

## Female Artists of Pakistan, and Impact of their work on Global Art Scene

Afshan Mehmood

*Research Centre, College of Art & Design, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan*

**ABSTRACT :** Art is a universal tool of communication and a medium of expression. The artists usually express their feelings and emotions through their art works. It is not only a mean of conversion of one's energies positively but also contributes in terms of educating the society. The artists are non-traditional story tellers, generally seek inspiration from their surroundings. So, the socio-political factors leave an everlasting impact in nurturing and upbringing of the artists. Female artists of Pakistan are the great contributors in terms of creating soft image of Pakistan nationally and internationally. These artists are multi-tasking individuals, in spite of household and family obligations they put in enormous efforts to play influential role in practical fields. This research is an endeavor of representing the efforts of some Pakistani female artists through visual arts. Some of the most prominent artists are being discussed along with their art works. The art works of these artists are the epitome of their contribution in the field of Art. They further comment on the society in a polite manner furthermore fulfill the aesthetic needs. Related information has been gathered through many sources like books, consulting and gathering data from the living artists and conducting interviews whereas Turabian method for referencing has been adopted for this paper. These artists are the representative of the global society and the biggest challenge for them is to sustain with their cultural identity.

**KEY WORDS:** *Art, Globalization, Female Artists, Soft image, Visual Art, Cultural Identity.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The contribution of female artists in the Artfield of Pakistan is enormous. Female students are greater in number as compared to the male counterparts. Art is a universal tool of communication. Artists usually express their feelings and emotions through the art pieces they produce. It not only converts one's energies positively but also contributes in terms of educating the society. The artists are non-traditional story tellers, generally seek inspiration from their surroundings. Socio-political factors also leave an everlasting impact in nurturing and upbringing of the artists. Female artists of Pakistan are the great contributors in terms of creating soft image of Pakistan nationally and internationally. These artists are multi-tasking individuals, they play influential role in practical fields in spite of household and family obligations. They put in enormous efforts to comment on the society in a polite manner. This research is an endeavor of representing the efforts of some Pakistani female artists through the spectacle of visual arts. Among the major female contributors in Pakistani Artfield are Amrita Sher Gill, Anna Molka Ahmad, Zubaida Agha, Laila Shahzada, Naseem Hafeez Qazi, Zubaida Javed, Mussarat Mirza, Salima Hashmi, Hajra Mansoor, MehrAfroze, Nahid Raza, Qudsia Nisar, Lubna Agha, Prof. Dr. Rahat Naveed Masood, Mussarat Nahid Imam, Shazia Sikandar, Faiqa Uppal and Anila Zulfiqar etc.

A remarkable exhibition of fourteen artists have been organized by *Indus Gallery* Karachi, which proved a remarkable initiative by Ali Imam. According to the observations of the *Herald*, "Some of the most promising painters at work in Pakistan are women and not men".<sup>1</sup> In 1994 *Herald* further noticed that "Women artists today have an edge over their male counterparts because they have the subject and perspective which can make art live again".<sup>2</sup> Through this reference we can witness the successful efforts of these leading Pakistani female artists.

<sup>1</sup>.Herald, June 1982, <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/274258554/>, (accessed on June 18, 2019).

<sup>2</sup>.Herald, January 1994, <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/754259542/>, (accessed on June 18, 2019), 286.

Pakistan Post issued a Rs. 40 sheet let of 10 reflective Pakistani Painters, on 14 August 2006, including three female artists Anna Molka Ahmed, Zubaida Agha and Laila Shahzada.

