

Social and Visual Discourses in A.R. Nagori's Art:

By

¹Sadia Pasha Kamran, ²Pervaiz Ahmed, ³Bijar Khan**Abstract:**

This study analyses the ease and perfection Nagori shows in expressing his fierce emotions and communicating his anger of a social activist. It also explores and investigates Nagori's connotation of "aesthetic manner" (Hashmi, 44) and his priority to keep the painting as a painting and not an open petition or a declaration against the prevalent social and political mayhem of the society that most of his paintings look like otherwise. For the clarity and better understanding the discussion is divided in three parts. The first part discusses the role of Art as a medium of Communication of feeling. The second part, Communication vs. Expression, differentiates between two situations where art has been used as a medium of communication and as a medium of expression. It analyses the impact of such choices in artistic endeavors in general and in Nagori's paintings in particular. The art of the German Expressionists and other like-minded artists from the history of Western Art is also surveyed to draw parallel comparison with Nagori's works and his time. The third part, Specific Aesthetic Emotion, while looking at the different emotion theories proposed by the psychologists, tries to identify specific emotions that result in certain kind of artistic expressions especially of a social activist painter such as Nagori.

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Introduction:

A.R. Nagori, through his paintings expressed his intense emotions against the socio-political injustice in Pakistani society. Salima Hashmi in her book *50 Years of Visual Arts in Pakistan* declares him “the voice of the downtrodden and victimized” (44). His “public personality as a provocateur” as Amjad Naqvi would suggest (520), earned him a title of an activist painter. On the other hand, this will not be fanciful to find in Nagori’s aggressive brush strokes, vibrant color and deliberate distorted forms an echo of the tortured souls of the Expressionist painters who were a product of WW1’s cultural climate. The Expressionists employed many languages to give visible form to their feelings. Thick encrusted surfaces and deliberate clumsy draftsmanship speak of their psyche as well as their intention to unleash the gross realities of life. In Pakistani society Fine Arts is considered to be the concern of the rich and the opulent people who have the resources to attend to their aesthetic needs while most of the society lives below the average income level and their only and utmost passion is to earn bread and butter for their families. Keeping this scenario in mind it is assumed that only the finer feelings and the romantic ideas are favored to be conveyed through the artistic mediums. Reality differs from it as there are Pakistani artists who choose to criticize the society and its institutions and address their audience rather just expressing their romantic emotions i.e. matters of psychology, religion and common belief.¹ Nagori is definitely from this league of Pakistani Expressionists.

Art as a Medium of Communication:

The concept of Art as a medium of communication is not new. It has been one of the main functions of Art since ancient times. Our ancestors, who lived in caves during the Paleolithic age, used art as an effective medium of communication. They could device hunting plans, share their experiences, documented and recorded events, left messages for their fellows and thus communicated through Art with each other even before they invented language or writing. Thus Art has played an important role in the development of human society. It keeps enjoying its significant social stature and being an important communal venture even in recent times where artists use Art as a medium to communicate their personal feelings and their individual perception. The purpose of this communication varies from just being annotations to criticism or to create awareness.

¹ See Jacques Burzun for definition of Romanticism

While describing Art as a vehicle of communicating feelings, Leo N. Tolstoy in his essay “Art as Communication of Feeling” justifies artists’ quest to convey their sentiments in an artistic or the aesthetic manner. According to Tolstoy, “through the use of such devices as color, sound, and movement, art communicates to its audience a feeling or emotion that the artist has previously experienced “he further adds that “the process of communication involves, instead, the transfer of emotions or feelings” (Wattenberg, 98). Thus, in Tolstoy’s view color, sound and movement are just the paraphernalia that facilitates the act of exchange of ideas and for that matter the act of art making has a pre-requisite of an idea, feeling, a sensation or a topic and on the other hand it requires an audience to complete the act of exchange of that idea, feeling or sensation. Now, how would the audience perceive the sensation that is created by the artist especially a painter as in case of interest to this study? It is definitely the color, the form and the treatment of surface of the painting which further includes the issues of paint application as well as the division of picture space and composition. In other words, the painter uses the elements of design e.g. line, color, shape, form, light, texture and employs principles of art i.e. harmony, rhythm, balance, focus, emphasis, movement, surprise and initiates a dialogue through certain visuals. The completion of the process of communication not only determines the success of the painter but it verifies the standard and quality of the art object. This quality when taken as the measure of beauty, grace and pleasure encompasses the issues of aesthetics in its broader sense. Thus, the aesthetics is automatically involved when the medium of communication is art.

