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Floral Symbolism in South Asian Art: A Comparative Study of Pre- and Post-Partition Traditions and Contemporary Pakistani Painting

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Abstract

With the progress of mankind art has evolved throughout the history. In the progression of art motifs and symbols played a significant role as modes of expressing emotions and ideas. Since ancient times floral motif has been used as a potent visual expression for natural affinity, symbolizing profound spirituality and belief systems as evident in Hindu, Buddhist and cave era paintings. Even though flora defines the plant indigenous to a specific habitat but the purpose of this research is to identify the symbolism and connotations which have remained associated with the floral imagery in the artworks of Pakistani artists. The Indian subcontinent has a time-honored tradition of art-making, where floral depictions have been abundantly used to convey a range of messages – spiritual, sociocultural, and personal. To analyze the evolution of flora as a motif and symbol in contemporary Pakistani painting this research broad its spectrum viewing those paintings done under different schools of thought existed before and after the partition of subcontinent. Although Globalization in current era and technological advancement enables

today's Pakistani artist to break the mold by layering up the floral motif with innovative ideas and techniques, hints of the past influences can still be traceable in the visual vocabulary of today's Pakistani art.Employing the qualitative approach this article examines the artworks done by both pioneer and contemporary artists from Pakistan to explore the transformative journey of flora in paintings and the connotations associated with it. Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore (b.1871),Ustad Allah Bukhsh (b.1885),Abdur Rehman Chughtai(b.1897),Zubaida Agha(b.1922) Shakir Ali (b.1916), and Anwar Jalal Shemza (b.1928) will be under discussion along with the artworks of contemporary artists including Rahat Naveed Masud (b.1953), Aisha Khalid (b.1972),Tazeen Qayyum (b.1973), Aqeel Solangi(b. 1978), Rehana Mangi (b.1986),Rahim Baloch (b.1988),Sadaf Naeem(b.1978)and Imran Ali Kazmi(1993).

Keywords: Floral symbolism, Contemporary Pakistani Painting, Flower as motif, Mughal miniature painting, South Asian painting, Lotus flower in painting, Shakir Ali, Aisha Khalid

1. Introduction

Flowers have been utilized as means for emotional expression in different social context both in East and West. In old times people used to employ flowers both at the festive activities like weddings and for condolence at the loose of loved ones similarly as they do today. From centuries in different cultures flowers have been used at sacred places to develop a spiritual connection with their creator. Flowers especially Roses used as emotive connotation even today in the form of gift. From botanical perspective flowers possess reproductive qualities as they carry pollens which can grow and bloom. Flowers apart from their visual beauty allure human's senses through their fragrance. Since age's poets, writer and artists looked at flowers as source of inspiration and explored them metaphorically and allegorically in their works. Flowers beyond their visual aesthetics have been celebrated throughout the history of South Asian art due to their cultural and historical significance to express multiple meanings.

With the advent of the Mughals–Persian Muslims-a compelling synthesis of Hindu and Muslim art philosophies emerged in the region's artistic and aesthetic history.

Mughal School of miniature painting evolved under Akbar's patronage due to his interest in book illustration and manuscript ornamentation. Floral motifs in the form of stylized arabesque designs for the embellishment of miniature paintings can be seen painted in the *Hashiyas* (decorative

borders).During his patronage multiple local artists used to assist on the same painting which resulted in the absorption of Persian and Hindu art influences in the miniature paintings from Mughal era. Projects like *Razm Namah* provided favorable chance to Hindu artists to freely utilize their art practices according to their interest and that was one of the reasons behind the budding of early Rajasthan School as well (Ali, 1995, pp.28-29).Central Asian, Persian, and regional Indian inspirations budding in these jam-packed miniatures done under Akbar's reign (1542-1605) reached at their full bloom during Jahangir and Shah Jahan's patronage (Musarrat, 1998, p.21).

Due to Jahangir's visual delight in flora and fauna an inclination towards naturalism became more evident in the miniature paintings during 1605-27 where individual portrait of a flower on a single page acquired worth of a complete artwork in itself.

Apart from having different subject matter and audience Mughal and Rajput School of miniature painting exerted influences over each other especially after the artistic interactions took place during 17th and 18th centuries. Rajput painting was practiced in the courts of Punjab Hills and Rajasthan under Indian rulers, it was religious in character based on the illustration of Hindu epic of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in which figures were painted with lotus petal shaped eyes as a metaphor for devotion. Floral symbolism became more obvious in *Bundi* miniature paintings for the execution of religious subjects where lotus flowers were painted to symbolize the piousness and enlightenment of God and Goddesses.

Photorealistic botanical illustrations of flowers emerged on art scene with the advent of East India Company which gave birth to company style painting in Indian subcontinent during 1757 to 1858.During British Raj western academic style was followed by the local artists to paint indigenous flora for record purpose which was exotic for British.

In the early 20th century Bengal School of art emerged on the art scene fostering the idea of nationhood rooted in Calcutta in Bengal against the colonial rule. Usage of contemporary sense of floral symbolism became conspicuous in the paintings of artists like Abanindranath Tagore who administrated this art movement and his follower Bengali artist Ganesh Pyne who utilized flowers as symbols of optimism amidst the fraught imagery of his paintings like *Ape and the Flower.*

Over time influences of these schools got penetrate into the visual imagery of the upcoming generation of Pakistani artists. Some of them altered the subject matter of their paintings after the partition of Indian subcontinent. Abdur Rehman Chughtai and Ustad Allah Bukhsh also altered their visual imagery permeated with lotus flowers and other Hindu motifs visible in their Hindu miniature paintings based on Buddhist and Hindu mythological themes towards the subjects of Islamic and National identity and Punjab folklore.

In the newly established Pakistan to forge an unparalleled sense of nationhood artists approached their ideas with a sense of abstraction and modernism. These paintings visibly feature flowers portrayed through metaphors, allegories, and human-like characteristics.Artist like Shakir Ali utilized floral symbols in his paintings to disseminate the message of hope and love in the days of despair and war. Zubaida Agha sought sense of emotional relief in her painted abstract floral forms. Not only the figurative painters but also the calligraphy painters also incorporated flowers symbolically in their work Anwar Jalal Shemza is one such artist.

Globalization and technological advancement enables contemporary South Asian artists of Pakistan to experiment with new mediums and ideas to imbue floral imagery with innovative meanings. Flower as motif does not belong to a specific age instead it travels through different parameters of time, culture and history and still thriving as a part of contemporary visual vocabulary of Pakistani art. Purpose of this research is to explore the meaningful synthesis of floral imagery done by the painters of Pakistan from the past and present in their artworks.

