
Western influences on Postcolonial Artist Tanweer Murshad's Art

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This research analyses the western influences of Romanticism and Fauvism on late Tanweer Murshad's landscape paintings. As a postcolonial artist, he lived and worked in Lahore, Tanweer Murshad's biography and artistic point of view is discussed in this paper. The western inspirations regarding the use of medium and techniques of landscape painting is also addressed in detail. Two landscape paintings are chosen to make a comparative analysis, one from 19th century Romantic Artist Turner and other from early 20th century Fauvist Andre Derain. The comparison explains about the similarities or dissimilarities in style of painting, compositions and subject matter. The change of methods, historical and social aspects of the works are also discoursed. The paper is an effort to explore western impact on postcolonial landscape painting in subcontinent by Tanweer Murshad. It paves a way to look for more western inspirations in the artworks produced in postcolonial period in Lahore. The postcolonial reading to discover the influence of Western hegemony on landscapes painting is analysed. This research is based on qualitative aspects, visual observation and analysis.

Introduction:

Tanweer Murshad was an art teacher and a practicing Pakistani artist during 1970s to 2013. His contribution in literature and art is not much recognised. His work is compared with the European artists during mid-19th to 20th century. The aims are to trace the inspirations and differences in the landscape paintings. The purpose of this paper is to highlight Tanweer Murshad's contribution in Pakistani art. The research emphasises on the historical aspects and circumstantiality under which the art works were produced in different times. The topic highlights the artist's intentions and his art works. Before this research no comparisons are studied or documented regarding Tanweer Murshad's landscape paintings.

The scientific revolution of 17th century transformed society focusing reasons over religious control. The education captivated in understanding and spread of knowledge. The Enlightenment promoted individual thinking. Thus

freedom, democracy and reason reoriented in Europe. This movement also referred as the age of reason. It condemned Rococo art for being immoral. The French revolution in 1789 transformed into bloody terror and led to the rise of Napoleon. Later idealism as aesthetics dominated the art scene. Nature as a subject matter inspired artist. Experience, dialogue and raw materials were the main ingredients for the creation of art. Ultimately it paved the way to 19th century Romanticism.

Starting from Indus valley till the partition of the subcontinent, the territories have been invaded by various civilizations including Arabs, Iranians and people from Central Asia and Europe. Due to location on its trade routes and invasions this region was exposed to different cultures and values. However out of many establishments the Muslim Mughal rule was one of the major influences. The Mughals were conquered by the British in the second half of 19th century and India became a colony of Britain. The colonial period laid foundations for the art education in India. The British raj came to an end in the mid of 20th century with the partition of the subcontinent. All these historical events shaped up and influenced the art scene in the region. The oldest and renowned art institutions in Pakistan were setup during the colonial period. The foundation of art education in Pakistan was the mix of both European and regional arts. All this has contributed a lot to the postcolonial art in Pakistan.

The post-independence Pakistani painters have been influenced by Western art movements. Though, most of the artists adapted the forms to their own cultural sphere. The influences can be clearly observed in Pakistani painters like Impressionism, Expressionism, Surrealism, Op Art and others. With the passage of time, artists have developed inventive styles.¹

In the early decades of 20th century, painters were engaged in articulating in a language derived from the break-up of European art traditions. The works of Shakir Ali and Zubeida Agha emphasised innovation as compare to Chughtai and Ustad Allah Bukhsh. They adopted the modes of expression personal appropriation of the outside world.²

Biography of Tanweer Murshad

Murshad was born on 31st July 1952 in Sialkot, Pakistan. He started excelling in fine arts subjects right from his childhood. After his secondary education in 1971, he came to Lahore and met with Shakir Ali and saw him working. He was also a student of Anna Molka Ahmed, the founder of College of Art and Design at Punjab University Lahore. During his undergraduate programme, an American artist Peter inspired him for learning how to think as an artist.

He won gold medal for participating in a group show painting exhibition at Punjab University in 1976. He also won the first prize in a painting competition

on the life of Christ at YMCA in 1978. His first solo show was exhibited in 1978. Later on, he produced seven solo exhibitions.

He accomplished his Master's degree in Graphic Design at College of Art and Design, University of the Punjab, Lahore. He also taught at CAD, PU for twenty-three years as assistant professor. He produced several books on poetry and religious subjects. He remained member of Halqa-e-Arab-e-Zouq from 1985-2013. He died on 29th November 2014 at Lahore.