Once realized that the artist creates an object of art and this object displays his emotions and expresses his feelings which he experiences as a member of society, the power of art increased manifold. When the social utility of art was enhanced it was often used to propagate agendas may they be religious, political or social as it could reach the masses. Great art was created to fulfill such requirements and we have frescoes on Sistine Chapel ceiling along with the facing *Last Judgment* (by Michelangelo, 1508), *Death of Marat* (Louis David, 1793), *Bobabilicon* (Francisco Goya, 1818) or *Guernica* (Picasso, 1937).¹ It is the same quality of Art that allows Nagori to use it as a tool to communicate with society. He talks, through his

¹ See Janson’s History of Art pg 499, 500,622,632,728 for detailed description and criticism on these works.

paintings, about what is important and relevant to him as a member of society. Art enables him to make his personal feelings accessible to others.

Communication vs. Expression:

While philosophers like Leo Tolstoy are enchanted by the quality of art as a medium of communication that involves the transfer of feeling to a recipient, there are others who do not associate Art with the exchange of ideas and feelings. For example, R.G. Collingwood complies with the idea of Art being just an expression. While defending his argument, he accuses Communication to be “incidental to Art” and defines Art as “a process by means of which artist expresses his own emotion for himself” (Waltenburg, 125). Such a point of view connate Art to be an individual thing—done for oneself by oneself and eliminates or at least ignores the effect it might create in its surroundings and on people who view and experience it. In other words, the Art is considered to be the expression of emotion and not its arousal. If agreed, one needs to experience a specific aesthetic emotion to create an artwork.

In cases where Art is an act of communication, the process of art making completes at the receiver’s end who is willing to collect and comprehend what has been reported and recorded for him through that artwork. When the message is loud and the artist is enraged, irritated and madden with fury, he doesn’t care for the outlook of his artwork nor he bothers for the soft and sophisticated, lyrical and elegant stirrings on the recipient’s mind as expected from an aesthetic experience. The artist becomes eccentric and his personal understanding and response to the situation that is his expression and not the literal representation of the event or the occurrence becomes his style. Such artists look inwards for inspirations and display moods, emotions and attitudes. As a matter of fact, such art becomes expressive and actual representation becomes de-emphasized or absent. Apparently, Nagori falls in the second category of painters; he tries to express his intense emotions through his paintings and by doing so he stands with the famous Expressionists like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Karl Schmidt Rottluff, Emil Nolde, Kathe Kolwitz, Egon Schile and last but not the least Oskar Kokoshka. It is these *Expressionists* with whom he shares his vibrant color palette too, his distorted forms, ragged out lines as well as the immediacy of his brush strokes. Not only the form but the content of Nagori’s painting resembles those of Expressionists as they “protested the hypocrisy and materialistic decadence of those in power”. E. Ludwig Kirchner’s 1913 statement that can be considered the Expressionist’s manifesto explains Nagori scheme of plans too.

With faith in progress and in new generation of creators and spectators we call together all youth. As youth we carry the future and want to create for ourselves freedom of life and movement against the long-established older forces. Everyone who reproduces that which drives him to creation with directness and authenticity belongs to us. (Kliener,839)

Specific Aesthetic Emotion:

Following Kirchner's statement, one considers that the Expressionists aimed at reproducing things, objects and entities or events, happenings and situations that aroused their creative and artistic instincts. Following Collingwood, their intensions were to understand their personal situation—the atrocities of WW1. Does Kokoschka *Self Portrait with a Prostitute* not inculcate a feeling of depression and regression onto its viewer? Robert Stecker has an answer to this. In his essay "Definition of Art" he confirms that "aesthetic instinct as artistic activities at some point become synonymous to aesthetic pursuits" (Levinson, 142). Thus, in simple understanding through these aesthetic pursuits (artworks) artists express their emotions. The issue arises when one tries to define emotion. Emotions are forceful and they employ strong influences on human behavior. Such strong emotions can instigate one to take extreme actions one might not normally perform, or avoid situations that one generally enjoys. Psychologists propose different theories to define emotion. These theories differ on the basis of one fact that the physiological response (that we know as emotion) follows the stimulus¹ or during the course of physiological response the subject recognizes the stimulus. According to the Cannon-Bard theory of emotion, "we react to a stimulus and experience the associated emotion at the same time".² The Cannon-Bard theory of emotion differs

