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The representation of Women Empowerment in Shazlay Khan's Art: A Feminist Perspective

Tuba Najam

Assistant Professor

Department of Art & Design

Government College Women University Faisalabad

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Abstract

The research article explores the representation of women empowerment in the art of Shazly Khan, a Pakistani painter. Khan's vibrant and symbolic compositions depict women as strong, nurturing, and connected to their families and communities, conveying hope, positivity, and joy. The article analyzes Khan's use of color, symbolism, and stylization to promote a positive message about women's lives and experiences, highlighting their strength, resilience, and beauty.

Keywords: Women, Representation, Feminism, Stereotypes, Education, Women Empowerment

1. How does Shazly Khan's artwork represent women empowerment in Pakistani society?
2. What symbolic elements does Khan use in her art to convey women's strength and resilience?
3. How does Khan's depiction of women in everyday moments contribute to the representation of women empowerment?



4. What role does color play in Khan's artwork in promoting a positive message about women's lives?
5. How does Khan's art challenge or reinforce traditional patriarchal norms in Pakistani society?

Women empowerment is about giving women the power to control their lives, make their own choices and have equal opportunities as men. Empowerment means women can pursue their goals, dreams, and aspirations without fear of discrimination or violence. It's about creating a society where women can thrive, reach their full potential and above all being acknowledged emotionally and intellectually. Women's empowerment is a pressing issue in Pakistani society, where patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes often limit women's access to education, employment, and healthcare; especially mental health.

As a mother, woman empowerment means having the ability to nurture, care, and provide for her children without societal or cultural constraints. It's about empowering the next generation, especially daughters, to grow into confident, independent and strong women who can pursue their dreams and make a difference in the world.

Shazly Khan is a female stylized Pakistani painter of modern era, who focuses the life and challenges of a female in our society. She was born in Saudi Arabia and visited many countries in Europe and Africa till her youth. She experienced the cultures of Spain, France and Italy before her father returned to Pakistan and settled in Karachi. All these places had vibrant art scene, which affected Khan artistically and aesthetically. According to her, the vibrant color palette of her compositions is a result of African tribal art. Her art carries a note of faith and strength for females and her work gives a message of hope and happiness for women, cherishing their strengths especially as mothers. Sun and dove in the art of Khan portray optimism, positivity and peace while the exaggerated limbs of women present their power and potential. In her art, sun symbolizes glory, hope, ambition and bright future, fish represents life and beauty, buildings symbolize fast phase of urban life style, while chair suggests a prominent place in society. According to Khan,



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her work is a tribute to Asian women, struggling for equal rights, inner peace and fulfillment of their desires and dreams.

According to the artist, her work connects people of different nationalities, genders and ages who can relate to different everyday life situations, which the artist expresses and registers on canvas. Her work presents empowered women of the society, linked with different situations and struggling equally along with male members of the society. Education is the strength of women in her opinion and daily life scenes along with children, taking tea, enjoying and relaxing in a garden with flowers, were themes quite popular in Khan's art. Many times she has presented her own personality in her art pieces.ⁱ

Khan has an influence of Modern European artist Gustave Klimt (plate 1). Klimt has used bright color palette with design elements and motifs involved in it which add a decorative effect to his art works. She has also made use of bright colors and symbolic elements in the form of design. Decorative stylized canvases are the quality of Khan's painting compositions.

