

PRISMATIC STORYTELLER: THE DISJUNCTIVE NARRATIVE IN AFSHAR MALIK'S ARTWORK

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ABSTRACT

The concept of disjunctive narrative in art has its origin in the first half of the 20th century and can be connected to art movements like Dada and Surrealism. Artists of these movements intentionally disrupted the tradition of representation and combined unlikely elements in order to explore the world of subconscious and defy reason. This trend did not just stay within European boundaries but travelled across continents and made its way to South Asia. Since then, disjunctive narrative has been an interesting and ever pertinent way of storytelling in Pakistani art, which enables artists to portray more complicated realities that are not always linearly explicable. Considering that Pakistan is a country with layered history, multicultural influences, and socio-political complexity, such narrative schemes prove to be a powerful means of expression. This paper explores the disjunctive narrative existent in the artworks of a famous contemporary artist of Pakistan Afshar Malik, as it helps him build complex and multiple levels of visual narration. The artworks fashioned by Malik are a perfect example of a prismatic style which is broken, surreal, and disjointed. This paper will address how Malik re-conceptualizes surrealism, mixing media, and disjunctive story-telling, moreover what it means within the emerging spheres of global art. The paper analyzes few of his works to explore the disjunctive narrative techniques used by Malik to express the themes of memory, recall, absence and presence, which interlace and generate a relationship between the past, present and future. These links illustrate an insightful account in the modern Pakistani art.

INTRODUCTION

Afshar Malik (b. 1967) is a renowned contemporary Pakistani artist, who created a new visual language by integrating surrealism with disjunctive narrative tools. He has taught in National College of Arts for several years, while working in almost every conceivable medium. Communication and dialogue are a special feature of Malik's artistic practice, through his art he addresses different mediums, imagery, pictorial history of the region and even himself. His paintings usually include fragments of his experiences, thoughts, memories emerging from old photographs along with surreal and unconventional images that are hard to interpret but contain several layers of meaning. These elements together in a composition, provoke the

viewer into the feat of decoding multiple symbols, disorganized memories and narratives to understand the chromatic storyline. The aesthetics of Malik are also in line with artistic trends that are contravening around the globe and avoiding an art of storytelling in a coherent narrative today, but rather a polychromatic, stratified form of narration.

Disjunctive narrative, which is fragmented, discontinuous and surreal in juxtapositions can be viewed as useful devices in the artistic vocabulary of Malik. It enables him to dwell upon a rather complicated set of problems like cultural identity, social values or subconscious desires. His work rejects linear narrative, and opens

viewers to a world of intricate symbolism and subconscious responses.

Method:

The study is based on mixed-method research on the existence of disjunctive narrative and surrealism in the paintings of Afshar Malik, a famous representative of Pakistani art, which implies both qualitative data collection and analysis methods. The methodology will rely on three main axes, specifically, profound interviews of the artist, immersive studio visits and thorough analysis of the artwork. The paper aims to find out how Malik uses surrealist modes and disjunctive narratives to explore the themes of identity, culture, and human condition within a Pakistani context. The method would help in presenting a comprehensive sense of the artistic vision and the working method of Malik within the context of contemporary Pakistani art as a whole.

As a first step of the investigation, several semi-structured interviews with Afshar Malik had been conducted. The interviews were used in order to derive first-hand information about his artistic philosophy, artistic process and influences. The interviews developed into a reflection regarding how Malik perceives and employs the concept of disjunctive narrative and surrealism, his motives in art as well as cultural and personal backgrounds underlying his art. The nature of the interview questions was open-ended, which gave Malik an opportunity to discuss his ideas and furnish voluminous responses, with all the details and shades. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to make them more accurate and easier to analyze in detail. The next step was to visit the studio of Malik to experience the working place, techniques and material used by the artist. The visits gave an insight into the practical quality of his artistic work, such as his artistic schedule, the rigs and materials he uses as well as the development stage of his artwork all the way to its final stage of completion.

