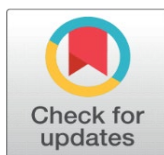
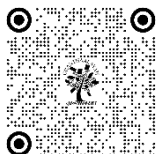


CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES IN PAINTINGS: EXPRESSIONS BY CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ARTISTS

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ABSTRACT

The present paper is an attempt to understand the relationship between the childhood experiences and its expression in visual art mediums such as painting, sculptures, and installations. Visual art is an important medium by which the subconscious mind finds its way for expression. In this research, some Indian contemporary artists have been studied on two parameters: first on their artwork and second on their childhood experiences. An attempt is being made to find out how the childhood experiences made an impact on their work. Both positive and negative experiences in childhood lead to creative pathways in an artist. The childhood experiences of these artists range from early demise of mother resulting in missing visage in paintings, to expression of darkness and death due to witnessing riots. The work of some artists who were abandoned 'pink' color due to dark complexion resulting in series of artwork titled 'I hate pink' or having positive experiences such as time spent with family being expressed in the form of family gathering paintings, are also elaborated in this paper. Psychologists have been finding ways to reach to the core of people's mind to gain insight about the mental health issues and its causes or origins for an individual. The understanding of an individual's artwork can be a way of identifying and understanding the expressions and reflections of that individual in drawings, paintings, and other visual art mediums.

Keywords: Childhood Experiences, Psychology of Paintings, Sublimation, Artists

1. INTRODUCTION

Clinical Psychologists, Psychiatrists and other mental health professionals often consider art expressed by an individual in forming an understanding about that individual. Art therapy is being used by mental health professionals to identify mental health issues. It becomes important for the psychologists to be able to interpret the reflections of persons in the form of drawings, paintings and other art mediums. It becomes even more challenging when a mental health professional is dealing with issues that a child experiences during childhood. Art therapy is used by

mental health professionals to treat various mental ailments. The understanding about the art content and its root causes becomes important. The present paper is an attempt to relate paintings of some artists with their childhood experiences.

A child has variety of experiences during the process of socialization. Such experiences create a lasting impact on the physical, social, psychological, emotional, and cognitive aspects of child's development. Children's experiences could take the form of a positive experience which an individual would treasure throughout the lifetime. It can also be a negative experience in the form of abuse, financial or other situations of the family, relationship issues of the parents and/or self or any other issue that can affect the child's development. These traumas or abuses may be the events occurring at a particular period of an individual's life, but such experiences remain in the subconscious mind of a child for a prolonged time or sometimes throughout lifetime. To identify, attend and intervene in these traumas is a real challenge. Our society is attempting to identify these traumas that children may experience during their childhood days. Behavioral Scientists and practitioners have contributed and developed various theoretical paradigms to understand what is going in the child's mind. It is important to cater to the needs of the child and the issues that they face which largely remain unidentified and affect the overall well-being of an individual.

Human mind comprises of three parts: the preconscious, conscious, and unconscious minds. [Freud \(1900\)](#) Conscious mind consists of the current awareness an individual has. Preconscious mind contains memories, experiences, information, and events to which one can easily reach. The unconscious mind is the mind that remains hidden and is a bundle of energy which consists of repressed thoughts, socially unacceptable urges and is expressed in indirect or symbolic ways [Freud \(1946\)](#). These repressed energies create disturbances inside an individual and comes out in some way so that the individual feels relieved. If the person has some traumatic experiences during childhood, it remains inside a person and affects his/her psyche.

According to [Freud \(1923\)](#), there are three structures of personality, Id, Ego, and Superego. These three personality structures interact with each other and function. In psychoanalytic theory, Id is explained as the primitive and instinctual part of personality which is focused on pleasure seeking and wants instant gratification of needs. It wants what it wants. Id works on 'pleasure principle'. Superego is the part which is the moral center of personality that follows rules, norms, and society expectations. Superego works on 'morality principle' Ego is the part of personality which is rational and realistic and works to balance both id demands and superego morals. Ego works on 'reality principle'. It allows fulfilling id demands only if there are no negative consequences to it. [Kogelschatz et al. \(1975\)](#)

Sometimes when the id or superego cannot be balanced, these parts of personality come into conflict with each other. Anxiety is generated for the ego itself. Then the individual uses some mental mechanisms which help in dealing with anxiety. These mental mechanisms are also called ego defense mechanisms which are used by the ego to protect itself from the anxiety generated due to conflict between id and superego.