2. Literature Review

Floral imagery embed with its intrinsic and extrinsic meanings has been interwoven throughout the history of South Asian art. Flowers in eastern religions retain special significance as Kossak &Watts (2001)mentioned in the book *The Art of South and Southeast Asia: A Resource for Educators* that nature remained a significant source of inspiration for the metaphorical language of artists to portray the perfect human forms where lips were painted like bloomed Lotus flowers and eyes like Lotus petals in the images.(p.24).In Hindu, Buddhist and Jain art Lotus is one such flower which symbolize spiritual purity and perfection either appeared fully bloomed or with its petals forming a plinth for divine beings for sitting and standing purpose(p.25).Such iconography

is traceable in the paintings of Abanindranath Tagore, Abdur Rehman Chughtai ,Ustad Allah Bukhsh, Rahat Naveed Masud, Aisha Khalid, Tazeen Qayyum and Aqeel Solangi.

In the period leading up to the partition of subcontinent Muslim artists frequently got inspired by floral motifs due to Islam's probation on the depiction of living beings. S. Amjad Ali stated in the book *Painters of Pakistan* that "It was also a common practice among Sultans and Emperors in Indo-Pakistan to decorate the interior of their buildings with that typically Muslim abstract decoration called arabesque. This was of two kinds: floral and geometrical."(Ali, 1995, p.26).

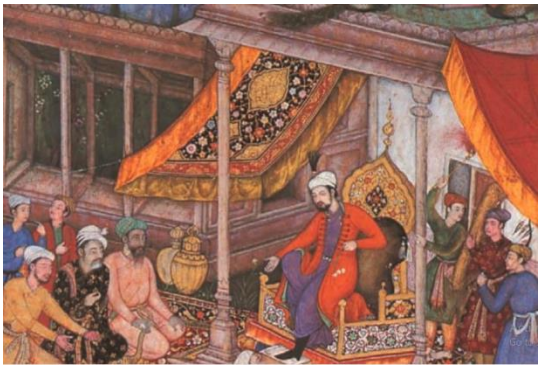
Flower imagery especially in turquoise and cobalt blue color is associated with sky and earth and when combined with arabesques and Islamic calligraphy is thought to evoke spiritual qualities in the pilgrimage (Ali, et al., 2024, p.131). Conventional motifs inspired by Muslim geometry and patterns of flower symbolize the divine systematical arrangement of existence done by God. (Kossak &Watts, 2001, p.37).

Floral forms interlaced with arabesque designs were painted in Akbar's era not only in *hashiyas* for embellishment but also as part of carpets and canopies in the scenes of miniature paintings as evident in the painting *A Crises at Court* (fig.1) an illustrated manuscript of *Anvar-i-Suhaili*.



Figure 1: Basawan, A Crises at Court.1596-1597, Opaque watercolor on paper, 25x14.2cm

(Source: Welch, India: Art and Culture 1300-1900, p.110)



Detail of Figure 1

Welch, Schimmel, Swietochowski &Thackston 1987 stated in the book *The Emperors' Album: Images of Mughal India* "that during the reigns of Jahangir and Shah Jahan flora mania became epidemic, artists of the book plucked blossoms from all available sources, from Iranian and Chinese paintings. As reminders of water, fertility, and tranquil gardens, flowers were passionately admired in Iran and India."(p.82).

Alien flowers for record purpose painted intricately with botanical details by the court painters due to Jahangir's fondness towards exotic flora. Marigold which was brought to Mughals by Portuguese from Maxico and later planted in Mughal gardens has caught Jahangir's interest. Separate and zoom in portraits of such flowers along with species were composed on individual pages as part of historical drawings of Mughal era (Das, 2020, p.101) as evident in painting *Marigold* (fig.2).



Figure 2: Marigold, 17th Century, watercolor on paper

(Source: Das, 2020, p. 101)

Flowers painted among other natural creatures possess hidden connotations. Rose among poppy often painted with peacocks and paradise birds in the borders of Mughal miniature paintings symbolizing integrity and nobility (Welch et al., 1987, p.194) as evident in painting *Shah Jahan and Prince Dara- Shikoh* (fig.3).

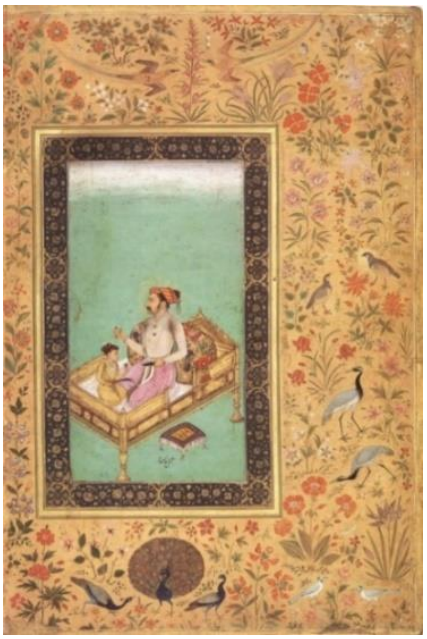


Figure 3: Nanha, Shah Jahan and Prince Dara- Shikoh, 1620, watercolor on paper

(Source: Welch, *The Emperors' Album: Images of Mughal India* 1987, p.195)

To boost the aesthetic value of illustrated manuscripts lilies, iris, poppies and marguerites in the form of botanical sprays were painted alongside birds and butterflies in the margins of miniature paintings during Jahangir period. (Percy, 1920, p.74).Sometimes intentionally a flower is shown painted in the hands of Mughal figures-a strategy utilized by the artist, who often use to make hands look as center of attention (p.83).Flower as motif got its zenith in reign of Shah Jahan especially in architecture. “Flowers were central to the decorative scheme of the Taj Mahal, because they symbolized the verdant flora of the Paradise that Mumtaz Mahal would find herself after her death. Artisans used the complex technique of *pietra dura*, inlaying coloured stones to create permanent flowers that, according to the seventeenth-century poet Kalim, would remain in perpetual bloom at the mausoleum (Arundhati Chauhan, 2023).

Rajasthani Miniature paintings are highly embedded with symbolism due to its association with Hindu religious aspect. Often in *Basholi* miniatures musical mode *Todi Ragini* is illustrated where flowers laden tree symbolize the lady's bloom of youth (Srivastava, 2001, p. 39).

The Company School emerged under British patronage, combining Mughal miniature techniques with Western realism to document India's flora and fauna through botanical illustrations by artists such as Sheikh Zain al-Din, Ram Das, and Bhawani Das as evident in (fig.4)(Egyptian lotus, n.d.).



Figure 4: Egyptian Lotus, 1780-1810

(Source: https://rammcollections.org.uk/collections/bd6e7b5e-c817-3295-8487-c7d1303ace37/).

