

THE ART OF A SOUL SEEKING  
SALVATION

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## ABSTRACT

Syed Sadequain Ahmed Naqvi is a highly acclaimed painter artist of Pakistan recognized worldwide. Sadequain's work has drawn much appreciation and criticism alike from the art connoisseurs. His work has actively been analyzed to gain knowledge about the true character of his creations which in turn helps to explain his deeper self as an artist. His work is loaded with enigmatic metaphors having inherently profound connotations. His painting as a medium of expressing his pursuit in life explains the spiritual nature of his quest which is to seek ultimate spiritual salvation. This study is an attempt to explore perception and insight of the artist by analysing the inspirations of his paintings working towards his spiritual goal to achieve salvation as revealed and understood through his artwork. His work is analysed by means of formal and contextual analysis, keeping in view his individualistic style and discreet visual lexis where his characters come alive on canvas as metaphors for his spiritual quest.

Syed Sadequain Ahmed Naqvi (1930-1987) possessed an iconic stature in the short history of Pakistani art. As is the case with all other eminent artists Sadequain's work has been extensively reviewed and underwent critical evaluation of all sorts. An artist's creative produce is usually analyzed to reach the true nature and character of his creations which helps to attain knowledge about his inner or deeper self. As is discussed by E.J. Walford "Art contextually is an expression of the key values, insights and aspirations of its makers, their patrons, and the surrounding culture. The exploration of style and media of art in such ways that connect with larger human concerns exposes the readers to their whole selves. Four dominant human concerns to be found at all times in all cultures are: Spirituality, The Self, Nature, and The City."<sup>1</sup>

Sadequain has emerged on the art scene of Pakistan as a master painter possessing an enigmatic personality, a gifted potential in draughtsman ship and a fecund imagination. His expressionistic, surrealist rendition of his subject matter has however inherently profound undertones. His painting as a medium of expressing his aspirations, whereby he articulates his own human concerns albeit embedded in culture, speaks volumes of his artistic and inner quest. His quest is not temporal in nature rather it sifts through the layers of inner self to discern the veiled, cryptic soul. The inspirations for his artwork appear to comment on the nature of his seeking soul which surfaces from within onto the canvas crying for salvation. This paper intends to explore artist's perception and insight regarding his pursuit in the spiritual realm as exposed through his artwork. His work will be interpreted by formal and contextual analysis leading to the discussion of iconology of the themes and metaphors he discreetly employed as a reflection of his spiritual quest.

The imagery employed by an artist comes usually as a response to the encounters with the outer world as felt by his deeper inner self. The artist's perception and outlook on life is far distinct from that of other mundane individuals in his surroundings. He analyzes the truth and complexities of the commonplace events with his own discreet mental faculty and recreates it with yet a unique approach of his own. Rookmaaker maintains that all perceptions

are spiritually directed for the artist whether or not they are oriented towards theology.<sup>2</sup> Many authors in the book *Art as Spiritual Perception* present the view that various artists generally express their spiritual aspirations, religious beliefs and humanity's place in the bigger scheme of things in their artwork and try to reveal spiritual truths through the depiction of natural elements. This approach alone has put religious themes and spiritual perceptions on the map of history of art.<sup>3</sup>

Hence artists like Sadequain create their art with the help of insights and perceptions which are spiritual in nature. They paint however they feel about all that is presented to them and are able to produce a diverse symbolic and allegorical vocabulary of images on their canvases. All sorts of subjects that act as inspirations for the artist are discerned by way of perceptions. In an artist's perception thus all existing objects may signify and explicate complex themes and phenomena. Therefore it is important for the interpreter also to develop an expanded perception of artist's work which attempts at understanding the possible undertones of his art. Robert Pepperell has articulated this point in these words "Visual perception and aesthetic response can vary from cognitive interpretation of an artwork. Sensory data gathered from visual system may not always be capable of being integrated with semantic knowledge".<sup>4</sup> Joe Sachs describes perception referring to Aristotle "as a faculty based on pure intellect besides five ordinary senses with the power of which we distinguish and understand imaginations and all that lies beneath the superficiality of things that appear on surface".<sup>5</sup>

This discussion about perception leads to the idea that realities are complex and holistic and which exist as comprehensible concepts, notions, feelings, ideals and principles etc. They can be distinguished and perceived by means of intellect and artist's inner response to his outward inspirations or his outward response to his inner aspirations. It is therefore inferred that the perceptions largely depend on personal experiences and the insight of an individual. One state of affairs might be excruciating for some but may not even spur slightest agitation in others. The artist keenly observes such dichotomy which spells the paradoxical nature of realities. Sadequain's art also is a testament to the fact that he constantly absorbed from his environment within and without as is discussed later, and his art is the reflection of this penetrating introspection through which he was able to bring soulful art works to his audience.