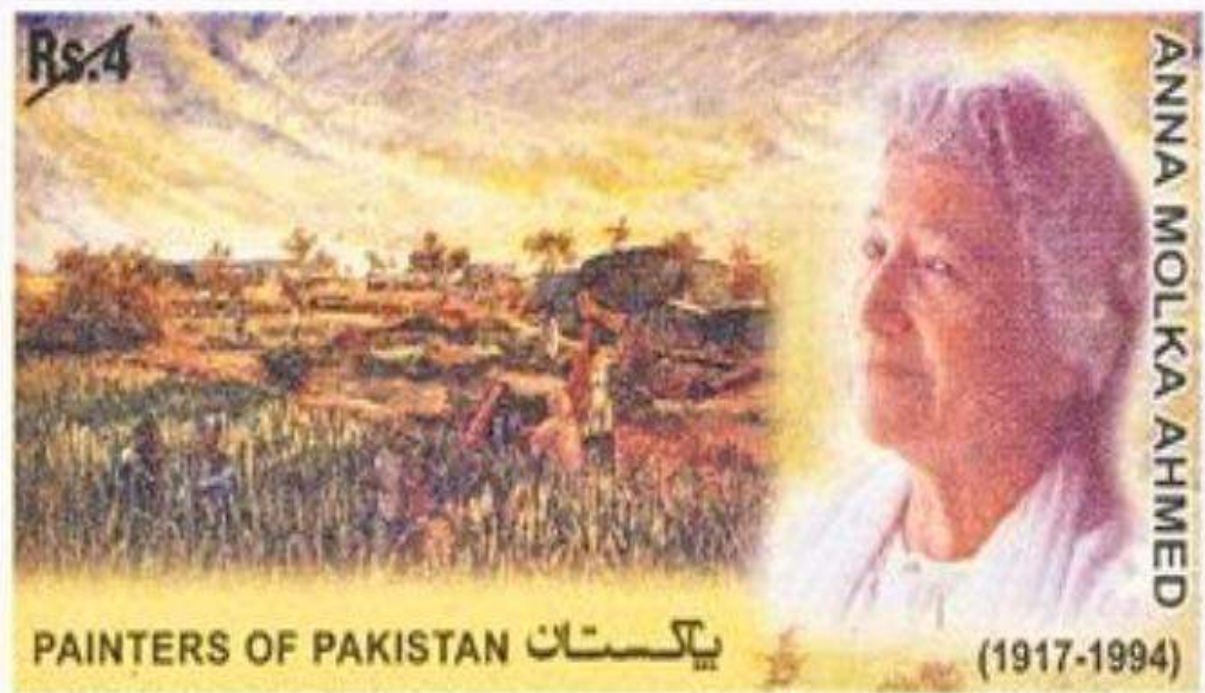


Fig 1. Postage Stamp, Anna Molka Ahmad, 2006, Pakistan Post, Source: <https://www.wnsstamps.post/en/stamps/PK013.06>

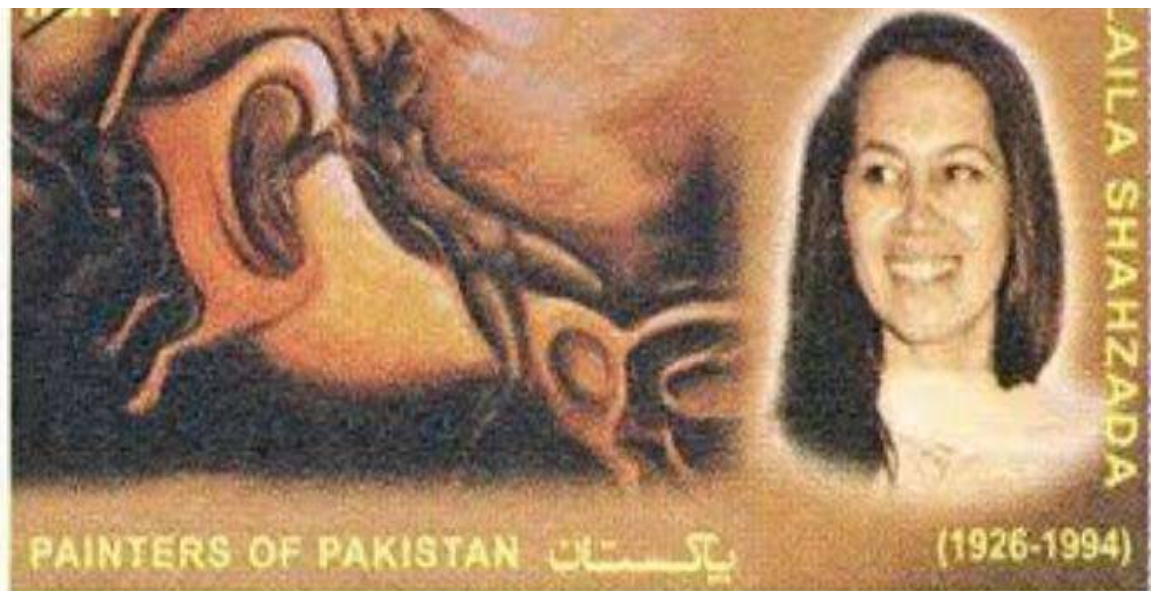


Fig 2. Postage Stamp, Laila Shahzada, 2006, 58mm x 30mm, Pakistan Post, Source: <https://www.wnsstamps.post/en/stamps/PK017.06>.