Unconscious mind is a reservoir of the energy due to repressed desires, conflicts, and thoughts. Some people channelize this energy that is in their unconscious mind through creative expression. This creative expression could take the form of writing a novel, poem, song, story, script or play or by making a painting or drawing or enacting in theatre etc. Expression of an individual's unconscious energy in the form of such creative expression is termed as Sublimation.

According to Psychologist Anna Freud [Freud \(1937\)](#), Sublimation is a defense mechanism by which an individual protects the ego by overcoming a conflict or anxiety. Sublimation is usually venting out true repressed feelings, unfulfilled desires, and energy by making a painting or writing a poem, novel, story etc. In the present research, an attempt is being made to study the pattern of sublimation and other forms of expression among the paintings of selected Indian contemporary artists and to relate the artists' childhood experiences with their expressions.

2. METHOD

2.1. OBJECTIVE

The present research is an attempt to find whether childhood experiences make any impact on the creative expressions through various mediums of visual art.

2.2. PARTICIPANTS

Some contemporary Indian artists were selected, and the paintings made by them were studied. These artists were selected on the basis of their significant contributions in the field of visual art in the form of their paintings, installations, sculptures etc. It was also noted that the artists represent different age groups and work areas. The selected artists do not represent the exhaustive list of artists who have made significant contributions; there are many other artists whose work can add further dimensions to the literature. Under the scope of the present research work, the following artists have been studied for drawing inferences.

2.3. SELECTED ARTISTS

Amit Ambalal, Ganesh Pyne, Jai Zharotiya, Krishna Khanna, Madhvi Parekh, Manjeet Bawa, Maqbool Fida Hussain, Mithu Sen, Rabindranath Tagore, Syed Haider Raza, Francis Newton Souza, Subodh Kerkar, Tyeb Mehta.

Content analysis was used as the method for this research. Content analysis is a qualitative research technique in which text documents, graphics, pictures, audio, video etc are evaluated for drawing inferences and interpretations about the purpose of the study. After selecting contemporary Indian artists, their paintings and other forms of visual art were screened for identifying a particular recurrent theme, figure, colour, pattern, composition, or any other notable thing.

On the other hand, each artist's biography, or information about his/her childhood experiences available on the various sources was also studied. In some cases, the artist has himself/herself shared the childhood experiences in some interviews on electronic/print media platforms. The artists' catalogues, interviews, newspapers, videos, biography excerpts have provided the requisite information about their paintings and experiences during their childhood.

3. DISCUSSION

This section presents the details related to the findings from the associations drawn between the artists' work in paintings and the childhood experiences.

1) Amit Ambalal

Amit Ambalal is highly influenced by his childhood experience of living in a joint family system. Expressing his memories of living in paternal grandfather's house, nurturing the values of co-existence and care for each other, he considers these childhood experiences the supreme phase of his life. [Myers \(2017\)](#) His paintings titled 'Dadaji's (paternal grandfather's) house in old city' and 'Mamaji's (mother's brother) house' reflect his childhood memories and experiences.

Figure 1



Figure 1 Amit Ambalal 'Dadaji's house in the old city' Oil on canvas

In his own words 'I used to spend time with Dadaji after dinner. I used to sit near Dadaji. This meeting was the centre of attention of all household activities. Dadaji used to sit on a white cushion, traditionally called 'gaddi' in Hindi. People from neighborhood also used to come after dinner and used to discuss the matters related to politics and religion.' [A part of my world \(2008\)](#) In a corner of the painting, Amit has painted himself, sitting with his grandmother who used to tell her mythological tales. A painting of 'Goddess Lakshmi' made by Raja Ravi Verma is also shown on one of the walls of the room

Another painting by Amit Ambalal depicts the joint family system that he experienced during the childhood at his maternal uncle's house. He also expressed the traditional and religious ceremonies that were held during his childhood. His birthday celebrations in the presence of their family guru (teacher), his discussions on planetary influences and astrology calculations are also reflected in his painting titled 'planets come and go'.