Art though is not merely a creative act to manifest an artist's environment through his poignant brush strokes but simultaneously a process of self-discovery. John Holcombe suggests that most of the times art crops up from some intense underlying personal sentiment or predicament as suffered by their creators that it is commonly construed that emotion might itself be the defining attribute of art. But he further comments referring to Croce who considered art to be an intuitively inspired activity and that to create art is "not simply letting off steam, or imitating actual feelings, but expressing the personality of the artist as it evoked some larger soul of man."<sup>6</sup> He furthers his point by implying that art is such a vital creative activity which "basically serves no end beyond itself." Holcombe highlights the personal nature of art as a medium of expressing the inner and emotional self of the artist. Whereby he vents out all the repressed energies for his own growth and may even seek an escape from or abnegation of temporal attributes of self and existence. He also remarks on the metaphorical nature of art to be an indispensable tool for the artist to comment on the "ineffable" in a most fitting manner and enable the society to appraise reality from the viewpoint of the artist.<sup>7</sup>

This leads to the fact that a man's very struggle is about deliverance from negative or pessimist states and to acquire the capacity to entering the fertile plains of hope and personal edification. Knowing or realizing ones potentials on the personal scale is of mega significance with far reaching implications. The artist becomes an inspired artist only when he wakes up to the comprehension of beneath the surface realities about himself and his surrounding environ. As he begins to understand the vanity, and expendable nature of the outwardly existence of things, a tumult follows inside the very being of the artist seeking his own truth as is evident in Sadequain's work also. He appears to be suffering from immense pain and agony of hopelessness through his experiences in the outer world and the infuriating turmoil in the inner-self. It is the inner self which relates to the sensitivity of the encounters with the real world in the real perspective and seeks salvation. Salvation sought is the beginning whereas salvation accomplished is the culminating point of self-realization. It redeems and liberates a soul. It is a liberated soul which is all set to acquire its actual and pristine nature of eternal bliss, wisdom and infinite perception which becomes the ultimate goal of a seeking soul.

The concept of salvation is of prime importance in an individual's life. The concept is inherited in the legacy of his belief

system. Almost all religions revealed or evolved, came up with the promise of salvation and redemption for his being both material and spiritual. Encyclopaedia Britannica explains the concept as “deliverance or liberation from fundamentally detrimental conditions, such as suffering, evil, death, or sin and penalty of sin so as to attain a better state”.<sup>8</sup> Ernest Valea reflects on the idea of salvation as analysed and compared on the basis of world religions which is stated here because of diverse inspirations Sadequain has used to demonstrate this subject:

Concerning the meaning of salvation from an eternal perspective, the views are again irreconcilable. In the pantheistic religions salvation corresponds to the fusion of the impersonal self with the Absolute, implying dissolution of knower and known. Others, such as Buddhism and Taoism, take salvation as an illumination, meaning a discovery of and conformity of oneself with an eternal law that governs existence. For most Eastern religions liberation equals extinction of personal existence, whether the self remains eternally isolated (according to the Samkhya and Yoga *darshanas*), merges with the Ultimate Reality (in pantheism), or is itself an illusion that ceases to exist (in Buddhism). Dualistic religions see human salvation as a return to an initial angelic state, from which one has fallen into a physical body. The monotheistic religions define salvation as entering a state of eternal communion with God, which means that personhood will not be abolished but perfected.<sup>9</sup>

By closely examining the theories about salvation it is not hard to deduce that the spirit behind the concept is to achieve the termination of the state of damnation. This state is although mostly subjective but at the same time perceptual in nature but does signify one fact; which is hoping to being saved or liberated from any undesirable condition one finds oneself to be in. The troubled condition may result from a sense of loss in the worldly realm or from spiritual turbulence. Regardless of the nature of suffering, the soul gets to be inflicted upon by all that is endured by the human body, mind and heart; hence a cry for salvation arises inside of his being. Salvation therefore might be a desirable virtue and an asset for those who are looking for gains in a promised heaven. Whereas salvation is a divine promise for those whose souls are ready to reach out to grow to their full potential, be rid of inner agony and find a balance between the dichotomy of visible and actual, of deeds and inner purity. This spiritual freedom is the aspired state of the creative, introspective artist. This is where his soul reflects on his experiences and he realizes intuition and receives inspiration. Salman Ahmad in his book about Sadequain, *Mystic Expressions*, writes:

Sadequain illustrated selected works of Ghalib, Iqbal, Faiz and himself to reveal various states of self-realization and consciousness. These paintings transcend our dormant susceptibilities as archetypal expressions of mystic vision. They hold a beacon to the path of enlightenment, guide through the gateway of spiritual freedom, and provide a conduit to transpersonal truth. In these paintings, Sadequain seeks to share his observations, experiences, and interpretations of the truth, and his relationship to the world around him and beyond through the poetry of his choice.<sup>10</sup>

Sadequain as an artist assimilated much from his surroundings and tried to glean the truths from his observations. His experiences with his environs, which include social and political climate, were vast and profound. He had seen times of social upheaval and of geographic divide fragmenting the very nexus and cohesion of the society he had known. He had seen men becoming recluse in the wake of deprivation and desolation having suffered at the hands of cruelty of destiny. He had also been a witness to innumerable dismal hands raised in prayer gesture awaiting a saviour bringing salvation to their barren lands and drab lives at the scorched plains of Gadani<sup>11</sup> where he settled after migrating to Pakistan.