The visits to the studio resulted in some insightful, informal chat with the artist, bringing more information and context to his work.

The research methodology was also based on the critical examination of a representative sample of Malik's artworks centered on the scope and dimensions of his artistic activities. It was chosen

along with the artist to make sure that it contains the works describing his usage of disjunctive narrative and the surrealist methods. In analyzing every piece of art, the element of form was also considered such as composition, color scheme, brushwork, and texture. Also, themes of every piece were examined with consideration into the kind of narratives or part of narratives presented, symbols and motifs used as well as the overall message or meaning being conveyed. The art-historical literature of surrealism and disjunctive narrative informed this analytical process as a theoretical basis behind the analysis of the work of Malik.

Literature Review:

Disjunctive Narrative and Storytelling in South Asian Art

In South Asian art the narrative tradition was based on flows and uninterrupted accounts that was the case with the classical Mughal miniature paintings, Rajput paintings and Hindu temple murals, where the stories of epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata were straightforward and presented continuously. Nevertheless, in modern times most of the artists have turned to disjunctive narrative or fragmented narrative strategies in order to stand up to the times of complex postcolonial societies, upsurge of socio-political issues, and devolution of cultural identities.

Also the modern world of the 20th and 21st centuries has styled a shift from traditional art in South Asia, still developing and growing in the course of an indirect, abstract flair of the artistic vision. This development is also partially affected by the movements of art in the world, such as Surrealism, Postmodernism, and Abstract Expressionism, that questioned the linearity and preferred multiplicity and disruption (Dadi, 2004).

Artists started working with collage, montage and layered symbolism as a method of invoking the viewer to interact with the artwork and analyze it actively. Such disjunctive methods also speak to local histories of fragmentation, whether that be partition, migration or cultural hybridity, and therefore can be used as tools of social commentary.

Colonialism, partition and the continued political tensions in South Asia has caused the South Asian collective consciousness to be

disjointed. These realities are reflected by the artists, who use fragmented narratives, avoiding mere story-telling in construction of layered and complicated images. As an example, fragmented motifs and layers of symbolism are common features in the works of Pakistani artist Imran Qureshi, these elements are often used to comment on the violence, conflict, and human resilience (Qureshi, 2014). The dislocated imagery that he employs has highlighted the sentiment of communal trauma that cannot be described in linear narration.

In the same manner, the Indian painter Subodh Gupta makes use of commonplace items in multi-strata, fragmented paintings, which conjure the chaos and hybridity of the urban society and migration (Gupta, 2011). Coupled with the existence of these stratified visual worlds, the viewers are also provoked to sift through several narratives at once, as a result of which the multilateral character of modern South Asian society is also being defined.

Disjunctive storytelling is also used by the South Asian artists to explore the themes of memory and myth. An example can be seen in the multimedia works by Nalini Malani, reflecting scattered tales based on mythology, history, and personal memory, ceasing to be complete spheres but are incoherent accounts of feelings and sentiments, this entails a sense of psychological and social displacement (Malani, 2005). Her art of disjointed images and superimposed meanings is a show of the disjunctive narrative being a linkage between myth and modernism, memory and trauma.

The paintings and drawings by Bhupen Khakhar in the Indian context, often contain both of an autobiographical and layered narration, at times illustrating disruptive social realities and personal histories which are actually too multidimensional to be delivered in a linear manner. His paintings are full of symbolism and feature different levels of storytelling, which the viewers have to unravel. Fragmented narrative is used by many modern artists in the South Asian region in order to critique governments, social inequality, and societal battle between cultures. Layered collages by Pakistani artist Nida Kanwal include fragmented representations of political protests, religious images, and urban destruction that mock practices of authoritarianism and social breakdown (Kanwal, 2019). Her artworks are the

perfect example of how the disjunctive narratives can take up a form of resistance, the capture of chaos and perseverance of the underprivileged groups.