Establishment of Bengal school unlocked doors for personal artistic expression, which was absolutely unconventional from the past practices. Artists of the Bengal school found Mughal painting and architecture both vital and irrelevant. Abanindranath Tagore's *Bharat Mata* employs the lotus as a symbolic motif to reinforce the notions of sacredness, patriotism, and devotion to the motherland. The female figure, depicted with multiple arms and elevated upon a lotus, evokes divine imagery, transforming the flower into a metaphor for spiritual purity and the sanctity of national identity.

The Bengal School of Art offers another compelling and historically significant example of the flower's representation as a vehicle for human emotions and symbolic expression. This symbolic approach is further exemplified in the works of Ganesh Pyne, who employed floral imagery as a subtle metaphor for optimism and emotional resilience within the otherwise unsettling and psychologically charged visual narratives of his paintings, as evident in *Ape and the Flower* (fig.5).His use of the flower introduces a nuanced layer of symbolic meaning, suggesting the possibility of hope, tenderness, and renewal amidst ambiguity, darkness, and existential tension. This development can be regarded as an important point of departure for understanding the flower as a metaphorical expression of human emotions and for tracing the emergence of an artistic vocabulary in which floral imagery becomes a vehicle for conveying the artist's subjective experience, emotional sensibility, and philosophical perspective.

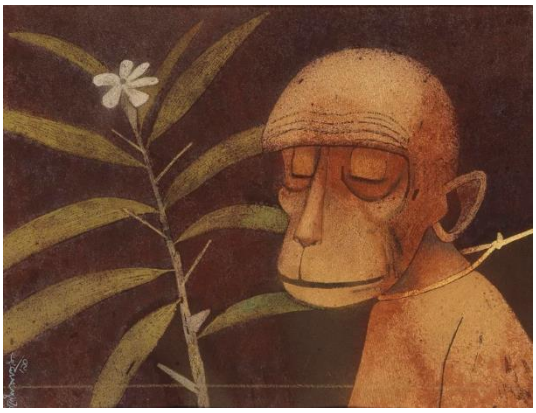


Figure 5: Ganesh Pyne,Ape and the Flower, 1990, Tempera on canvas, 38.1 × 48.9 cm

(Source:https://www.artsy.net/artwork/ganesh-pyne-ape-and- the-flower)

Later on with this flow flowers in Shakir Ali's paintings mirror the collective soul during the 1960's Indo-Pakistan war. Shakir Ali tried to overcome the fear of war days by disseminating the message of hope and zest through the blossoming floral imagery in his paintings (Ali, 1995, p.120).

Abstract floral forms in Zubaida Agha's paintings are expressive of her mood and disposition of mind as she was more interested to portray true nature of objects and thoughts instead of their physical appearance (Hassan, 1991, p.52).

Anwar Jalal Shemza was the first Pakistani artist to set the standard by elevating calligraphy into an absolute expressive visual medium. He incorporated meaningful floral forms along with calligraphy in his paintings from roots series exhibited in 1986 (Sirhandi, 1992, p.49).

3. Materials and Methods

The study utilizes a qualitative approach and follows the formatting and citation guidelines established by the APA.Collection of data relies on the direct conversations with the contemporary artists Rahat Naveed Masud, Tazeen Qayyum, Aqeel Solangi, Rehana Mangi and Rahim Baloch**.** Secondary sources comprise of research articles, books and online material.

4. Discussion and Results

4.1. Pre- Partition Paintings

Before the establishment of Pakistan in Indian subcontinent artists like Abanindranath Tagore, Abdur Rehman Chughtai and Ustad Allah Bukhsh were active in painting themes inspired from Hindhu mythology. All three painters employed floral symbols especially the lotus flower meaningfully in their paintings.

Abanindranath Tagore mindfully integrated novelty accompanied with the Indian heritage, Japanese-inspired Asian unity and indigenous culture of Bengal in his paintings (Banerji, 2010, p. 16).The Indian campaign for independence was progressing in 1905 when Abanindranath Tagore painted *Bharat Mata* (fig.6). He distant his art from European academic naturalism and struggled to create a spiritual identity for his local people of India. He incorporated various symbols inspired from Hindu and Buddhism iconography in his paintings one such symbol is white bloomed lotus flower which signifies purity of soul painted under the feet of female figure which anthropomorphically represent Indian nation.(Kumar, 2024). This exemplifies his distinctive reinterpretation of established floral symbolism, contrasting with the approaches adopted by Chughtai and Allah Bakhsh in their artistic representations of flowers.



Figure 6: Abanindranath Tagore, Bharat Mata, 1905, gouache,26.6 x 15.2 cm

(Source: https://smarthistory.org/abanindranath-tagore-bharat-mata/)

Before the establishment of Pakistan Chughtai painted Buddhist and Hindu themes as well according to his personal perception about such subjects.After the independence Chughtai did not paint such scenes of Radha Krishna and Buddhism, before 1947 he used to paint such subjects and used to paint a lotus flower as his signature mark in the corner of such paintings (Ali,1995,p.65).Usage of pink coloured huge sized lotus flowers in the form of adornments were symbolic of his painted figures which belong to Hindu and Buddhist themes. (Sirhandi, 1992, p.26).*Muraqqa-i-Chughtai* painted by Abdur Rehman Chughtai is based on illustrations of Mirza Ghalib's Urdu poetry published in 1928.The mood of these paintings revolve around poetical notes, melancholy and darkness. Artist has symbolically incorporated pink semi bloomed pink lotus flower painted as the focal point of the painting which brings life and playfulness with its color and movement in the despair as evident in the painting *Life* (fig.7) (Sirajud-Din, 1970, p.80).As the lotus flower is shown in the painting carrying a lighted *diya (lamp*) above it and forging ahead floating above water portrays an amalgamation of Buddhist and Hindu iconography adapted by Chughtai in his *Muraqqa* paintings.



Figure 7: Abdur Rehman Chughtai, Life

(Source: Chughtai, Chughtai's paintings: Forty-five plates in all; forty one plates in colours, rest in monochromes 1970, p.81)

Like Chughtai, Ustad Allah Bakhsh depicted Hindu mythology in large-scale oil paintings, particularly Krishna themes, which Hindu devotees valued for their sacred and spiritual significance (Naqvi, 1998, pp. 107, 112). Symbolic usage of floral imagery in these paintings especially of Lotus flower is traceable in his painting *Lord in Heaven* (fig.8) where Radha is shown gazing longingly with adoration at Krishna's mirrored face painted in the center of lotus flower.