Sadequain's journey was not one of shifting places and changing landscape, rather like many other destitute and impoverished souls, his was a journey through the states of homelessness, migration, destitution and disillusionment. It is only after having experienced such turmoil was he able to actually reflect on the uncouth realities of life. He was not the artist who belonged to the gentry neither was his art meant for the elitists. He himself was reported to have labelled himself as the artist of the dustbin. This kind of abnegation of personal pride and conceit in favour of crude truths echoes loud in Sadequain's art. One can always capture the flavour of cynicism, irony and derision in his paintings and poetry alike blended with an air of gloom.

Asim Fared writes about Sadequain "Sadequain was self-destructive and spiritually tortured. To see this is to understand his work".<sup>12</sup> which suggests that all the ugliness of his circumstances tarnished his being and left a mark on his soul. This is not to say that it deteriorated him rather his creative faculties flourished and his spirit bloomed in wake of his tormented state. He managed to compare the dispensable nature of physical existence against higher ethereal goals. He let himself become a hermit; sought refuge in solitude to let his inner infernos well ignited which would allow

him to receive his inspirations to produce epic tales of man and his struggles. As Farid further proposes “It is in retrospect that we may now see that this unconventional figure was a vessel through which the divine communed with man”.<sup>13</sup> and As Leonardo da Vinci has said that “the painter always paints himself”<sup>14</sup> is to say that all artistic endeavours are but the allusions of the perceptions of the artist about himself and his surroundings and his art is his struggle and quest of self-discovery.

In his quest Sadequain let the entire grotesque imagery of his society penetrate his consciousness in order to contribute even more to let others also see the world and life from his perspective. The evolution of his work bears witness to his evolving self. He started off with nude human representations, went on to describing parables of human plight, then took to converting poetry into pictures of renowned visionary poets and eventually settled at producing mystifying Quranic calligraphic paintings. Not content by producing pictorial art alone the restless Sadequain also tried his hand at writing poetry. He has produced immaculate quatrains much in the fashion of Omar Khyam the poet, whom he seems to be inspired by. He himself proclaims that he created poetry through his pictures and he would now produce pictures in poetry. This paradigm shift in his interests and inspirations is nonetheless an evidence of the growth and progression of a soul which transcends the limits of the known into the search for the baffling unknown.<sup>15</sup> This suggests that it is a search for enlightenment attained via salvation, as is portrayed in his self portrait where he paints himself akin to the Lord Buddha “*the fasting Sadequain*”. (Illus: 1)



Illus: 1-Fasting Sadequain

Image courtesy: <http://www.sadequainfoundation.com/paintings/>



In order to understand and interpret Sadequain's work it is crucial to be acquainted with his inspirations. He approved and recognized much with all modern art movements specially Cubism, Surrealism and Expressionism. But Sadequain was also much inspired by the Renaissance artist Michelangelo in spirit of his ideals, and rendition of his subjects painted as metaphors for sublime concepts of irony of deeds and fate, salvation and redemption. He himself has said that he takes the divine Michelangelo to be his tutor and mentor. He was a tormented soul like Michelangelo who was in quest of salvation. His works are infested with such distressed images of man as are reminiscent of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling. <sup>(Illus:2)</sup>



Illus: 2- The Last Judgment, Michelangelo

Image courtesy: <https://100swallows.wordpress.com/2009/02/08/the-last-judgment-by-michelangelo/>

Unlike Michelangelo, Sadequain was not into personality cult. As Michelangelo had a clear notion of a saviour, Sadequain on the contrary believed that salvation must come from the inside of person by undertaking a journey into one's own soul to seek one's divine or higher self, by casting aside the basal and lowly human instincts. This doctrine of salvation is displayed in the very heart of most of his themes he chose to draw and paint. In all the wretchedness and discontent which are a hallmark of his art, there is this idea of hope and faith secreted deep inside. As disgruntled as he seems through his art it was only a depiction of awakened soul who could perceive the world differently and had the courage to comment on his own depraved self and the vile of ostentation and

numbness of the society in the most ruthless manner. He was blessed with an inexhaustible imagination that could extend the symbolic vocabulary to any limits to serve this purpose. His symbolism could capture the essence of realities which are subjective in nature though skewed, and was able to stretch the imagination to vastest horizons.