In Bangladesh, one can trace this passion as well: artist Shahabuddin expresses the pain of war, displacement, and identity crisis in layered and fractured collages. His broken visual language identifies with the displacement of the postcolonial societies, which insists on plurality in one fabrication.

The contemporary South Asian artists still break the horizon of disjunctive tale telling, with new mediums, videography, installations, and digital art, which further highlights significance of multiplicity and a shift in expression. For example, Indian artists like Shilpa Gupta have combined layered and fragmented imagery with sound and digital media to convey compound stories of migration, politics of borders and cultural mix (Gupta, 2018). The strategy is in line with world trends, though it is highly grounded in local histories and socio-political realities, this helps to demonstrate the continued viability of disjunctive narrative tactics in the execution of complex subject matters.

Discussion:

Afshar Malik's Art Style and Techniques

An artistic style of Afshar Malik is defined by synthesis of surrealism, mixed media, collage, and symbolic disjuncture. The layering of the textures, collage inserts, and vigorous color schemes produce the effect of a prism, in a way that communicates several realities and stories of a particular artwork. Malik includes found objects, photographic images, and an assortment of digital images, unlike mediums into his practice as an approach to integrate traditional painting and seemingly incoherent, disjunctive visual language.

Saturated, contrasting colors, such as reds, blues, yellows, and greens, are also used throughout the palette of Malik and cause people to have strong emotional experiences. The manner in which he uses color strategically to reflect certain moods, cultural imagery and storytelling is in itself a distinctive language.

Malik also shows the influences of surrealism in his works, where he uses dreamlike composition and symbolism as well as imagery driven by the subconscious. His technique of assimilating a

collage of not only the material but also of contrasting ideas, is postmodern in its tendency to unshackle an image from its identity, character or limitation.

It is also significant for the artist to translate his concerns through incoherent narrative because cultural critique in the form of fragmented truth provides a less harsh window to reflect and reform. It also provides a platform for the artist to emit socially unacceptable thoughts and ideas like personal conflicts and uncertainty in relationships, in an appropriate acceptable way. The surreal layers of narration by Malik gives a feeling of prismatic account, a multitude of stories being observable on a single visual plane.

His paintings are usually full of complex structure with several things in focus, making viewers investigate the depth of the story. Malik uses dynamic shapes- swirling lines, overlapping

irregular forms and figures rendered in diverse styles, to build a sense of movement and evolution of a story.

Although most of his work is built on classical themes, such as Mughal miniatures, Malik reinvents them using contemporary abstraction, making this visual language a threshold between the past and the present. This exploitation of forms makes his work accessible and conceptual but at the same time makes it very complex as far as narrative is concerned.

The art by Malik celebrates the diversity of Pakistani culture by showcasing characters and figures belonging to a number of cliques, and by using traditional motifs with contemporary elements. His vivid tones are an embodiment of the bustling energy that Pakistani life has, as it encourages a feeling of pride and cultural continuity.



Figure1. Afshar Malik, Step into the Paradise Earth, Mix media and Acrylic on Canvas

" Step into the Paradise Earth " presents a broken landscape populated with abstracted human figures, irregular shapes, and peculiar verdure. The composition uses a layered assortment technique, creating a prismatic effect where different visual planes overlap, emphasizing disjunction. The color palette is vivid— lush green, electric blues, some earthy tones and stark white—heightening the surreal atmosphere. Textural contrasts are achieved through mixed media, combining paint with collage elements like paper.

The figures appear alienated, in a variety of poses, each busy in their world, fulfilling their unique roles, with one upside down male nude floating independently in a bubble, symbolizing fractured identities or fragmented consciousness. Vegetal elements—ambiguous shapes, divided grounds— evoke notions of memory, gravity, and personal cosmos. Irregular shapes serve as metaphors for

order and chaos, intersecting with organic forms to suggest a tension between modernity and tradition. The erectly standing figure in the bottom right corner is fully clothed and even further draped by an electric blue sheet stands out the most among the other figures becoming the central to the visual narrative, seemingly a new addition in this paradise. While other figures being nude or seminude are fading into the landscape becoming a part of it. This ethereal landscape is the artist's invented concourse; a space where there are no rules, and principles of connection between different elements don't matter. The composition resists linear storytelling; instead, it offers a disjointed tableau where viewers must piece together visual clues to get deeper insights. The overlapping layers evoke subconscious thoughts, reminiscent of surrealist ethics.



