
The Context and Significance of Symbolic Use of Crow in Sadequain's Art

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Abstract. This paper is an inquiry into the symbolic significance of crow in art works of the famous Pakistani artist Sadequain. The paper discusses the meaning and significance of the symbolic form of crow in the light of artist's vision as a painter and human being. The vision forms the necessary context in which the symbol is interpreted. It is suggested that Sadequain was a visionary painter with a revolutionary approach to transform individual and society. He was acutely aware of the emotional and intellectual inertia that plagued most of the individuals in society. It has been proposed that Sadequain had a dual concept of self and like the *Malamattya* tradition of Sufism; he expressed the dialogues between the two versions of self by putting himself in the situation and hence indirectly influenced the viewer. The paper concludes that the symbolic significance of crow in Sadequain's art cannot be understood without appreciating the context in which it largely stands positive.

Key Words: Symbolism, Revolutionary approach, Conscience, Self, *Malamattya* characteristic, Intellectual inertia

Introduction

Symbolism was originally developed as a literary device. Later, in art, it became a thoroughly affective communication strategy. The symbols used by an artist convey certain meanings through their association with certain intellectual, emotional, cultural and political paradigms. An artist understands the general subjectivity of people and is aware of the underlying meaning and power of a symbol. By creating various contexts through composition of a work, an artist adds subtle shades and layers to the meaning of a symbol and hence communicates a certain idea or feeling with its nuances. The form used as symbol does not remain mere form but becomes a composite in which subjective meaning or significance is synthesized. Due to an agreed connotation and meaning of a symbol for the viewers, the artist is provided with a chance to unleash the subjective potential of meaning that a synthesized form may give rise to. The communication potential of a symbol is not therefore in how accurately it appears to the viewer but how deeply it affects and pulls upon ideas and feelings.

Another interesting feature of symbolism is that it does not provide a direct and definite meaning but remains somewhat mysterious as if something is inviting an interpretation. This feature gives a work a longer period of life since the vague connotation makes the symbols subject to different ways of interpretation and as the time passes, new meanings unfold. This is probably the reason that artists who were pursuing a certain goal through artistic communication or who were involved with the macro mechanics of human life used symbolism with great effectiveness. The timelessness and universality of their themes demanded a rich symbolism in which a realistic form must be viewed in all its depth and meaning. For instance, the use of birds, animals, and even human form provide a kind of suggestive imagery for the viewers and can provoke the whole gamut of feelings. These forms are universal and have deep connotations that are developed through various phases of civilization. Symbols stand and speak for realities and there lies their hidden power.

If we consider an image to have a concrete referent in the objective world and to function as image when it powerfully evokes that referent, then a symbol is like an image in doing the same thing but different from it in going beyond the evoking of the objective referent

by making the referent suggest a meaning beyond itself; in other words, a symbol is an image that evokes an objective, concrete reality and prompts that reality to suggest another level of meaning (Harmon, 2014).

Communicating abstract ideas through simple forms has been a hallmark of revolutionary artists who witnessed decadence in their respective societies and felt the urge to express their acute sensitivities through their works. These artists required communication with masses since they were dealing with their ailments. Since, their work was intended to communicate with larger factions of society therefore they used symbolic forms that had a generalized connotation. The spirit of these artists has been aptly described by Wassily Kandinsky who equated painting with power that refines human soul. He stated, “the artist must have something to communicate, since mastery over form is not the end but, instead, the adapting of form to internal significance” (Spry, 2014).

In Pakistan, Sadequain has been one such painter, who was a revolutionary, affected by moral decadence of society and used suggestive forms to convey his ideas and ideals. Sadequain works are loaded with symbolism. He had an acute observation and was a deeply sensitive human being. The extent to which he expressed his pain, the universality of the issues involved, and the stylistic conventions he followed necessitated the use symbolism as an effective means of communication. Nadeem Zuberi wrote about him:

He was attracted to tragic subjects. He uses allusive forms and symbolic images to convey his concerns towards society. Such as darkness and light to represent war and peace, crows and cobwebs around men and women suggesting decay, decline and degeneration, rats and lizards and cockroaches crawling on men and women and even snakes entwining them showing that the people are emotionless and completely insensitive. (Zuberi, 2014).