Sadequain's inspirations and subjects can be shortlisted to few metaphors repeatedly illustrated in his paintings which would be analyzed so as to grasp an idea of his stance on his spiritual quest.

**Man:** Man being Sadequain's most favoured inspiration, emerges in his paintings taking his place at the centre stage of creation, to depict him as Divine's choice to play His will, His command. Man's struggle against all odds is nonetheless a theme which accentuates Sadequain's resilient persona through his paintings. Man in Sadequain's art diction signifies action and not mere characters. As life itself is a personification and embodiment of what man makes of it, Sadequain comes up with effigies on canvas engaged in the drama of life earnestly playing their part. His imagery is loaded with the sinners and the pious, with dead souls and the immortals, with dejected and the glorified, with decadent and the pure, with seekers and the enlightened alike. Such characters are more of concepts than individuals. Whatever man has allowed him to become and whatever worth he has earned by virtue of being the crown of creation is the primary focus of the artist. When he employs man as a universal symbol Sadequain sometimes stumbles on the man's labours whereby he stands scarred, weary and dishevelled yet embracing on to hope and faith in life, and sometimes he comes across dormant, inert man who has given up all hopes and prospects of salvation. There are still more images of man where man emerges triumphant despite being surrounded by extremely precarious circumstances and goes on with his life winning over his state of dismay entering the state of peace. Apart from the context the form given to such representations of man is of vital importance and adds much to the subject. His man is drawn with strong lines, rising taller than his milieu, engaged in perfect action sometimes with tensile strokes. The overstated sizes and disproportionate postures indicate that Sadequain is not after portraying material realism but urges upon the viewer to appraise the context of the action he proposes. He adds drama with the use of chiaroscuro and bold colours which contribute in understanding the character of the person he illustrates.

The renowned personalities Sadequain has chosen for his brush to paint are the people who left an imprint on the wholesomeness called the cycle of life. They are the people who refused to vanish into the abyss of nothingness writing their memoirs on the immortal sands of time. They are the people who are not mortals but quintessence of higher attributes of man. In his painting treasures of time one can detect the flavour of Sadequain's nostalgic fascination with such giants of our historic legacy as the western philosophers Aristotle, Socrates, Plato, Archimedes, Herodotus, Sophocles and Confucius and the intellectual marvels from Arabia and Persia, Avicenna, Al-Khwarzmi, Ibn al-Haisam, Ibn al-Hayan, Al-Farabi, Firdausi, Al-Kundi, Ibn-i Rushd, Rumi, Al-Idrees and Ibn-i Khaldun. History has long acknowledged their contributions towards establishing Muslim doctrine and ideology. Leonardo da Vinci, Newton, Galileo and Goethe as the iconoclasts of their times also find their place on this world stage set by Sadequain on his canvas. The voices of the modern day world Iqbal, Einstein, Tagore, Karl Marx, Walt Whiteman and Darwin also play their part in this timeless saga woven by Sadequain's infatuation with the enlightened beings where Buddha takes to be at the centre of the composition.<sup>16</sup> The most intriguing feature is the inclusion of the artist himself in the Muslim group suggesting his place is also with these people who dared to change the course of fate in their times without paying any heed to the contempt and censure they attracted. Buddha taking the centre stage also suggests that where each character of the composition is busy working in his domain in order to realize the purpose of his existence it is actually the way of Buddha i.e. making the journey in the spiritual realm, which enables man to achieve the highest goal of salvation bringing enlightenment and self-realization. It is however important to note that the painting is a tribute not to these individuals but to the ideals they stood for.

Sadequain has used the usual colour palette of blues and ochre in different tonal values. The buildings in perspective are only painted to be suggestive of the faiths these individuals belong to. The high rising minarets also contribute in the drama standing tall as fascinated spectators witnessing the higher stature of these glorified people. The sun with a dark outline and its rays with a shadowy nimbus also describe the painting as allegorical. The sun here acts like the universal sun which is the eternal source of all energy and existence and illuminates these beings who have been the recipients of its light. The colours of the sky blended with the colours of the cloaks and the very individuals and absence of

shadows also imply that the scene belongs not to the material realm but the archetypal world in the ethereal realm. Artist's presence in this world therefore casts light on his spiritual aspirations. (Illus: 3)



