

Punjabi Cultural Narratives in Pakistani Art: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Selected Artists

By
Prof. Dr. Samina Nasim
Principal
University College of Art & Design
University of the Punjab, Lahore

ABSTRACT:

Aim of the Study: The aim of the research is to explore the styles and cultural significance of Pakistani paintings, highlighting the works of selected artists. Identification and analysis of common themes such as cultural identity, social life, and representation of the country's heritage, traditions, and values to highlight their perspectives and contributions to the art world is focused.

Methods: Qualitative methods with an analytical study of the artwork are discussed in a descriptive way. Recommendations for contemporary and young artists to depict cultural heritage village scenes in their paintings and promote Punjabi culture through the use of innovative surfaces. In present research, the artworks of Ustad Allah Bakhsh, Ghulam Rasul, Ghulam Mustafa and Mugheez Riaz have been selected for the study.

Results: The research presents a depiction of the paintings which shows the beauty and simplicity of village life and the cultural heritage of Punjab in the artworks of Pakistani artists. The paintings also highlight the social and economic realities of rural Pakistan. Promotion of Pakistani Art and Culture: The work of these painters has played a significant role in promoting Pakistani art and culture globally. The selected paintings are visual documentation of Pakistan's history and cultural heritage.

Conclusion: In Pakistani cultural paintings, artists created balanced compositions of rural landscapes reflecting figures, yellow and green fields, buffaloes, and cultural heritage. Every artist has his own style and vision to express his feelings through his own lens to depict village life and culture in Punjab. The depiction of buffaloes, fields, and village scenes serves as a common thread.

Key Words: Punjab, Cultural Heritage, Visual Artists, Lifestyle, Vibrant Colours

1. Introduction

Punjab has a rich cultural heritage full of visual treats, having vibrant colours, vast landscapes, lush green fields, and natural pure lifestyle. Pakistani visual artists portrayed the lifestyle and cultural heritage in their paintings. In present research, the artworks of Ustad Allah Bakhsh, Ghulam Rasul, Ghulam Mustafa and Mughees Riaz have been selected for the study. The research will focus on Punjabi cultural heritage, the subject matter of the paintings, landscape, cityscape, cows, buffalos, a variety of different trees, figurative compositions, imagery of village life, and the use of elements and principles of art in the artworks; all are a part of the study. Use of material and sustainability of the surfaces are also under discussion. In this research discourse analysis is preferred to know about the artistic approach of selected Pakistani artists. They represent Punjabi cultural narratives in their artistic expressions. The focus is on understanding how these visual narratives construct Punjabi identity. Paintings are painted to convey Punjabi cultural values and traditional Punjabi cultural narratives.

2. Literature Review

Pakistani art reflects the rich cultural diversity of the people of the region. Writers, scholars and artists acknowledge it through a distinctive fusion of traditional and modern influences. Bakhsh and Rasool's paintings are among the major artists and styles that are highlighted in Hassan's book, which offers an overview and fundamental understanding of Pakistani painting.¹ In the book by Hashmi, she examines the ways in which female Pakistani artists have influenced the nation's artistic landscape and highlights their contributions, which are frequently disregarded in popular narratives.² But in this book paintings by the renowned artists of Pakistan are not under discussion. In another book Naqvi explores the development of Pakistani art between 1947 and 1997 by highlighting and examining the cultural and political expression in artists' work. He mentioned how it affects the artistic expression.³ Nesom writes on contemporary Pakistani art, emphasising how artists have addressed issues of tradition, modernity and identity. He also mentioned the social and cultural concerns and cultural heritage.⁴ Azam gives a description of the expansion of the customs, art and architecture.⁵ Ali

¹ Ijazul Hassan, "Painting in Pakistan", (Lahore: Ferozsons, 1991) 45.

² Salima Hashmi, "Unveiling the Visible: Lives and Works of Women Artists of Pakistan", (Karachi: Women's Action Forum, 2002) 12.

³ Akbar Naqvi, "Image and Identity: Fifty Years of Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan", (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998) 25.

⁴ Marcella Sirhandi Nesom, "Contemporary Painting in Pakistan", (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2006) 30.

