



RESEARCH PAPER

Aesthetic Study of Formalism in Modern Western and Pakistani Painting

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ABSTRACT

Formalism is a modern artistic approach that prioritizes the visual elements of an artwork over the historical, conventional, or narrative context. The research article aims to examine the evolution of formalist approach in modern Western painting, in addition to analyzing its significant influence on Pakistani art. The theory of formalism originated in association with modern Western art, which emphasized the aesthetic structure of an artwork as a principal component. Thereafter, Pakistani painting shows formalist tendencies reflecting intervention of the modern West. In the light of foundational theories regarding formalism presented by Western art critics and theorists, this research delves into aesthetic study and qualitative analysis of paintings by Western and Pakistani artists. Research findings underscore the significance of modern influences that have contributed towards the development of Pakistani painting. With a chief focus on formal aesthetics, Western artists pursue pure abstraction, while Pakistani painters explore cultural identity. A holistic comprehension of formalism in painting offers a profound insight into this distinct artistic expression while situating Pakistani painting within global modern art. The research opens avenues for further research on formalist theories and their application within new media practices.

Keywords: Formalism, Modern Western Painting, Pakistani Painting, Aesthetic Study, Modern Influences, Formal Elements, Artistic Expression

Introduction

Formalism is an approach to create, to look at, or to interpret art in terms of form, specifically visual components that constitute an art work (Brown, 2015). Among these visual components are the seven basic elements of art which, when implicated in an artistic composition according to the principles of art, create an aesthetic appeal. These seven elements are line, shape, form, texture, color, value and space. While the principles are balance, emphasis, contrast, proportion, rhythm and movement, unity and variety, and repetition.

The formalist approach of an artist or an art critic only focuses on and responds to these visually apparent forms, whereas neglecting the content, historical context, philosophical aspects, and conventional or academic standards of art. The artists having a formalist approach endeavor only to create and examine the optical or psychological response of the viewer to the forms rather than to convey a certain meaning (Brown, 2015), e.g. "Homage to Square" series of paintings by German artist Josef Albers (1888-1976).

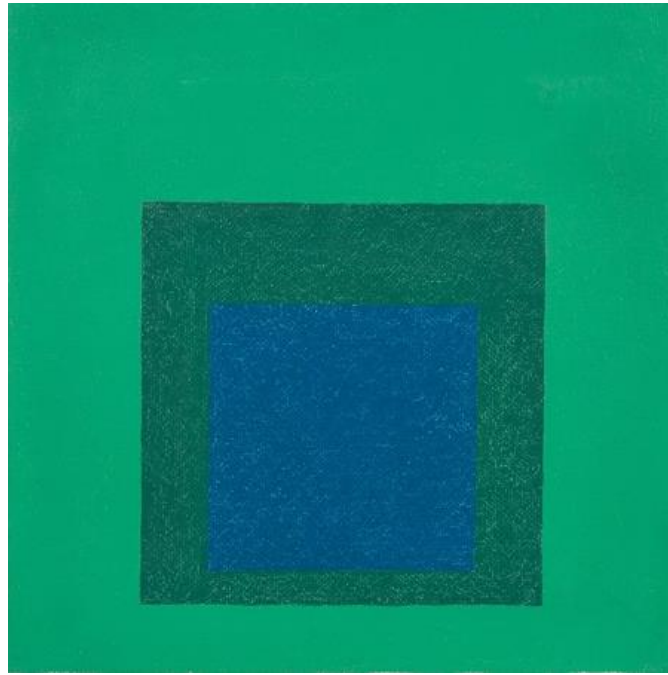


Figure 1. Josef Albers, *Study for Homage to the Square*, 1957, (Source: Artnet, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/josef-albers/3>).

This article studies the formalist approach in the art of the modern West, and presents an analytical study of Pakistani paintings influenced by this approach. Critical writings and theories on formalism by Western art critics provide a theoretical framework for the research.

Literature Review

A comprehensive review of literature pertinent to formalism in art highlights the seminal writings that help to analyze the artworks. In the view of Clive Bell (1881-1964), an English art critic, the judgement of the value of an art work is dependent on the well composed formal elements of art, which altogether are ultimately responsible to evoke aesthetic emotion of the viewer. Thus, he links subjective approach of the viewer to the formal aspects of art, regardless of the time and place of creation. Bell claims the emotions, having no physical existence, as superior to the physicality of a work of art. Such quality highly differentiates this kind of art from the art serving the purpose of documentation, education and historical purpose (Bell, 1913).