Illus: 3- Treasures of Time

Image courtesy: <http://www.sadequainfoundation.com/paintings/>

**Crows and Cobwebs:** An important metaphor Sadequain has exercised in his works is the crow. It is a series of drawings and paintings he has rendered. Crow has a very significant place in the occult symbolism and enjoys different connotations and status in different cultures. In the ancient pagan societies it enjoyed prophetic significance yet in some others it is a symbol for darker forces of nature. Hence is considered a harbinger of bad luck.<sup>17</sup> In mythology and folklore as well as cultural history in general, crows are associated with disease and death due to their scavenging nature and with cleverness trickery and deception<sup>18</sup> By examining Sadequain's use of this emblem deeply one can relate to both implications of the crow symbolism. Crows are intriguingly enough sitting on man's head, hatching eggs or resting calmly on the apparently lifeless, inert human body. The imagery apparently suggests the irony that man has lost his place, dignity and glory amongst God's creation so much so that lowly creatures reign over him as he lies at the mercy of destiny as Hameed Zaman suggests that crows tease and menace the timid and mean humans who are unable to ward off these evil forces. He further comments on the use of this symbol as an insinuation by the artist on the decadence and degeneration of a petrified society as the carrion crow seems ready to devour the leftovers of a diseased community.<sup>19</sup> However if analyzed deeply, the scarecrows appear to be the metaphor for the cherished dogmas of the society which stand tall, self glorified

but have no worth or strength to change the appalling condition of man. Man however feels safe while having clung to these canons for long. He feels insecure on the mere idea of forsaking his beliefs and entering an unknown perilous realm. So static he lies to be dictated by his preordained destiny whereas revolutionary stray thoughts keep coming to him in the cloak of crows to haunt and dare them.

Sadequain thinks of himself as a man who imbibes wisdom by allowing the crow to weave nest and hatch eggs, implying his dare to dream and think creatively in a society that has long resigned to a quiet slumber. <sup>(illus: 4)</sup> He does not identify himself as another amongst the intellectual pygmies or a stooge to be decreed by a scarecrow. His path is the path of a rogue where he is content with his unconventional ways that would allow him to experience greater freedom of thought to exhume his inner self and find peace therein. The evolution of his thought process bears evidence that after having practiced his freedom he did attain some peace as depicted in the form of dove replacing crow on his head in one of his paintings.



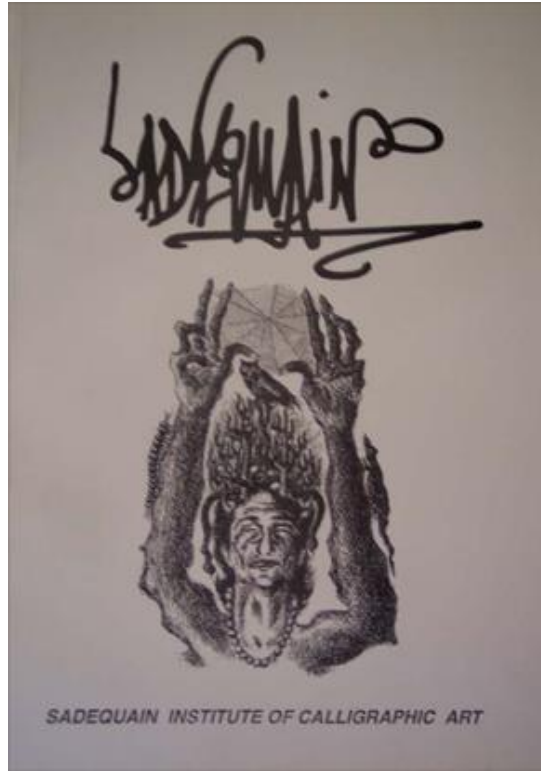
Illus: 4- Crow series

Image courtesy: <http://www.sadequainfoundation.com/paintings/>

Same is the idea behind the use of the symbol of cobweb where man seems to be content being in the prison of the slimy, eerie cobwebs. By the look of events taking place cobweb imagery goes to a level further in its implications. The grim landscape, the tall buildings and humans being enslaved by this monstrous web propose the event to be an outcome of man's own doing. Man seems to have won over material resources to glorify his worldly life and his sense of creativity and growth appears to cease with his

materialistic gains; hence the sadistic imagery of cobwebs. Webs pronounce the man's renunciation of his real potential of evolving as the human species. The cobwebs do not look like an entity of an alien origin but appear to be arising from the very actions of man himself. The actions are of pride, materialism, greed, malice and vanity. The mean lower self harbours such conditions of man leaving him a captive of his hideous desires hence pronounced as a cobweb. Realizing this fact however makes one feel that the grip of a cobweb is not much to reckon with and one blow of a firm, honest pledge to not to fall prey to the enticements of lower self will set his beleaguered soul free. Here again the misery the soul suffers is the acting theme lying deep inside the whole pessimistic drama.