⁵ Ikram Azam, "Pakistan: A Cultural History", (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1997) 15.

provides detailed information on Pakistani literary and artistic traditions.⁶ The relationship between art and politics is examined by Afzal-Khan. He draws attention to the ways in which artists have criticised and questioned social norms through their production.⁷ Khan writes about Pakistan's Islamic architectural heritage, especially mosques, shrines, and monuments.⁸ All the above-mentioned literature have different objectives to mention the Pakistani cultural heritage in scholarly way. No one has mentioned the Punjabi cultural representation through artistic lens. The present research aims to contribute to the existing discourse on Pakistani art, focusing on the works of selected artists like Allah Bakhsh, Ghulam Rasool, Ghulam Mustafa, and Mugees Riaz, exploring the ways in which they represent Pakistani culture and identity through their paintings. The scholars have written on Punjabi culture, folklore, and poetic texts on the narratives of Punjab. Few visual artists of Pakistan also represented the cultural heritage of Pakistan in their paintings, but scholarly study to discuss the Punjabi culture through the artists' lens will be significant contribution to the academic writing.

3. Research Methodology

The study is based on qualitative research approach to explore and describe Pakistani paintings, focusing on the works of selected artists, aiming to provide an in-depth understanding of the subject matter. Data analysis makes it possible to understand Pakistani visual art in detail. The study is descriptive, observatory and analytical. It gives a comprehensive understanding of artistic expression towards the explanation of paintings' ideas and cultural heritage through brushstrokes. Interviews with artists, visits to the art galleries and use of social media will be the primary sources of the data collection, and for secondary data, visits to the libraries and reading of relevant books and articles will be preferred. What styles and themes are prevailing in Pakistani paintings? In what ways do Pakistani artists use their art to express their culture and identity? What role do Pakistani paintings play in South Asian art? thematic analysis will be employed.

4. Discussion

The simplicity and beauty of village life have long captivated Pakistani painters. Through their lens, numerous artists have depicted the essence of Pakistan's rural areas on canvas,

⁶ S. Amjad Ali, "Cultural Heritage of Pakistan", (Karachi: Pakistan Heritage Society, 2001) 20.

⁷ Fawzia Afzal-Khan, "Art and Politics in Pakistan", *Journal of Asian Studies*, 60, no. 2 (2001) 34-40.

⁸ Hasan-Uddin Khan, *Islamic Art and Architecture in Pakistan*, (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2006) 30.

emphasizing the significance of village life. In order to highlight the importance of Punjabi village life in Pakistani art, this study examines the paintings of Pakistani artists.

4.1. Ustad Allah Bakhsh (1895–1978) is a well-known Pakistani painter who depicted village life on canvas. He was a self-taught artist who created a distinctive style that combined traditional and modern techniques. He was born in the Punjabi village of Chakwal. His village scenes are painted with bold colours and strong, smooth brushstrokes. He captured the daily life and busy routines of the people in rural Punjab. His representations of bulls, buffaloes, and cows alongside farms, as well as his intriguing compositions of fields that depict different seasons, have contributed to his popularity (figure 1 and 2). He is recognised for encapsulating the essence of rural life in Punjab. He is not renowned nationally only; his paintings are also exhibited in international museums and art galleries worldwide. The paintings belong to village scene showcase his interest in depicting everyday life and cultural traditions of Punjab. His works are examples of the rich cultural heritage of Punjab, showcasing the region's vibrant traditions, folklore, and beauty of nature. Baksh's paintings frequently depict human figures alongside cows, buffaloes, and bulls, illustrating the profound connection between rural communities, their farms, and the livestock that sustain them. The subject matter of his paintings portrays figurative compositions with landscape compositions in a traditional way. Cultural attire embodying the essence and spirit of Punjabi culture. He captured village scenes characterized by vibrant colours reflecting the hospitality and warmth of Punjabi people. He preserves the cultural heritage of the region through his paintings and presenting the resilience and joy of its people.

In the painting "Village Scene", a depiction of rural life featuring peasants working in the fields shows everyday village life (figure 2). The artwork features peasants harvesting crops and engaging people in everyday activities. Two figures are painted behind the pair of bulls, one white with black spots and the other black, ploughing and involving themselves in agricultural work. The scene shows a strong connection between farmers, animals, and agricultural practices. The artistic use of colour and composition highlights the excitement and energy of village life and the importance of agriculture in Punjabi culture. The painting focuses on Punjabi cultural heritage and village life. The scene symbolizes the backbone of Punjabi rural culture agriculture and community life. The painting is not just a visual representation; it's a visual narrative of the people, their struggles, and their bonding to the land.