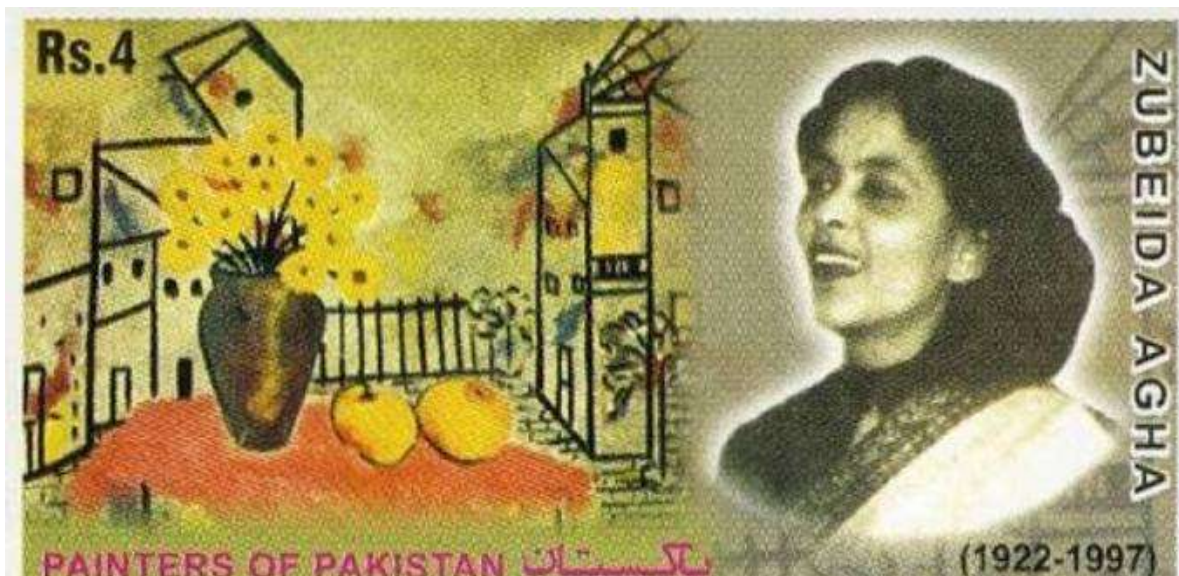


Fig 3. Postage Stamp, Zubeida Agha, 2006, 58mm x 30mm, Pakistan Post, Source: <https://www.wnsstamps.post/en/stamps/PK016.06>.

These postage stamps can be well thought-out as the remuneration of remarkable achievements of these Pakistani artists. Some of the leading female artists are also being discussed here for better comprehension of the art scene of Pakistan.

### 1.1 Anna Molka Ahmad (1917-1994)

Professor Emeritus Anna Molka Ahmad was a British lady who converted to Islam and married Sheikh Ahmad. She settled in Lahore after attaining her degree in art education from Royal College of Art, London. She established the Fine Arts Dept. of the Punjab University Lahore, in 1940. Art education was not only her passion but also the goal of her life.<sup>3</sup> Anna Molka Ahmad was a great inspiration for a huge lot of students. She directly or indirectly inspired the Pakistani female artists. Those who worked under her were directly associated with her, while those who learnt art from her students stayed under her indirect influence. She materialized her approach through visually perceptible and symbolic icons, carrying in-depth meanings.<sup>4</sup>

Her paintings were inspired by the corporal geography of her adopted land. Her iconic painting “*Dance of Death*” is the epitome of her intangible approach, giving meaning to the highly erudite philosophical concept, to be contemplated by man for safe and secure future of humanity.



Fig 4. Anna Molka Ahmed, Photograph, Source: <http://www.artnowpakistan.com/anna-molka-ahmed-one-of-pakistans-early-art-pioneers/>.

<sup>3</sup> Akbar Naqvi, *Image and Identity* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 647.

<sup>4</sup> S. Amjad Ali, *Painters of Pakistan* (Islamabad: National Book Foundation, 1995-2000), 101.



Fig 5. Dance of Death, Anna Molka Ahmed, 8' x 4', Oil on Canvas, 6 panels, Pakistan National Gallery of Art, Islamabad, Source: An Artist an Institution, 65.

She combined religious subject matter with philosophical interpretation in her painting *Dance of Death*, Fig. 5. She painted this mural consisting of six panels, where death has been shown as a metaphor. It also shows her spiritual and philosophical concerns of universal truths and death. She also depicted her concern about the people who are lost in the trickery of mundane power. All six panels consist on outright and inclusive compositions. Corpses of the dead on the foreground, ignorant wealthy people carelessly devastating them under their feet, rejoicing in the intoxication of their worldly power, while blue and green skeletons hopping and laughing around them at their ignorance.