Amit Ambalal attempts to express the dependence of Indian life and culture on fortune and astrology. In his own words 'people used to come to their family guru with their concerns and problems and wait for the entire life for planetary changes which never occur.' He shows a man in scanty clothes in a painting in which some planets are also shown symbolically, and the man is waiting for the planetary change so that he can see good days in his life. All such observations of Amit Ambalal's childhood days have found a place in his artwork. [Ambalal \(n.d.\)](#)

2) Ganesh Pyne

Ganesh Pyne's paintings reflect his obsessions with death. He witnessed riots during his childhood days. He along with his family was thrown out of their house. He stumbled upon a pile of dead bodies while roaming around the city. He also saw a naked old woman with wounds on her breasts. These experiences resulted in dominance of blue and black colour in his paintings [Pyne \(n.d.\)](#) His paintings rarely have light background. His painting titled Man with a sword show a man laced with weapons such as sword, shield and arrow. Half chest of the man is hurt, and the ribs are seen. Such dark subject matter in his paintings has roots in the violence that he observed in his childhood. ('He Raises the Ghosts of the Past' — a Guide to Ganesh Pyne | [Christie's \(2020\)](#))

Figure 2



Figure 2 Ganesh Pyne 'Man with a Sword' Tempera on canvas, 16" x 14"

3) Jai Zharotia

Jai Zharotia grew up in a family who initially had all the usual facilities at home and spent time joyously. Then suddenly things became worse, and he had to suffer many scarcities in life. He portrays his childhood in his paintings. [The Jai zharotia. \(2010\)](#) His experience of having something in beginning and then lacking the same later became a part of his dream world and became a part of his artwork. He thinks that we need to understand the language of animals to understand their problems so as to fulfil their wishes. He also expressed the problems of lack of communication among humans in the present times where people are deceiving each other. He portrays this issue of communication gap by depicting human heads with animal bodies or trees and vice versa. He says it provides us a chance for us to talk to these birds, trees, and animals because human; animals are made up of the five basic elements i.e., earth, water, fire, air, and space.

Figure 3



Figure 3 Jai Zharotia Untitled, 2002 Mixed Media on paper, 17 x 22 in

4) Krishen Khanna

Krishen Khanna's paintings exhibit the times when the tensions between the British rulers and Indian freedom fighters were high. [Khanna \(n.d.\)](#)

Figure 4



Figure 4 Krishen Khanna 'Your time up', 2009 Oil on canvas, 72x48 in

His paintings titled 'Your time up' has a character named 'Gurbaksh Rai', a homeopathic doctor, who is being arrested by the Police. Gurbaksh is saying goodbye to his family. The paintings depict the agony that a family faces when the head of the family is being arrested. A lady with her hands on her head, a small girl who is embracing the man being arrested and the two policemen in the background are also seen in the painting. The painting shows an atmosphere filled with stress and fear. Policemen have neutral emotions on their faces whereas Gurbaksh Rai shows pride on the face as he is getting a feeling of contributing for the nation. [The Wire \(2017\)](#)

Figure 5



Figure 5 Krishen Khanna Exodus, 2007 Oil on canvas, 72 x 96 in

Another painting by Krishen Khanna depicts tragedy of migration that happened during the partition of India in 1947. A family is shown riding a horse-cart. The forelegs of the horses are in the air which shows that their destination is not certain. The path which they travel is also shown by conical stones which show hardships that they face on their way. An old lady with her back towards the new destination is also seen who is still in thoughts of whatever has been left behind. All the characters of the paintings show tension on their faces. The man riding the cart is also looking to the backside to check if anybody is following them. [Saffronart \(2007\)](#)

5) Madhvi Parekh

The paintings of Madhvi Parekh focus on representation of God figures. She considered Jesus Christ as an image of peace and empathy. In her paintings titled 'Christ came to my village', 'Christ: Journey of Christ', she has painted Jesus which

depict the messages which can be felt in these paintings. Her childhood memories of Goddess Durga Pandals (the places where Goddess Idols is kept for worship during nine auspicious days) have also been depicted in her paintings. The decoration, the austerity and spiritual experiences of the artist have also been depicted in these paintings. [Khurana \(2017\)](#)

