An Investigation of Dr. Shahida's Symbolic Expression and De Kooning's Abstract Expression

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Abstract

Pakistani art underwent many transformations, and contemporary artists have adopted diverse ways of expression. Dr. Shahida Manzoor is a well-recognized artist of Pakistan whose style of work has expressionistic undertones while expressing the divine nature in personal manner. Her work is compared with the American abstract expressionist Willem De Kooning. This research paper explores the applicability of theory of Sublime by Kant in the art works of both painters and explains how imagination and intuition have freedom of growth. Employed methodology is qualitative with a comparative analysis of the styles and works of both the artists to trace the unusual connection between their approaches to subject matter. The outcome of the research suggests that both artists have used nature for the sake of inner self. Both the artists reflect a longing for unobtainability in their work. Hence, it is concluded that theory of sublime and subjectivity in their work relates both the artists with Romanticism but in a novel style.

Keywords: *expressionism, sublime, abstract expressionism, subjective, individual freedom.*

Introduction and Background

Western art is characterized by a diverse expression in comparison to Eastern art. However, similarities in inspiration and amalgamation of styles can be seen in both as the modernists

believed in the prospect ofuniversal communication(Meyers, 1959a). Gauguin's modern approach had an inspiration from the art of East and Japanese prints (Meyers, 1959b), similarly cotemporary modern artist of the East is inspired from Western artistic approach.

Twentieth century brought about many changes in the artistic world specifically due to World war I and II. In the first half of the century, artists rejected the traditional representations and became inclined towards self-representation with emphasis on form, line, and color. Expressionism started in Germany, brought a drastic change in the appearance of symbolic stylized forms and unnatural colors with the use of strong outline. The aesthetic look of expressionist work is often abstract (Werner Haftmann, 1957). It appeared as an avant-garde movement in the reaction of growing industrialism and modern society (Dube, 1983).

In the second half, Abstract Expressionism was introduced in America based on Formalist theory with stress on the formal properties of artwork. Modernists rejected the past and pursued novelties in material, style, and form. Artists worked on their individuality and used their art works for subjective expression (Dube, 1983). After fifties, multiple views were acceptable as a diversity in style and content. The art engaged the viewer in search of reality and involved thinking (Milbrandt, 1998). Artists were also inspired by the Surrealist expression of emotions related to the unconscious. After World War II, artists were concerned in the expression of their feelings and emotions(Milbrandt, 1998).

According to Clement Greenburg, modern art is based on the aesthetical philosophy of Kant that relates the twentieth centuryart with the romanticism with emphasis on subjectivity(Tansey & Kleiner, 1996). Greenburg considers modern art to be the foundation of aesthetics, art for the sake of art, and independence of art from the traditional values and political-social issues. In pre-modern age, art and beauty were objective, while modern age claimed that art and beauty possess a subjective nature (Norbert Lynton, 2004). Kant's aesthetic

ideas are those ideas that have emotional impact on human beings.The aesthetics of emotional experience is more explained in his theory of Sublime. The feeling of sublime is not a simple feeling of pleasure, but a mixed state in which pain is a necessary precursor of pleasure(Sheppard, 1987), an idea seems to be borrowed from Edmund Burke, a British philosopher, who influenced Romanticism.He observed that the most intense human emotions are evoked by pain or fear and when these emotions are distanced, they can be thrilling like great storms and raging rivers(Mamiya et al., 2005). Sublime is experienced by the observation of natural vistas so vast that cannot be bound in a single image, but the pleasure lies in the effort of the imagination to grasp them in a single image. This experience is induced by powerful and threatening natural objects like volcanoes, furious sea and like. Fear and moral superiority to nature is important and imagination plays a role to create this connection(Guyer, 2005).

This article concentrates on the evolution of art in the modern era and how subject matter and style changes over the years along with discarding social and historical stress and focusing on personal feelings. For this purpose, style and work of western Abstract Expressionist William de Kooning is discussed and compared with the Eastern modern painter Dr. Shahida Manzoor from Pakistan, who has a foreign training. Although both the painters have a diverse choice of subject matter and style but similarities in freedom of expression, imagination, intuition, and spirituality are noteworthy. Likewise, the selected artworks are investigated according to the theory of sublime. Sufficient literature is available in libraries and e- libraries on the evolution of western art. Interview with Dr. Shahida has also been conducted for first-hand knowledge regarding her painting perspective.

Dr. Shahida Manzoor: A Contemporary Expressionist

Dr. Shahida Manzoor (b. 1960) former principal of College of Art and Design, Punjab University is a well- established modern artist. She is a renowned modern painter in the art

scenario of Pakistan. After completing MFA Painting, she got the opportunity to complete her Ph.D. from the University of Ohio, USA. She served as an art teacher at the University of Punjab and participated in many group-shows and two solo shows(College of Art & Design, 2019). Her foreigner training can be seen in the diverse style of her painting. She can be called expressionist from the beginning as she has always worked in arbitrary colors with focus on form (Manzoor, 2024). Her work shows strong Romantic's influence in the depiction of personal emotions and subjectivity while the Expressionist quality is evident in the use of pure, bright, and unnatural colors. Feelings and emotions are expressed in simplified forms, heightened colors and use of outline. Paintings are highly symbolic and transcendental. To articulate subjective reality, she often manipulates objective reality in her work. Her canvases are never planned, starting with background colors in broad stroke, then adding freehand natural elements on the canvas, she explains the inner realities (Manzoor, 2024).