¹ The James-Lange theory is one of the best-known examples of a physiological theory of emotion. Independently proposed by psychologist William James and physiologist Carl Lange, the James-Lange theory of emotion suggests that emotions occur as a result of physiological reactions to events. According to this theory, you see an external stimulus that leads to a physiological reaction. Your emotional reaction is dependent upon how you interpret those physical reactions. For example, suppose you are walking in the woods and you see a grizzly bear. You begin to tremble and your heart begins to race. The James-Lange theory proposes that you will interpret your physical reactions and conclude that you are frightened

²Another well-known physiological theory is the Cannon-Bard theory of emotion. This theory states that we feel emotions and experience physiological reactions such as sweating, trembling and muscle tension simultaneously. More specifically, it is suggested that emotions result when the thalamus sends a message to the brain in response to a stimulus, resulting in a physiological reaction.

from other theories of emotion such as the James-Lange theory of emotion, which argues that physiological responses occur first and its results are the cause of emotions or from the Schachter-Singer Theory that “claims the physiological arousal occurs first, and then the individual must identify the reason behind this arousal in order to experience and label it as an emotion”.¹

It is Cannon-Bard type of emotion that can help understand an artist’s aesthetic expressions and especially the Expressionist artist’s emotion. Accordingly, one realizes that in a situation the artist is aware of the sensation and recognizes his emotion first before expressing it through his chosen artistic/ aesthetic medium. It is to be noted that the recognition of the emotion is pre-requisite hereto the act of expressing; in fact, it has to be a concentrated recognition that must compel the artist to express his intense emotion passionately. Thus, there are specific emotions that instigate the artist to express their emotions aesthetically. Whether the artist chooses to express aesthetically out of his habit i.e. being an artist it is the best medium of expression known to him or he does so in an effort to be novel or to attract the attention of a specific group of audience or in certain cases if the freedom of expression is denied the artist chooses aesthetic expression to avoid any direct confrontation with the social system are consequent issues. It is to be noted, and to our disappointment, that Collingwood rejects such specific aesthetic emotions as to him “no artist proper, can set out to write a comedy, a tragedy, an elegy or the like...” (Watenburg, 133). Though he admits that there is a specific alleviating feeling of having a successful expression that can be called a specific aesthetic emotion. He is concerned about using art as a medium of catharsis, a process during which one recognizes and comprehends his situation or develops an understanding of one own self. Art, as a matter of fact is not limited to a self-exploring and entertaining activity, it is a social enterprise which is affected by its surroundings and as a result it does affect the society. In this way Art becomes a two-way open-ended system of communication in a society.

¹Also known as the two-factor theory of emotion, the Schachter-Singer Theory is an example of a cognitive theory of emotion. This theory suggests that the physiological arousal occurs first, and then the individual must identify the reason behind this arousal in order to experience and label it as an emotion.