All the figures have been symbolically presented in fancy colorful cloaks, with thick impasto represents her emotional nature. The fifth panel shows the atomic explosion and the return of man into Stone Age, a predictable future of the modern weaponry race. This painting has been executed in 1985, when the earthen globe was being pulled by the two Super-Powers; USA and USSR. Devastation has been symbolically presented in the 5<sup>th</sup> panel with demolished sculptures of Linen and the Statue of Liberty.

Her contribution for the field of art education and its promotion has been the most influential. She also started a departmental magazine *Vista* with procreations of paintings and articles by the staff and students of the department and actively wrote about these exhibition brochures. She has been awarded with *Tamgha-i-Imtiaz*<sup>5</sup>, for her services in the field of fine arts. She is acknowledged among the greatest artists of her period as she was the trend setter and the most influential female artist in Pakistan.

## 1.2 Zubaida Javed (1937-2015)

Zubaida Javed was also one of the renowned artists and art educationists of Pakistan. She was an eminently known conceptual landscape painter. After obtaining her Master's degree in Fine Arts from the Department of Fine Arts at University of the Punjab, she also taught there till her retirement.

Taking inspiration from nature, she transmuted her landscapes into almost non-representational compositions, which were highly subjective too. Her strong and bold color palette satisfies the aesthetic entreaty of the viewer. The conceptual approach of her artworks and the use of colours as a tool of subjective manifestation depict the emotional immersion of the artist with the surroundings. She also picked symbols from her surroundings and presented them on her



Fig 6. Zubaida Javed, Photograph, Source: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1224003>.

<sup>5</sup>. *Tamgha-i-Imtiaz* is a national award of excellence which is given to any Pakistani citizen on the basis of his/her achievements.

canvases through imaginative renderings. Her cityscapes also depict the suggestive figures rather being distinguished.



Fig 7. Murree Hills, Zubaida Javed., Oil on Canvas, Source: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1224003>.

the true spirit of the woodland and its surroundings can be felt visibly. The environment has been created with the use of heavily applied impasto strokes of vibrant colors. The artist has effectively balanced the density of middle ground by the use of green, blue, red yellow and black with the tones of yellow ochre, in the foreground. She successfully applied bold colour with the pellet knife like her mentor Anna Molka, in a unique formation. Her expression was very fluent and harmonious, capturing the fleeting effect of her surroundings. Artists like Zubaida has introduced a new genre of art to the coming generations. According to the artist, "The use of colour is not calculated. Nor does it have to do with the subject matter. It comes from within me on the spire of the moment when I am painting and it keeps on changing."<sup>6</sup> Thus, it can be said that the artists express themselves through colour.

Her first solo show was held in Rawalpindi in 1975 and second solo Exhibition was conducted in Karachi during 1981. She was privileged with the Anna Molka Award originated by the Fine Arts Department of University of the Punjab in 1997. In 2004, she was awarded with the Presidential *Tamgha-Ilmtiaz*.<sup>7</sup>

### 1.3 Lubna Agha (1949-2012)

Lubna Agha graduated from Karachi School of Art in 1967. During her early 20s, in 1967, she was selected for second prize in the National Art Exhibition of Pakistan. She was known among the foremost female artists of Pakistan for her colorful abstract compositions. She assimilated great fame in 1973 due to her *White Series*. The artist, at that time, used to be dressed up in white as well as the paintings displayed in the show were also white with a few suggestive colours subdued with white.<sup>8</sup>



Fig 8. Lubna Agha, Photograph, Source: <http://islamicartsmagazine.com/magazine/view/in-memorial-lubna-gha-artist-in-white/>

<sup>6</sup>. Qudus Mirza, *50 years of Visual Arts in Pakistan* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel

<sup>7</sup>. Marjorie Hussain, *Homage: Remembering an art icon*, (Dawn: December

<sup>8</sup>. Akbar Naqvi, *Image and Identity* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 19

After her tour of Morocco and Turkey during 2004-2005, she became awfully inspired by the Islamic Architecture and geometrical patterns. This interest frequently changed her style of painting, and painting subject matter was now replaced with arched windows, wooden structures, geometric motives, minarets, domes and crenulated windows of mosques and palaces instead of figurative work. According to Dr. Marcella Sirhandi “ Her art brought her closer to her heritage and gave her a sense of peace”.<sup>9</sup>

