

The Development of Surrealistically Flavored Expressionism in the Paintings of R.M. Naeem

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Abstract

This article presents one of the outstanding artists in Pakistan who contributed towards contemporary and conceptual art in Pakistan. He represented several social and religious aspects which are present in the Pakistani society in more powerful artistic manners. His art work also reflects his innovations through a beautiful blend of realism and surrealism.

R.M. Naeem happens to be foremost among the young and ambitious artists of Pakistan. Born and raised in a remote village of Mirpurkhas, Sindh, an abode of diverse religious praxis and a richly interwoven culture. In the early phase of his career, his experience as a painter remained limited to the depiction of pictures and decorative designs on trucks, buses and cinema hoardings. This was carried out at a workshop known as Jamil's Art, in Mirpurkhas, under the able guidance of Haji Syed Jamil Ahmad. He said that

“truck, rickshaw and signboard paintings were a vital aspect of our culture which had died out before our eyes. I belong to that class, and, I belong to the soil of this land, where the cultural values take us to the depth of our own selves. I believe in workmanship. And I believe in the truth of my own world and the world around me as well.”(Naeem 2008)

He left his hometown in 1989, and began life as a student at the National College of Arts, Lahore. He started off at NCA with what little knowledge he had received during his stint at Jamil's Art Center. Working endlessly, R.M.Naeem finally got the necessary appreciation from his teachers. The distinctive quality of his craftsmanship allowed him to get selected for a scholarship on merit basis from 1991 to 1993. Marjorie Husain sharing Naeem's experiences in NCA wrote in *Art Views: Encounters with Artists in Pakistan*:

“I was so happy to receive admission to a great environment with an opportunity to study art and learned from experienced teachers. But when I reached the National College of Arts, I had a crisis of confidence that had to do with my simple background. My fellow students seemed to me to be so much more worldly and knowledgeable than I was. I determined to work very hard and overcome these complexes and I made friends with serious and intelligent people. I spent my time with these friends and teachers, and began to learn about art, life and human values. At the same time, I engaged in all sorts of labor to pay my college fees. I value that experience too.” (Husain 2005:164)

The ‘*Four Whites*’ (Fig 1) is one of his earliest paintings dating back to 1992. Today it has a place in the collection at the Lahore Arts Council permanent collection. It was exhibited in a show organized by the Lahore Arts Council in 2005 under the title of ‘One 2 One’. This exhibition was held in commemoration of 58 years of Pakistan’s existence. The works of 58 prominent artists were displayed. It is among these that R.M. Naeem’s canvases attained a prominent position. In this painting he has composed a single female figure in a white attire right in the center of the rectangle against a white wall. The figure has been syncopated in a naturalistic style. As a matter of fact, the tonal values have been recorded with accuracy. The source of light is also quite defined. Bold strokes inform the total treatment of the figure. At this stage his work reflects a clear influence of his teacher Saeed Akhter’s painting the “*Standing lady*” (Fig 2). This painting belongs to his salad days while he was studying at NCA. The impress marks of his teachers are clear as the light of day. He was seriously engaged in the process of learning how to paint in an academic manner. In this painting the wall is textured and exudes a natural look. It reminds one of doodles haphazardly made by a child. This effect engendered a natural ambiance in the pictorial design.

From 1994 onwards he had been a visiting lecturer at the National College of Arts. It was here that he lent assistance to his teachers, two very famous portrait painters of Pakistan, Saeed Akhtar and Muhammad Asif, in their drawing studios. In 1996, he established his own studio in order to teach drawing and painting to the art students.

Naeem also practiced the art of illustration and meticulously observed the anatomy of the human figure. He tried to understand compositional values and the design-like divisions of the colored surfaces in the world of painting. This approach can be seen in his single figure compositions with a variety of square shapes in the background. In order to find his way he sought to quench his thirst using the works of some western surrealist artists and his teacher, Colin David. In the year 1997, with the millennium approaching fast, he mounted his first solo exhibition in Karachi. Marjorie Husain gave a criticism of exceptional wit to this exhibition and commented in an article:

“there was a lot of energy and excitement in his paintings, he was not afraid to take risks while evoking a curiosity about the world outside his own perception of it. His approach to the medium was sensual and the rich textural effects served as a backdrop for figure studies and portraits based on direct observation. It was a case of reality diffused with surrealistically flavored expressionism. One found in the artist’s work a spark of fantasy that leavened the truthful power of observation.”(Husain 2005:165)

Colin’s seal of approval can be seen in many of Naeem’s early paintings, such as “*A Girl Standing*” (Fig 3). The style of the standing figure in the painting is very similar to Colin’s standing figure entitled “*From the Back*” (Fig 4). Naeem effectively blended the influence of his teachers with the latest ideas of dividing a surface into squares and rectangles with different textural effects. This created more interest and intrigue in his compositions.

Apart from his figurative paintings with academic realistic approach a series of abstract expressions evolved during his final year studies at NCA. It was entitled as *Everything has two sides* (Fig 5). This work reveals and obscures, at one and the same time, the thematic concept behind the picture, yet it threads itself insidiously like a leitmotif under the exterior screen. A Hindu erotic myth from the “*Kama Sutra*” (Naeem 2008) looms around this work. In these series he has played with an erotic scene behind small white blocks. The painting is divided into about

six squares of various different sizes. The white blocks reflect three figures; a couple is engaged in caressing each other, and a maid is serving them a drink. The highly charged scene is portrayed in simplified and stylized forms suggestive of a Mughal miniature painting.

The erotic empathy in his work was also a debt to Colin's influence. As time flew by, Naeem left behind the socialization instilled in him by Colin David and started on his own way to follow his ideas plotted with fusion of his past and present. Naeem said on this: "after shedding the early influences, there was no going back" (Naeem 2008).

Being a child of the decade of 70s in Pakistan it was not easy task for a painter to avoid the (post)modern, iconoclastic and contradictory times and unquestionable fact in the shape of having one's own culture as a constant reminder of the not-to-be forgotten racial roots. In spite of his new experiments with textural interfaces he could not totally escape Colin's influence. However, it's ironic that though he tried to create a divergence from his previous inspirational impetus, the after-effects of Colin's figurative work unconsciously seeped into Naeem's work. Naeem expressed himself by saying

"I began by painting isolated figures, but at my second solo exhibition held in 1999, titled '*Configuration*' (Fig 6), I started concentrating on the structural and technical values of miniature paintings with a realistic sense of discipline. I did not consciously break or design the anatomy of the human figure. That was a later development. I just tried to practice the academic exercises of constructing space and volume on a flat surface" (Husain 2003)

Afterwards he arranged for several solo exhibitions in Islamabad and Lahore and remained busy in practicing life drawing from life models in his studio. In the true-to-life drawings of female nude models, the faces were deliberately hidden, as nudity was strictly prohibited in Pakistani society. He came across the enigma of unidentified personalities which became an ardent obsession and the very gist of his philosophy of painting hermaphrodite individuals. Whenever he drew a nude lady, she made a request that her face which was her real identity should remain

anonymous so that no one would be able to recognize her. (Naeem 2008) The hidden physiognomies of these nude females revealed a new concept in an unidentified, faceless and mysterious world of individuals. The featureless or covered faces incited him to ascertain a search for the solution to non-identification whether it was in the harassed soul, religion or in the fiery depths of his own self. The outcome was a string of paintings depicting genderless and unidentified bald-headed imaginative figures in different contexts of his wildest fantasies. Throwing further light on this phenomenon, he reveals his experience via profound contemplation. In his own words, he narrates:

“Once I was painting a very pretty girl whom I knew to be a very deep and uncontaminated personality. The beauty and the untainted inner self of the lady, including her conversation, made my concentration waver. I tried to paint her many times, but her attractiveness always distracted me. The spell of her personality disorganized my painting. To solve this problem, I analyzed her personality and decided to eradicate the hair, as it was one of the most indispensable elements of her beauty. So I painted the girl with a bald head and aptly entitled the painting *Keep in Moonlight* (Fig 7). This concept is analogous to inscriptions on medical paraphernalia such as “Keep in Cool Place” or “Protect from Heat and Light” for the sheer purpose of protection. (Naeem 2008)

He painted a box-like shape around her because “the box represents the enclosed walls of a house which is a sign of protection for females in our society” (Naeem 2008). This approach lends itself to personal symbolism, which further verifies a search for fresh ideas.