Figure 8: Ustad Allah Bukhsh, Lord in Heaven, 1920, oil on board, 63.20 x 37.50cm

(Source: https://www.tuliresearchcentre.org/generic/ustad-allah bukhsh/research-centre/all/ustad-allah-bukhsh-lord-in-heaven-oil-on-board-hard-board-early-1920s-painting-0017899)

In the artistic milieu shaped by these three masters before the Partition of the subcontinent, Ganesh Pyne's *Ape and the Flower* (Fig.5) represents a distinctive contribution to symbolic expression. Through the metaphorical use of floral imagery, Pyne conveys human suffering and psychological anguish amid mounting social pressures and the political turmoil surrounding the independence movement. This iconographic approach offers an important precedent for understanding the emergence of flowers as vehicles of emotional and metaphorical expression in the contemporary art of the subcontinent.

4.2. Post- Partition Paintings

Zubaida Agha born in 1922 in Lyallpur now Faisalabad. Although belonged to a well reputed family of highly placed bureaucrat of the British Raj she remained bound between free will art and obeyance of social codes and moral standings. She was interested in painting ideas. "She wanted to go deeper into the realm of abstract, non-objective reality of art" (Naqvi,1998,p.159).As her art got mature it became more reflective of her inner fragile and insightful soul (p.157).She painted flowers not as realistic objects, but as vibrant expressions of pure colour. Emotions and colours lack physical form in her art. Floral imagery in her paintings along with colors and textures is expressive of her moods and thoughts as evident in the paintings *Red flower* (fig.9) and *Burst of flowers in front of a Window* (fig.10).Both paintings express contradictory moods. Red flower composed directly facing viewer gives impression as self-portrait of artist herself having character of virgin modesty. Whereas second painting (fig.10) holds flamboyant, vital character with overtones of intruding feminine sanctuary (p.170).



Figure 9: Zubaida Agha, Red Flower, 1989, oil on canvas, 90.17x 59.69 cm

(Source: Naqvi, 1998, p. 177)



Figure 10: Zubaida Agha, Burst of flowers in front of a Window, 1984, oil on canvas, 91.44 x 58.42 cm

(Source: Naqvi, 1998, p. 177)

Shakir Ali is one such artist who is considered as the father of modern art in Pakistan. Symbolic language of his paintings was infused with multiple meanings. Flowers among other symbols like birds and moon portray exuberance of life in his paintings. In 1965 during Curfew of Indo Pakistani war Shakir Ali emerged with some of his potent canvases as Intezar Hussain mentions that "explosions were hitting in outdoors and Shakir Ali engaged himself productively by creating flowers and moon on canvases. His painted flowers and moon symbolize the ray of hope after the despair of darkness in both nations. He opposed the war and its aftermaths by creating floral paintings (Ali, 1995). In 1966 he painted *Still Life with Vase and Flower* (fig.11) which is the portrayal of his emancipation gala from war, erotic and connubial captivity. He used to perceive flowers as bliss for life. Emblematic usage of flowers in Shakir Ali paintings varies according to the context in which they are painted, among birds portray artist's innermost longing towards liberty and elegance. (Naqvi, 1998, pp.228-230). Shakir admired Czech writer Julius Fucik's free will and his patriotism towards his nation and from his writings derived symbols like flowers, birds and sun. Shakir wondered "that even when threatened with a death sentence Fucik was able to write about sun and flower and birds" (Sirhandi, 1992, p.44).



Figure 11: Shakir Ali, Still Life with Vase and Flower, 1966, oil on canvas, 63.5 x 96.52 cm
(Source: Naqvi, 1998, p. 229)

In almost all cultures flowers apart from their ornate qualities have been also appreciated for providing a complete sensory experience. Across all languages, poetry traditionally uses flowers to symbolize femininity. Artists blended floral imagery into calligraphic paintings as metaphors, investing the written text with layered symbolic significance Anwar Jalal Shemza is one such artist. He did diploma from Mayo School of Art now NCA in 1947 and made first appearance on art scene in 1953 with his first solo exhibition. He went to London in 1956 to complete his graduation from Slade Scholl of art. He remained there for thirty years but remained connected with his roots in Pakistan through his art. Carpet weaving remained his family's traditional trade which later on amalgamate in his calligraphy paintings in the form of creative arabesque patterns (Ali, 1995, pp.148-149).Paul Klee's writings and art played significant role in shaping Shemza's later work. Klee stated that "The artist is human; himself nature; part of nature within natural space" (Klee, 1968, p.7). Shemza discovered visual possibilities in Arabic writing.In his *Roots series* (fig.12) he painted flowers emblematic of adoration and linear Arabic calligraphy in the form of roots expressive of his strong emotional connection with his homeland in East and its culture. In this series "Arabic characters became the roots and flowers of occult plants growing from the ground of magic" (Naqvi, 1998, pp.280-282).

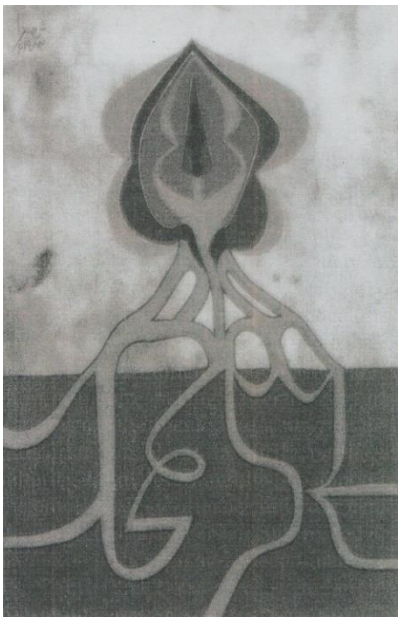


Figure 12. Anwar Jalal Shemza, Roots series, 1984, mixed media, 31.75 x 22.86 cm

(Source: Naqvi, 1998, p. 281)

In 1986 postmortem touring exhibitions conducted of his recent paintings in different art councils of Pakistan after his departure from this world in1985 portraying floral and calligraphy forms done on small scale as evident in (fig.13). (Sirhandi, 1992, p.49).In this painting the soaring flower symbolizes the ultimate reward of his hard work as supported on human hands generating out of the roots in the form of Islamic script.



Figure 13: Anwar Jalal Shemza, from Roots series

(Source: Sirhandi, 1992, p. 49)

4.4. Contemporary Painting in Pakistan

Rahat Naveed Masud is one of the prolific female artist of Pakistan who cherishes the soil of her land and belief systems associated with it in her paintings. From 2009 to 2013 she performed her duties as the principal of College of Art & Design in Punjab University Lahore. In London from Kingston University she did her masters and in 2010 ended her Ph.D. Floral imagery remained a recurring feature in her paintings. She painted flowers like marigold and especially red roses metaphorically for the love which is both profane and divine. In her *Red 1* (fig.14) red roses remain part of the compositions where figures as devotees seem lost in meditation in pensive silence as longing for their beloved. Full-blown red rose has emblematic meaning of ethereal beauty and spiritual enlightenment intensified by the usage of silver leaf at the back of figure's head as making a halo. (Rahat. N. M., personal communication, October 01, 2025).