Amongst various symbols that he skilfully used, for instance cactus, severe heads, educational gadgets, cobwebs, insects and reptiles etc., the use of crow has been peculiar to his work. He used this symbol in various ways to bring to focus the intellectual and emotional decadence of people to which he belonged and for whom he had a strong urge to bring about a moral uplifting. The following account focuses on the symbolic use and significance of crow in Sadequain’s art.

The Symbol

The crow has been widely used as a symbol in Western art tradition. Its meaning has been largely negative, destructive, satanic, malevolent and deterring, however, there are many shades to meaning when it comes to the context or composition in which crow is depicted. The crow has been associated with meanings of adultery and evil thoughts especially when in a painting it is shown with a married couple. If it is painted near a holy figure than its meaning alters, it then refers to devil. The crow has also been used in biblical context. For instance, a crow with a silver coin refers to Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Christ (History of Painters, 2011). So, there are multiple examples in which crow has been associated with negativity in a social and religious context. But there are also instances where crow is used to depict positive emotions and ideas. It has been associated with intelligence, fearlessness, adaptability and personal transformation. According to Ina Woolcott, ‘Crow is an omen of change. Crows live in the void and have no sense of time, therefore being able to see past, present and future simultaneously. They unite both the light and the dark, both the inner and the outer. Crow is the totem of the Great Spirit and must be held with utmost respected. They are representations of creation and spiritual strength’ (Woolcott, 2014). Sadequain’s depiction of crow has its own peculiar setting which attaches, as we shall see, a largely positive meaning and significance to the symbolic use of crow. To understand the significance, it is crucial that the vision of the artist is briefly outlined.

The Context

Sadequain was an internationally acclaimed artist of Pakistan. His body of work is magnanimous and has been critical of human condition. For Sadequain, society acted as a trigger for his emotional and intellectual processes. Artists like Sadequain grasp the present, comprehend it, evaluate it and finding it without promise, turn their backs upon the dictates of the environment, and seek and explore new directions and new truths. Having established them in their minds, being artists, they proceed to feel deeply about them in terms of their human sensitivities. Then they express those sensitivities and these expressions then become their themes. In addition, they then disclose to them appropriate forms as a vehicle for those themes. They have the competency as artists and a command over their medium, to communicate their contemporaries powerfully and successfully. Sadequain's works depict a conscience that absorbed both the true and false states of existence, their struggle to defeat each other and then he had the emotional strength to loudly speak out and an intellectual vigour of attempting a resolution. The context in which he used the symbolic form of crow is imbued with the aforesaid degrees of his conscience.

A critical review of Sadequain's body of work reveals that he had an unusual sensitivity to the suffering of man especially due to the conflict between the 'original self' and the 'acquired self'. He defines the original self as a struggling phenomenon of life that faces all odds and still manages to be resilient (Sirhandi, 1996, p. 58). His cactus symbolism supports this very nature of human being at both collective and individual scales (Hakim, 1985). Cactus is a force against oppression (Mir, 2003, pp. 80-81) and a symbol of determinism of self (Ahmad, 2013, p. 67). In his Rubayat, Sadequain seems to repeat this interpretation several times. He declares the mission of self profoundly:

*I am the line that shall adorn every page
I am the word etched deep into every stone
The mystery Nature has endowed me with
The secret shall I fully reveal to you* (Anwar, 2004, p. 104)

This particular view is of great importance in understanding what Sadequain thought about the original nature of man or the original self. The 'I' is held significant in both the macro and micro dimensions of life. He uses the metaphors of 'line' and 'word', which on one hand refer to his skills of a painter and a poet and on the other hand the essential motivation and direction of man to overcome all the obstacles and own the natural process.