Figure 6



Figure 6 Madhvi Parekh World of Magician Acrylic on Canvas, 2004

6) Manjeet Bawa

Manjeet Bawa belonged to a family of merchants which had many cattle. His father had got a dwelling made for these cattle. He was born and brought up in 'gau-shaala' cow-dwelling. This resulted in immense love in him for animals. His childhood memories of the times that he spent among these cows, bullocks and other cattle became an important prevalent component of his artwork. The entire atmosphere of cattle dwellings gradually was put to canvas through his paintings. [Wild Films India \(2017\)](#)

Figure 7

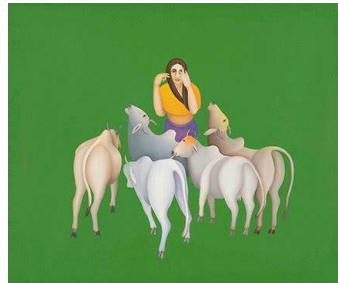


Figure 7 Manjeet Bawa Untitled, 1994 Oil on Canvas, 43.75 x 52.75 in.

7) Maqbool Fida Hussain

Maqbool Fida Hussain is known for his various series of paintings. One of the series is the paintings on 'Mother Teresa'. When we look at these paintings, the figure of 'Mother Teresa' is prominently depicted as a faceless entity, in which the facial features and details are missing. He had shared in one of his interviews that he does not recall his mother's visage; hence facial details are missing from most of his female figures in the paintings. Mother Teresa's figures not only depict the figure of 'Mother Teresa' herself but are also a depiction of motherhood in general. [Husain \(n.d.\)](#) Hussain's mother passed away when he was one and a half years of age. His paintings have always attempted to fill up the maternal absence in his life. He writes "In Hindu culture, it is the mother, Shakti (Power), the Goddess who takes care of us. My paintings have always been a searching for that." [Adams \(2018\)](#)

Figure 8



Figure 8 M.F. Hussain Mother Teresa, 2004 Acrylic on canvas 67 1/2 × 36 in

8) Mithu Sen

Mithu Sen narrates her own story when she was a little girl and was wearing a pink frock. She overheard a guest telling the other person that she should not wear pink as it did not suit her dark complexion. Such comments exerted such a big impact on her that pink color was banned from her wardrobe. [Jmerhar \(2019\)](#) In 2003, when she was an adult, she expressed the internal agony with her art installation titled 'I hate Pink'. [Sen \(n.d.\)](#)

Figure 9



Figure 9 Mithu Sen 'I hate Pink', 2003 Mixed media

By this work, she challenged the prejudices surrounding the color pink. After she reclaimed a pastel which she was denied in youth, she has made it an important feature of most of her work in various modes of expression such as paintings, sculptures, and installations.

9) Rabindra Nath Tagore

Rabindra Nath Tagore's work is also influenced by childhood memories. Listening to horror stories, remembering the underground rooms that he witnessed, he was fearful of darkness. These underground dark rooms contained many big sized earthen pots. These rooms were dirty, dark, and stinky. These experiences led him to include weird, shaped birds and animals. [Parimoo \(1989\)](#) Tagore used to witness the figural patterns in the moisten, broken and stained walls during childhood. Such visuals remained with him for a long time which he later expressed in his paintings.

Figure 10



Figure 10 Rabindranath Tagore Dodo birds Ink on paper

10) Syed Haider Raza

S.H. Raza became unhappy with his work and wanted a new direction in his work. He experienced India's various cultural and artistic places very closely which resulted in the form of his paintings titled 'Bindu' (meaning a 'dot') which signified his rebirth. He attributes the idea of 'Bindu' to his elementary school teachers. (*Abstract Artist S. H. Raza Famous for His Bindu Series*, n.d.) This teacher used to find Raza not concentrating on the class and used to draw a dot on the blackboard and ask him to find the dot. That experience motivated Raza to focus, concentrate and meditate which resulted in the series of paintings expressing 'Bindu'. This is an example of how smaller incidents or interactions can have lifelong impact to form creative pathways. He further added newer dimensions to 'Bindu' such as triangles and the female and male energy figures in his paintings. [Raza \(n.d.\)](#), [Raza \(2014\)](#)