Figure 14: Rahat Naveed Masud, Red 1, 2006, silver leaf and pastels on handmade paper, 86.36x57.15 cm

(Source: Courtesy of the Artist)

Her Paintings from *Ishq series* were exhibited at Ejaz Art Galleries Lahore in 2011.These paintings were produced as part of her doctoral study which examines the concept of Sufism and mysticism. Influence and inspiration for the visual symbolic elements has been derived from artist's childhood memories of Shah Inayat Qadri's *khanqah* (Sufi monastery), situated near Queen's road where artist once used to live. She visited this monastery and personally witnessed the feelings of connection with God through *sufi* traditions. She successfully portrayed those expressions in her paintings where a *dervish* like figures depicted as engaged in deep trance making whirling

movement. In her paintings, she employs marigold imagery as a symbol of enlightenment, drawing upon its vibrant yellow hue and its deeply rooted significance within local cultural and religious traditions.

In *Submerged 3* (fig.15) imagery of keys with opened locks and cages having opened doors encircled by the garland of marigold, successfully renders the spiritual awakening and freedom of soul from worldly materialism. Lotus flower in her painting *Submerged 2* (fig.16) has emblematic meaning of rebirth, introspection and love. (Rahat. N. M., personal communication, October 01, 2025).



Figure 15: Rahat Naveed Masud, Submerged 3, 2008, gold leaf and oil on canvas, 71.12 x 91.44cm

(Source: Courtesy of the Artist)

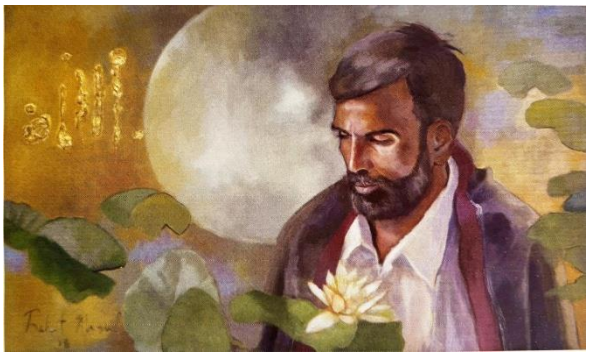


Figure 16: Rahat Naveed Masud, Submerged 2, 2008, gold and oil on canvas, 45.72x 76.2cm

(Source: Courtesy of the Artist)

Aisha Khalid is an internationally acclaimed artist from Pakistan who got her early art education from National College of Art and did post-graduation from Rijksakademie, Amsterdam, Netherlands from in 2002. Her artistic practice contributed significantly to the contemporary reinterpretation of miniature painting and its international recognition. Experiences of migration, cultural conservatism, and gendered social constraints informed her visual language, manifested through veiled figures and concealed forms that symbolically articulate identity, repression, and sociocultural anxieties. In her painting *Chandan Pani* (fig.17) pink and white colored Lotus flowers became a new addition in her painting practice. (Hashmi,2003,pp.155-157). Painting depicts female figures cloaked in *burqahs* confined in boundary walls and sitting on the Lotus flowers as some pious being sitting on a throne. Lotus flower in her paintings is symbolic of resurgence diverging against social norms as this flower locate itself on leaves although having its roots in muddy water it manages to keep itself stain free and grow. Stella Kramrisch says that "the lotus is a symbol of transition" (Aamir & Malik, 2017, p. 203).

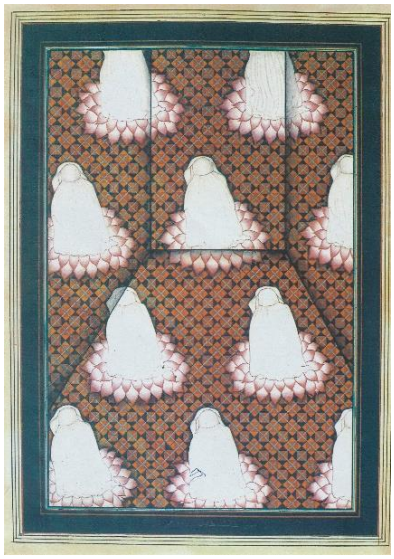


Figure 17: Aisha Khalid, Chandan Pani, 2000, Opaque water colour on wasli, 26 x 35cm
(Source: Hashmi, 2003, p.2)

Zimmer said that "The ancient symbol of the lotus continued to be associated with a female deity called Lakshmi. This deity was described as "lotus-born" and "abounding in lotuses "her other title was Padma the "lotus bearer". She was often shown standing or seated on a lotus and continued to appear on monuments well into the latest Buddhist period" (Badiee, 2000, p.14).

Female imagery and symbolism in Aisha Khalid's painting (fig.18) has hints of references of old miniature schools before partition of subcontinent. One of the well-established school of the broader Rajasthan style miniature painting is Bundi state. Miniature paintings from this school often use animal and flower images as symbols for religious, cultural, and social themes. Goddess is often shown seated on a lotus flower symbolically holding the same flower in her hand along with two winged elephants. In *The Goddess Lakshmi* (fig. 18), elephants are depicted pouring water from ritual vessels over the goddess, symbolizing purification (Ahluwalia, 2008, p. 71). Similarly, Aisha Khalid's *Chandan Pani* evokes feminine dignity, purity, and resilience, paralleling Lakshmi's lotus-seated imagery to affirm women's strength and selfhood amid sociocultural constraints.

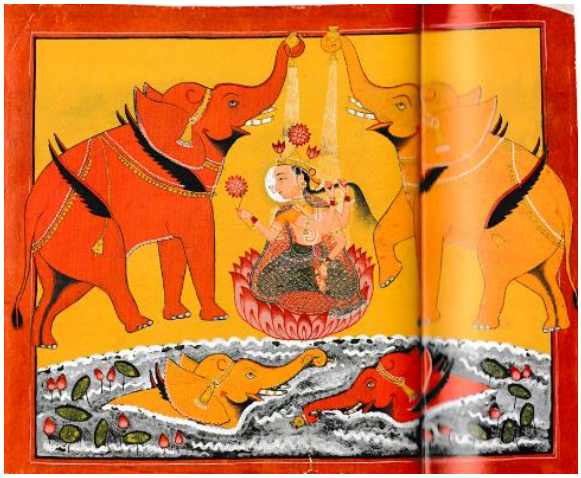


Figure 18: Gajalakshmi: The Goddess Lakshmi, 1700-15, Opaque water colour on paper, 22.9 x 27.5 cm

(Source: Ahluwalia, 2008, pp.22-23)

In her painting *Coming up next 2001* (fig.19) tulips also appeared as an emblem for western world and roses especially of blue colour portraying the blue *burqah* of Afghan women with political overtones. After the political upheaval of 9/11 incident and during the outbreak of war in Afghanistan her imagery took a visible shift in the form of disruptive patterns and blue roses replaced blue *burqahs* (Khalid, 2026).