Figure 1. Village Life (1950), Allah Bakhsh, Oil on Canvas. Collection. Lahore Museum Picture by author



Figure 2. "Village Scene", (1960), Allah Bakhsh, Oil on canvas
Source: www.punjabies.com accessed January 2nd 2024.



Figure 3. Village Life (1960s), Allah Bakhsh, Oil on Canvas.
Source: www.bonhams.com accessed January 2nd 2024.



Figure 4. Women at the Well" (1970s), Oil on Canvas.
Source: <http://www.facebook.com/paintersofpakistan> accessed January 2nd 2024.



Figure 5. The Bull Cart. Allah Bakhsh (1970s). Oil on Canvas.
Source: <https://lahorenama.wordpress.com/ustad-allah-bux> accessed 3rd January 2024.



Figure 6. Rural Life with a Group of Buffalo. Allah Bakhsh(1970s)
Oil on Canvas
Source: <https://lahorenama.wordpress.com/ustad-allah-bux> accessed 3rd January 2024.

The painting titled “Village Life” depicts a group of eight labourers working in a green field harvesting and tending crops (figure 3). The figures are in bending posture over the vegetation, wearing traditional clothing and cultural attire like shirts, head wraps and turbans, while baskets sit nearby for harvesting. The artwork captures the physical labour and effort involved in farming. The tonal variety of greens and earthy tones adds interest and movement to the composition.

The painting “Women at the Well” (1970s) features women gathering water from a well (figure 4). Its colour harmony, tonal variety, perfection in drawing and depiction of Punjab’s village life – all elements are remarkable. A woman is standing beside an old stone well in a natural outdoor setting. Her traditional attire is a pinkish shirt with a purple *dupatta* covering her shoulders and head. A small clay pot is placed on the well’s edge, suggesting she is fetching water. The artwork captures a daily life moment of rural women collecting water from wells for daily use. Trees in the background are supporting the composition, and the woman is the centre of interest; her posture is relaxed highlighting the simplicity of domestic routine. The painting reflects cultural customs through realistic detail and soft colour rendering. The painting gives a feeling of calmness, with quiet surroundings showing an ordinary moment in a village. The artist pays attention to the textures of the surroundings to give a real feel of village life.

Bull Cart is a simple expressive depiction of rural life (figure 5). The other artwork depicts a rustic scene with buffaloes on the bank of river and shows a busy day of Punjab’s village life, where buffaloes are the centre of interest (figure 6). In the foreground, a group of buffalo near the water of river with a nursing calf, with figures interacting with the animals. The background depicts a landscape with trees, a mud house, and open fields under a soft sky. His precise brushwork, balanced compositions, and use of light and shadow create perspective and depth in the painting. His colour palette with muted tones and realistic rendering conveys calm realism.

4.2. Khalid Iqbal (1929-2014) landscape Pakistani painter is famous due to capturing the exact environment and time of the place. His landscape paintings are a true picture of dedication and concentration on the spot. As an art educator, he explored various themes. Iqbal's village scenes are a direct approach towards rural life in Punjab (figures 7, 8 and 9). He captured simplicity with diverse landscapes of fields and captured the feeling of ambiance with tonal gradations of colours. By featuring everyday scenes and characters, his use of bold and

strong brushstrokes with smooth rendering created a sense of vitality. His landscapes depict his love towards his land, and expression is created through multiple tones of blues, greens and earth colours.



Figure 7. Landscape, Oil on Canvas by Iqbal Hussain. 35 x 45 inches
Source: "The News", Dated 29 June 2014.



Figure 8. Landscape, Oil on Canvas by Iqbal Hussain. 30 x 40 inches
Source: "Dawn", article, Dated 8 November 2015.



