



Innovative Ideas of Aakif Suri in the Field of Miniature Painting

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Abstract: This article is intended to document the innovative ideas of Akif Suri in the field of Miniature painting. Current contemporary art scene in Pakistan is bringing forth young blood and they are elevating the standards of art practices with their innovative ideas and experimentations. Aakif Suri emerged on the art horizon of Pakistan as an academically trained artist. He born in 1982 and graduated from the National College of Arts by specializing in Miniature Paintings in 2006. He has created a name for himself in this particular field. His paintings present a very interesting combination of humanistic trends, new ways of using traditional techniques in the compositions and surreal-symbolic concepts to present the essence of his experiences in Pakistani society.

Moreover this article presents a detailed analysis of artists painting compositions and philosophical aspects in the light of many references from the prominent art critics of the region.

Keywords : Art In pakistan, contemporary art in south Asia

The contemporary art trends gradually caught momentum during the last ten to fifteen years in Pakistan. Various artists presented the glimpses of the actually prevailing norms and trends in Pakistani society and culture along with the evolution process of its art panorama. A few young artists came up with courage to experimentation with traditional techniques of miniature paintings and demonstrated “the conviction of artists living through some of the most trying times the nation has witnessed over the past few decades” (Yusuf 2012)

Aakif Suri emerged on the art horizon of Pakistan as an academically trained artist. He born in 1982 and graduated from the National College of Arts by specializing in Miniature Paintings in 2006. He has created a name for himself in this particular field. His paintings present a very interesting combination of humanistic trends which are and have remained the great aspiration of European artists. They seek to assimilate the astounding and stupendous principles of the scientific element in their work. The artists of the subcontinent for centuries have been following the native traditions based upon abstract and semi-abstract signs and shapes. Later on, under the Persians and Mughal patrons, this fine art attained solidity of form. Today it is known as “miniature” because mainly

the pictures are painted on a small scale. The art of miniature painting flourished during the Mughal period, but gradually it vanished with the advent of the British East India Company. However, this art still existed in the region and staggered on in pockets of different cities of the subcontinent despite neglect by the governing forces.

When Pakistan came into existence, in 1947, miniaturists such as Chughtai and Haji Sharif entered the share of Pakistan. A lot of artists worked here but they turned their backs towards the discipline of miniature painting. Recently, this young generation has revived its spirit. Shazia Sikander, Imran Qurashi, Wasim Ahmad, Aisha Khalid and Mudassar Manzoor are also considered the budding artists in this particular field. Their experimentation and contributions have become a fundamental part and parcel of new characteristic forms in miniature painting practice in Pakistan.

A most interesting aspect has emerged in the work of a talented young artist who goes by the name of Aakif Suri. He has combined the humanistic element with the traditional manner in his miniature paintings. He accepted the traditional and cultural values as a subject to support his art works. He also experimented with the surrealist imagery to present a world of thoughts which is the outcome of his experiences being a resident of such society that has become the crucible of socio-political upheavals.

Akif Suri’s paintings present different phases of his artistic and aesthetic journey which is based on a verity of subject matters. His art works reflect a very appropriate blend of his observation and the influences he received from the contemporary art trends. “He spent early days of his youth in Dera Ghazi Khan (South Punjab) where he found a very interesting culture that men used to wear a heavy cloth on their heads. He was inspired by that kind of headgear.”(Suri 2009) At the early stage of his artistic career he remained caught by the strong influence of his reminiscences of turban culture of rural areas which was a clear emblem of tribal manner of dressing up as well as it shows artists attentions towards religious allusion and ethno-linguistic locale.



His paintings, on the whole, have been rendered in small scale and the objects have been painted or drawn in an exceedingly precise and sure style. Some of the objects, while revealing three dimensional elements, have retained a kind of tonal quality which gives them structure and shape and also an element of recognition. At the same time there are many other objects including human figures, stones and branches of trees which are entirely drawn in outline form. The lines are so solid that they provide a structural solidity to the objects and figures. This type of line drawing can be compared with any great master of both eastern and the western domains of art.

While working on each miniature he has been very pertinent in building up a sense of composition. Otherwise, in one picture, there are several other objects or themes painted in a staggered state, as if one can see each of the objects as a complete picture in itself. However, he has built a link between various objects and parts of the painting by drawing a thin line between them. This works as a thread through which every object or part has been stitched. This device of connecting different parts in one composition reminds one of the cubical abstractions of Frank Jensen in his "Composition IV" (Figure No.1). Apart from this mechanism, he also unites his composition by the looks of the figures toward the other objects or by piles of stones painted in a horizontal form. These function as a bridge between the two separated areas.



