



*A deadly silence behind the serenity of landscapes painted by Mughees Riaz*

**Sadia Arshad**

Assistant Professor Fine Arts  
Department of Visual Arts  
Institute of Visual Arts and Design  
Lahore College for Women University  
Lahore, Pakistan

**Abstract:** Art in Pakistan flourished in robust manners during last two decades but the documentation about the progress of evolution of art scene is still scanty. Artists from different domains of art are performing a high caliber of productivity in their respective field which needs to be acknowledged and appreciated. This article represents the art works of Mughees Riaz. He is one of the mature artists from the current generation of Pakistani artists. His paintings reflect a particular mood which is documented by some critics as 'peace' or 'serenity' with reference to artist's inspiration from nature. Whereas this article suggests that the mood in his paintings is in fact a kind of deadly silence which is actually the outcome of artist's experiences and survival in the current socio-political circumstances of the country.

Moreover this article presents a detailed analysis of artists painting compositions and philosophical aspects.

**Keywords:** Art In pakistan, contemporary art in south Asia

Mughees Riaz is one of the mature artists from the current generation of Pakistani artists who started his career in the late 1990s after getting MFA degree from the University of The Punjab, Lahore Pakistan in 1997. He painted landscapes without human figures and also opted for figurative compositions. His inclinations appeared to be the representation of evening scenes, particularly in a soundless setting. Apart from this, he also created gorgeous sunset scenes around the River Ravi in Lahore. He has composed the river under the expanse of a wide sky with the presence of any of a series of objects; such as a buffalo standing alone in the center of the painting (Fig 1), boats with a few trees near the bank of the river; or only a flag entrenched on an unidentified grave.



*Figure 1. Golden Buffalo painted by Mughees Riaz, oil on canvas 91.5 x 91.5 cm*

He tried to give voice to his silent art by the addition of life in the form of birds or animals to his creative surplus. But the feel one gets in his landscapes and figurative compositions is one of immobility. An unknown stillness prevails throughout his work. His paintings evoke lonesomeness and emptiness. This theme seems a common factor among most of his contemporaries as well. The only difference is that Mughees's presentations are more personal and a product of the world of his own imagination.

His paintings have a sense of calmness and are steeped in tranquility. They take us beyond our mundane world into the otherworld of the artist's own perceptions. As he has said it so well, "my work is a simple reflection of my inspiration. I always wanted to amalgamate nature with my inner feelings. Fascinated by nature, I have always derived immense satisfaction and pleasure while creating the wideness of a blue sky, or the soft tranquility of a river in motion. The repose of a field of fresh green grass with grazing buffalos and opportunistic crows scattered in it is a tonic for my imagination. A brown landscape, a pink sky especially a "kaleidoscopic sunset" always compels



me to paint and express my love for nature. I just pour my passion into these subjects and in return these images become me". (Mughees, 2008)

Through his statements it becomes clear that his inspiration is his own inner world. Everything from his surroundings or Nature is transferred onto his canvas after being drenched in the color or mood of his internal ambiance. Moreover the significance of the bird 'crow' as he said it 'the opportunistic crow' suggests some deeper meanings. It is not just a simple presentation of a bird in his paintings. It becomes a symbol of those people who actually take advantage of any situation. It can be a hint towards the fraudulent persons who do injustice to others by their unfair means. Marjorie Hussain compared Riaz's understanding of his paintings with the romantic realism of Ustad Allah Bukhsh in his *Bulls threshing corns* (Fig 2). She compared Mughees's works with commonly found elements of Allah Bukhsh such as 'Naturalistic simplicity, intensity of theme and a lyricism of colors' (Mahmud 1988).



Figure 2. Bulls threshing corns painted by Allah Bukhsh, oil on canvas, 121.92 X 243.84 cm

However, one cannot see such affinities yet and the folk idiom of Punjabi life as caught in Allah Bukhsh's paintings can never be found no matter how much you scrutinize Mughees Riaz's paintings.

One can speculate by matching Mughees Riaz's paintings with 'the vast skies and never-ending farmlands of the Midwest United States by an American landscape artist, Sharon France, who was inspired by impressionism, luminism, tonalism, abstract art and realism' (Dan, 2010). Mughees Riaz's Ravi embankment, skim tides, and luminous skies of Lahore have some similarities with the peaceful rural American landscapes, hazy days and wide empyrean heights in Sharon's paintings.

One of Sharon's painting *Old cabin on a misty morning* (Fig. 3) lends access to a landscape in the midst of a mood of indolence. In this picture, there are a few houses, while one of these is more salient than the others; it comes into being from within the dense atmosphere of the background.

The picture is composed in two sequences. The upper portion represents the sky and occupies a large area of the canvas, whereas the lower portion is a much smaller area and symbolizes the fields and the farmer's abode.

In comparison to that *Bank of river* (Fig. 4) Mughees Riaz has a similar approach towards composition. What is visible, however, is that the landscape remains barren as far as any atmospheric effects are concerned. This does not in any way enliven the ambiance of the picture.