Figure 11

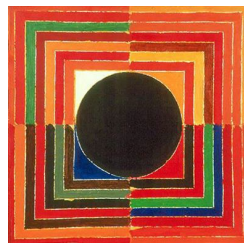


Figure 11 S. H. Raza 'Bindu, 1998, Acrylic on canvas, 20 x 20 inch

11) Francis Newton Souza

[Suza \(n.d.\)](#), a young artist, started looking rebellious from the very first exhibition of his paintings. The problems that Souza faced at the family environment front and the social discrimination that he faced planted the seeds for his creative expression in a rebellious way. The impact of his childhood experiences became permanent in his work. His father died when he was three years old. His mother abandoned her with her grandmother and went to another city. Later his mother took him to that city for his education. [Raaj \(2010\)](#) The deprivation of love from the parents troubled Souza a lot. His paintings do not depict the usual aesthetics. Even the paintings of Jesus lack empathy and compassion.

Figure 12



Figure 12 F.N. Souza Reclining Nude on Brocade, 1962 Oil on brocade, 118.1 x 163.8 cm

Figure 13



Figure 13 F.N. Souza Crucifixion, 1959, Oil on board, 183x122 cm

In one of his interviews, he considered himself a dirty insect that does not have any name, race and power that has been ignored, hated, and rejected everywhere. His dilemmas and life struggles made such a huge impact that the female figures in his paintings are not delicate and affectionate but are erotic, sensual, and devilish with no affection and empathy. The female figures could only find naked and shameless image in Souza's paintings. [Suza \(n.d.\)](#)

12) Subodh Kerkar

Subodh Kerkar expressed his childhood memories of playing on the seashores and making pyramidal or conical houses using sand. His artworks consist of such features used very creatively. He used to walk on the seashore with his father. His father used to tell him stories. Subodh has included content of these stories in his artworks. [Lalit Kala Akademi Chandigarh \(2013\)](#) The 500 white portraits in the installations on the seashores and other places symbolically represent his father and the childhood memories of the time spent with his father. His father also used to tell stories to him while walking on the seashore. He has expressed these stories in creative ways through installations.

Figure 14



Figure 14 Subodh Kerkar Child Memories Mixed media

13) Tyeb Mehta

Tyeb Mehta considers something that he sees of experiences very private. He considered his previous generation to be very aggressive who used to indulge in the street fights which could easily be triggered. He also witnessed riots during childhood. [Mehta \(n.d.\)](#) From the windows of his house, he saw a crowd which slaughtered a young man to death. The smashed figures in Tyeb's work which are mutilated and disfigured reflect his experiences during childhood. The incident of riots put an indelible impression on his psyche which he later portrayed in his paintings. [Nath \(2011\)](#)

Figure 15



Figure 15 Tyeb Mehta Trussed Bull, 1955 Ink on paper, 28 x 38 cm

4. CONCLUSION

On the basis of the observations of the selected paintings of these artists and their childhood experiences, it has been found that childhood experiences do become a part of one's art in various ways. Be it the expression of faceless women by M.F. Hussain due to death of mother in the infancy, Mithu Sen's obsession with the pink colour in her art for being criticized for using pink due to her dark complexion, Amit Ambalal's expression of joint family system and the related details show us the importance of childhood experiences in our future lives. Ganesh Pyne's emphasis on dark subject matter, death, and skeletal component due to the violence observed during partition in childhood, Suza's depiction of female figures in a devilish way due to her abandoning by mother, Krishna Khanna's reminiscences arrests and of leaving own home during British rule in India also depict the importance of childhood memories. Madhvi Parekh's depiction of God reminding her childhood, Rabindranath Tagore's depiction of strange birds in paintings due to various birds observed in dark underground rooms and in horror stories. Raza's recalling a 'dot' made by the teacher in the classroom, Subodh Kerkar's time spent with father at seashores during childhood are some more examples. Tyeb Mehta's depiction of hand-tied figure depicting a man tied and beaten to death during riots, Jai Zarotiya's desire to talk to animals by placing human heads to bird figures and

Manjeet Bawa's depiction of Lord Krishna and cows as he spent his childhood with these cattle have also been discussed.

The above summary of the artists and their work shows that art is an important medium to understand about the psyche an individual. Further studies are needed to analyse the art content from other points of views so that such understanding can help clinical psychologists, psychiatrists in developing an insight about the mental health status, specially about the content which remains latent in an individual.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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