Figure2. Afshar Malik, From a Rain Cloud Album, Oil Paint Markers on Melamine Tray

Another work of Malik, “From a Rain Cloud Album” displays a man and a woman seated next to one another and yet absorbed in their own thoughts. The notion of multiple frames of consciousness are present in this image, giving it a deeper and layered meaning. The complexity of the subject is mainly embedded in the use of unnatural colors for the main characters of this story. These contrasting colors reflect that two people may suppress extremely divergent realities while sharing same space at a single moment. The quiet and alienation between them create boundaries like an abyss. Unnatural colors of the two individuals are narrating the feelings through prismatic lens of Malik’s artistry, blue color suggesting grief and discontent, while yellow hinting decay in their relationship. The two framed photographs in the background brings another layer into the narrative quality of this painting, the two sphinx like heads on an Egyptian landscape in one of the frames are facing each other yet being firm on two opposing ends, hints at the past of the couple in question. This vibrant and recurring contrast allures the viewer to muse over these signs and carefully observe the body language to decode the meaning behind this painting.

When inquired about this particular oeuvre, the artist recounted that this painting has its roots in an old picture from his photographic repository. With the intent of concealing the identity of the pair in the image, he shared the graphic source of this painting was taken at the occasion of their wedding anniversary and they recently had a serious argument. Malik revisited those days and narrated that they never had a smooth and peaceful relationship, they constantly had their conflicts forming unseen barriers between them. Furthermore, the two frames in the background were added by the artist, which were two other snapshots, one depicting their trip to Egypt and the other one was their daughter’s. They way artist has used the colors to embody emotional states and psychological realities instead of translating naturalness, is a powerful narrative instrument. Addition of their daughter’s frame in this composition reflects that in the whirlwind of a sore relationship, individuals associated to you get tangled, whether they share the focal ground with you or not. Artworks like these represent the artist’s engagement with his own past and how he now reincarnates it through art, taking the onlooker along if one can connect the dots and figure out the emotional depth behind such delineation.



Figure3. Afshar Malik, Two and Two makes Eyes Four, enamel paint markers on melamine

Unlike the previous creation, Malik’s diction in “Two and Two Makes Four” seems to have sprung from the traces of Indian miniature

paintings. One can see various streaks of his pictorial practices merge here. His usage of artistic details reminds us of the complex artistic

heritage of Lahore. It is as if you are looking at a miniature painting of the Basohli School, the Mughal court or the Sikh period at Lahore Museum. There is also the imagery that is like appreciating the beauty of a puppet show in one of our villages or seeing a familiar setting on the highway. Taking inspiration from these sources, which are not just pictorial but also cultural, Malik creates a mystic world in which there is a woman holding a parrot and a man riding a horse holding a bow and arrow, a carpet with brightly

colored geometric pattern, looking quiet indigenous is being rolled out, hinting at the rider's esteemed status. The attire of both figures find their roots in Mughal era, referring to our opulent, influential past. Use of flamboyant colors and loose brushstrokes provide the contemporary turn to a historical narrative.

In that sense, Afshar Malik has opened a new door to reality through which each of us can enter, providing one with an occasion to sort out one's own location in this wide world of dreams and stay connected to the roots.