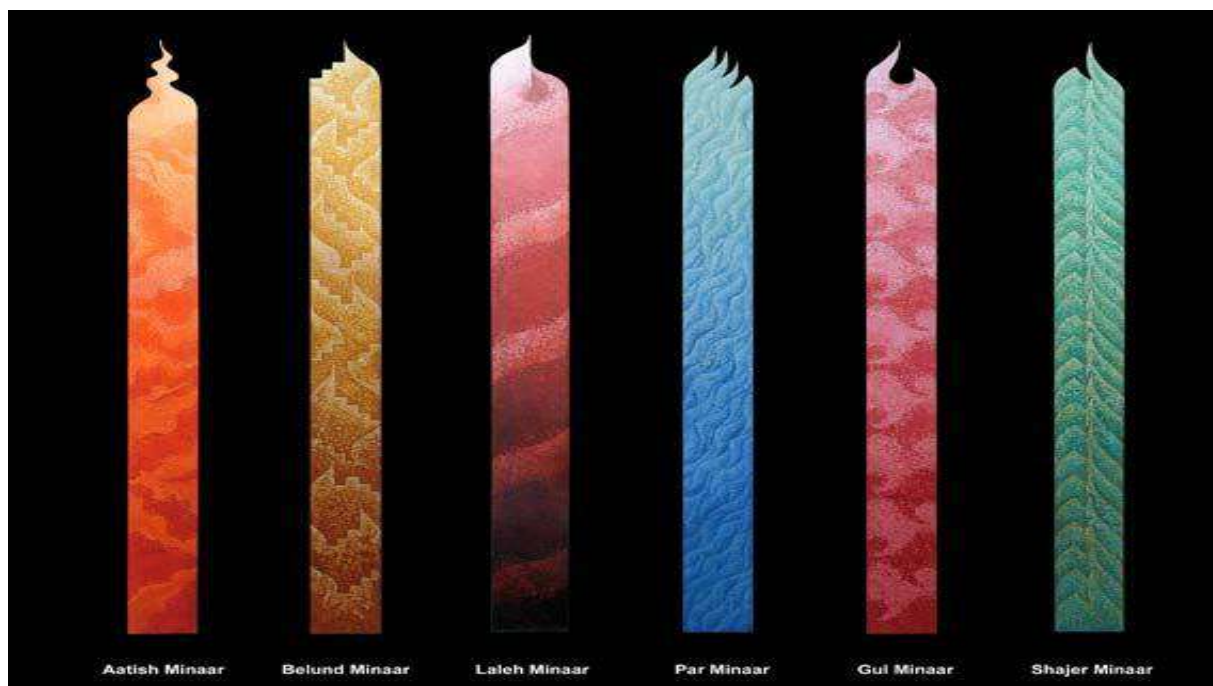


Fig 9. Minarets, Lubna Agha, Meenaars - Minarets, 19” x 34.5”, Private Collection, Source: [http://islamicartsmagazine.com/magazine/view/in\\_memoriam\\_lubna\\_gha\\_artist\\_in\\_white/](http://islamicartsmagazine.com/magazine/view/in_memoriam_lubna_gha_artist_in_white/)

Her painting *Minarets*, Fig. 9, is the best example of her interest in Islamic patterns. She perceived the Islamic structures in a different formation, and added the element of design in her new compositions. Minarets usually retain profound importance in Muslim architecture. She painted the pair of six minarets, placed side by side, in a deliberate manner, with basic and complementary colors, separately titled. Starting from right to left first in the row is “*ShajarMinar*”<sup>10</sup> which was designed with the leaves in green colour tones while the top seems cropped in the pointed format like the outer edge of the leaf. Second is the “*Gull Minar*”<sup>11</sup> with the pattern of red petals and carrying the same carved petal top. Third is the “*Par Minar*”<sup>12</sup> it’s uppermost part suggests feather shaped design format in blue colour tones. Fourth is “*LalchMinar*”<sup>13</sup> with the variants of red colour. Fifth composition is “*BulandMinar*”<sup>14</sup> which was designed with stairs inside and top is also in stair format. Sixth and the last one is labelled as “*AtishMinar*”<sup>15</sup> contains the color of fire and top also indicates fire flames. All six minarets placed against a pure black flat background shows her conception of forms.

At the peak of her career, Lubna had to move to Sacramento, California, with her family. Besides this, she did many solo shows internationally as well as in Pakistan. She is considered among the leading pioneers of abstract and non-figurative art in Pakistan. She transmuted her artworks from representational to semi abstract.