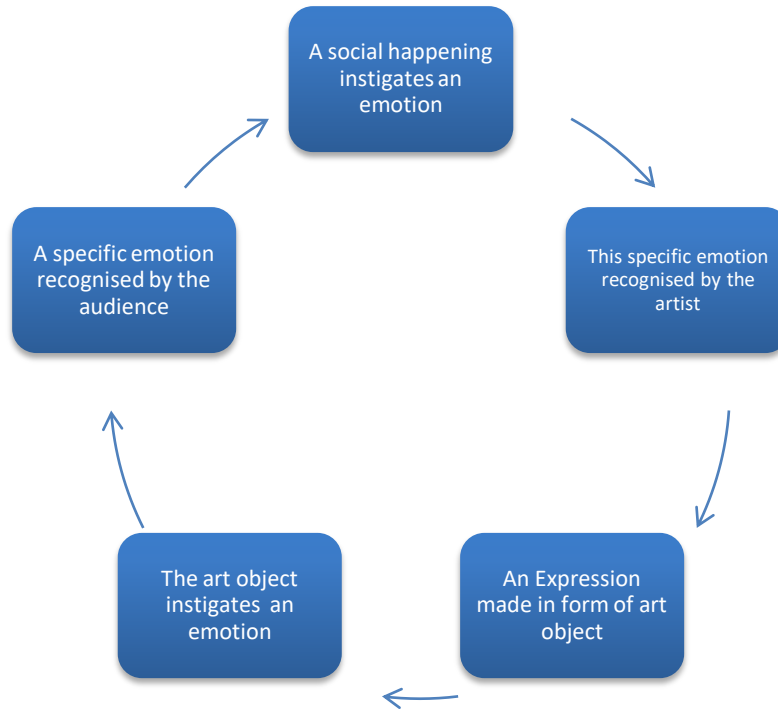


Fig: System of Communication through visual, aesthetic discourses

Now there are two cases,

1. Feeling a specific emotion (Canon-Bard type)
2. Intention of evoking a specific emotion.

In Expressionists case both types of specific emotions coincide. They feel injustice, chaos and anarchy in the society and wanted to project and highlight the same. This double dose of expression lends a sense of urgency, a kind of passion, which is indeed an eminence of a social activist like Nagori.

He himself claimed “the driving force behind [his] work has been to project social evils and crimes against women and children in an aesthetic manner. I am very particular about the fundamentals of art which should be understood and it is my priority that painting should remain painting. But there is always a topic, like struggle against repression or about environment” (Hashmi, 44). Such a statement highlights Nagori’s idea of art making; firstly, his urge to express and share his emotions and communicate his feelings through his paintings and secondly doing it in an aesthetic manner

Thus Nagori's addresses the society through his aesthetic discourses. In his quest to project social evils as what one understands from his position of an activist, he aims to attract the attention of the society towards the wrong that was happening with the children and women of Sind, the forced labour of the *hāris*, the child labour, the child marriage, the adulterous feudal, the wicked middle man who benefitted from the crafts industry, the pathetic situation of human rights in rural Sind and the list goes on. In Daud Pota's words "His bright-colored paintings exuded slap-in-the-face defiance, urging the onlooker to think about change – if not bring it about" and "In Pakistan's history, there was no painter like Nagori sahib. He was a committed artist who never painted for money. He always raised a voice against the injustice in the country even though he was jailed, tortured and threatened in the regime of Ayub Khan". Some art is created as social criticism, not just to record the events for posterity but also to provoke a reaction to political or cultural situations. Nagori says, "For me art also has a social purpose." He rose to prominence when his paintings called the 'oppressed people of Sindh,' protesting militarism and violence during the Zia-ul-Haq era, were censored in 1982. Afterwards, his exhibition was sponsored by the Federation Union of Journalists, in 1983. But it was his anti-dictatorship show at Ali Imam's Indus Gallery in 1986, which created a stir in the local as well as international media. It is reported that the Manila Bureau Chief of the *Los Angeles Times* and the New Delhi Bureau Chief of the *Time* magazine were directed to see that exhibition in order to understand Pakistani politics. "Perhaps nowhere were those troubles placed in sharper focus than in the Indus Gallery in Karachi, where an exhibit by artist Nagori sought to document Zia's legacy in a series of angry paintings," wrote Mark Finemann in *Los Angeles Times*.

Conclusion:

A.R. Nagori is known as an activist painter. He belonged to the generation of painters that rose against the military dictatorship and addressed, through their paintings, the atrocities, injustice and other maltreatment in the society that followed the notorious and much criticized military autocracy in Pakistan. Nagori's fiery statement as exhibited through his zealous composition and vibrant use of colour. Nagori not only felt the pain caused by the injustice and social discrimination but he made it a point to express these hurtful emotions of his in form of paintings. His paintings are an artist's documentation of prevailing inequality and vulnerable status of women and children around him. This documentary definitely reflects artist's personal perception of its origins and occurrences. It also doesn't specifically record any one incident yet attracts the attention

of authorities that could play part in ceasing the cause of artist's severe distress and of the suffering humanity on the whole. As a matter of fact, Nagori talks to the people, for his people and he does so through his much expressive and aesthetically composed artworks. His dialogues are biting and his sermons are provocative. His paintings which were instigated by specific emotions of distress evoked specific emotions of concern and in doing so he himself underwent specific emotion of respite. Thus, his art introduces a new form of art –art as visual discourse. While discourse here, describes a structure which extends beyond the boundaries of the statement and what is beyond the boundaries is the after math of all that coerced the artist to say something as well as how he said it, who listened to him and how the listener countered it. In other words, such art must be indicative of the emotions and feelings of the oppressed and must compel the influential and the authoritative to respond. Art enables him to make his personal feelings accessible to others. Moreover, by making the best feelings of one age accessible to the next, Nagori's art plays a pivotal role in spiritual development of our society.

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