His paintings entertain the possibility of traveling from realistic settings to the philosophical world of bald-headed and genderless individuals seeking illusory recognition. The same quest led him to explore and excavate many concepts of Hinduism as we can see in his painting of a blue figure on a red background (Fig 8). The painting reminds us of the *Krishna* cult. He has inadvertently converted the cult of Krishna into that of a blue female figure. This painting also suggests the expectancy of receiving some sweet oblivious moments of ecstasy and bliss from one’s soul mate. The timelessness literally permeates with divine powers. Through these

existential experiments he originates alienated de-sexed individuals and in the process creates instinctual hidden nuances that are essentially religious.

During the year 2000, he had paid a brief visit to Colombo, where he experienced, on a first-hand basis, the harmony of diverse beliefs as they were practiced in concurrence with each other. An excrescence of this was that he started work on a series of paintings titled *Mystic Rituals* (Fig 9). Within the borders of these color creations, a variety of motifs are illustrated in sculptural form. They are analogues to the art of Gandhara, both in shape and religious power. A sensation of metaphysical proportions, which was not defined in his “genderless” paintings, breaks into the foreground. Pertaining to his paintings he has this much to say:

“Trying to write about my work, I have questioned myself regarding issues of gender; examined philosophies of the east and west; watched in dismay at the terrible disasters afflicting the universe and wondered at whether these are the handiwork of nature, or are merely created through the folly of mankind? For me painting is a meditative activity. Is the solution to be sought on a physical level or a metaphysical plane of existence? Many of these questions stir me profoundly and my point of view always reflects these ponderings. I express my quest for answers, which are sometimes found in my paintings, but ultimately I leave the decision entirely up to the viewers...they may perhaps, listen to my story, or narrate one of their own.” (Naeem 2008)

In the paroxysms of such clutching contemplation, the work of an American artist, Kerry James Marshall, may also have attracted the attention of R.M. Naeem. Marshall painted a series labeled “Lost Boys” in the 1990s (Fig 10). Based on interlinked portraits and produced after the tragic loss of his youngest brother, “who ended up spending seven years in prison”, (Rowell 1998) Kerry presented Negroes with drunken, dreamy white eyes with expressionistic textures in the background. All this was in loving memory of his younger brother. R.M Naeem too, in some of his paintings (Fig 11), represented the same kind of imagery. He has painted dark blue face sporting prominent white eyes and carrying a lotus flower poised on the head. But here the artist has very skillfully veneered the whole picture in a rather surrealistic and religious miasma.

A genius in his own right, R.M. Naeem painted “*mystic rituals*” in acrylics because he had become allergic to oil paints. In these paintings he entered a bold and daring mood and used color and textural surfaces in an extravagant manner. This series was painted on a small scale since he was to carry these paintings with him on a journey to various countries abroad. (Naeem 2008) The basic theme of his paintings was none other than a link with his early life, particularly the peaceful childhood spent in a small village in Sindh. It was here that he was surrounded by various ethnic racial groups, among which the Hindus were in abundance. He got a chance to observe their customs and rituals. And later on, during progressive days of his career his trip to Colombo awakened the religious instincts once again. As he has stated so succinctly in his interview: “My inspiration is not only my own religion, but also all the religions and cultural values that are being practiced in South Asia.” Notwithstanding this statement, his art remains a paradoxical conundrum. Dr. Khalid Mahmud conveyed this enigma in plain words in his article. He cites the fact:

“A semblance of the past recollections is based on cultural and religious perceptions in his manifestations. This is self-evident in a painting (Fig 12) representing a couple of believers of diverse faiths, stand in communion with each other. The lady is crowned with a floral wreath and gazing at the man standing in the direction opposite to her. His visage is partially covered with leaves and tendrils. The lady is painted in crimson hues and the facial features of the man are shaded in a green pigment. His creed appears to be Hindu in nature. It looks to be that they are in communication with each other through the help of a gaze of tendrils and leaves, which are uniting them imperceptibly, though there is no sound of any utterance from either one of them.” (Mehmud 2004)

This sense of aphoristic atavism is unique and leads to neo-surrealism. The phenomenon presents before us a world of unknown aspects. The whole atmosphere is of a planet belonging to some other region of the universe. Lotus flowers are probably a symbol of innocence and purity emerging out of sinful mess, as is shown in Buddhist art. A similar subject issues forth in an angelic frame holding a lotus flower in full bloom. Once again this mirrors a seraphic blank slate

but the figure is less of an angel and more nearer to Hindu liturgy. Thus the metaphysical verisimilitude is narrated in a most complex and shrouded state.