#### 1.4 Rahat Naveed Masood (b. 1953)

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Marcella Sirhandi, *In Memoriam: Lubna Agha-Artist in White* (Islamic Arts, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> *Shajar* means tree.

<sup>11</sup> *Gull* means flower.

<sup>12</sup> *Par* means feather.

<sup>13</sup> *Lalach* means greed.

<sup>14</sup> *Buland* means high.

<sup>15</sup> *Atish* means fire.

Professor Dr. Rahat Naveed Masood graduated from Lahore College in 1974 and obtained her Masters degree in Fine Arts from University of the Punjab in 1976. She started her teaching career by joining as a lecturer in the same department.

She also achieved another Master's Degree in Art and Design in 1995 from the Kingston University, London. She further documented that period by painting and drawing the landscapes and scenes around her. The use of gold leaf in her art works, combined with light and dark pastels hues, create striking impact. Although she works in realistic manner yet her artworks are teemed with conceptual imagery.

She also served as the principal of College of Art and Design, University of the Punjab. She is still an active female artist in Pakistan's art scene, furthermore she is a very committed member of the Punjab Artists' Association. She exhibited widely, both in Pakistan and abroad. She also played a vital role in giving a new direction to theory and practice.



Fig 10. Rahat Naveed Masood, Photograph, Source: <https://rungg.co/rahat-naveed->



Fig 11. *Beyond the Impediment*, Rahat Naveed Masood, Oil on Canvas, 48"x 36", 2015, Source: <https://canvasgallery.net/portfolio/rahat-naveed-masud/#&gid=1&pid=2>.

In the painting, *Beyond the Impediment*, Fig. 11, the artist has made herself surrounded by impediments, symbolically. It seems as if she is moving forward, while suddenly turned her head towards the viewer. As she is trying to convince the viewers; look how I have experienced by now. She has used lots of symbols to convey her feelings. The artist has shown herself in the middle of the composition, dressed in blue and white printed shirt and properly covering herself with white veil around her shoulders. In the background, nine tiny people have been shown, wearing white masks. It seems as she has depicted those people who may have tried to create problems in her life, without revealing their identities. She has conveyed her message by the depiction of these strangers. Two barriers in blue and white, unfinished brick walls and a pile of stones are also the indication of hurdles. Yet the positive signs of success, hope and optimism can also be seen in the painting. Ladder in a symbolic way suggests her achievements, while red rose in her hand shows that she firmly grasps her loved ones in her journey. Dove, the symbol of peace, is shown flying at her head, while fresh green leaves also indicate positivity in her life. The painting is permeated with symbolic imagery that successfully conveys its message to the audience.

Rahat Masood is also highly acknowledged for her incredible Portraits, Naturalistic studies and sole figure compositions. She is not only an expert of Pastels but also known for her oil painting skills. She developed an exclusive technique of using Pastels with Gold leaf on hand made paper.

She possesses several awards and prizes. She was also awarded with prize in Painting by Punjab Council of Arts in 1991 and Artists Association of Punjab Award in 1999.<sup>16</sup>

### 1.5 Shahida Manzoor (b. 1960)

Shahida Manzoor is also among the most prominent and leading practicing female artists and researcher of Pakistan. She completed her master's degree from University of the Punjab in 1987 and joined the same department in 1989. She also received scholarship for her Ph. D. degree from Ohio University, USA. There are also many solo and group shows at her credit. She went through a very long journey of struggle, dedication, hard work, devotion and determination during the course of her life. She set up an example for the coming generations that hard work always pays and by no means goes unrewarded. She is a living evidence of the phrase 'Allah help those who help themselves'.

Shahida Manzoor's paintings reveal the spiritual nostalgia with nature as a whole. The main source of her inspiration is Nature; which is evident in her every piece of art. In her paintings one can experience the fusion of visual and aesthetic expressions with deep observation of the environment and its elements.