He says that this responsibility has been given to me by Mother Nature and it has to be expressed. Sadequain's thoughts are reminiscence of the great Sufi tradition of Iran. 'The Lute will Beg' by Shams Al-din Hafiz Shirazi reverberates the same theme:

*You need to become a pen
In the Sun's hand.
We need for the earth to sing
Through our pores and eyes.*

*The body will again become restless
Until your soul paints all its beauty upon the sky.
Don't tell me, dear ones,
That what Hafiz says is not true,*

*For when the heart tastes its glorious destiny
And you awake to our constant need for your love
God's lute will beg
For your hands.* (Hafiz, 2017)

Along with a view of the original self of human being, we find Sadequain complaining and fighting with the weaker acquired self of man dictated by his lust. Salman Ahmad in *The Saga of Sadequain* states:

During the decade of the 1970s, Sadequain devoted a major portion of his work, art and poetry, to expose the hypocrites of society who live a dual life, replete with contradictions. But to the dismay of struggling common man they lead a life in an apparent lap of luxury. These unscrupulous manipulators seldom fail to exploit the vulnerabilities of the innocent. They suck the very pleasure out from the joy of existence and make it miserable for the most unsuspecting. Many writers and poets in the past have expressed their concerns and raised their voices against this ruthless exploitation behind the mask of hypocrisy and exposed this dualism. Sadequain too expressed his opposition in his poetry and paintings and waged a war against this exploitation and double-faced corruption (Ahmad, 2013, p. 171).

Sadequain himself said that ‘against all odds, but with determination, I am at war with dark characters of society. The struggle is not easy, but the fight goes on against the pervasive hypocrisy that surrounds us’ (Ahmad, 2013, p. 183). His way of sensitizing people was unique. The duality of human existence in the original and acquired states becomes obvious not only in Sadequain’s paintings but also his poetry. In both his painting and poetry, he would put himself on stake and this would imply an echo in the viewer. For instance, in the following *Rubai*, he puts himself and represents the struggle between the original and acquired self:

In what situation, I am in

A terrible situation that I am in

In what contraption caught, is my heart?

In whose custody I am in (Anwar, 2004, p. 84)

At another instance he wrote:

How shall I alter the demands of my heart,

Whatever is in my nature, how shall I change?

I am chained to my habits,

How can I break the chain of my habits (Anwar, 2004, p. 105)

This clearly implies that Sadequain was referring to the internal struggle of a human being where his original self has been overshadowed by his acquired self. This theme has been repeatedly used by Sadequain. We find him praising man in *Saga of Labour* at one hand and on the other he shows the dark side of man in the Cobweb series Playing Card series. His fascination with Allama Muhammad Iqbal was also a reflection of his idea of the centrality of man. The intended meaning and significance of the symbolic form of crow should be viewed in this context.

The Significance

The depiction of crows can be understood in the light of above discussed context. One can infer three features of the context. The first is the struggling nature of man, wherein, he is symbolized with cactus and is supposed to face odds and with resilience survive through toughest of circumstances. The second feature is highlighted as his stagnancy and hypocrisy, his lust for material wealth and his moral decadence go hand in hand. The man is shown being trapped in evil doings. The third is a reference to the struggle that goes within these two states. We must acknowledge that the first feature and third feature differ in a crucial way. The first kind of struggle is about triumph over nature, which he depicts in *Saga of Labour*, but the second kind of struggle refers to the seed of awareness that a trapped human being experience. Sadequain focuses three kinds of individuals. One is who follows the originality of Self, the other is who follows the acquired Self, the third is who is trapped in habits acquired self but is becoming aware of the original Self. The word suffering cannot be used for those people who

follow their acquired self; they are the insensitive against whom Sadequain wedges as war. It is the third kind for whom Sadequain shows concern and identifies himself. The crows are shown in relation to this particular kind of people. In the words of Faiz Ahmed Faiz:

To depict a loveless and macabre world — a world of the scarecrow acting as the lord of blood-thirsty crows, of the harridan decked out as a beauty queen, a world of trapped tongues and cobwebbed hearts, of debased flesh and servile manner — this bitter vision of reality may not be the whole truth. Sadequain is not unaware of the hope borne by his huge canvases depicting the conflict of peaceful forces and their antagonists (Faiz, 2003). Sadequain himself presented the theme in one of his *Rubai*:

*What a crow's nest on my head, ask not
What troops of pests on my body, ask not
When I got out of myself to have a look at my self
Oh, how frightful was the scene, ask not* (Anwar, 2004, p. 105)

One can clearly see that there is a dialogue taking place between two versions of self. One is the trapped or acquired self and the other is the original self for whom the scene is frightful. This focus and method used by Sadequain were inspiration from 'Malamattya' tradition of Sufism. According to Idries Shah, "the Path of Blame is known in Persian as the *Rahimalamat*. Although called a 'Path', it is in fact a phase of activity and has many applications. The teacher incurs 'blame'. He may, for instance, attribute a bad action to himself in order to teach a disciple without directly criticizing him." (Shah, 1997, p. 323)

According to Sara Sviri, "In the *Malâmatî* teaching, there is always a dialect between the *Nafs* (the 'lower self' and the centre of ego consciousness) and the *Sirr* (the innermost consciousness of one's being)... *Malâmatî* teachers seem to have proposed a system in which sincere self-scrutiny and self-criticism were interwoven into a highly acclaimed social code" (Sviri, 1999). This is not to assert that it is the only source for Sadequain's inspiration, but there are certain similarities. What we can be certain about is that Sadequain addressed, through his painting and poetry, the kind of people who had that seed of awareness about original self but were trapped in the acquired self.

His expression complimented his vivid imagination. In a manner similar to how a classical poet would use metaphors and symbols in his poetry, Sadequain created his own visual vocabulary of unique metaphors and an array of symbols of unconventional imagery of crows, crows nesting on human heads, headless men, stagnant society caught in cobwebs, which were deemed probing by the inquisitive and left lasting images on the inquiring minds (Ahmad, 2013, p. 66).

The symbolic meaning of the crow is that its presence with a trapped human being is intimation to the viewer. Since the impact of such paintings is to make the viewer aware of the ugliness of acquired self and cling towards translating the potential of original self so the symbolic form of crow has a negative meaning but positive significance. The negativity is in the fact that crow adds into the ugliness of situation but this ugliness becomes a vehicle for reflection, as it informs the viewer about ugliness. This awareness becomes the first step towards awareness of the original self, which is Sadequain's purpose. And this purpose is what makes his art works revolutionary in the true sense of the word.



Figure: Sadequain. *Artist Crowned with Crow's Nest*. 1968. Pen and Ink (Sadequain, 2003, p. 518)

Analysis

The above drawing is a classic example of the symbolic use of crow in Sadequain's art. Sadequain portrays himself as a man whose head has become nest of a crow who has also laid eggs. Sadequain puts himself in a visual argument where the symbolic meaning of crow is carefully used. The nest being the crown shows a person with a trapped existence. His mind and heart have become stagnant to the extent that a crow has made a nest and is laying eggs. In most of his art works he used images of crow's nest, cactus, spider webs, lizards, owl etc. as symbols. He used these symbols as their cultural connotations to imply universally significant meanings. At the same time, he used these self-created symbols to present his perceptions and philosophies to address intriguing cultural issues and social structure.