Figure 3. Old cabin on a misty morning painted by Sharon France, acrylic on canvas, 60.96 X 76.2 cm



Figure 4. Bank of river painted by Mughees Riaz, oil on canvas 152.8 x 152.8 cm

There is a little hardness in the technique which is followed. Thus there is a kind of artificiality in the composition, which in many ways contradicts the aforementioned statement of Mughees, where he claims that he tries to paint and express his love for nature.



In his figure composition *Male Nude-I* (Fig. 5), he has followed the same device while presenting the main focal subject in the lower quadrant of the canvas occupying a smaller portion in contrast to the background. A similar division of composition is prominently visible in Sharon's landscape too, which is entitled as *Quiet of Pasture* (Fig. 6). The fascination with painting a flat empty background has reached such an extent that it has become the leitmotif in the figure composition. This background represents a wide bare area suggesting the existence of a wall to our senses. It is in no way different from the background as painted in a landscape (Fig. 1) mainly representing a buffalo.

In both figurative and landscape composition the depth and perspective work within the locus of a limited space because the background blocks the eye and it becomes impossible to perceive any visual beyond one's immediate sensibilities. Therefore, between a landscape and a human figure composition there is no difference of aesthetic sensibility and design aspects. The faded colors and lifeless bodies narrate a journey toward a silent and emotionless mystic romanticism instead of the realistic approach of Allah Bukhsh's landscapes of Punjab village life.

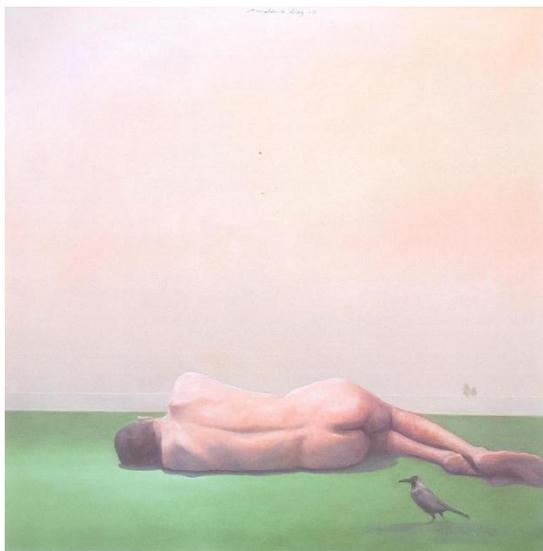


Figure 5. *Male Nude-I* painted by Mughees Riaz, oil on canvas 122 x 76.2 cm



Figure 6. *Quiet of Pasture* Painted by Sharon France, acrylics on canvas, 40.64 X 50.8 cm

Marjorie Hussain postulates about his paintings as "reinterpretations of natural phenomena" and further states that he painted "the Ravi and its surroundings under diverse conditions of light and atmosphere" (Hussain, 2008). But one hardly finds the play of light of a different kind suggesting atmospheric effects or any particular mood in his landscapes. His landscapes are usually painted with faded shades of peach, beige and lavender. So the feeling of life remains absent and the whole ensemble is evocative of an airless and humid status quo.

At the end of her article she elucidates the artist's work in the following words:

"In the artist's painting one often finds boats on the banks of the Ravi, a seemingly personal narrative that creates a sense of scale. Generally fond of animals, one finds buffaloes often comfortably inducted in his panoramas; peaceful, solid animals that introduce a comforting sense of continuity. His favorite birds are crows that co-exist with the buffaloes in his work. Riaz feels an affinity with birds, an attribute of 'hope' personified in several cultures. These simple creatures deeply incorporate the artist's work in reality....." (Hussain, 2008)

The peaceful conditions in Mughees Riaz's paintings, in actual fact, seem like a mournful silence that lasts too long. Nowhere in his paintings can one detect a glimmer of hope. The analysis of Mughees Riaz landscapes and nude figure compositions leads us to a world of desolate and downcast romanticism. Paintings from a series of male nude figures (Fig. 5, 7 & 8) on green, or some times on a red foreground, again rendered a dead environment.