In Naeem's paintings a paradoxical doctrine inevitably surges and drifts. Momentarily, a viewer is softly parried from the main focal underlying theme and deferred in the free play of graphic images. No matter how hard one tries realization does not arrive. However, it seems "like Cezanne he sought to attain something permanent and monumental in art out of the exciting ephemeral ingenuity regarding the abstruseness and latent meaning(s) concealed within the painting. In fact, the commentary on society in his peculiar style, method and intellectual depth always remains an enigma to the unaccustomed viewer. "This aspect stirs one's intelligence to probe deeper for hints and clues in a game of charades. Is he seeking *Nirvana* or *Moksha* through these exercises?" (Mehmud 2004)

A series of paintings were displayed in Colombo in 2007. They were entitled "*Hope, Faith and Lesson*". Offering a peek into his inscrutable imagination, he stated:

"My work is an outcome of a series of stimuli from my environment. At one level it is a nostalgic reminiscence of my childhood days, when we used to make paper boats and play with them. At another level this toy boat symbolizes Noah's ark and in turn is an extension of how religion is intrinsically ingrained in every child which comes forth into this world. Another stratum of my work celebrates the indigenous part of me as an entity. The religious iconography, which I have connoted through these sexless, bald-headed figures, is a symbol of how all religions impart the message of peace and it is this factor which binds mankind. In fact it is a sense of belonging to a metaphysical ideology. It is a need to perform mystic rituals which is a unanimous urge of mankind and connects one individual to another." (Naeem 2007)

A painting from his exhibition in Colombo entitled "*Lesson I*" (Fig 13) embodies the transference of the spiritual beliefs of an individual to his legatee in the form of a child's paper boat. Noah's ark was the redeemer of those who had faith among the nonbelievers and became a sign of the revival of life on earth. But the paper boat symbolizes a weak or frail attempt to secure this life. This futile endeavor is unconsciously transmitted to the next generation.

Naeem performs in a daring style and postulates the existence of his art as a distinct entity. Nestled in a surrounding where forms stand out or rather pop out in absolute modulation, his themes are intriguing. They arouse curiosity among the viewers who are keenly desirous of unveiling the hidden, covert and mystical phenomena in his art. His enigmatic attitude and overtures create metaphysical and spiritual realms. Most of his mind-works proceed from an order of existence beyond the visible (the in-visible). These endeavors stand as a bridge between the visible and the invisible. It would be reasonable to say that he simultaneously evolved a blend of surrealistic expressionism with a touch of mysticism.

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Fig 1 R. M. Naeem, *Four Whites*, 1992, Oil on canvas, 122 x 152.2 cm. collection of Al-hamra Permanent Art Gallery Qadafi Stadium Lahore.



Fig 2 Saeed Akhter, *Standing lady*, 1992, oil on canvas, 50X48 inches, artist's collection, Lahore.

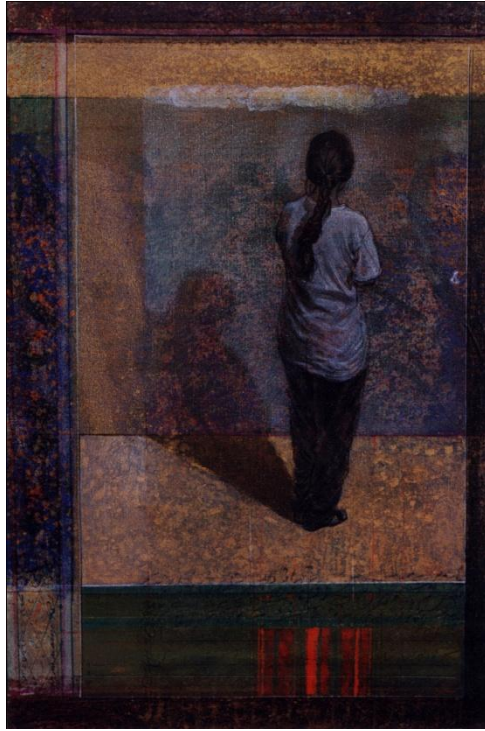


Fig 3 R.M.Naeem, *A girl standing*, 1993, oil on canvas, artist's collection, Lahore.