Figure 9. Landscape, Oil on Canvas by Iqbal Hussain. 30 x 30 inches
Source: "Tribune", article, 2nd February 2 2025

4.3. Ghulam Mustafa (1934-2001) is another Pakistani painter explored various subject matters and themes regarding village scenes in his paintings and represented Punjabi culture. He is another Pakistani painter who explored various themes, including village life in Punjab. Mustafa's village scenes are marked by a conscious feel of serenity and tranquillity, often featuring women engaged in everyday activities. His use of colours and gentle brushstrokes is creating a sense of intimacy and warmth in his paintings. Mustafa's village scenes are marked by sensitive views of everyday activities. His use of fresh colours and brushstrokes creates a sense of attachment and warmth in the paintings. Some notable works by Ghulam Mustafa include "Amaltas", "Landscape with Red Floral Trees" and "Paintings with *Tonga*" are a few of his masterpieces (figures 10 and 11).



Figure 10. Landscape with Red Floral Trees. Oil on Canvas. 24 x 30 inches.
Source: artciti.com accessed 2nd Feb 2024



Figure 11. Paintings with *Tonga*. Oil on Canvas. 36 x 48 inches.
Source: artciti.com accessed 2nd Feb 2024



Figure 12. Rural Landscape. Ghulam Rasool Oil on Canvas 17.5x12 inches.
Source: Ejaz Art Gallery Lahore.



Figure 13. Fields. Oil on canvas. 24 x 48 inches
Source: cliftonartgallery.com. accessed 3rd January 20



Figure 14. Mustard Fields. Oil on Canvas. 36 x 36 inches
Source: cliftonartgallery.com accessed 3rd January 2024.



Figure 15. Misty Green Field. Oil on Canvas 24x34 inches
Source: cliftonartgallery.com. accessed 3rd January 2024



Figure 16. Green Fields. Oil on canvas. 24 x 40 inches
Source: cliftonartgallery.com accessed 3rd January 2024



Figure 17. Fields. Oil on canvas. 24 x 34 inches.
Source: cliftonartgallery.com accessed 3rd January 2024.



Figure 18. Fields. Oil on canvas. 36x36 inches
Source: cliftonartgallery.com accessed 3rd January 2024.



Figure 19. Green Fields with Buffalo. Oil on canvas. 30x40 inches
Source: cliftonartgallery.com accessed 3rd January 2024.

4.4. Ghulam Rasul (1942 - 2009) a Pakistani painter born in the village of Narang, Punjab, is known for his vibrant landscapes of rural areas of Punjab. Rasool's village scenes were characterized by intricate details and senses of narrative. He usually painted village scenes with green and mustard fields, buffaloes and figurative compositions. His painting "Rural Landscape" featured an everyday scene depicting animals and figures with trees and fields. A strong feeling of summer rest time is creating bold expression through lines and vibrant textures (figure 12). His textured technique appears more spontaneous by focusing on the central tree to frame the activity. It shows more mythic or poetic elements reflecting Punjabi folklore. Four buffalo grazing on the left side, three figures (women in colourful attire) sitting under the tree on the right, and a textured, oil-paint-like style with vibrant greens and blues show strong composition. In comparison to the work of Allah Bakhsh's smooth brushwork, refined details, and subtle light effects, Ghulam Rasool's work has visible textured strokes, creating a rugged, expressive surface that adds tactile quality to the greens and blues. Vibrant greens and blues in this painting, enhancing the lively atmosphere of the rural setting, evoke an emotive, poetic vibe, stressing cultural identity and rustic simplicity through symbolic elements like the tree and buffalo.

The painting composition is divided into three horizontal zones connected with each other. In the foreground is a yellow-green field speckled with tiny yellow dots representing flowers with light reflections and the texture of grass. (figure 13). Two groups, one of human figures and the second of buffaloes, overlapping each other. In the background tall, slender bare trees stand aligned in the background. The composition emphasizes colour contrast and atmospheric simplicity, focusing on the harmony between earth, meadow crops and overall scene.

Greens, yellows, and a few spots of red, burnt umber and blue are creating contrast. The painting presents a vibrant village scene with three main zones. A bright green field speckled with yellow dots, flowers or grass tips, giving a feel of texture to the surface. In the middle of the composition is a mud-bricked house with a teal door and an open doorway where a figure stands, indicating daily life. Cows and buffaloes stand nearby, adding rustic charm. The composition uses bold colour contrast, yellow and green fields and focuses on everyday rural life, capturing the atmosphere of a peaceful village life. [Green](#) field in the foreground and a mud-brick house with colourful cloth strips on the roof are supporting the composition.