The Western art produced in the 1940s till the 1970s was referred as Greenbergian Formalism, after an American art critic namely Clement Greenberg (1909-1994). He exercised a great influence on post-war art, more particularly Abstract Expressionism (Kleiner, 2016, p. 953). Greenberg encouraged the artists to concentrate on formal characteristics specific to respective medium, such as flat or two-dimensional nature of a painting and spatial depth or three-dimensional nature of a sculpture (Kleiner, 2016, p. 954). Greenberg states,

“A modernist work of art must try, in principle, to avoid communication with any order of experience not inherent in the most literally and essentially construed nature of its medium. Among other things, this means renouncing illusion and explicit subject matter. The arts are to achieve concreteness, ‘purity,’ by dealing solely with their respective selves – that is, by becoming ‘abstract’ or nonfigurative” (Kleiner, 2016, p. 954).

To have a thorough understanding of the formalist approach employed by the artist in an art work and that perceived by the viewer, we need to take into account the versions of formalism in accordance with the aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties.

Nick Zangwill, a modern philosopher, identifies the aesthetic properties to be the formal properties having physical and sensory appeal which are responsible to evoke viewer's response. While he identifies the non-aesthetic properties to involve the historical and contextual aspects. The Formal properties are entirely dependent on the context and history. Whereas the historical and contextual aspects are not entirely dependent on the formal properties (Zangwill, 2001, p. 21-27).

According to Zangwill, the consideration that "all the aesthetic properties of a work of art are formal," constitutes *Extreme Formalism* (Zangwill, 2001, p. 56). Whereas, the consideration that "no aesthetic properties of a work of art are formal," constitutes *Anti-Formalism*, which was proposed by Kendall Walton (1970, p. 345), an American philosopher, who was of the view that aesthetic judgement of art is made chiefly in the light of history. While Zangwill himself is of the view of *Moderate Formalism*, that is, considering "some aesthetic properties of a work of art as formal, while others as non-formal" (Dowling, n.d. para. 68-69).

Zangwill's moderate formalism is a derivation resulting from Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) "distinction between free and dependent beauty." Kant states that free beauty "presupposes no concept of what the object should be", whereas dependent beauty "does presuppose such a concept" (Zangwill, 2005, p. 186). Kant, however, restricted the judgement of formal aspects of beauty to the nature, excluding the works of art having representational character, though including the abstract and non-representational works (Dowling, n.d. para. 80).

Material and Methods

The article presents a curated selection of Western and Pakistani paintings reflecting formalist approach. In the light of the literature by Western art critics and theorists, a qualitative analysis of formalist paintings is executed, examining the diverse styles adopted to employ the basic elements and principles of art. The article follows documentation and citation style of American Psychological Association (APA).

Results and Discussion

Formalism in art firstly originated with the technological innovations of the nineteenth century. Before that, the realistic approach in art had been flourishing since the Renaissance till Romanticism and Realism. The art at those times was evaluated according to the academic standards. The religious, mythological and historical themes were of great interest because of the patronage of art and in accordance to the standard of acceptance in the salons.

A great shift in the depiction of imagery in art occurred with the emergence of the Impressionist artists who intended not to paint the conventional themes, rather their intention was simply to observe the effect the light on their eyes and on the scene being painted, and to capture the fleeting moments of the day and weather conditions. They created in their paintings the textural forms of colors consisting of short and broken brush strokes just to create an impression of the scene with certain light effect. The patches of varying colors created an impression of the complete scene (fig. 2). The introduction of photography brought about a major shift in painting, undermining realistic rendering.



Figure 2. Claude Monet, *Impression: Sunrise*, 1872, oil on canvas, (Source: Kleiner, 2016, p. 843).

Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) took Impressionism to an innovative form. He proposed to, "Treat nature in terms of the cylinder, the sphere and the cone, everything in proper perspective ..." (Protter, 1997, p. 136). His paintings are mainly the study of relation among the line, plane and color, to create a sensation of depth (fig. 3) (Kleiner, 2016, p. 860). Moreover, an optical discovery in 1830s, of the Stereo Vision by an English scientist Charles Wheatstone, greatly influenced Cézanne's art (Januszczak, 2015). The human sight is based on stereo vision, which means each eye sees the same thing in different perspectives. When these two perspectives are combined, an accurate distance can be judged by the sight.