***Morning Breeze* (2017) Acrylic on Canvas, 24 ″x 24″**

The painting (Figure 1) is taken from her second solo show *Mysteries of the Sublime* exhibited at Hamail Art Gallery in Lahore in the year 2017 when she was working as principal of University College of Art and Design. As the title suggests, painting is highly romantic with implementation of the idea of Sublime along with the daring use of vivid colors, symbolic motifs, passionate forms, and personal vision for the manifestation of emotions. *Morning Breeze* has been painted with layers of broad, flattened vertical brush strokes with cool hues of blues and whites along with expressionist touches of blacks. Use of bold outline is prominent. Two stylized sparrows are painted as a symbol of life, peace, and harmony, correspondingly related to the sensation of morning breeze also. Numerous white flowers painted randomly are representative of beauty and hope in an intuitively personal manner. Misty light, birds, flowers,

and vertical stems are cohesive elements of purity of nature (Manzoor, 2024).In her words, her painting is not a substitute to nature but a gateway to an eternal and personal world (Manzoor, 2024). Sublime has the power to arouse excitement in the feelings of spectators with the purity of nature. Her flowers, birds and stems are representative of divine presence of Allah, the supreme power(Hamail Art Galleries, 2017). Painting expresses inner truth rather than external world of reality.



Figure 1: Dr. Shahida Manzoor, *Morning Breeze 2017*. Source: Hamail Art Galleries

Willem de Kooning: Painter of Dramatic Expression

Willem de Kooning (1904-1997) is a prominent painter of the 20th century in western world, belonging to Abstract Expressionism. Recognizable forms and identifiable subjectmatters can be seen in his thickly applied colored paintings. His work is characterized by abstract forms, loose brush strokes and dramatic expression. Focus is on subjective emotions rather than objective reality. His work can be taken as a combination of radical and traditional, a quality that distinguishes his work from the pure action painting. He worked as a commercial painter and enthralled by American Pop culture. As a modern artist, he mostly painted

abstracted female figures. After World War II, his forms became more abstract. He had solo exhibitions at Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and became a celebrated artist. Later, visuals are graced with a combination of female figures and landscape charged with emotional energy. In the mid of twentieth century, he changed his subject from women to broadly painted urban landscapes. De Kooning first did tracings and then worked methodically to add spontaneity on his canvases and painted vertically, like an easel painter. Later paintings are dripped with emotions, shocking force, and vibrancy, especially in his urban and rural landscapes. His life in The Springs brought a revolutionary change in his personal and professional life and produced some of the best pastoral landscapes. In his last works, his palette and forms became simpler (Morris, 1999).

***The North Atlantic Light* (1977) 80 x 70' (203.2 x 177.8 cm)**

After 1960, his life is full of personal transitions. De Kooning bought a house in The Springs, near East Hampton, and spent most of the time there with family and painted pastoral women and landscapes. In 1975, de Kooning made a series of 20 large paintings *Whose Name was Written on Water*, title taken from the Romantic poet John Keats tomb, to exemplify the glory of these land and seascapes. These are recreations and allusions of places with the help of memory of different times and places. De Kooning enjoyed painting a place that inspires him like trip to Manhattan. North Atlantic Light (Figure 2) is one of this group of canvases that de Kooning accomplished in quick way. In the middle of the canvas is a sailboat with its reflection(Morris, 1999). Boat is only described in few lines in a formalist style of Abstract Expressionism. Colors are subtle and pastel like. Brush strokes are emotional, spontaneous, unconscious, and expressive of subjectivity and personal feelings, a distinguishing feature that relates his work to Romanticism. Theory of Sublime can apply to this painting as thick and full of action strokes are creating the feeling of awe in the depiction of threatening natural

force.This artwork exemplifies his intra subjective nature and personal experience coexisting within his inner self. The atmosphere is immense, depicting de Kooning's desire to fit in with his passion and vision of nature.



Figure 2: Willem de Kooning,*The North Atlantic Light 1977*.
Source: The Essential Willem de Kooning p. 99

Conclusion

Exploration of colors, forms, shapes, and gestures for the depiction of some novel ideas which have no relation to historical, religious, or cultural bonding led these artists transcendent with strong spiritual undercurrent. Although they both have no cultural or religious similarity, yet their connection is strong regarding their mindset and their approach towards their subject following their instinctive and mystical attitude. The connection and the conflict between the direct and the indirect, the spiritual and the physical, the empirical and the metaphysical has been achieved and handled by both using symbolic language of forms and colors. Their art inculcates a feeling of conflict and sensation that engulfs the senses with the diverse use of

symbolism and manifestation of ideas. Selected subject matters have multiplicity of choices along with distinct handling. Dr. Shahida has applied random colors without any initial drawing, whereas De Kooning has made planned canvases but with an inner freedom. But both have focused on their eccentricity and uniqueness and took essentials from the whole world, seen or unseen. They have used arbitrary colors and record observation of their souls and outside world. Intensions are to record dramatic truths in a highly expressive way and to produce harmony through variation. Above all, both have used nature in an emblematic way with the implementation of sublime for the search of the inner

self.

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