Figure No.1 Frank Jensen "Composition IV"

Source: <http://www.easyart.com/art-prints/Frank-Jensen/Composition-IV-104387.html> (Accessed on March 1st 2009)

In *Land of Gold-I* (Figure No.2), a very small figure has been painted in minute details. These reflect a strong academic background as well

as the artist's command on his brushwork. He reveals the three dimensions the limbs possess. The man in the painting is shown in the process of cutting various threads with a pair of scissors. These are then intricately stitched onto the cracked surface of an egg or egg-like shape. The artist has very successfully and skillfully created a state of extreme terror by the presentation of an unknown power. Symbolically, this manifests itself in the form of a giant animal possessing golden colors. This animal is coming out of a very fragile egg shell, which is in a totally fractured state and fallaciously tied up (or stitched) with a very thin thread. A young man, who doesn't know the after effects of this whole racket, is busy cutting threads to help the animal that seeks to be free. The egg has been painted in a tonal value and so is the animal. A similar treatment is meted out to the solitary human figure. The stones on which the man is sitting are drawn in their outline. These stones also give an impression of solidity and structure. The painting, on the whole, creates a kind of pressure in the mind of a viewer who feels a state of panic arising within him or her. It almost seems that if the giant unknown animal comes out then the loss will be beyond belief.



Figure No.2 Aakif Suri, *Land of Gold-I*, gold leaf and gouache on vasli, 25.2 x 48.2 cm, Taseer Art Gallery Arif Jan Road, Cantt, Lahore

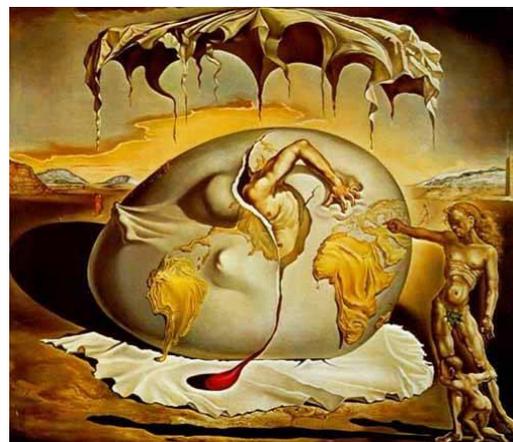




Figure No.3 Salvador Dali "Geopolitical Child Watches the Birth of New Man" Oil on canvas, Courtesy of www.dalipaintings.com (Accessed on February 20th 2009)

The phenomenon of the cracking of the egg and the birth of an unknown formidable force reminds one of a painting by Salvador Dali titled "Geopolitical Child Watches the Birth of New Man" (Figure No.3). In this painting a large egg is manifested, out of which a man is struggling to emerge. The struggle of a man to come into being is very firmly symbolized in this painting. A dark canopy shades the large egg-like shape which symbolically represents the world of the new man. The whole ensemble reflects the application of a struggle by the emerging man to free himself and come into being as a separate entity. The dark canopy above the ovoid shape (probably a symbol of the world) holds several symbolic meanings. And outside the egg, a woman is standing with a child pointing at the event of the birth. The child seems to be in a state of curiosity or rather fear has turned her knees to jelly. Her eyes are wide open in fright. The perception of fear or panic is further heightened by the posture of the child. This situation elevates the uncertainty and sense of horror. Whereas Suri does not directly reflect the concept of the birth of the new man, he nevertheless presents the same kind of alarming situation with the depiction of the birth of a giant animal which is an indirect symbolic commentary on the birth of demonic evil. The unpredictable fear in the paintings of both artists brings their concepts nearer to each other.

It is very difficult to unveil the real philosophy behind this painting because of the characteristic versatility of the objects which in fact represent many-sided meanings. He said,

"Some of the pieces are based on experimentation with blending traditional working techniques of miniature painting, with contemporary and modern tools and mediums available. The melding of influences and methods symbolizes how interconnected we truly are, despite our projected differences. I create circumstances around me so that I can paint what I see, knowing that I cannot fully see. A part of the story has not been told ..."(Husain 2014)

Aakif is the only artist, so far, among the current generation whose stance is very different from the rest. His paintings come out as a sort of enigma for the viewer. The apparent meaning, if one could interpret it may be that for centuries the people and particularly the young lot of this

country remained fettered under social, religious and political conditions. Probably, this young artist has tried to expose and reveal the difficulties of the times and the confined physical and mental state of the lost generation. The giant golden wild animal of unknown and limitless powers is probably a symbol of the coming generation. It is struggling to erupt out of a superficial and frail shell which is destined to burst pretty soon. The external erroneous restrictions are suggested through the thin threads and the artist is trying to cut them down.