Figure 19: Aisha Khalid, Coming up next, 2001, Gouache on wasli paper, 20.32x25.4cm
(Source: Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/ aishakhalid72/p/DaUhJWDjJlg/?img_index=3)

Tazeen Qayyum is a versatile artist having Pakistani origin currently lives in Toronto Canada. After completing her graduation from National College of Art she moved to Canada in 2003.After the incident of 9/11 a revolution came in the global political landscape along with the rise in Islamophobia and a global war against terrorism was initiated by the United States in Iran and Afghanistan. Being a Muslim living in a non-Muslim country raised so many questions in Tazeen's mind at that time. Through her work she comments on how political conflict diminishes the value of human life just to the status of insects as there is a famous idiom in English "To crush like an insect". From this time onwards cockroaches began to appear in her work as an anthropomorphic representation of humanity against the political officials. Whereas floral imagery becomes significant in her work when combines with the symbol of cockroach. In *Test on a Small Area Before Use -III* (fig.20) juxtaposing of these two contradictory visual elements creates tension in her work to arouse inquisitiveness of the audience. She makes insects look like branded products by painting flowers on them. (Tazeen.Q,personal communication, December 02, 2025)

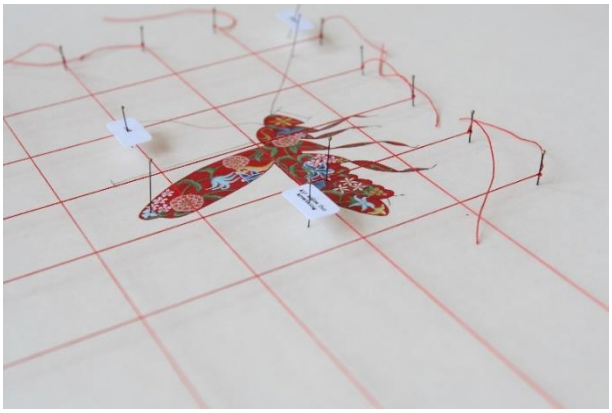


Figure 20: Tazeen Qayyum, Test on a Small Area Before Use -III, 2007, Opaque watercolor, entomology pins, labels and cotton thread on wasli in wooden display case, 50 x 40 x 5.5cms

(Source: Courtesy of the Artist)

In some paintings floral form can be seen emerging out of the placement of cockroaches. In *You Live Within Me (fig.21)* motif of cockroach can be seen overlapped and arranged in a specific order intentionally which raise idea of beauty and disgust, life and death, illusion and reality simultaneously.

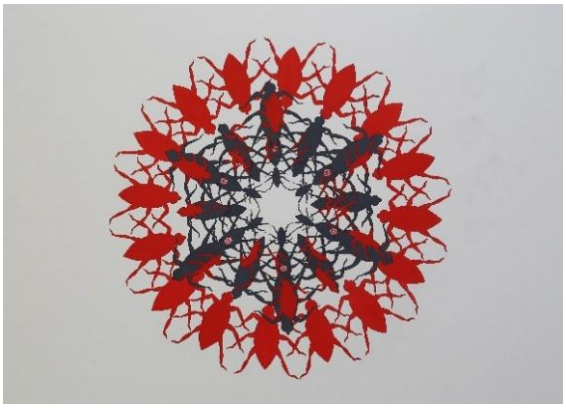


Figure 21: Tazeen Qayyum, You Live Within Me, 2017, Opaque water colour on illustration board, 50.8 x. 152.4 cm

(Source: Courtesy of the Artist)

Tazeen Qayyum art practice includes paintings, sculptures, installations and performances as well. In one of her artworks she has created manhole covers made out of cast iron comprise of three panels and placed them on floor evident in *Cover Up I, II and III* (fig. 22). She decorated the manholes with self-created patterns including Lotus flower and cockroaches. The main function

of a manhole is to seal sewer openings from where these insects came from. Lotus flower is composed in the center as the focal point around which cockroaches have been composed in circular rhythm as creating a vortex around the flower. Rising from the filthy waters of the dark depths towards the triumph of bloom in the sun is one of the characteristics of Lotus flower. Through the depiction of contradictory visuals of cockroaches and lotuses on manhole lids artist illustrates the idea that how perseverance enables existence to triumph over hostile environments. (Tazeen.Q,personal communication, December 02, 2025).



Figure 22: Tazeen Qayyum, Cover Up- I, II and III, 2020, cast Iron, 23 in. dia

(Source: Courtesy of the Artist)

Aqeel Solangi is currently teaching at National College of Arts in Rawalpindi as Assistant Professor, he brought up in Ranipur in Sindh. After receiving his first Master degree from NCA in 2005 he went to United Kingdom to complete his second masters from Bath School of Art and Design in 2016. Fresco painter Ustad Saif Ur Rehman guidance helped Aqeel Solangi to learn the traditional practices involving various flowers and how the flower arrangements were traditionally utilized during the Mughal period. His paintings portray a large variety of flowers including Lotus, Roses, Periwinkle, Narcissus, Marigold, Hibiscus and Chrysanthemum which creates a poetical visual language when combine with other symbolic objects in his paintings. Portrayed as emblems of grace and holy affection, roses signify both outward adornment and a spiritual connection to the sacred love in his painting *Surkh Gulaban De Mausam Wich* (fig.23). (Aqeel.S,personal communication, December 09, 2025).



Figure 23: Aqeel Solangi, Surkh Gulaban De Mausam Wich, 2019, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 152.4 x 152.4cm

(Source: Courtesy of the Artist)

Having been born in Sindh, he traveled to the border zone area of *Thar* Desert, where the majority of the residing population was Hindu as compare to Muslim. Inspiration for the Painting *When the Night Comes* (fig.24) came from his memory of that visit when he interacted with Hindu minorities. Hibiscus flower is painted here by the artist metaphorically to represent the Lord Ganesh. Periwinkle flowers painted here as creating a bed or throne of white colour upon which Hibiscus flower is resting symbolizing peace and spirituality. Background painted in the form of chipped of layers indirectly portrays different memories of artist and also resembles with migrating sand hills known for creating beautiful landscape of this desert. He draws inspiration for his visuals from his formative childhood memories and from the literature of famous writers and poets including Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Nasir Kazmi, and Amrita Pritam. Periwinkle *Sadabahar* flower, in Urdu *Sada* means ever and *Bahar* means bloom remains a signature element in every canvas of Aqeel Solngi as he considers this flower embodies the resilient traits as it remain in bloom throughout the year. (Aqeel.S,personal communication, December 09, 2025).