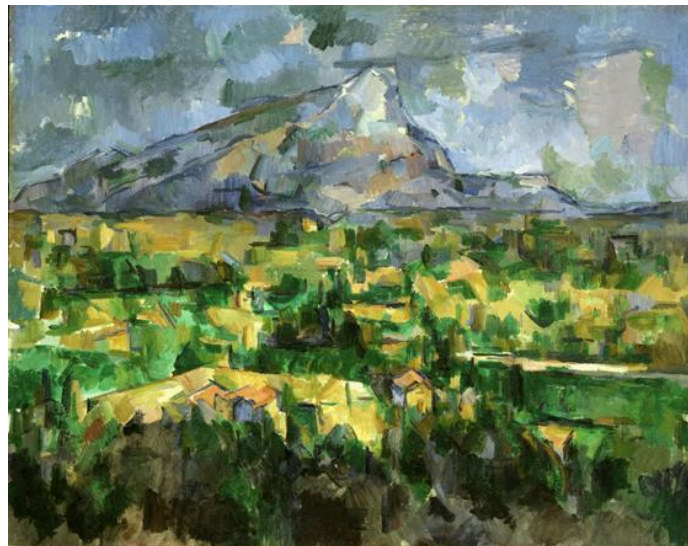


Figure 3. Paul Cézanne, *Mont Saint-Victoire*, 1904, oil on canvas, (Source: Kleiner, 2016, p. 860).

So, the introduction of geometrical forms and implication of stereo vision in painting by Cézanne provided the first step towards formal approach. This approach anticipated all the twentieth century Avant-Garde art movements, more particularly Cubism. The Avant-Garde artists rejected the traditional qualities of the art in the favor of the formal qualities. According to the Cubists, an object is known not just from one angle, so they depicted on canvas its vocabulary by splitting it into its components and painted various angles simultaneously (fig. 4).

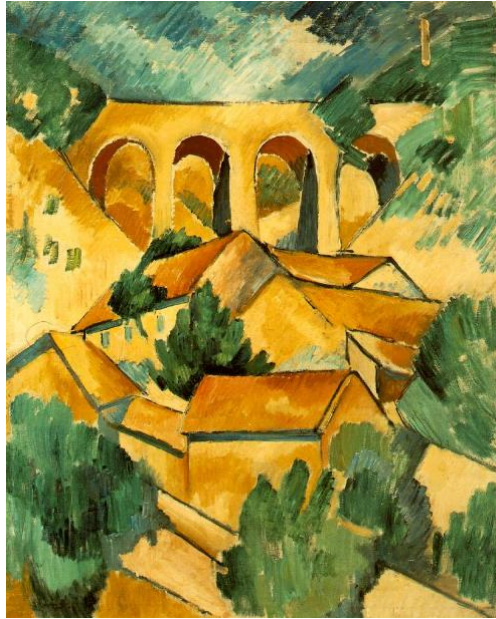


Figure 4. Georges Braque, *Viaduct at L'Estaque*, 1908, oil on canvas, (Source: Smarthistory, <https://smarthistory.org/georges-braque-le-viaduc-a-lestaque-the-viaduct-at-lestaque/>).

On the other hand, the Fauvists intended to observe the effect of different schemes of complementary color on human emotions. The use of pure colors as opposed to imitative colors make their art more formal (fig. 5). The choice of color scheme and placement of the compositional elements according to the colors give an understanding of the decorative formalism, as according to Henri Matisse (1869-1954), composition in painting refers to the art of organizing the elements in aesthetically pleasing way to articulate artist's emotional expression (Kleiner, 2016, p. 884).



Figure 5. Henri Matisse, *Harmony in Red*, 1909, oil on canvas, (Source: Kleiner, 2016, p. 884).

The twentieth century saw great scientific innovations regarding the time, space and matter, especially by Albert Einstein (1879-1955) who negated the Newtonian theory of matter having only physical existence. Einstein, however, proposed that "time and space are relative to the observer and linked in what he called a four-dimensional space-time continuum" (Kleiner, 2016, 887); and that matter is not actually a physical entity, rather it is energy shaped into substance (Kleiner, 2016, p. 887).

Such innovations in science also influenced the art of that time, esp. that of German Expressionist Vassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) who for the first time (among other expressionists), negated naturalistic representations and adopted abstract visual forms (fig. 6). The formal aspects of the Expressionists paintings express their feelings and are the source to elicit viewers' emotions. According to Kandinsky, artist's deepest emotions must be expressed through the harmonious arrangement of compositional elements in a painting, in the same way that music composers create symphony using notes, without imitating natural sounds (Kleiner, 2016, p. 888). He also emphasizes that art is the emotional and perceptual experience of the viewer in response to the formal elements and chromatic scheme of the artwork (Green, 2016).