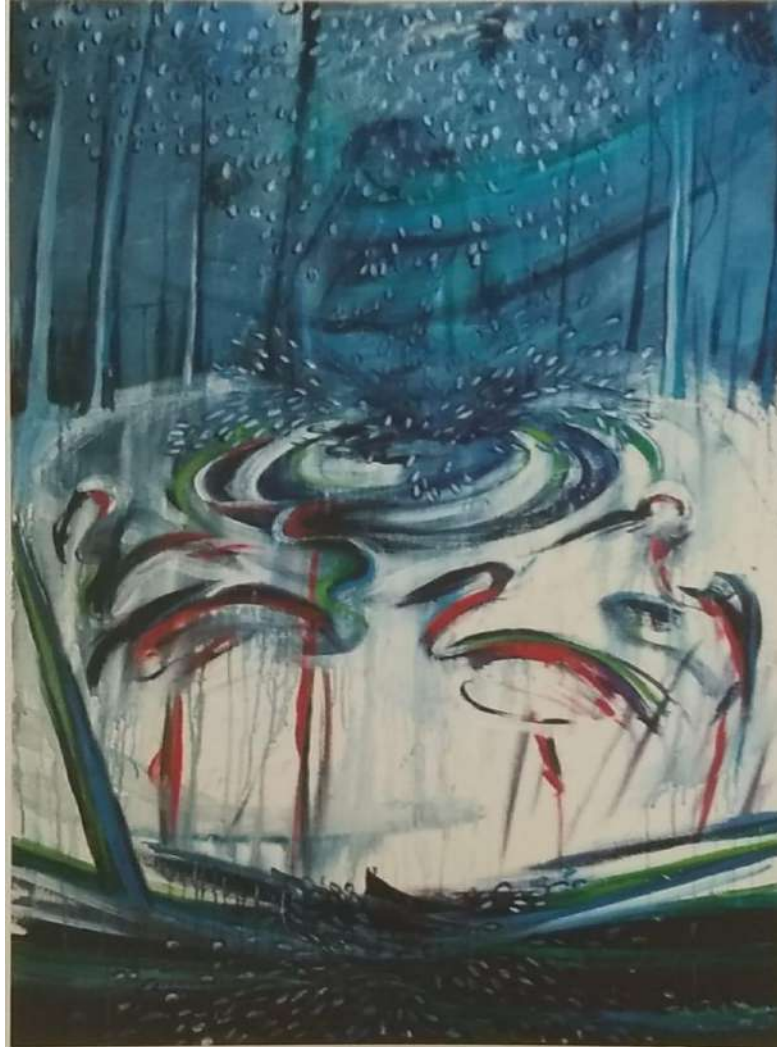


Fig 12. Dr. Shahida Manzoor,

Photograph. Source: Artist.

<sup>16</sup>.Salima Hashmi, *Unveiling the Visible* (Lahore: Actionaid Pakistan, 2002), 206.





*Freedom III*, Fig. 13, represents the feelings of ecstasy. It is a famous quote of Khalil Gibran that

“Life without liberty is like a body without spirit”<sup>17</sup>. This is true in the sense as freedom is one of our fundamental rights; every one wants liberty in all aspects of life, both physical or emotional, yet it should be conserved within certain terms and conditions. This is related to freedom of physical self of man but the painting *Freedom-III* represents the highest rung of the ladder that is Freedom in its truest sense as Maulana Rumi defines the different ranks of spiritual elevation. This painting is filled with this transcendent inclination of freedom. It can be felt through the swirling motion of the strokes, which leads the creatures to a semi-conscious state of mind which ultimately leads to spirituality. A semi-abstract figure in the center of the painting rendered in hues of blue is also visible. Flamingos in the foreground also symbolize human strivings to get freedom from everyday’s perceptibility and the central figure is demonstrating spirit which is linked with Allah. Human spirit is also connected with Allah, according to the Islamic beliefs. Swirling waves also remind us the movement during the circumambulation, with tears washing away the spirits. The soul is thus being purified in the act of circumambulation, which is also symbolic to get purification. These tears like drops have been painted on three stages. They may indicate three major stages of human beings which are childhood, youth and old age or either they can be the stages of spiritual elevation. The final stage of which is Nafs-iSafiawa Kamila. So, it can also be said that symbols are not always created deliberately but sometimes unintentionally created forms also turned out into something representational or symbolic. Rapidly moving and revolving as we see in ‘Sufi’ dance, there comes a stage of being lost, one entangles in the feelings of nothingness, getting freedom from the external worries and connected to the divine force, Allah. Everything in the painting seems revolving and melting to achieve the divine unity.

<sup>17</sup>. Quotes.net, STANDS4 LLC, 2020. "Khalil Gibran Quotes." (Accessed February 20, 2020). <https://www.quotes.net/quote/2773>.

Strokes of red and green are also complementing each other. Vertical lines added in the background are the suggestive of the tree trunks, they are also creating movement in the composition. Diagonal lines of the foreground are also creating depth in the painting. The rhythmic splashes seem purifying the souls. The painting as a whole, is very harmonized and balanced which fosters our imagination.