The same situation is visible in his other paintings (Figure No.4, 5 & 6). Except for the previous startling situation, he has added the motif of clouds. These clouds also contain eggs or egg-like shapes within them. The clouds consist of a number of spiral forms. A set of small clouds floating in the air contain eggs and form one massive segment in the upper part of the painting. The treatment reminds one of the type of clouds which have been painted by Mudassar Manzoor. Evidently such an influence is possible because both of them studied under the same teacher: R.M. Naeem in the National College of Art Lahore.



Figure No.4 Aakif Suri, gouache on wasli, 25.2 x 48.2 cm, Catalogue *Color of Paradise: Contemporary art from Pakistan* published by Ejaz Art Galleries Gulberg III Lahore 2008



Figure No.5 Aakif Suri, gouache on wasli, 48.2 x 25.2 cm, Catalogue *Color of Paradise: Contemporary art from Pakistan* published by Ejaz Art Galleries Gulberg III Lahore 2008



Figure No.6 Aakif Suri, gouache on wasli, 48.2 x 25.2 cm, Catalogue *Color of Paradise:*

Contemporary art from Pakistan published by Ejaz Art Galleries Gulberg III Lahore 2008

If one could deeply analyze the egg like shape for its fundamental purpose, it stands as a symbol of the beginning of life. Similarly the clouds bring rain and make the land fertile, which is again a source of life. So the egg shapes and cloud motifs both have worked as symbols of life within life. The presence of such a deep symbolism in these paintings is inundated with thematic endeavors.

The concept of “life within life” can also be sensed in Suri’s painting (Figure No.7). He portrays an egg-shaped form, which is in the final stages of cracking. As a result some areas inside the egg are exposed whereas a major image remains obscure. From this shape, a head of a man is coming out, and this egg shape rests above a circular form which is broken from one edge at the lower portion. The head of the man retains another egg which happens to be inside his mouth. It is only a head or a portrait of an imagined and novel personality which is expected by the artist to bring a change in this chaotic society. Nobody can imagine what kind of change he will bring; the better one or the worst kind? However the broken circle around this head may suggest the insignificance of this personality. The people are yet unaware of its potentialities entirely due to their insensitive attitude and negligence. The other possible interpretation which suits the existing condition of the corrupt ruling people may be seen reflected in this image.

The artist has referred to several elements to highlight the powers of this upcoming personality. Other symbols, such as the head, wears elaborate kind of turban enriched with pearls and quills at the top. The turban is a kind of headgear which has been used by the Muslim Rulers in the subcontinent for centuries to enhance their authority and affluence. The same essence is being portrayed in this image. The emblem of long hair indicates vicious power.



Figure No. 7 Aakif Suri, gouache on wasli, 48.2 x 25.2 cm, Catalogue *Color of Paradise: Contemporary art from Pakistan* published by Ejaz Art Galleries Gulberg III Lahore 2008

Keeping in mind the current situation of the country, the artist has decided to unveil the ruling political parties in this image, as the hidden face is gradually getting exposed through the peeled off area by virtue of cracks created with the passage of time over the shell of the ruling people.

The areas which are exposed reflect an image of a person who, due to his features and the style of his hair, seems to belong to the same martial race as the Mongols or Timurids. This is raw power and vigor at its best. The head is endowed with such symbols and the character demonstrates inattention and vindictiveness towards the common people. Suri has tried to expose the present merciless monarchs through his image all the while combining symbolism and surrealistic elements in the greater whole.

“Suri’s artworks are not merely on the surface they have deeper meaning into it. A hidden message or artist’s feelings related to his artworks. At first glance, one also feels that Suri’s artworks are based on political themes, but according to artist statement his artworks might give a political feeling but the story does not end here, it is about behind the scene story, the tussle between various interest group in Humans, formed on the basis of language, skin, colour, culture, religion, economics, region and so on. Observing intently Suri said, I charge onto my surface of depiction

of the bitter reality of what surrounds me; revealing itself as the culmination of rapid political, social and religious upheavals. I see The Man, the symbolic entity that wields power over the world, as a tainted, sad, corrupt, controller hungry for ever more power, devouring greedily anything and everything that obstructs his personal benefit and pleasure.” (Bingulander 2015)