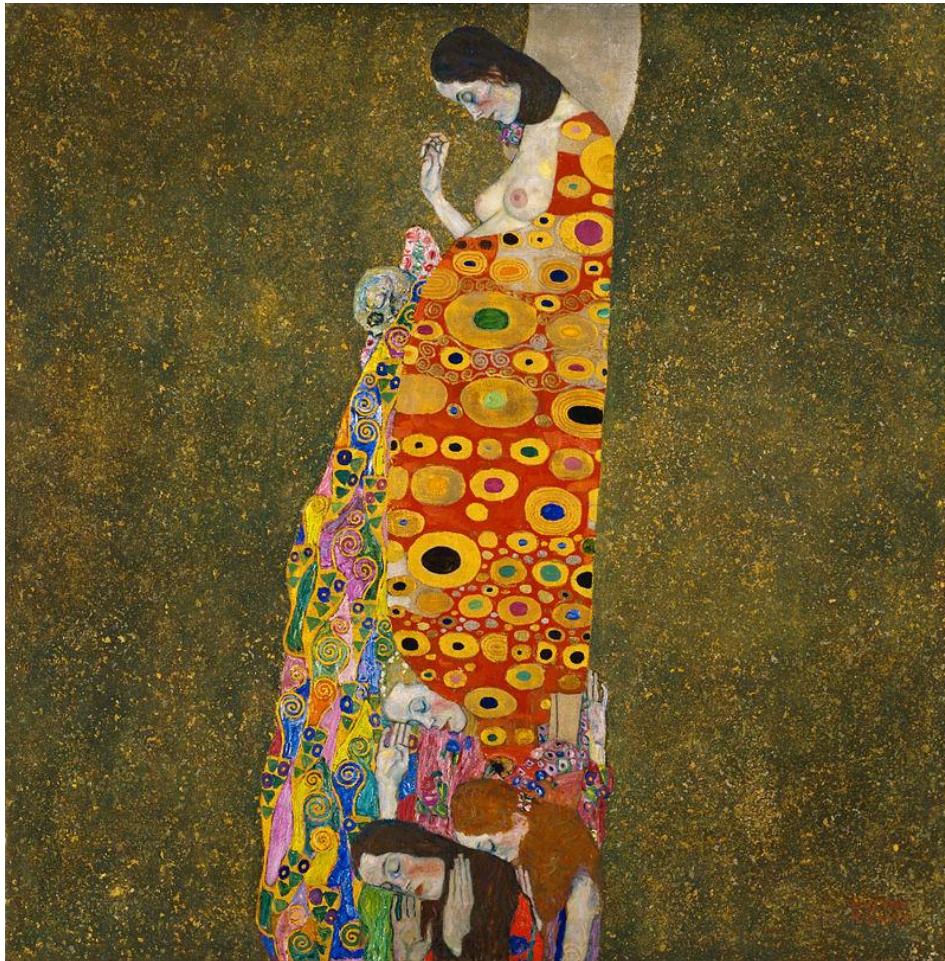


Plate 1. Gustave Klimt. *Hope II*. 1907-08. Mix-media on Canvas. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustav_Klimt#/media/File:Gustav_Klimt_-_Hope,_II_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg (accessed April 04, 2020.)



Plate 2. Shazly Khan. *Dreamers*. 2012. Acrylic on Canvas. 30 inches x 24 inches. Private Collection.

Source: <https://gulfnews.com/entertainment/arts-culture/celebrating-womanhood-through-art-1.1086895> (accessed April 04, 2020.)

Stylized figures, along with birds, flowers and sun create a colorful composition in the painting titled “Dreamers” (plate 2). A pregnant figure along with bird, flowers and sun is painted by her to present growth and progress in a symbolic manner. Multiple figures in praying postures symbolize the well wishes being sent in the way of blessed one, to cherish the special movements on part of family and friends. The stylized white bird presented in a protective shield of arms, symbolize the awaited new soul sheltered in womb of a woman. The whole composition symbolizes the beauty and warmth of motherhood in the whole. Elongated, stylized and simplified figures painted by Khan create a composition having prominent design quality. The sun, flowers, bird and meditating figures, develop an atmosphere of hope and positivity, which is a prominent quality of Khan’s art. The subject matter of Khan’s art is women same as previously used in the



art of Tabinda Chinoy and Nahid Raza. The individuality in Khan's art is that she presents the happiness and contentment of a women's life instead of presenting her struggles and hardships as expressed in the art of Chinoy and Raza.



Plate 3. Shazly Khan. *Family*. 2015. Acrylic on Canvas. 48 inches x 72 inches. Hamail Art Gallery, Lahore.

Source: <http://www.hamailartgalleries.com/art/4484> (accessed April 04, 2020.)

Exaggerated forms and elongated limbs add interest to the stylized canvases of Khan (plate 3) The warmth of family relations and the importance of small joys in life are focused by Shazly Khan expressed through her lively canvases with a presentation of all good by the artist. Her art has a feeling of freedom, unity and bonding altogether. Women are seen busy outdoor and indoor taking tea, smelling flowers in the garden; playing with children and sharing secrets with friends. Women are shown long-limbed with flatly rendered faces and brilliantly colored dresses. These long limbs and colors of their dresses depict their support and strength for their children as well as



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the colors of joy present in the life of women associated with their children and families. "Mother and Child 2012" is a painting composition presenting a faceless stylized female figure and a simplified figure of child, surrounded by a composition presenting a mother's love for child (plate 4).



Plate 4. Shazly Khan. *Mother and Daughter*. 2015. Acrylic on Canvas. 42 inches x 54 inches. Hamail Art Gallery, Lahore.