### 1.6 FaiqaUppal (1969-b)

FaiqaUppal is also a distinguished contemporary female artist of Pakistan who completed her Masters with distinction from University of the Punjab. Through her art works she explore the relationship between life and colors; along with feelings and expressions. She uses conceptual approach to portray her feelings and expressions. She renders her artworks are in fresh and bright water based mediums which adds fluidity in the art works. Through these mediums she produces contrasting hues and textures.

She is a practicing artist and regularly displays her art works at national and international level. She moved from Pakistan to United Kingdom which not only brought about a revolutionary change in her artworks but also improve the positive image of Pakistan globally. Along with this, social, cultural and atmospheric changes her work took a new stance. Her earlier Mughal inspired dancing figures were switched by European ballet dancing figures and landscapes. Like a fresh breeze this new wave of change added more coherence in her paintings. Her European ballet compositions and landscapes were changed into floral paintings. Her painting *Harmony*, Fig. 15, is a vivid example of her spontaneous art work.



Fig 57: FaiqaUppal, Photograph, Source:Artist.



Fig 15. Harmony, Acrylic on Canvas, Private Collection.

The painting *Harmony*, Fig. 15, is a very soothing and fascinating piece of art. The flow in the female figure and swan reminds the researcher of the 'S' shaped figures of Ajanta art, where figures were generally rendered with counter bodily twists of upper and lower parts. The gentle tones of blues and whites are creating very soothing and harmonized effect. White colour of swan seems harmonious with the white flowers painted around the head of female figure. The rhythm of music seems dominating the whole surroundings. The gesture of lady with flute, filled the air with the feelings of rejoice and meditation. All the environment created in the painting is filled with lyrical quality, one can experience in poetic manner. Linear approach and flow of the above mentioned painting gives the feeling of serenity.

She renders her art works in such a manner where form and color play a very major role. She describes her paintings as 'Expression with a touch of Impression'.<sup>18</sup> The manifestation of joy and pleasure is a very dominant character of her art works. Her work revolves around life, colors, feelings and expressions. Her art works combine the Eastern and Western traditions in uniquely blended compositions. She has successfully justified with this medium which also shows her attachment with the eastern traditions.

### 1.7 Anila Zulfiqar (b.1975)

Anila Zulfiqar is a Lahore based female artist who portrays her conceptually woven ideas through different mediums. She also writes in several Urdu and English magazines. She has also participated in several National level competitions from 1995 till date, besides her five solo shows. Like other eminent artists of Pakistan Anila is also contributing in creating soft image of Pakistan.



Fig 59: Anila Zulfiqar,  
Photograph, Source: Artist.

18. FaiqaUppal, *Rang BaatainKarain* (Lahore: Hamail Art Gallery,2020).



Fig 17. Nostalgic Expressions, Anila Zulfiqar, Mix Media, Source: Artist.

The above mentioned art work *Nostalgic Expressions*, Fig. 17, is part of her *Nostalgic* series which she associates with her childhood memories about the interior of Lahore with her grandmother's home. The artist has built this collage with a totally different material, fabric rolls, as her medium of expression. The artist has tried to convey her vision in a unique pattern. Irregularly shaped fabric rolls of vibrant colors against a dark background build iconography and also create movement in her paintings. The composition seems to be suggestive of cityscape in itself. Colorful night life of Lahore reflects the cultural and artistic life of the city.

The artist states about her work in person interview: "In my work vibrant colors and irregular shapes create noise and chaos. I have used fabric as medium of my expression."

Besides painting she also did video installations in 2015, 2017 and 2018. Currently, she is also working on 3D symbols. After observing her art works, we can say that Anila Zulfiqar has provided symbolic expression of her feelings in her creative endeavors. Like many other artists she also used color as a tool for her emotional expressions. Through the symbols of colors and shapes she tried to express her nostalgia of childhood experiences and memories of Lahore in a distinctive and innovative manner.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The paintings of These Pakistani female artists are the epitome of various aspects for example physical environment, socio-economic and cultural environment, religion, gender and psychological implications. These artists employ symbols due to psychological or emotional implications which are the global means of communication. These female artists express their moods and expressions through their art works. They also absorb positive and negative vibes from their surroundings and consciously or unconsciously adopt certain symbols to express their selves. Female artists of Pakistan are also creating positive image of Pakistan nationally and internationally through their art and ideology. These artists are the representative of the global society and the biggest challenge for them is to sustain with their cultural identity.

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