The cries for salvation are at the loudest in the following drawing <sup>(illus: 5)</sup> where all the uncanny and creepy symbols come together on the being of the artist who sits in the guise of a *jogi* engaged in an eternal state of contemplation. Apparently it seems that eons would pass before the prayers would be answered hence the cobweb woven between the risen hands and the rodents and snakes crawl on the hermit so freely as he is so lost in his contemplation and connection with the Divine as to appear a nonliving entity. The theme seems to be of utter pessimism and hopelessness as if to suggest that one would almost perish in his pursuit of realization and help seems a far cry. In actuality though, the demons from his meaner self plague him; his intelligence, arrogance, ego all are reduced to be represented as crawling creepy animal symbols. This imagery is of vital importance as it conforms to the idea that the path of spirituality whereby one seeks salvation is a hazardous one and one has to deal with ones inner fiends first which is a stage in the purgation of soul. The serenity of the hermit says much about the perseverance he seems to possess in the way of God realization. The hands are shown perpetually raised to ask God of his providence and bring to him the much awaited, much needed salvation as no endeavours of human intellect can promise him this holy bliss. Left entirely at the mercy of his own resources would still leave him a presumptuous soul drifted far away from salvation.



Illus: 5- Cobweb series

Image courtesy: <http://www.sadequainfoundation.com/paintings/>

**Wilderness and Cactus:** From the enigmatic and quiet world of Sadequain's imagination come more symbols weird in nature and inexplicable in context. Sadequain has somehow glorified the otherwise very unimpressive plant, the cactus. Cacti grow mostly in wilderness oriented landscapes which other than the growth of this very species appears to be a barren, inhospitable and unwelcoming land. But cacti break open this rocky soil and prove to the world their potential of growth and resilience in the harshest of circumstances. Wilderness exemplifies the vast emptiness the artist himself feels infested with. In the barrenness and sterility of the soil Sadequain traces the impotency of his own soul which despite the fruition of his creative mind seems incapable of reaping the fruits of fulfilment. Hence stretch on his canvas the bleak, dreary long nights of soul in the form of wastelands where the morbid loneliness would dance to the tunes of nature, where the ghostly phantoms would jump out of imagination and take on the form of macabre and distorted creatures and where none but the thorny cacti would grow.



The cacti which grow on their own, untamed, untended and fed on little nourishment extracted from soil, still grow to heights and strength. The contempt and callousness absorbed from their milieu grows on them in the form of spikes. Yet they don't complain and under their hard and thick skins they also contain the pure, untainted sap of life. Christa Paula in her lot 13 also puts forward the view that Sadequain finds these cacti akin to himself as he indicates in his drawing "the transforming cactus". To him the cacti are the recluses, the hermits standing in contemplative, pensive gestures raising their hands to the Divine in hope and faith. His painting "mystic figuration" <sup>(illus:6)</sup> is such an enticing piece of work in this regard saturated with the artist's soulful experience. The cactus appears as a seated human figure, exaggerated, deformed in the usual Sadequain's expressive rendition of his subjects. Befitting the context the cactus as an entity is rendered in strong dark colours, the blue and ochre; yet a mystifying light illuminates the background where the hands spell out the name "Allah" by means of placement of fingers of hands.<sup>20</sup>



Illus:6- Mystic Figuration

Image courtesy: <http://www.sadequainfoundation.com/paintings/>

**Hands:** hands take on greatest importance in Sadequain's art. Although the complete figure of man is always exaggerated but still more highlighted are his hands. The fingers look contorted, the tips though conical but resembling the tips of either pen or a pointed paintbrush.<sup>(illus: 7)</sup> If human soul is the vessel and instrument to experience the act of Divine, Sadequain as the creator of the



destiny of characters and subjects of his paintings takes his hands to be the instrument to play his mind's will. It is his hands that have perfected the solidity of line and stroke to come up with impeccable and flawless execution of colossal images. Had it not been for the steadiness of his hands he would not have been the mighty Sadequain we know, "who might as well have painted more square feet than Michelangelo" says Ali Adil Khan.<sup>21</sup> Much in the tradition of Michelangelo's fascination with hands where the hands of God in one painting separate light from darkness, yet in another the God's touch of finger breathes in man His Divine spirit, Sadequain's hands also propose to be engaged in action in almost all of his works. From the erotic scenes to the esoteric his hands are busy unwinding the mystery of the event he has painted. Hands are shown to point to directions, to spread in gesture of prayer, to have metamorphosed to have cobwebs woven around them, to untangle the myths beneath the forms of characters and their actions, and as the carrier of seat of wisdom i.e. the heads of decapitated bodies.