It is interesting to note that he used crow in a significant manner. The crow is symbolic for beginning therefore the eggs can be interpreted as a reference to the process of creation. The creation can further refer to two different processes capable of initiation by virtue of an individual's choice. One is the process of decadence that begins with intellectual and spiritual deterioration of man. It involves a gradual desensitization of human sensitivities that result into a chaotic and unpleasant inner world where man struggles for peace and harmony but ends up in conflicts. The eggs refer to a furthering of already decadent situation of man. The other process, which may or may not be artist's intent, is a progressive realization of decadence. The gradual decadence can lead man to a state where the suffering and pain amount to change his entire approach towards life and a realization to be otherwise can take root. This is also a process of creation and is logically inherent in the process of decay and destruction. If we take into account the whole vision of the artist, it does not seem far-fetched that Sadequain had this unique ability to show something with an intent that is in opposition; he would show a hopeless situation of man but at the same time the mere act of showing can lead to a realization of decadence, which can turn into a positive omen.

The nest being the crown of the head is a satirical argument, again provoking man to feel and think about what the nature of affairs is, in which he got himself involved. It utterly subtracts the highest mental qualities of man in a glimpse since the nest means that there is a breeding ground for man's stagnancy. There are new expressions of decay that are in the making. The nest adds a time dimension to the hopelessness of man's situation. The artist's take on human condition has been both minds bending and convincing. The symbolism caters to various facets of human deprivation and intensifies the ugliness of the situation. The presence of crow is also symbolic of a messenger who is reminding man of his emotional and

intellectual stagnancy. Again, one is allowed to interpret the presence of crow in both ways. If one only considers the painting, Sadequain has merely shown the critical condition of man which is hopeless and is decaying but if one takes into account the impact on the viewer, the art work is bound to generate awareness about the ugliness of the situation. This is the point where Sadequain becomes a revolutionary artist. He defines ugliness through the use of symbols in a way that the character of ugliness acquires a clear identifiable outlook. This tangibility of a negative state of existence is what propels an individual to think otherwise. Perhaps, the dual connotation of crow is relevant in this context.

In the scarecrow series, Sadequain has again made a satirical visual statement. He has shown men worshipping scarecrows, while crows are not dodged. Hassan has commented:

Scarecrow Series depict men who have lost their spiritual vision. They are shown worshipping scarecrows, in order to seek protection from the crows. The crows are not intimidated by the scarecrow gods, and descend upon them in colonies. While the crows peck and nibble at the human flesh, nest, and multiply their menace, the men remain prostrate before their false and impotent gods (Hassan, 1996, p. 81).

One can clearly see that Sadequain portrays an illogical situation and therefore appeals to reason. The act of putting the illogical act together in the painting is a *Malamatty* characteristic. His purpose is that the viewer could reflect and see how his acquired self has made a fool out of him. The crows nibbling at human flesh are symbolic of the timeless macro dimension of nature, where the useless are destroyed.

Sadequain was not merely a painter who used symbolism and imagery to describe human state, he was also solution oriented. We find in the last work of his life at Frere Hall that he has been suggesting a solution to the misery of man. He emphasizes the importance of intellectual process and doing. He does not see doing separate from intellectual process. He is certainly suggesting practical wisdom as the solution to human problem. In this light, his use of crow as a symbol is highly meaningful. The crow is not only symbolic of a man's stagnant state but, as the nest emphasizes the intellectual inertia that plagues a man's doing. The eggs also give rise to multiple meanings. One is satirical, wherein, it is the head's state of rest that furnishes a ground for laying eggs. The other meaning is cosmic as eggs symbolize a possibility of new beginning. They also refer to the potential of awareness of original self for which a trapped human being might develop some vague idea. The crow also symbolizes the cosmic dimension of human life, which is not meant to be stagnant but an ongoing process of struggle to be.

Conclusion

Sadequain's life and body of work is of paramount importance for an art historian and critic. It gives us a glimpse of a profoundly intuitive mind that had a deep concern for the sufferings of humankind and was continually struggling to enable us what it could see so vividly. He is one of the few artists who embodied a carefully and responsibly thought out vision in their works and approached art as a significant means of generating awareness amongst the masses. His originality is immensely imaginative and his work ethic without precedent. The universality of his themes and the expressiveness of his style continue to haunt sensitive minds till date. The symbols he used continue to express deeper meanings questioning the unthinking minds that follow unexamined habits.

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