Source: <http://www.hamailartgalleries.com/art/4498> (accessed April 04, 2020.)

Plate 5. Shazly Khan. *Family*. 2017. Acrylic on Canvas. 24 inches x 18 inches. Collectors Art Gallery, Lahore.

<https://collectorsgalleria.com/product/shazly-khan-041-acrylic-on-canvas-24-x-18-sold/>
(accessed April 04, 2020.)

It is a highly symbolic composition and stylization is prevailing throughout this art piece involving both simplification and exaggeration of forms collectively. Rose plants full of red roses on both sides of figure present love and happiness while the protective arms of mother around the



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child adding colors of happiness to the life of the little one, are presented through abstract geometric addition of color around the figure of the child. The arms symbolize the world of child under the supervision and love of mother, which is full of colors and joys. Fish is also a symbol of life and growth, which is present in the painting under discussion. Tea being a symbol of life in Khan's paintings, is also present in the currently discussed art work, turning it into a highly symbolic personal expression by the artist. Shazlay Khan has an optimistic approach towards life and she tries to present life of woman full of blessings and love associated with her family and children.

Women are the focal point and main subject matter of all of Khan's work. While explaining her work, Khan explained that women have bonding with their families, relations, dreams and desires and all these are presented through her art. Human forms and their relations are the main subject matter of her art, where the work is highly stylized and symbolic in nature. Color is the strength of her art along with symbolism and design quality. Her paintings are an expression of love, life and relations.ⁱⁱ

The "Mother and Daughter 2015" is a comparatively mature art work by Khan, which she has rendered in her specific symbolically stylized manner with an addition of texture to enhance the compositional strength of the painting (plate 4). Design value of the painting is very strong and asymmetrical balance and contrast is created through the addition of red roses painted in different sizes. The figures of mother and daughter are faceless stylized figures where the interest is created by the addition of texture to both figures. Strong mother daughter bonding is presented by Khan in the art work, which carries painterly expertise and design qualities. The exaggerated limbs represent care and bonding while the stylized composition is developed by the simplified roses background and figures, along with elongated arms. Sun, roses, blue sky and the bonding among mother and daughter all present love and positivity. The "Family 2015" is another painting by the artist focusing on the importance and beauty of family bonding (plate 5). Mother, daughter and grand-daughter are painted in a way presenting protective shield of family and relations in life. The rendering and color application show maturity and skill of the artist. In the composition shades of blues and brown present hurdles and dangers of this world while the red color used in dress of



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figures symbolize love warmth and protection, altogether found in the personality of a mother for her children, unconditionally and selflessly. Moreover the flowerless dry plants present unfavorable conditions but the flower in child's hand is the focal point of the whole composition, presenting that even in uncomplimentary scenarios children are a source of happiness for their mother always. Moreover the flower in child's hand also symbolizes the fact that mother bears the unfavorable conditions but protects the joys of her children in any case. The elongated limbs symbolize strength and a protective shield as well as add stylization and design quality to the painting composition. Sensitivities of family bonding are presented in the work of Khan. Closeness, affection and bonding are the most important aspects of a woman's life which she cherishes throughout her life time. Stylization prevails the vibrant symbolic art works of Khan.ⁱⁱⁱ

In 2015, a nine-days solo exhibition titled "Celebrating Life" took place at Hamail Art Gallery Lahore. Khan used large scale to present her ideas in a stylized manner. Instead of focusing on facial expressions, Khan expressed her ideas through symbolic rendering of faceless stylized figures and she tried to focus on dignity and struggle of women keeping with the traditional norms, without getting out of boundaries in her work. Her colorful palette provides a strong expression to the viewers.^{iv}

Khan said in an interview that she is known for her "Tea Celebrations". She told that a cup of tea is something, which one may spend and share the precious time with one's friends and family. There are many problems and issues present in our society, but Khan wants to focus on the good and positive perspective of life. The importance of face to face interaction is presented in her art in the age of social media and technology. Social distancing is taking place due to technology, which she wants to point out and focuses on the importance of family relations and close interactions. She uses acrylic colors because these are fast drying and also strengthen her themes on the whole due to variety of shades and textures available with them. Pigeons represent inner peace in Khan's art. Texture is the second main component in her art where the first one is surely color.^v

Tea is the most important element of Khan's art which symbolizes daily routines and practices of life. Moreover it represents relations and social links as well. Her work has positive