Illus: 7- Hands

Image courtesy: <http://www.sadequainfoundation.com/paintings/>

**Decapitated bodies:** Decapitated bodies a theme frequently represented in Sadequain's long list of uncanny inspirations speaks volumes about the inscrutable persona Sadequain possessed. On the face of the things the subject appears bizarre and grotesque but contextually it suggests artist's desire for freedom from mind's rationale which would allow a peek into the matters of soul. Mind being the strongest inhibition which continues to reason and sustains on the resources provided by the five senses alone is

treated as a hindrance in the way of achieving intuitive faculty, and spiritual insight. This idea can further be probed by associating the decapitation with sacrifice. In all the works the headless body is carrying the severed head itself and still engaged in some action. (Illus: 8)



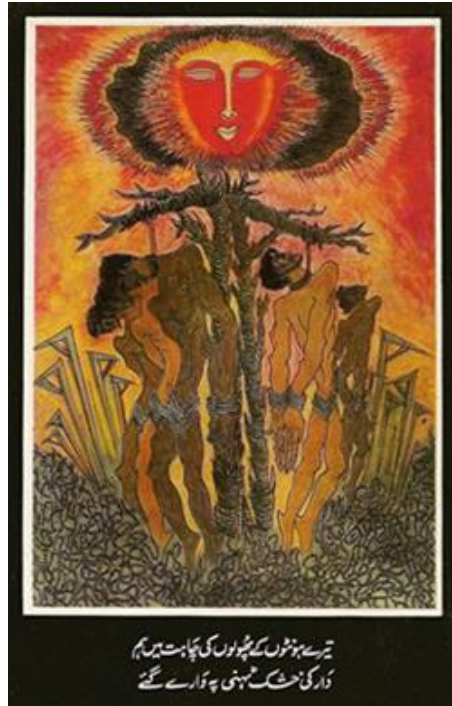
Illus: 8- The Artist

Image courtesy: <http://www.sadequainfoundation.com/paintings/>

This notion implies an act of sacrifice. Sacrifice is in itself an act of sheer selflessness which can never be a product of a thinking mind but of a loving heart and an awakened soul. Sacrifice is a theme which resonates in the art and literature throughout history, of Muslim creative artists as a legacy left by the iconic figure of Imam Husain; a practice and custom to be followed by the people of the heart in their brazen desire to stand for truth in the most hostile of conditions and attain martyrdom. Martyrdom in Islam is considered a death by consent, hence a sacrifice of highest order and purest nature man can offer on his part to claim for the blissful union with God. Sadequain seems to be deeply moved by the sacrifices of the leader of the martyrs Imam Husain. In ‘The man and his masks’ the writer says:

Sadequain was a fervent admirer of the imaginative elegies of Dabeer and their message of salvation and spiritual power through sacrifice. Karbala for him was a universal simulacrum of bad faith, injustice and tyranny. Like the great *marsiya* poets, he placed the story of Karbala in the wider context of human suffering, and of human emancipation from all kinds of exploitation.<sup>22</sup>

The spiritual power curiously enough does not lie in making miracles to change the course of fate rather embracing it with full courage, valour and fidelity for the One whom the sacrifice intends to please. This is the *sunnah* of Hazrat Imam Husain in whose footsteps later mystics followed like Husain Ibn Mansur Hallaj of Persia and Sarmad of the then sub-continent, two other figures who command a distinct place in the lineage of martyrs of truth and manage to capture fancies of Sadequain's canvas.<sup>23</sup> Hallaj famous for his heretic claim *Ana al-Haq* attracted his martyrdom to achieve complete salvation through self denial. As ironic as it sounds he looked at himself as a vessel emptied of all corporal attributes hence to draw the Beloved's presence and become a medium to speak on His behalf. In the way of his immense love and longing for his Absolute Beloved he offered himself for sacrifice and was brutally tortured, crucified and beheaded; a sacrifice which has adorned the welkin of mighty poets like Attar and Rumi, and later Faiz whose poetry Sadequain painted, and echoes as the voice of yearning souls aspiring spiritual heights, freedom and salvation. (Illus:9)



Illus: 9 painted version of poetry by Faiz Ahmad Faiz  
Image courtesy: <http://www.sadequainfoundation.com/paintings/>

Second most significant inspiration for Sadequain was Sarmad. Sarmad was also decapitated on the orders of the despotic Mughal Emperor Aurangzib Alamgir for his heretic religious beliefs which did not comply with *Sharia*. Sarmad did not surrender his beliefs and did not renounce his practices despite being fully aware of the emperor's wrathful nature and deadly intentions, hence meeting his fate of a martyr.