According to Tanweer Murshad "art is our natural knowledge and exists within the orbit of nature with us". He believes that it effects the sensitive self and only sensitive people can realise the values of humanity. Thus, in his paintings in 2003 the series were built under the slogan Art Causes Humanity. He says his art is a message of peace for mankind.³

Tanweer Murshad's Summer Winds

Tanweer Murshad's painting *Summer Winds*, is a landscape depicting a forest scene from the lands of Punjab. This scene is quite similar to the compositional approach and subject painted by a Romantic artist Joseph Mallord William Turner's 'Snow Storm - Steam Boat off a Harbour's Mouth' painted in 1842, though the orientation of the landscape is dissimilar. The 'Summer Winds' is painted in portrait layout and the 'Snow Storm - Steam Boat off a Harbour's Mouth' is in landscape format. The subject by Turner was focused on the forces of nature, displaying shipwrecks at sea. The strong winds and blinding snow present catastrophe. In 'Summer Winds' the strong wind is ruining the grass and plants similarly. The strength of the storm is symbolising the force of nature against man. Both paintings display intense emotions through colour.

During the 19th century the Romantic art was based on natural forces which wrecked the human culture. Although these manmade vessels were always at the mercy of the wind. Turner's *Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth* depicts a ship struggling against a storm. The story in the painting presents Turner's lifetime experience on the sea. The steam boat in the centre of twister displays the effect of environment over man's helplessness.⁴ Turner's autobiographical reference explained it as "I wished to show what such a scene was like, I got the sailors to lash me to the mast to observe it, I was lashed for four hours, and I did not expect to escape, but I felt bound to record it if I did."⁵

Turner's art suggests an alienation and submission to the overcoming of natural forces at all stages. His landscapes depict nature as persistently threatening human desires of society and civilization. Turner's artistic career started as watercolourist in the circle of Girtin, with whom he worked at Dr. Monro's. After 1800 he began to produce landscapes in oil which encompasses historical themes.⁶

Turner explained about ‘Storm - Steam Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth’ that “I got the sailors to lash me to the mast to observe it; I was lashed for four hours, and I did not expect to escape, but I felt bound to record it if I did.” Although the autobiographical note, the ambiguity regarding the authenticity of actual experience has never been established. It is believed that maybe it is Turner’s own sea going experiences which is observed by earlier painters who recorded storms at sea. Answering to a criticism that the picture looked like a ‘soap-suds and white wash Turner said “soap-suds and whitewash! What would they have? I wonder what they think the sea is like?”. The critic in *The Athenaeum* of 14 May 1842 described the painting as a ‘frantic puzzle.’⁷

The composition of the Snow ‘Storm - Steam Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth’ swirls to move the eye in circle continually. Whereas, the ‘Summer Winds’ spins in ovalized shape to move the eye repetitively. The turner’s ship seems helpless in the centre similarly the plants and grass in Murshad’s painting seem blown away with the stormy wind and helpless. The viewer of both paintings can imagine the aggressiveness of nature and its impact. Both paintings portray the power of the nature and the uncertainty of existing environment. The oppression against the storm raises fear. The brush strokes applied by Turner and Murshad’s paint application are quick and shows the free-flowing paint on canvas. Turners thick and light brush work seems to inspire Murshad’s painting technique on the canvas. The colour palette in both paintings creates calm tones. Both light and motion creates chaos. As both these artists tried to simulate the true nature of a storm as a subject of experience. Turner’s lights and darks emphasize the ship in the centre and Murshad light and dark establishes the direction of the wind blowing from left to right.

Turner’s work inspired many artists and influenced post-Impressionist movement. Modern art admires the ‘Snow Storm – Steam Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth’ a great landscape and famous in Britain and worldwide. However, Murshad’s inspiration is quite visible in his landscape as both subject matter and technique of painting. Regardless of dissimilarities, the overall painting seems an extension of the Turner’s experiment in postcolonial period in Lahore. Though the landscape subjects are different but it has an impact on Murshad’s work.



Figure 3. Summer Winds painted by Tanweer Murshadin 2003.
Source: Photograph from Author's Personal Collection



Figure 1. Snow Storm - Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth painted by Joseph Mallord William Turner in 1842.

