and icons he used, they represented his personal image, commemorations and associations. For example, in this mural and elsewhere, he painted hands with unusually long fingers that resembled his own hands and fingers. In the mural the hands are growing like cacti representing the force of growth. Sadequain had a strong association with this desert plant. To him it was a symbol of endurance because it can survive and thrive in harsh conditions. The cactus can be seen as a dominating icon in many of his paintings. This icon illustrates the artist’s own ideology that man with his faith and beliefs can stand up to the test of time, passion and all the rudiments.

The artist has used figurative iconography or calligraphic cubism amply on the discs and in the background of the giant hands (fig. 2 & 4). He derived these forms from Kufic lettering of Quran. Sadequain’s forefathers were

calligraphists and he remained in touch with this traditional art and created calligraphic cubism that was new and original. It shows that he had strong attachment with his identity and originality.

In the mural some small spinning discs are also painted with their outer edge comprising working tools. These working tools symbolized physical resources. Sadequain illustrated the message that by using physical resources man can triumph over time. The very prominent Urdu letter *Aaj* formed by two working tools depict the idea that by identifying today one can secure his self from the angry fire on Judgment Day. The identification of powers and potential with proper use of physical resource is so important for Sadequain himself that he used this icon in many of his other murals as well.

The calligraphic arabesque is another part of his iconography. The rhythmic linear patterns of Kufic lettering can be seen as symbolic of human figures in the background of the giant hands. These figures are tightly knitted and fill the discs representing the new destinations. In this way, Sadequain transformed the Islamic Calligraphy

into a new kind of arabesque. Before that the Muslim artists used interlacing of foliage and scroll patterns to decorate the surfaces. In fact his calligraphic cubism and calligraphic arabesque contributed not only to the Muslim art but enriched the modern art as well. Naqvi (1999) acknowledged his contributions and revealed that his art is an exceptional addition to Muslim Art.

### **Conclusion**

The overall theme of the mural symbolizes three elements (1) the immense resources available to man, (2) the limitations of time and space put on him to complete the obligation and (3) the secret to reach new statures and destinations. Sadequain magnificently painted the ideology of poet Iqbal on a vast mural showing that though mankind is a part of this universe but man is created to triumph over this universe through his powers, wisdom and hard work. Sadequain used metamorphosed images, calligraphic cubism, cactus like hands, and other icons which are typical to Sadequain's style yet every time these symbols and icons unfold new meanings and vision to the viewers.

## References

- Ahmad Salman. "Lines and Drawings by SADEQUAIN". *Sadequain Foundation*. 2014.  
<http://www.sadequainfoundation.com/lines-and-drawings-by-sadequain/>(accessed 6, 07, 2015)
- Ahmed Salman. "The divine inspiration". *Dawn*. February 8, 2015.  
<http://www.dawn.com/news/1161864/>  
 (accessed 5, 07, 2015).
- Chishti, R., Naeem, M. Q., Mujeeb, Z. & Seemi, I. "The Revival of Islamic Calligraphy in Pakistan through the pen and brush of Sadequain". *PUTAJ Humanities and Social Sciences*, 23 (1) (2016).
- Dadi, Iftikhar. "Sadequain and Calligraphic Modernism." *Islamic Arts and Architecture*. Calligraphers. December 6, 2011.  
<http://islamic-arts.org/2011/sadequain-and-calligraphic-modernism/> (accessed 8, 01, 2014).
- Farrukh Nilofur'. "Decolonizing The Spirit, Pakistani Art from 1947-79". *Art India, Pakistan Issue*, 2004.
- Farrukh Nilofur's review of public murals titled 'Art without social barriers' in the July 14, 2007 issue of Gallery
- Malik Sonia. "Sadequain mural: Long process of restoration begins". *The Express Tribune* September 10, 2012.  
<https://tribune.com.pk/story/434064/sadequain-mural-long-process-of-restoration-begins/> (accessed 12, 10, 2014)
- Naqvi Akbar. *Image and Identity: Fifty Years of Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan*, Oxford University Press, 1999. p. 364-436.
- "Sadequain, the Ultimate Artist and Calligrapher". Special supplement with *Qatar Tribune*. pp. A6. August 14, 2011.  
[w.qatar-tribune.com/data/20110814/pdf/pakistan.p df](http://w.qatar-tribune.com/data/20110814/pdf/pakistan.pdf) (accessed 12, 10, 2014)



(Figure 1)



(Figure 2)



(Figure 3)



(Figure 4)

Source: Sadequain's Foundation source: The Nation