Figure 6. Vassily Kandinsky, *Improvisation 28*, 1912, oil on canvas, (Source: Kleiner, 2016, p. 887).

Piet Mondrain (1872-1944), a De Stijl artist, moved a step further from Cubism and Expressionism. He was of the view that the Cubists could not achieved what they intended i.e. "the expression of pure plastics" (Kleiner, 2016, p. 928). In his endeavor to represent the inner side of things, he created the outer surface using the visual forms including lines, primary colors and values, which altogether are the constituents of a composite whole, thus the reflection of the inner side (fig. 7).

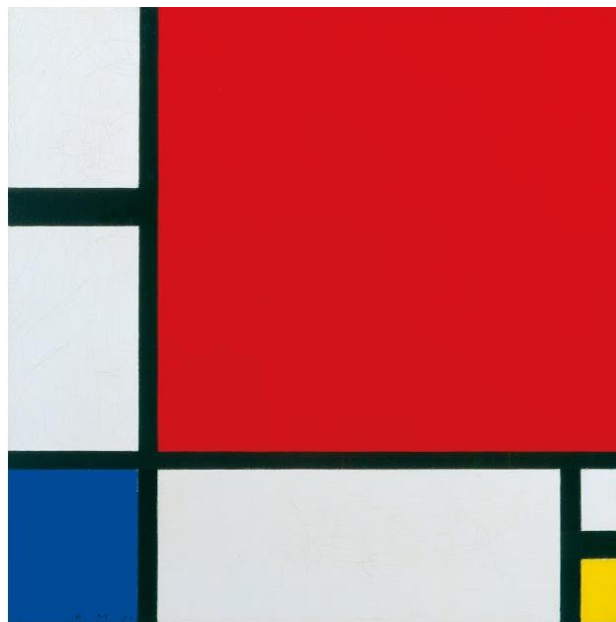


Figure 7. Piet Mondrain, *Composition with Red, Blue and Yellow*, 1930, oil on canvas, (Source: Kleiner, 2016, p. 928).

The gestural expression in the paintings of Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) connotes the artist's unconscious improvisations, as he himself mentions that during the process of painting, he loses conscious awareness of his own actions (Kleiner, 2016, p. 955). The process of creation involved in his painting is the chief element which causes him to relieve his inner self (fig. 8).



Figure 8. Jackson Pollock, *Number 1 (Lavender Mist)*, 1950, oil, enamel and aluminum paint on canvas, (Source: Kleiner, 2016, p. 954).

The chromatic abstractions of Mark Rothko (1903-1970) and Barnett Newman (1905-1970) consist of color field paintings having large spaces of flat colors, which are the simple expressions of artist's complex emotional state with respect to the social circumstances (figs. 9-10). The formal elements of their art provoke viewer's feelings in accordance to the color (Kleiner, 2016, p. 957-958). Mark Rothko asserted the significance of subject matter, however the formal features of the paintings of chromatic abstraction artists almost overshadowed it (The Art Story, n.d., para. 28).



Figure 9. Mark Rothko, *No. 14*, 1960, oil on canvas, (Source: Kleiner, 2016, p. 958).



Figure 10. Barnett Newman, *Sublime Heroic Man*, 1951, oil on canvas, (Source: Kleiner, 2016, p. 957).

Abstract Expressionism gave rise to Post-Painterly Abstraction which implied Greenberg's idea of "purity in art" (Kleiner, 2016, p. 958). The artists working in Post-Painterly Abstraction, Ellsworth Kelly, Frank Stella, Helen Frankenthaler, and Morris Louis, based their art on creating pure elemental compositions. Kelly (1923-2015) emphasizes on "pure form and color" and creates "spatial unity" (fig. 11) (Kleiner, 2016, p. 958).

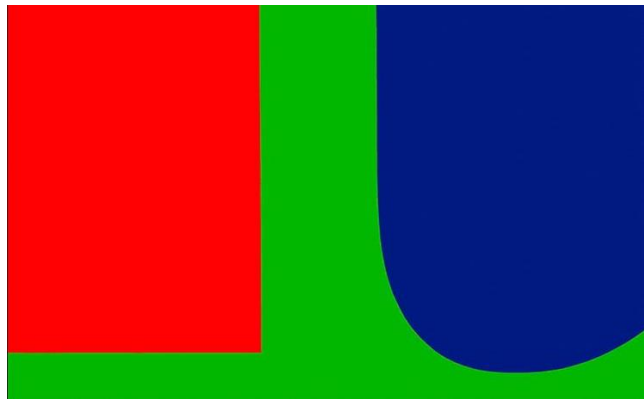


Figure 11. Ellsworth Kelly, *Red Blue Green*, 1963, oil on canvas, (Source: Kleiner, 2016, p. 959).