Apart from the above Akif Suri in his later works presented himself as a contemporary artist and generated a kind of conversation for the spectator’s response through creating recognizable objects and precise lines and carvings on the wasli paper. He presented three wonderful works on an unusual theme of ‘fish’. *I am a fish* (Figure No. 8) revealed another debate about the survival of the artist or art in more symbolic and surrealist manners. Fish was considered “a symbol of sacramental feast” (Husain 2104) during ancient times in several cultures. In this painting artist referred himself as a fish which again reflect another symbolic connotation of self expression. According to Native American beliefs a fish “intimates a life-sustaining relationship with water. This way water element connection with fish suggests emotions, healings and purification. Fish symbol also stands for unconscious and higher-self, intelligence and thought process, fertility birth and rebirth” (Bernadette 2017). If we judge the painting *I am a Fish* according to the above discussed theology one can identify a strong link between the imagery of fish the artist presented and his life experiences being a part of the society which is on the brink of a cleft of socio political and economic ordeal.





Figure No. 8 Akif Suri, I am a Fish, Spray paints and gouache on wasli, 236 x 99 cm,

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1132765> (Accessed on April 26th 2016)

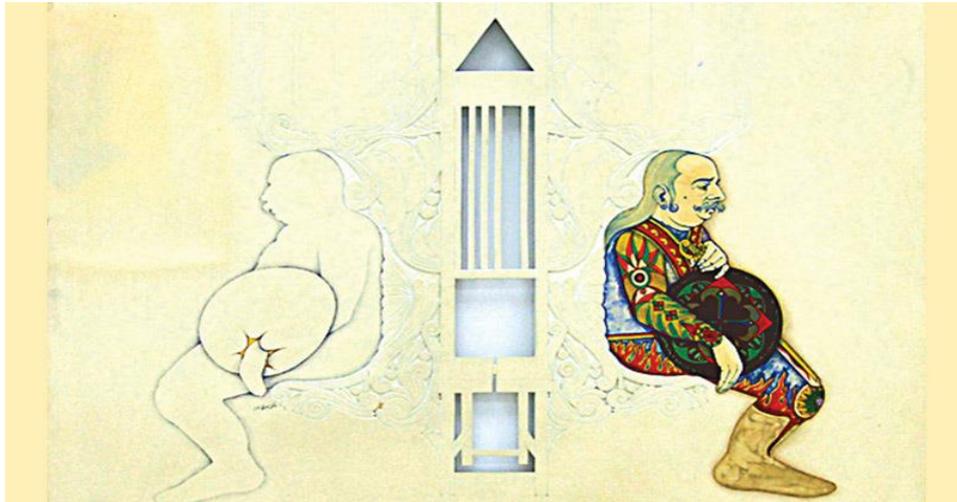


Figure No. 9 Akif Suri, Kings Selfie, gouache and carving on wasli, Marjorie Husain, *Pop art: Telling part of the story*, Published in Dawn, Sunday Magazine, October 5th, 2014

In another very interesting painting which is entitled as *King's Selfie* (Figure No.9) Suri used the technique of carving and painting delicate design patterns along with figurative representation on wasli paper. His wish to show the prevailing authorities of the country in a mocking way comes true with this painting where he reflected a King's image with fat belly wearing a colorful dress. "The protruding stomach also depicts the man's greed that devours anything and everything that obstructs his personal benefit and pleasure. Below the king's apparel is an ordinary person and the throne and the power yielded through it only an illusion." (Rafi 2014) Marjorie Husain one of the leading art critics in Pakistan commented on this painting she wrote:

"The 'selfie' is very much a part of the claim to (or wish for) celebrity of modern times. One is besieged by photos of individuals taken by them and passed around particularly on Face book thanks to mobiles or mini cameras. The artist incorporates this aspect in the work titled 'King's selfie'. Here we have an important

work of art, carved and painted with gouache on wasli in which the artist alludes to numerous references." (Husain 2014)

Besides all of the technical and aesthetic innovations in the field of miniature paintings Akif Suri developed a wider range of witticism through the titles of his works like *Part of the Story has not been Told* and *Inside Out* etc. His Ideas dwell on the stories which are still hidden and untold. Meticulously rendered images provide a range of symbolic meanings and hints towards the actual relationship of sovereigns and subservient in the Pakistani society.

He has participated in numerous national and international shows. His works were displayed among the contemporary European artists in Slick Art Fair in France 2010. He has also participated in *Melbourne art Fair* Australia in 2012 and *Contemporary Art of Pakistan* at Basel art Fair Switzerland in 2012. Currently Suri is working with National College of Arts and Pakistan Institute of Fashion and Design in Lahore.

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