Figure 4. Afshar Malik, Little more Umbrella, enamel paint markers on melamine

Although Afshar Malik's imagery is small in size but seems to be imperative and bold. Tiny little details are elaborately designed thus create a substantial effect. For instance, in "Little more Umbrella", there is a seminude man sitting on a red rug and a woman rushing towards him holding a little umbrella in her hand. The man with muscular physique holding gada weapon in his hands looks like a Punjabi pehalwan, there is

a car beneath him, the richly colored pattern of the car is faithfully reflected in the puddle underneath. The woman in western attire seems totally under the pehalwan's spell, his dominance is also multiplied by the glow casted by the light holder. These unlikely elements weave a narrative of multicultural society reflecting a confusing state, where there is a merger of traditional norms with modern approach.



Figure 4. Afshar Malik, Walk Around the Pillow to Sleep, enamel paint markers

Another intriguing visual that opens a new door into Malik's tale telling art is "Walk Around the Pillow to Sleep". In this painting, Malik organizes another depressing, ghostly picture where the prominent element is a single figure a man in striped pajamas, crawling on four legs. Having an animalistic posture, it is stressing on the vulnerability, primal instinct, or a reversion to

subconscious level. The body language of the man, crawling in a circle, indicates compulsive habit or ritual, to possibly indicate sleep deprivation, obsession, or search of comfort in a chaotic surrounding.

The environment is textural yet simple, which invites the viewer to focus on the man and enormous pillow, that looks like a central

element in the act nearly a religious one. Behind the figure, several large bubbles resembling eyeballs float. These bubbles are fantastic eyes without bodies and make us want to consider them as watchful, suspicious or self-spying.

The striped pajamas worn by the figure can be symbolic of innocence or vulnerability, but the repetitive nature of this design could signal either confinement or routine, perhaps symbolizing life imprisonment by society or oneself. Crawling on all fours like an animal reflects a setting back to earlier times or a primal reversion, maybe to collective unconsciousness, or at least to the best of fears and instincts. This action of revolving around a pillow that signifies sleep and comfort may imply a restless mind, lack of sleep or that thinking and trauma are cyclic. It lifts up the importance of the pillow, that can be used as a symbol of desire, safe haven, or a weak shelter. The floating eyeballs remind one of some sort of control, paranoia, or self-judgement. They can embody the eye of society, introspection or subconscious fears. That disembodied, surreal nature of the image is in line with the amount of symbolism Malik is inclined to, and it puts into a question of whether one is living in reality or in illusion.

The surreal, fragmentary composition of this scene does not allow linear storytelling. Rather, it is open to numerous interpretations, believing more in inner psychological conditions than in

external reality. The surreal imagery created by Malik reminds one of dreams or night terrors, when one is comfortable and at that peaceful moment, this feeling of ease has been transformed into a nightmare, paranoia or other primitive drives.

Upon enquiry Malik told that this disjunctive scene serves as an allegory on the human condition, one's anxiety and obsession that make sleep impossible, or the trauma and memory wrapped around and around with itself. The animal positioning, resembling a dog, alludes to sink back to bestial terror and the floating eyes have been used as a reference to external or internal mutiny.

One can find the elements of observation, censorship, and the psychological traumas of society in the socio-political environment of Pakistan. This scene of a vulnerable and animalistic figure through the watchful eyes of other people by Malik is a parable according to which the collective psyche got traumatized, paranoid and sleepless because of the constant influence of the unrest and instability.

Psychologically, the narrative revolves around the motifs of insomnia, subconscious fears, or the repetitive cycle of trauma, which are widespread in postcolonial societies, struggling with the question of identity, memory, and resilience. In this surreal scene Malik summarizes the conflict between safety and danger, sleep and dreaming, innocence and basic instincts.



Figure 4. Afshar Malik, My Head Bows Down for Fire, enamel paint markers on melamine

The composition of “My Head Bows Down for Fire” is split in two parts and contrasting backdrops in the same picture. The left side shows a street scene: a lone man with a mustache performs an action of a primitive character by taking a matchstick in his hand as he is trying to light a cigarette or a pipe. He's wearing nothing

more than a blue cap and grey underwear, sitting with his head strained, and with the body at a point of ritual concentration.