Figure 24: Aqeel Solangi, When the Night Comes, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 60.96 x68.58 cm
(Source: Courtesy of the Artist)

Aqeel Solangi's engagement with the Periwinkle flower originated from his first artistic assignment, given by his mentor, cinema-board painter Ustad Mehboob, since then he established the motif as a recurring element in his subsequent practice. In his painting *Whispering Lotus* (fig.25) one can see repetition and overlapping of contradictory flowers over each other juxtaposed with other symbolic elements like clouds and tents to create a dreamy landscapes. In this painting clouds are inspired from Kalidas's poem *Meghaduta* where *Megha* means cloud and *duta* means messenger. In a metaphor of love, clouds act as a messenger to deliver a lover's thoughts to his beloved, depicted here as a lotus flower resting on a halo made out of periwinkle flower enhancing the idea of divinity and purity.). (Aqeel.S,personal communication, December 09, 2025).



Figure 25: Aqeel Solangi, The Whispering Lotus, 2024, acrylic on canvas, 50.8 x 71.12cm

(Source: Courtesy of the Artist)

Sadaf Naeem is a Pakistani based contemporary artist who completed her MFA from University of Hawaii in 2022 at Mona USA. Her paintings achieves a transformative effect through the dynamic interplay of intimate environments and feminine identities. Paintings from her solo show *In Connection with* in 2019 create a bridge between tangible existence and non-physical states of being. She translates the shifting colors of nature into textile patterns, letting every stitch tell a story about the surroundings. Flora in its organic form always captivates her attention. In *Love – story-1*(fig .26) she wants to portray the role of a house wife of South Asia painted in silhouettes who looks confident and content in her character.



Figure 26: Sadaf Naeem, Love –story-1, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 91.44 x 91.44cm

(Source: Courtesy of the Artist)

Her visual vocabulary is a blend of her encounters of life being a daughter, wife and mother juxtaposed with the floral patterns inspired from designs of pillow covers, bed sheet, and curtains and also from natural surroundings. Her creative process embrace such techniques and materials that are reminiscent of traditional skills and artistic heritage. In her painting *Ethereal* (fig.27) and *Interconnection* (fig.28) from the exhibition entitled *In Connection with* floral symbolism occupies a substantial place in her work. She celebrates female hood and nature in her paintings through floral patterns.(Sadaf.N, personal communication, October 26, 2025).



Figure 27: Sadaf Naeem, Ethereal, 2024, oil on canvas, 60.96 x 60.96cm

(Source: Courtesy of the Artist)



Figure 28: Sadaf Naeem, Interconnection, 2024, oil on canvas, 60.96 x 60.96cm

(Source: Courtesy of the Artist)

Rehana Mangi is another female artist from Pakistan who contributes in neo miniature art by experimenting with unusual mediums and techniques in her work. She belongs to Sindh where unknowingly she developed an ingrained practice from her grandmother to collect shed hair. During her academic days at National college of Art she used to make drawings of those collected hair and later on started weaving with them. Microgrids drawn on *wasli* became restorative and introspective for her. Weaved roses and butterfly motifs along the cross stiches of human hair meticulously executed on the surface of *wasli* became hallmark of her work as evident in her miniature painting *Untitled* (Fig.29). Hair remains highly valued while on a person's head, but it is discarded as waste the moment it sheds. Rehana Mangi explores the sensations arouse by a dead fallen hair when utilized in her miniatures to breathe new life and become more divine and precious.

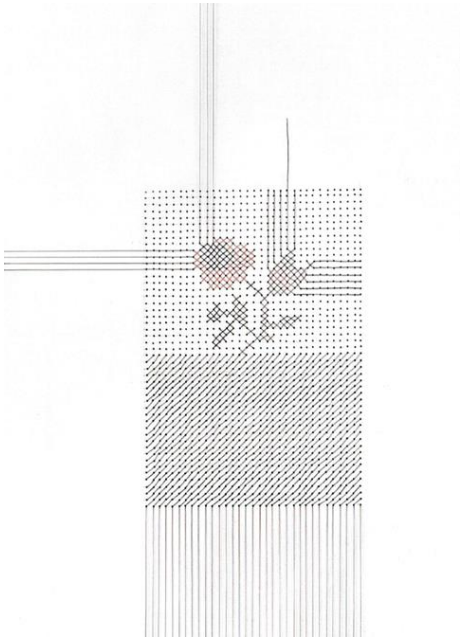
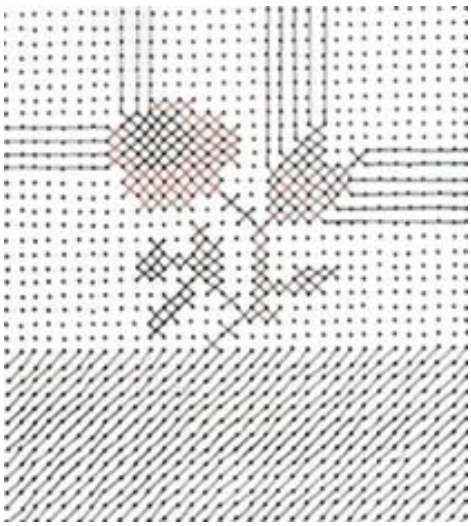


Figure 29: Rehana Mangi, Untitled, 2009, Human hair on wasli, 22.86 x 20.32cm

(Source: Courtesy of the Artist)



Detail of Figure 29

She incorporates floral motifs derived from the embroidered shawls worn by her grandmother in Sindh. Having learned cross-stitch embroidery from her aunt during childhood, Rehana Mangi draws upon these domestic textile traditions and memories. In *The Plant* (fig. 30), she employs cross-stitch techniques and an image of plant with flower on *wasli*, translating her childhood experiences into a distinctive visual language. (Rehana.M,personal communication, May 28, 2025).