Frank Stella (1936) simplified his paintings introducing more defined forms as compared to the Abstract Expressionists (fig. 12). The linear compositions of equally placed parallel lines is the embodiment of the formal aspects conveying no meaning other than asking the viewer to acknowledge what they see, as Stella states, "What you see is what you see" (Kleiner, 2016, p. 958).



Figure 12. Frank Stella, *More or Less*, 1964, metallic powder in acrylic emulsion on canvas, (Source: Kleiner, 2016, p. 959).

The colors applied by Helen Frankenthaler (1928-2011) do not speak of the meanings they typically convey, rather they subordinate the emotionality (unlike Abstract Expressionism), and are more concerned with the formal aspects, as she tries to find the perfect color scheme (fig. 13) (Kleiner, 2016, p. 960). The paintings of Morris Louis (1912-1962) are grounded on the same formal aspects as those of Frankenthaler (fig. 14).



Figure 13. Helen Frankenthaler, *The Bay*, 1963, acrylic on canvas, (Source: Kleiner, 2016, p. 960).



Figure 14. Morris Louis, *Saraband*, 1959, acrylic resin on canvas, (Source: Kleiner, 2016, p. 961).

In representational art a specific theme is conveyed, while the act of painting is secondary. However, Formalism opposes the representation of any idea or meaning, and mainly emphasizes the response of the viewer to the elements involved in the formation of an art work. Having its origin from the art of Cézanne, Formalism's primary interest is the act of painting – the elements and technique involved in the making. It ignores the reason for an object being depicted.

The philosophic and scientific theories, as well as modern Western painting, are responsible for the development and transformation of art worldwide, also influencing the art of South Asia. Pakistani artists, particularly trained in the West, introduced foreign style of painting in Pakistan. The advent of modern art in Pakistan with the abstract paintings of

Shakir Ali (1916-1975) inspired from Cubism, matured to a form dominated by formal aspects, though representative of an idea which seems secondary. "The Dark Moon" expressing war, best exemplifies Shakir Ali's formal approach, with the moon and village reduced to their basic shapes in striking blue prominent against large space of flat red (fig. 15) (Wille, 2015, 29-31).



Figure 15. Shakir Ali, *The Dark Moon*, 1965, oil on canvas, 152 x 99 cm, collection of Fakir and Shahnaz Aijazuddin, Lahore, (Source: Wille, 2015, p. 30).

Shakir Ali inspired and paved the way for the formalist paintings of Zahoor ul Akhlaq (1941-1999). Moreover, Greenberg's modernist theory of recognizable objects not within the recognizable, three-dimensional space, but rather on the two-dimensional painted surface, is highly reflected in Akhlaq's work (fig. 16) (Wille, p. 2015, 59). His emphasis on the forms is more apparent in a rectangular canvas divided in two main rectangles; a vertical and a horizontal, which further contain smaller rectangles having triangles and quadrangles within them. In each of these smaller shapes Akhlaq has studied the tonal variation from black in the bottom to grey and then almost invisible towards the upper side (fig. 17). This work is an abstract synthesis of his artistic practice based on the Mughal manuscript painting, calligraphy and Islamic architecture, studying the relation of the basic shapes in accordance to their arrangement on the surface (Wille, 2015, p. 69-72).



Figure 16. Zahoor-ul-Akhlaq, *Shah Jahan Triptych*, 1981, acrylic on wood, 121.92 x 91.44 cm, private collection, Lahore, (Source: Wille, 2015, p. 68).