Source: http://www.artble.com/artists/joseph_mallord_william_turner/paintings/snow_storm_-_steam-boat_off_a_harbour%27s_mouth

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Tanweer Murshad's art was also influenced by European art movement Fauvism. The Painting Mountains at Collioure 1905 by Andre Derain is his additional source of inspiration from the West. The use of colours as symbol initiated by Gauguin and free flowing brush strokes are adopted in Murshad's Summer Winds.



Figure 2. Mountains at Collioure painted by André Derain in 1905.

Source: <https://theartstack.com/artist/andre-derain/mountains-at-collioure>

Derain said “colour as a means of expressing my emotion and not as a transcription of nature”⁸. The Mountains at Collioure was painted when Derain was with Matisse at Collioure in 1905. This work was added in the landmark Salon d’Automne exhibition. The painting is made-up with isolated brush strokes to structure the trees and ground of landscape. The colours are nonrepresentational and unnatural as the tree trunks are bright red and hills in purple and orange. The contrast of these colours suggests the heat of the Mediterranean summer. Derain rejected chiaroscuro and spatial depth and keeps the viewers’ attention through the effect of light and motion in this landscape.⁹

Derain’s work took a greater proximity with the multiplicity of colours and tones, the flickering flamelike brush work, the partial use of colour line to define the dominant part in the composition. It conveys the audacity which in the long run turned out to be unfamiliar to his flair.¹⁰

Murshad kept the drawing simple and exaggerated colours like the one in the Derain’s Mountains at Collioure. The spontaneous and subjective response to the subject similar to the Fauves. The bold brush strokes express emotions but vibrant colours are replaced with harmonious colour palette. This wild approach and use of symbolic colours adopted as a Gauguin tool to express spiritual emotions powerfully. The choice of colours is based upon observation, feeling and the nature of experience. The loud contrast of colours is different but the simplified drawing style of Mountains at Collioure is followed. Thus, viewer sees an overall decorative pattern of colour mixing through a natural process. As the post-impressionists created new possibilities in art so do the Murshad’s inspiration from Romantics and Fauvists seems postcolonial Pakistani art.

Conclusion

With the arrival of Western art in subcontinent the cycle of challenge and response continues. The works of Chughtai, Ustad Allah Bukhsh, Zubeida Agha, Shakir Ali, Sadequain and Ahmed Pervaiz are the building-Blocks of Pakistani painting. All these are connected with the heritage of subcontinent. These old and modern artists created individual styles which are historically influential yet culturally viable.¹¹

It is because of this that our artists will have to reach back in order to find their identity by recalling past. Thus, they can command and respect postcolonial Pakistani art. Our past is still under our possession. The West have franchise over the present and future. Responses are different from artist to artist and generation to generation.¹²

Tanweer Murshadis inspired by western art. The landscape environment is native and expresses his personal experience of the nature like the Romantics. The colours are harmonised and picked up according to the natural scene experienced. The Turner Snow Storm influenced the artist's compositional approach towards the movement of wind storm in lands of Punjab. The loose thick paint applications are applied due to which the painting look likes more spontaneous. The colour scheme is soothing to the viewers eyes. The lack of shadowing and thickness of paint application is opted like Fauvists are celebrated. The brush work is avoided and it seems that artist has enjoyed the freedom of the enamel paints as medium. The inspiration from nature and application of enamel paints in place of oil paints is unconventional. The landscape expresses the artist's mood of experiencing the nature.

Tanweer Murshad's work seems a revolt against the conventional approaches of landscape artist in Pakistan. His landscape is not less than avant-garde due to his medium and style of painting for Pakistani contemporary art. His creative innovativity is also reflected through the selection of enamel paints as a new medium for landscape painting. Murshad experiences and expressions as artist are combined in his landscape the Summer Winds. It seems that his innovation of medium and style of painting is criticizing the approach of contemporary landscape painters in Pakistan.

Finally, Tanweer Murshad appears as a daring and innovative contemporary artist through the selection of his subjects and mixing styles. Unfortunately, not much is written or discussed about his paintings and artworks. His paintings secured by Lahore museum authorities is not less than an appreciation to his work. As he has left this world but one can meet him through his paintings, which are still telling the tale about his experiences and contributions in the world of art.

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⁶ Thomas Crow, Brian Lukacher, Linda Nochlin, David L. Phillips, Frances K. Pohl. *Nineteenth Century Art, A Critical History*. Slovenia: Mladinska Knjiga, 2002. 135

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⁹ The Art Story, Modern Art Insight. Mountains at Collioure (1905)

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