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vibes being happy and lively, unconcerned with political and social issues happening in the world. The “Tea Celebration Series” are a series of colorful and cheerful compositions painted by Khan, where tea is the compulsory ingredient for all the canvases developed during that time period (plate 6). Colorful dresses rich in motifs and design elements are presented in friends’ get-togethers, bonding and sharing, altogether. Flowers, colors and decorative design elements are some of the important characteristics of Khan’s art created under her tea celebration series of paintings, where stylization is a permanent and unchangeable characteristic of her art. In the first painting of the series added to this research, two female stylized figures are painted having tea in a light mood, while the background as well as the figures are painted, in very bright and cheerful color palette. Red is the color of love and warmth of relations in Khan’s paintings, while the variety of color add interest and decorative appeal to the art work. Geometric patterns in the dress of one figure and the stylized roses add design quality to the painting composition, while the red of other figures dress is balanced by red roses and red sun in the background (plate 6). In another painting from “Tea Celebration Series” there are three elongated stylized female figures painted by Khan as the main subject of her art work.

The colorful stylized compositions of Shazlay Khan have close similarity with the painted illustrations of Dutch-Egyptian artist Roeqiya Fris currently settled in Netherlands (plate 7). She graduated from Willem De Kooning Academy of Visual arts, Rotterdam (Netherlands) in 2005^{vi}. Women presented individually or in groups are depicted in majority of her mix media art works. The subject matter of women, family and joy represented through colorful stylized compositions by Roeqiya Fris, are somehow close to the style and subject matter of Khan, following her own idea and perspective. Same as women, flowers are also a common element present in the art of both artists, and both used them in either the dresses of figures or in the background as supporting elements. The colors and rendering of both contemporary artists have close similarities and a feeling of strong bonding and connection in their art.



Plate 7. Roeqya Fris, *Untitled* 2018. Mix media on paper.

Source: <https://www.artisticmoods.com/roeqiya-fris-2/> (accessed march 29, 2021.)

Khan's art is a depiction of women instincts, especially women in relations like daughter, sister and above all mother. Her work is interesting, colorful and simplified altogether. Khan embellishes her canvas with the use of sparkling and vibrant color schemes. The addition of flowers to many of her paintings, create freshness and life to her art works.

In paintings from the “Tea celebration Series” artist has used a lot of symbolism in stylized manner rendered by using a vividly brilliant color palette. The variety of symbols added to the composition, are presented in the form of design rendered in vibrant colors, creating interest and depth at the same time. The symbols related to life are added to the painting including fish, flowers, sky, water, butterflies, sun and womb and child, are presented in completely stylized manner as imagined by the artist. The color palette is different and mature in the art work under discussion as compared to the previous works of Khan, but the variety and spontaneity of colors remains the same. The arms of the faceless woman presented as the main subject of the painting are exaggeratedly elongated adding emphasis and stylization to the whole composition. The pigeon on the head of figure as well as the houses, butterflies, and cup of tea painted inside the boundary



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of arms full of bangles represent the circle of happiness of a woman's life while the other symbols associated with the life of a woman are painted outside the boundary to develop design quality and add compositional value to the artwork. Stylization prevails the work under discussion, like it is dominating most of the work created by Khan in different phases of her career. The geometric and floral motifs involved in the work of Shazly Khan, support the compositional value of painting, where red is the color for warmth of relations in her work, which can also be seen as the main color present in the background of the painting contrasted with white textured dresses of mother and daughter, where white is a color of purity and presents the pure love in the relationship of a mother and daughter, which can never be changed or over ruled by anyone in the world. The decorative motifs added to the dress of both figures add design values to the stylized composition.

Feminism, friendship and fertility are three aspects used in Khan's art, which proved to be the main idea behind her compositions. Elongated female forms are painted to present feelings of love, care, companionship and protection among family and friends simultaneously using vibrant enchanting color palettes.^{vii}

Collectively her work is a breeze of hope and freshness for women facing challenges daily in their lives.

ⁱ <https://www.linkedin.com/in/shazly-khan-319557b7/> accessed April 02, 2020.

ⁱⁱ <https://gulfnews.com/entertainment/arts-culture/celebrating-womanhood-through-art-1.1086895>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1081209> accessed April 02, 2020.

^{iv} <http://www.iran-daily.com/News/133566.html> accessed April 02, 2020.

^v Interview of Shazly Khan, <https://vimeo.com/386560459> accessed April 02, 2020.

^{vi} <https://flair-magazine.com/bridging-east-roeqiya-fris/> accessed April 01, 2021.

^{vii} <https://tribune.com.pk/story/658707/artistic-endeavours-shazly-khan-and-her-epic-journey/> April 02, 2020.