Such lofty personalities acted as inspirations for Sadequain for the effigies of headless bodies that stand tall in the chronicles of time as sheer symbols of devotion and allegiance to their religion of love and sacrifice. Aspiring to carve himself a niche amongst such people, Sadequain himself draws in his series "artist and the muses" an event in archetypal setting whereby Khayyam, the poet asks Sarmad about Sadequain. In asserting a relationship with Khayyam he draws himself painting mystical ideas on the mind's firmament in one figure with severed head held in the hand. While in another similar image of himself his dismembered head is crying his voice out through a trumpet in the likes of Sarmad. This gives a fair idea of the artist's aspirations as a seeker and the bearer of inner truth. He yearns to realize the same truth and love that made these great mystics arduously toil and wilfully sacrifice for. Love is the state of soul which shuns all impurities, deceptions and lies to claim nearness with the Beloved. The way of truth is perilous and asks for a truculent labour on the part of the seeker. It asks for sacrifices of all kinds of one's name, honour, status and even life. Sadequain realizes that the ascetics relinquish all the worldly pleasures deeming them as hazards in the growth of spiritual life and hence they cast off all the lies and go on to embrace the freedom which lies in realising the true nature of man which seeks Divine.

Bilal tanveer comments on Sadequain's theme of headless bodies as:

Among recurring motifs in Sadequain's work is the image of a headless man holding his lopped head in his hand. The dislodged head, sitting on the palm of the man's hand, is studying a beloved subject, while the other hand sketches the subject on canvas.

In another variation of this motif, the severed head is looking back at the vacant spot, while the brush is drawing the self-portrait of the head in blood. In all these versions, the lopped head is an unmistakable symbol of ecstatic transcendence: the head is dismembered from the body but is reunited in the subject, in the act of creation, in the contemplation of the beloved.<sup>24</sup>

The idea of ecstatic transcendence is a definite state of mystical experience whereby one is free of the falsities of self but has realised that which is Divine in ones being or soul. This experience is so liberating that the idea of sacrificing one's life and one's self comes to happen when the soul is not only advancing in the way of truth but also exploring divine love '*Ishq*'. It is only out of love that man's ego truly ceases to exist as he perishes himself to glorify the Oneness of the Beloved. Sacrifice, mystics believed is the act of utmost selflessness which would bring purest form of actualisation of the One so that no duality remains.

### **Conclusion:**

Andrew Hamilton says "At the end of your brush is the tip of your soul".<sup>25</sup> Sadequain's life reflects through his work which speaks loudly about his restlessness, discontent nature, struggle with life, self and society, and a relentless effort to make of himself a man of his own ideals. His work mirrors his journey and his quest. On his quest he made himself a recluse, sometimes an ascetic, at others a metamorphosed cactus-man and last but not the least a decapitated martyr. He was a vagabond by nature and called himself a '*Faqir*'. He said his art was not meant to be personal possession but was to be entrusted to people. He used to give away his paintings and sketches to his friends and strangers alike without asking a penny for them.

Nouman naqvi establishes in his essay on Sadequain that "Askesis or Faqr in Muslim tradition is not only recommended but urged as a form of Jihad and that Sadequain was one such artist who experienced and practiced abnegation and aestheticism throughout his life which is chronicled in his oeuvre. Sadequain inherited this legacy of askesis from Islam which he presented with Gnostic ontology of struggle with one's self."<sup>26</sup>

This lack of bondage with material yet a strong adherence to the desire to seek answers to riddles of life from within his soul was his ultimate truth; which is sign of a soul awakened to its spiritual needs. Spiritual growth leads to spiritual salvation; the ultimate state of bliss and as per monotheistic religions and eastern traditions the state of perfection of selfhood. Sadequain was informed of this reality through his knowledge, observation and experience. When he experienced the decadence in his society and in himself he unabashedly painted it thus realisation and acceptance of truths. When he suffered loneliness and faced disease and looming death in the arid and scorched desert of Gadani he found cacti as a

symbol of resilience of life. In that he found the purity and mystique of nature that abounds in all creation. When he met with the echoes of giants of history he fancied to stand among them as somebody who has carved himself a deserved niche; an attempt to make him immortal in the chronicles of history just like those great men. Sometimes he follows in the footsteps of Buddha, sometimes he becomes the Qalander of Iqbal whose poetic works he painted. Iftikahr Dadi writes:

Like non conformist *Sufis* Sadequain also digressed from the accepted norms of society and tradition thus attracting criticism which never troubled him. He was on the quest to becoming the perfect man who possesses a colossal status on a cosmic scale. Iqbal made available for Sadequain an aesthetic of modernist subjectivity characterized by restlessness, struggle, and heroism. Sadequain plays out Iqbal's characterization of the *Qalandar* as a restless, superhuman creator, with the artist himself exemplifying this character. Another verse by Ghalib suggests that art itself, and especially painting, is merely an excuse for a meeting with the beloved.<sup>27</sup>

And lastly in a final attempt at finding salvation for his soul he identifies himself with the likes of Hallaj and Sarmad who were martyrs on the path of love and truth by illustrating himself decapitated yet still undergoing a process of creation suggesting that the soul's journey goes on. All the archetypes that captured Sadequain's attention, imagination and canvas bear witness to his journey on the path to self discovery leading to achieve the blissful state of salvation or the peace within.

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