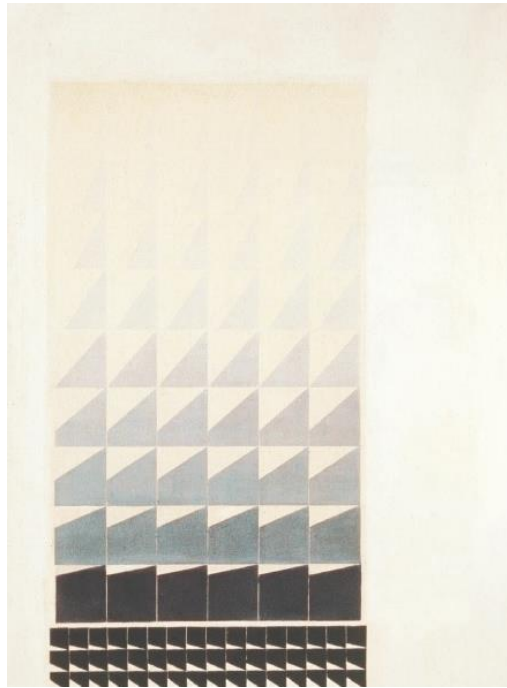


Figure 17. Zahor-ul-Akhlaq, *Untitled*, mid 1970s to late 1970s, acrylic on canvas, collection of BIRTHA and Muhammad Sadiq, Lahore, (Source: Wille, 2015, p. 72).

The action paintings of Ismail Gulgee (1926-2007) are the pure “forms” of sweeping impasto strokes constituting calligraphic words of vibrant colors. The dynamic compositions add to the aesthetic appeal of the paintings (fig. 18). Like Jackson Pollock, while painting he was unaware of what he was painting.

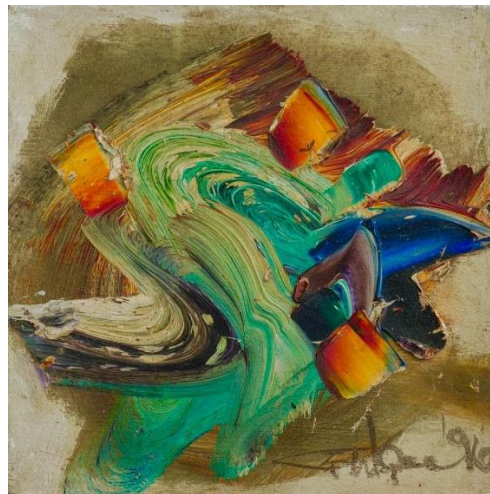


Figure 18. Ismail Gulgee, *Calligraphic Action Painting*, 1996, oil on canvas, (Source: Medium, <https://medium.com/@milenaollesinska77/ismail-gulgee-calligraphic-abstraction-4d70b17609fb>).

In the art of Pakistani calligraphy, the abstraction in form was first introduced by Anwar Jalal Shemza (1928-1985). The decoration of geometric forms and letters is central to his works, arranging the letters B and D in aesthetically pleasing compositions, reflective of Western inspiration (fig. 19). A British art critic, G.M. Butcher mentions his paintings as “unreadable signs, meaningless calligraphy and mysterious evocations of literary content” (Sirhindi, 1992, p. 80).

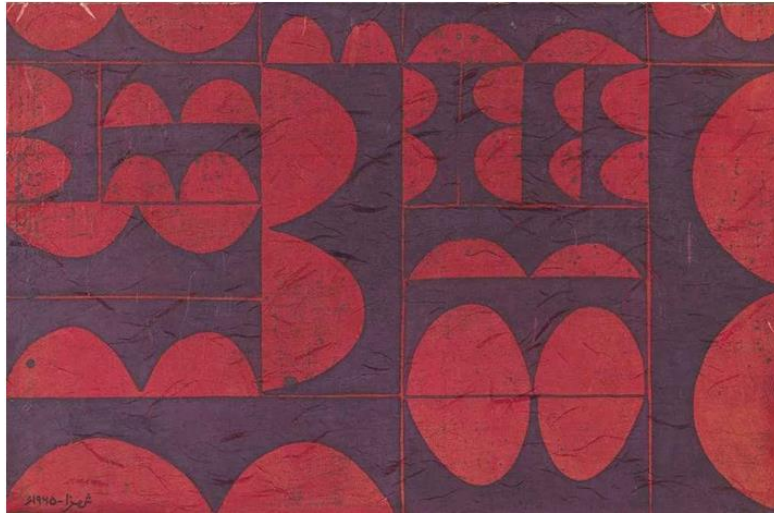


Figure 19. Anwar Jalal Shemza, *Untitled (Red and Blue Composition)*, 1965, ink on handmade paper laid on card, 33.6 x 52.1 cm, (Source: Artnet, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/anwar-jelal-shemza/>).

The socio-political scenario of the country also plays a vital role in shaping the works of art. The late twentieth century faced a political upheaval in Pakistan, thus effecting artists' works to become more formalist, as demanded by then current situations. The recent works of some of the contemporary Pakistani artists also tend towards the formalist approach. One of the most prominent of them is Aisha Khalid whose paintings are characterized by repetitive geometric shapes. The four sides of her shapes are representative of the natural forces: wind, sun, earth and fire as opposed to the situations after 9/11 (fig. 20) (Rizvi, 2015, 99). Though suggestive of a contemporary idea, her paintings adhere to the formal aspects of art.