Figure 30: Rehana Mangi, The Plant, 2019, Thread and Gold leaf on wasli, 24.63 x 26.16 cm

(Source: Courtesy of the Artist)

Rahim Baloch is a miniature artist who belongs to Balochistan. He meaningfully incorporates floral imagery with other elements of nature in his paintings to render his personal experience of life. For many years, flowers remained a recurring motif in his visual vocabulary as a symbol of remembrance, adoration, and deprivation to portray the emotional bond he shares with his family and father. In his work flower represents a spiritual love that outlasts physical presence, remaining alive in memory, nature, and feeling. The connection between the honeybee and the *Motia* , Jasmine flower lies at the very heart of this symbolism. In *Untitled* (fig.31) he portrays the spiritual connection between the both forms of life. He metaphorically painted himself in the form of honey bee who remains in continuous search and always returns towards the flowers which reflects artist's personal connection with his father and family. (Rahim.B,Personal communication, May 28, 2025)

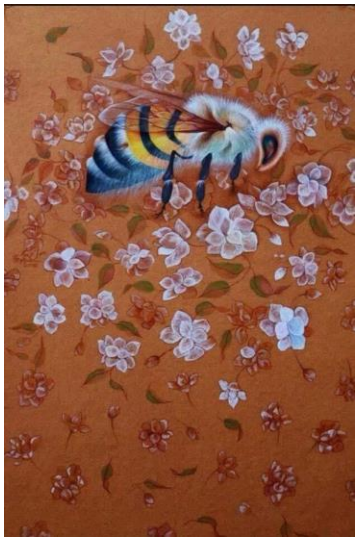


Figure 31: Rahim Baloch, Untitled, 2016, Gouache on wasli paper, 38.1x 50.8cm

(Source: Courtesy of the Artist)

In *The Night with White Flowers* (fig. 32), the white jasmine and bumblebee, set against a dark background, evoke the dualities of familial love, togetherness, and the devastation caused by the war against terrorism in Balochistan. The composition articulates themes of affection, separation, grief, and enduring psychological trauma, while the torn and damaged flowers metaphorically embody the emotional anguish of families fragmented by unfair political decisions.In the painting *The love flower* (fig.33) he painted a red rose within a white glow like bleeding wound through a white bandage to portray the physical trauma and emotional agony. Through the imagery of a

flower, he examines that how love can simultaneously bring immense joy and profound loss and sometimes act as an embodiment of memories(Rahim.B,Personal communication, May 28, 2025).



Figure 32: Rahim Baloch, The night with white flowers 2016, Gouache on wasli, 45.72x 73.66 cm

(Source: Courtesy of the Artist)



Figure 33: Rahim Baloch, The love flower, 2022, Gouache on wasli, 152.4x 101.6cm

(Source: Courtesy of the Artist)

Imran Ali Kazmi is a contemporary artist born in Kasur city of Pakistan who graduated with distinction from National College of Arts Lahore. He did commissioned paintings for Pakistani officials as well. He got the opportunity to create replica of Rembrandt's famous painting *Saskia at* London's National Gallery. His work got recognition at National and also at international level. His photorealistic paintings represent dual symbolic elements through flowers, particularly roses, jasmine, and marigolds with combination of fat male models, as evident in *Pehalwan 5* (fig. 34). By foregrounding the male physique, the artist interrogates notions of presence, absence, identity, masculinity, and emotional vulnerability. Rather than celebrating conventional masculine strength, *Pehalwan 5* establishes a visual tension between physical power and fragility through the depiction of a muscular male figure holding delicate roses. This juxtaposition challenges conventional perceptions of dominance, suggesting that strength may also reside in tenderness, restraint, and the capacity to embrace opposing qualities. (Imran.A.K,personal communication, November 10, 2025).



Figure 34: Imran Ali Kazmi, Pehalwan 5, 2025, oil on linen, 91.44x 121.92cm

(Source: Courtesy of the Artist)

In his paintings *Untitled* (2019) (fig. 35) and *Untitled* (2025) (fig. 36), Imran Ali Kazmi employs roses, jasmine, and marigolds, often arranged as garlands, to evoke devotion, longing, ritualistic celebration, and the subtle traces of cultural deterioration. Scattered petals further suggest the repeated relationship between abundance, decay, and the passage of time. The use of gold and red reinforces associations with reverence, supremacy, and sacrifice. In *Untitled* (2025), an inverted red rose suspended against a golden disc evokes a halo, elevating the flower as an emblem of symbolic and spiritual significance. His compositions consequently negotiate the dualities of celebration and lamentation, fragility and strength. With the presence of flowers in a symbolic

language, Kazmi transforms silence into expression, vulnerability into strength, and cultural traditions into evolving forms of contemporary consciousness. Imran.A.K,personal communication, November 10, 2025).



Figure 35: Imran Ali Kazmi, Untitled, 2019, oil on wood, 22.86x 60.96cm

(Source: Courtesy of the Artist)



Figure 36: Imran Ali Kazmi, Untitled, 2025, oil on linen, 58.42x 76.2cm

(Source: Courtesy of the Artist)

5. Conclusion

A historical analysis of pre- and post-Partition art, extending from the inception of Pakistan to contemporary painting practices, reveals the continuing implication of floral imagery. Rooted in South Asian symbolism and metaphorical traditions, flowers have continued to inspire successive generations of artists, retaining their expressive and symbolic relevance in contemporary Pakistani painting.

Paintings created before the partition in subcontinent represent floral motifs loaded with Hindu and Buddhist influences with the touch of lyricism as seen in the paintings of Abanindranath Tagore, Ustad Allah Bukhsh and Abdur Rehman Chughtai. Whereas a few like Ganesh Pyne introduced more personal and subjective interpretations of floral symbolism. Floral imagery is not linked with a specific time span in art history in fact in every era artists responded towards emotional, social, political and religious scenarios by fusing floral symbols with other visual elements and styles of painting as visible in the paintings of Shakir Ali, Zubaida Agha and Anwar Jalal Shemza. Although technological growth and globalization have enthused many artists to experiment with the traditional painting techniques to enhance the individual resonance and conceptual depth in their artworks fusion of personal hair and thread in paintings by Rehana Mangi is the outcome of such growth. Even though the past remnants of floral symbolism from pre-partition time are still traceable in contemporary painting of Pakistan. In current time artists are executing floral imagery with a modern touch that remains deeply connected to traditional influences as well. A continues symbiotic relationship exist between the creator, art and the spectator. Aforementioned artists responded towards the motif of flower and utilized it symbolically according to their personal aesthetics and the knowledge of the past they possess. Aisha Khalid and Tazeen Qayyum integrates floral motif of lotus loaded with the past eastern cultural influences for the social political analysis. On the other hand Rahat Naveed Masud incorporates rose, marigold and lotus flower symbolically in her paintings to investigate love, devotion and self-awakening. Aqeel Solangi painted Lotus, Roses, Periwinkle and Hibiscus flowers with the touch of lyricism which reminds one of the *Ragamala* paintings of *Rajput school* and *Muraqqas* of Abdur Rehman Chughtai. Sadaf Naeem celebrates life and women empowerment by incorporating flora symbolically in the household draperies. Rahim Baloch integrates floral symbolism in his paintings to investigate personal constructs regarding mortality and existence

whereas Ali Kazimi questions those notions associated with masculinity and fragility in our society through his painted flora.

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