The right part changes to nocturnal landscape: dark closed door against a night sky, having a small half-moon which does not give off much light. There is a Siberian tiger that takes up most

of the foreground. With its head being lowered a bit, walking through the border of night and day. A part of the tiger's head seems to branch out into the street scene, providing the point of visual dissimilarity between the two sides.

The man's scanty clothing and even his sole action of lighting a pipe brings out a sense of vulnerability, a sense of primitivism and perhaps a ritualistic or meditative habit. The very gesture of lighting fire which is represented by the matchstick could be interpreted as a quest of enlightenment, ignition of desire or destruction. The urban or rural street scenario can be interpreted as the everyday life, struggle in society or an impulsive personal rite amidst havoc. The fact that the man engages himself in trying to light his pipe indicates that the man wants to either show, awaken, or inflame something whether hope, anger, or self-realization. The shut and sealed door might symbolize barriers, whether emotional, social, or psychological, that obstruct entry or escape. The small moon represents hope or enigma or unconscious desire during darkness.

The tiger, a leading predator, which is used to signify strength, danger, and perseverance, is shown with its head lowered as a sign of surrender, thoughtfulness, or worship. By entering the other half, it confuses lines between nature and human habitat, between primal instinct and social action, which implies conforming nature with human mind.

The splitting of the background into two opposite worlds of the street life of day and the life of secrets by night, brands the narrative disjunctive, supposed to be understood in various ways. The surrealist style creates an emphasis on the area between the primal, animalistic instinct and the social, cultural cover-up.

The artist reflected in the interview that the tiger bowing its head intends to reflect a scene of subjugation to fire- a dominating element. The insertion of its head into the street scene means a diffusion of borders between man and animal, reason and instinct, rational and primeval. This crossing indicates that there is something very fundamental and instinctual under the façade of society, that endangers beings and also makes them strong.

Through these artworks Afshar Malik emerges as a successful pictorial narrator of his time. He engages his viewer into contemplation as one

tries to unravel multiple meanings in his compositions and choice of subject matters. Since the very foundation of Pakistan modern art influenced by the European style but rooted deeply in traditional pictorial vocabulary, artists like Malik have played a significant role in shaping contemporary aesthetics in Pakistan.

Malik's paintings provoke the audience into think about the conflicts between social constructs and individual urges, it implies that enlightenment or liberation can hardly be achieved without admitting the existence of the austerity inside. The crossing of the boundaries, as well as the multi-layered symbolism of the surreal compositions by Malik, accentuate the relationship between the subconscious and the outside reality of human beings. By plunging into the gallery of these colorful memory-filled paintings of Afshar Malik, we get involved in this significant artistic tradition of analyzing themes and content, that continue to stay alive even under the new reality and new form.

Conclusion

The dramatic nature of the disjunctive narrative used by Afshar Malik is the milestone in the modern art development in Pakistan, as it introduces surrealism and stratified narration. The manner in which Malik puts together all his unlike characters, lends it a certain unique fable like atmosphere that reminds one of the traditional tales. He uses the aesthetics of miniature painting in a big way, not just as a visual style but also as a storytelling tool. A painting of such style doesn't reflect a single isolated subject but considered to be an episode of a greater story being enacted. It makes his work seem pretty deep-seated and unified in narrative, insinuating that every composition is just a scratch of a much larger world. The very description itself recognizes the inability of language to be able to encapsulate the concept behind his masterful and evocative designs. There is minimal linear rendition used in his paintings but rather, a prismatic plateaus of symbolism, disintegrated pictures and implicit themes. Malik is a critic of cultural hybridity, personal and political instabilities and identities within his visual works that pose him as a prismatic narrator of works that are layered and surreal in their fabrication.

The follow-up academic studies could discuss the influence of Malik on other new Pakistani artists, and perhaps carry the argument into online and multimedia adaptation of disjunctive storytelling, in the quest to put Malik in even more contextualized frames as a global contemporary artist.

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