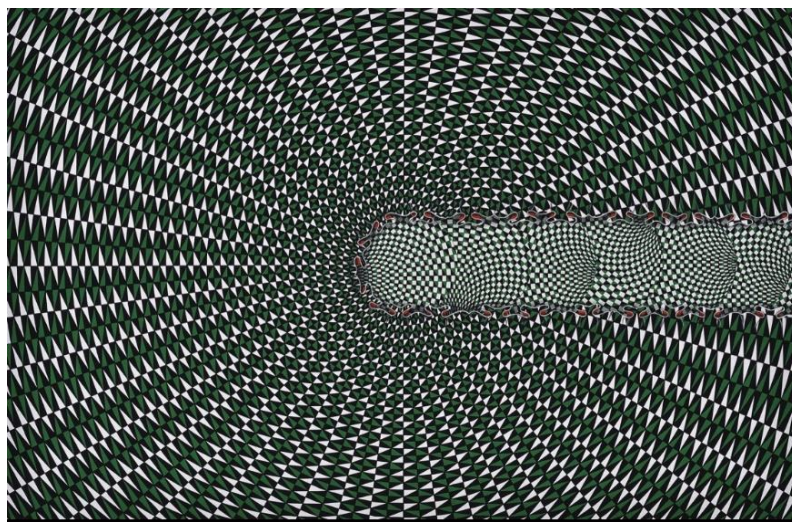


Figure 20. Aisha Khalid, *At the Circle's Centre*, 2017, gouache on paper board, 75 x 117 cm, (Source: Art Basel, <https://www.artbasel.com/catalog/artwork/64815/Aisha-Khalid-At-the-Circle-s-Centre>).

A contemporary and internationally acclaimed artist, Waqas Khan, using dots and small delicate linear patterns create an aesthetic appeal in his artworks (fig. 21). The artist, during the creative process, delves deep into the act of repeating the same patterns creating non-representational drawings. This act takes the artist to a meditative state. While the serenity emanates from these formalist drawings (Jones, 2015, para. 1-11).



Figure 21. Waqas Khan, *Breath of the Compassionate I* (detail), 2016, (Source: Art Asia Pacific, <http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/108/AlternativeNeoSpiritualities>).

Ghulam Hussain, another contemporary artist, makes use of weaving inspired from the traditional craft of his hometown Hyderabad (fig. 22). Though he intends to depict his association with this form of craft in the contemporary scenario, yet his art works are strictly formal.

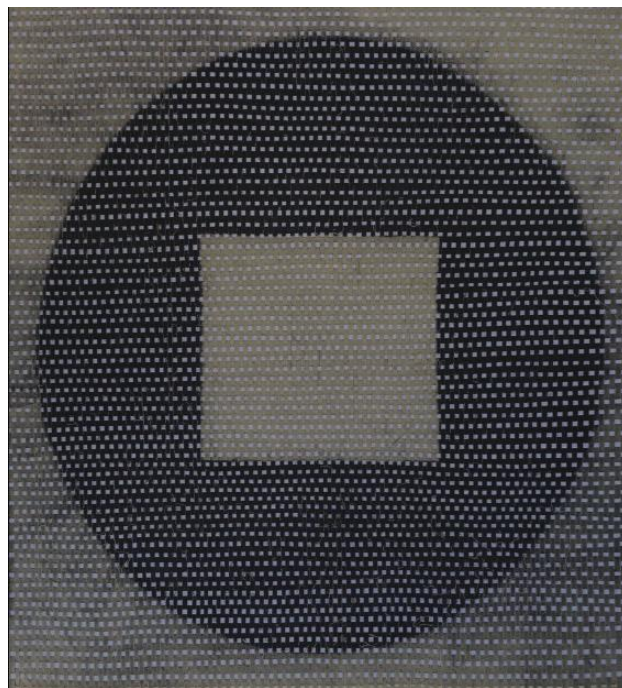


Figure 22. Ghulam Hussain, *Composition with Oval inside the square*, 2016, *surash*, acrylic and graphite on weaved canvas, 20.5 x 22.5 inches, (Source: Ghulam Hussain, <https://artistghulamhussain.com/pages/work/>).

Furthermore, the commercial art, with its main concern for serving as an earning source for the artist, and with no intention to portray artist's emotions nor his concerns for the current socio-political scenario effecting the lives of the masses, is also categorized in the formal art. The calligraphic paintings of an active artist, Tahir Bin Qalandar, having vibrant colors and decorative quality, appealing to the eyes, exemplify this aspect (fig. 23).