The painting "Mustered Fields", again, has rural subject matter depicting a village scene with a fresh green-yellow field in the foreground; a simple mud-brick house with clothes hanging and figures near the doorway are part of the scene (figure 14). The work is focusing on everyday village life with bright, textured brushwork. Compared with Bakhsh's smooth surfaces of light and shadow, Rasool's textured application is visible in the field's stippling that gives a lively brushstroke feel. Bold greens and yellows in the field and bright clothes, creating energetic contrast against the muted house. The painting shows a rural setting with a bright green field in the foreground dotted with yellow flowers or fallen leaves. The leaves application is similar to the Western painting style Pointillism. In the background is a simple mud-brick house with a teal door and an open doorway where a person stands.

A blue-tinted image of cows walking in a green field (figure 15). The painting features a blue-green-tinted view with several cows moving across misty, green fields. The cows are composed in a horizontal line, silhouetted against the blue sky, depicting a herd walking through a foggy atmospheric landscape with a feel of the winter season. The mist softens the view, adding depth and mystery. It emphasizes tonal gradients and atmospheric perspective, focusing on light and mood rather than sharp detail, typical of expressive landscape work. Cows in such settings often symbolize tranquility, rural life, or the harmony between nature and animals.



Figure 20. Landscape. Oil on Canvas by Mughees Riyaz 30 x 30 inches.
Source: www.myartguide accessed 4th January 2024.



Figure 21. Buffalo with Crow. Oil on Canvas by Mughees 35 x 40 inches.
Source: www.dawn.com 2nd December 2023 accessed 2nd January 2024.

4.5. Mughees Riaz (b. 1968), is a Pakistani painter known for his oil paintings presenting Ravi riverbank buffalos and crows as expressive depictions of his interest in painting village life and the cultural routine life of the surroundings of the River Ravi. Riaz's village scenes are characterized by bold colours and rendered brushstrokes. His paintings capture Punjabi culture with vibrant and expressive depictions of landscape scenes with the Ravi River, buffaloes, and crows as the centre of interest.

His painting “Buffalo and Ravi” presents a brown buffalo resting on the golden ground near the Ravi River and a small bird perched on its back, set against a hazy sky with distant trees (figure 20). The main subject matter of his paintings is buffaloes and crows. An atmosphere is created with soft light, and a misty background gives calmness and a sunset-like mood, highlighting the relationship between buffalos and Ravi with crows. The presence of a crow on the back of a buffalo shows the natural cleaning often seen in rural settings. The setting suggests a rural Punjab environment, where this kind of scene is a part of everyday village visuals.

Buffaloes need plenty of water for drinking and wallowing. The Ravi’s banks provide easy access to water, especially in Punjab’s hot season, where they cool off and take bath in the river. Mostly, all the above-mentioned painters painted buffaloes and fields but in their own style, having variety in their implementation of materials. In Punjab’s farming system, buffaloes are used for plowing fields and milk production. Farmers keep them near water to ease their daily care by providing them a comfortable environment.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is observed that the paintings of selected Pakistani artists share common threads that reflect the rich cultural heritage and rural landscape of Punjab. One of the most striking aspects of their work is the presentation of buffaloes, yellow fields, and green fields; a variety of trees; crows; and daily rural life scenes. These views serve agricultural roots and the traditional living style of villagers. The use of vibrant colours, such as yellow and green, adds warmth and growth to paintings, capturing the essence of Punjabi culture.

The painters have made significant contributions to the art scene, capturing the sensitivity of rural life and traditions in their work. In the paintings they are celebrating village life, highlighting the social and economic realities of rural areas and also presenting the struggles and hard work of farmers and villagers. The painters are promoting Pakistani cultural heritage through their artistic lens, showcasing the beauty and simplicity of village life. Their work not only celebrates the traditions and customs of rural Pakistan but also provides a preview of the lives of ordinary people living in villages. The analysis reveals several themes belonging to tradition and Punjabi culture that are common across the paintings, like rural landscapes, everyday life, and rural cultural traditions. The visual language facilitates an understanding of the relationship between artistic vision and cultural traditions, shaping national identity through art. The paintings by Bakhsh, Iqbal, Mustafa, Rasool, and Riaz significantly contribute to the observation, appreciation, and celebration of Pakistan's cultural heritage through artistic expression.

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