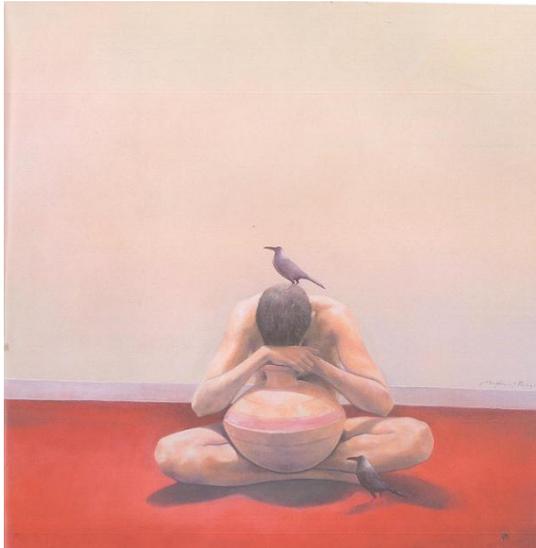


Figure 7. *Male Nude-II* by Mughees Riaz, oil on canvas 91.5 x 91.5 cm



Figure 8. *Male Nude-III* painted by Mughees Riaz, oil on canvas 91.5 x 91.5 cm

The greens did not infuse life in the figures and the same is the case with the reds. In the painting *Male Nude-II* (Fig. 7) he has visualized a seated nude in a regretful pose while hiding his face and unmentionable organs with a dehydrated and empty water pot. The picture is composed with two crows in it; one is perching on his head and one is visible on the red ground. The red surface does not produce the impression of red earth beneath the vast open sky. It appears as if it is a red carpet in a room against a bare wall. One thinks of the red carpet treatment reserved for celebrities and VIPs all over the world. The red carpet symbolically suggests that man is the celebrity of his own internal world. However the presence of the red does not show his powers, his emotions, his passions or how much he is really worth. Red connotes the bloodshed of his heartfelt desires. The repentant pose with a waterless pot on a red carpet suggests that the figure awaits death after living an extravagant and excessive life. As for the presence

of the crows, they underscore the mortality of human beings, since crows and death have a strong link with each other. It is a well-known fact that these creatures always flock together to eat carrion.

In his composition *Male Nude-III* (Fig. 8) he shows a green carpet spread out underneath a seated man who is, not only nude, and in a dejected pose, but also hiding his face with shame. He is clutching a water pot in his lap. A crow and a white cat accompany him. All scientists and even the 'Greek philosophers of bygone days believed that water is the source of life' (Symbolism of Water in Lord of the Flies, 2010). Here, on the contrary, the water pot seems empty or dry that proves to be an emblem of the deficiency of life itself. His greens do not symbolize the natural color of greenery on a vibrant and verdant earth. The grasping onto an empty water pot is sufficient proof of the futility of trying to hold onto life.



Figure 9. *A Landscape with buffalo* painted by Mughees Riaz, oil on canvas 122 x 91.5 cm



Figure 10. *painted by Red Flag* Mughees Riaz, oil on canvas 91.5 x 106.8 cm

In painting *Male Nude-I* (Fig. 5) Mughees has painted a reclining nude lying on a green ground with a crow behind his body. The presence of the crow behind the body suggests that the bird is awaiting his death so that it can get a chance to feed upon the dead meat. The flying kites in the bowl of the sky and the crows inhabiting the lonely grounds send out the same ecological message loud and clear for all to hear. Whether it is in the presence of broken clay pots, while seated on the



back of an exhausted buffalo (Fig. 9) or for that matter at an unnamed grave (Fig. 10) with his lethargic male nudes this artist confirms the ever-present danger of the twin menaces of death and decay.

More over his two paintings *Male Figure* and *Begging* (Fig 11 & 12) are mentionable with the reference to explain the symbolic representation of current socio political upheavals of the country in which the artist is surviving. *Male Figure* (Fig. 11) presents the torso of a male and his head is covered by a very specific kind of scarf. It can easily be understood as an emblem of the presence of extremist Muslim community in the country. The male figure is still and stiff and the activity by the birds which are almost in mating posture resting on his head clearly reflect a kind of mockery on the socio political status of the specific people.

Whereas another very interesting composition with male nude entitled as *Begging* (Fig. 12) open up the side of economic depression and social status of general public or ruling people within the current Pakistani society. In this painting he composed a human figure hunkered down in a plea most probably for food. And symbolically a chicken is present on his back resenting silently without any fear. This is a clear satire on the country men or political authorities by the artist that they are not attentive to the resources they have in their hands but continuously they are begging for the economic help from different international sources and the World Bank.



Figure 11. *Male Figure* painted by Mughees Riaz, oil on canvas, 121.92 X 91.44 cm



Figure 12. *Begging* painted by Mughees Riaz, oil on canvas, 91.5 x 91.5 cm

Presently and previously Mughees Riaz is presenting a sense of lonesomeness, silence and emptiness in his landscapes along with a social satire through figurative composition. The analysis of his paintings undoubtedly suggests artist's intentions to present human insecurity, helplessness, death and decay. Anna Ali supported the presence of the concept of death and decay through commenting on his work. She said “

“The stillness of the figures is symbolic of man's helplessness in modern times – the perched crows and chicken on his body confirm that fact, as no bird will rest easy on an active human being. Riaz's work alludes to the condition that his country finds itself in, where extremism, sectarian violence, suicide bombings, drone strikes and target killings have rendered its populace helpless. His still figures symbolize death – juxtaposed dramatically with the pottery urns that allude to the opposite – the omnipresent cycle of hope and life.” (R. Amina, 2011)

Mughees Riaz has consciously deliberated on the mysterious silence which is such a staple trait of his paintings. It is the true dawn of the individuality of his inimitable and intimate art.

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