Figure 23. Tahir Bin Qalandar, calligraphic painting, mix media on canvas, 24 x 24 inches, (Source: Revivers Galleria, <http://reviversgalleria.com/drop-down2.php?r=18&page=1>).

However, Muhammad Ali Talpur uses the calligraphic elements to construct the paintings with regular repetitive patterns, which are

“...purely formal exercise of mark making based on the movement of a hand holding a pen. The spellbinding effect of repetition awakens memories of calligraphy and associated rituals, replete with connotations yet ‘avoiding content’, to quote the artist (fig. 24)” (Hashmi, 2015, 140).

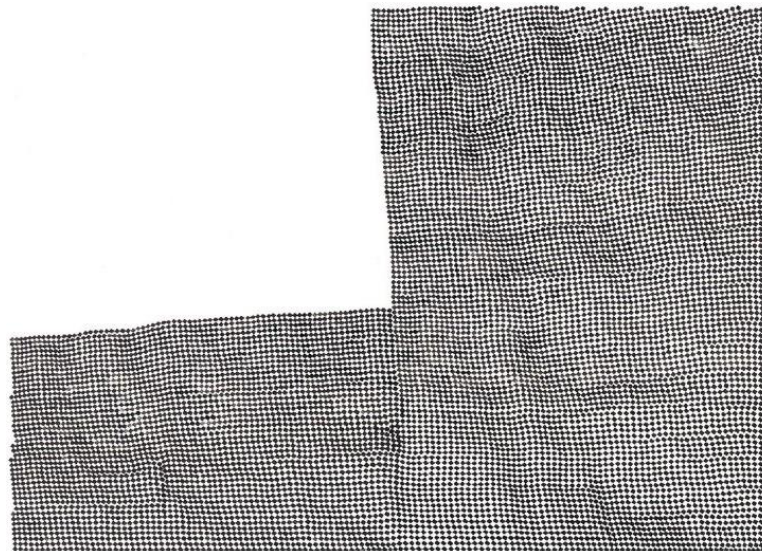


Figure 24. Muhammad Ali Talpur, *Alif 3*, 2012, ink and *qalam* on paper, 22 x 30 inches, (Source: Hashmi, 2015, p. 245).

Talpur’s formalist approach, along with that of the other mentioned artists, is a strong force in shaping the art of the country to a form which is not easily readable by the viewer, yet alluring in terms of the formal elements used in accordance to the principles of art. Although evolved out of the tradition, yet developed in the light of modern theories, the contemporary art has emerged far beyond the limitations of the tradition. In the contemporary scenario, the criteria for the judgement of art follows the moderate formalist aspects, identifying some elements as aesthetic and formal while others as non-aesthetic and non-formal with respect to the medium and the way of representation of an idea.

Conclusion

The scientific innovations, philosophic theories and their development have imparted a great influence on art. The era of purely representational art with religious, historic, or mythological themes and naturalistic rendering was followed by rebellious art movements, which disregarded the academic standards of art judgement, basing majorly on the innovative theories, thus creating the works categorized as Avant-Garde. Cézanne's departure from the conventional painting in the favor of the exploration of forms lead to a complete transformation of the Western art scenario, encouraging the Cubists and all the prominent twentieth century and even contemporary movements to emphasize on the technical and formal aspects of art creation, putting aside or disregarding the conventional approach. This revolutionary influence travelled throughout the world of art, also inspiring the artists of Pakistan. Just as the creation of the art works, the judgement of the contemporary art is based on moderate formalist approach, where the formal and non-formal elements are considered side by side. The formalist approach of Western artists reveals a pursuit of pure abstraction. Whereas, formalist tendencies in Pakistani painting reflect an interrogation of the idea of cultural identity. The research highlights the significance of aesthetic harmony beyond conventional and narrative boundaries for artistic expression. It signifies the formalist approach as persuasive means of visual communication.

Recommendations

The research article recommends that art educators incorporate the component of formalist analysis in both studio and theoretical courses in order to develop visual literacy. Additionally, cross-cultural art activities like collaborative exhibitions and residencies would cultivate fresh insights into the global and transformative potential of form in visual art. The article anticipates further research regarding formalist approach in contemporary Pakistani art, specifically in digital and experiential media. In-depth studies would reveal global influence of formal aesthetics and unfold reinterpretations of forms in new media practices in Pakistan.

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