Fig 4 Colin David, *A girl standing from back*, oil on board, 72X48 inches, National Museum PNCA Islamabad.



Fig 5 R.M. Naeem, *Everything has two sides* 1997, water color on paper, artist's collection Lahore.

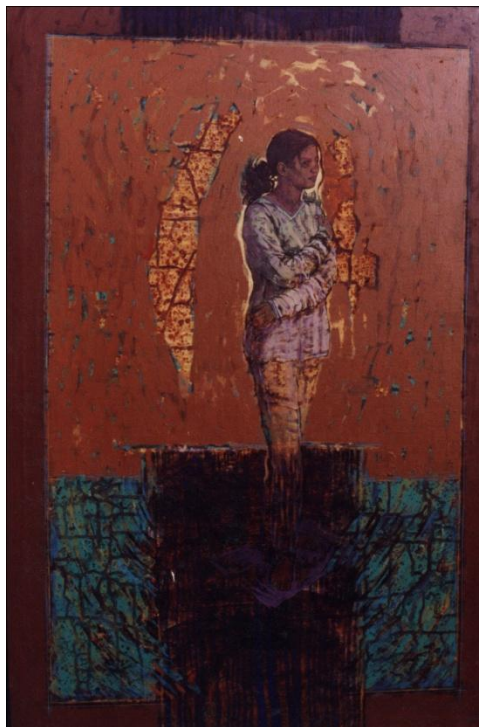


Fig 6 R. M. Naeem, *Configuration*, 1997, oil on canvas, Artist's collection Lahore.



Fig 7 R M Naeem, *Keep in moon light*, 1999, oil on canvas, artist's collection Lahore.

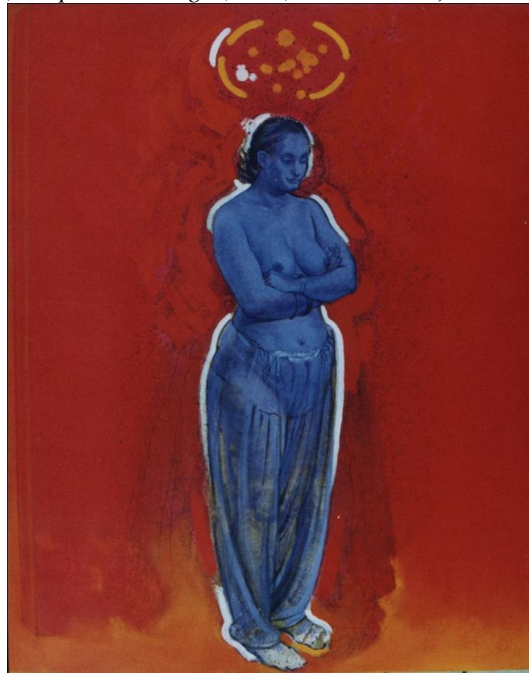


Fig 8 R M Naeem, *Blue Figure with red background*, 1999, oil on canvas, artist's collection Lahore.



Fig 9 R M Naeem, A painting from the series *Mystic Rituals*, 2003, acrylics on canvas, 15X15 inches, Ejaz Gallery
Lahore.



Fig 10 Kerry James Marshall, *Lost boys AKA Black Johnny*, 1993, acrylic and ink on canvas
<https://www.pinterest.com/paredesruizcarm/kerry-james-marshall/>



Fig 11 R M Naeem, *Untitled*, 2003 acrylics on canvas, 42X42 inches, Art Scene Galleries Karachi.



Fig 12 R M Naeem, *Untitled*, 2003, acrylics on canvas, 24X36 inches, artist,s collection Lahore.

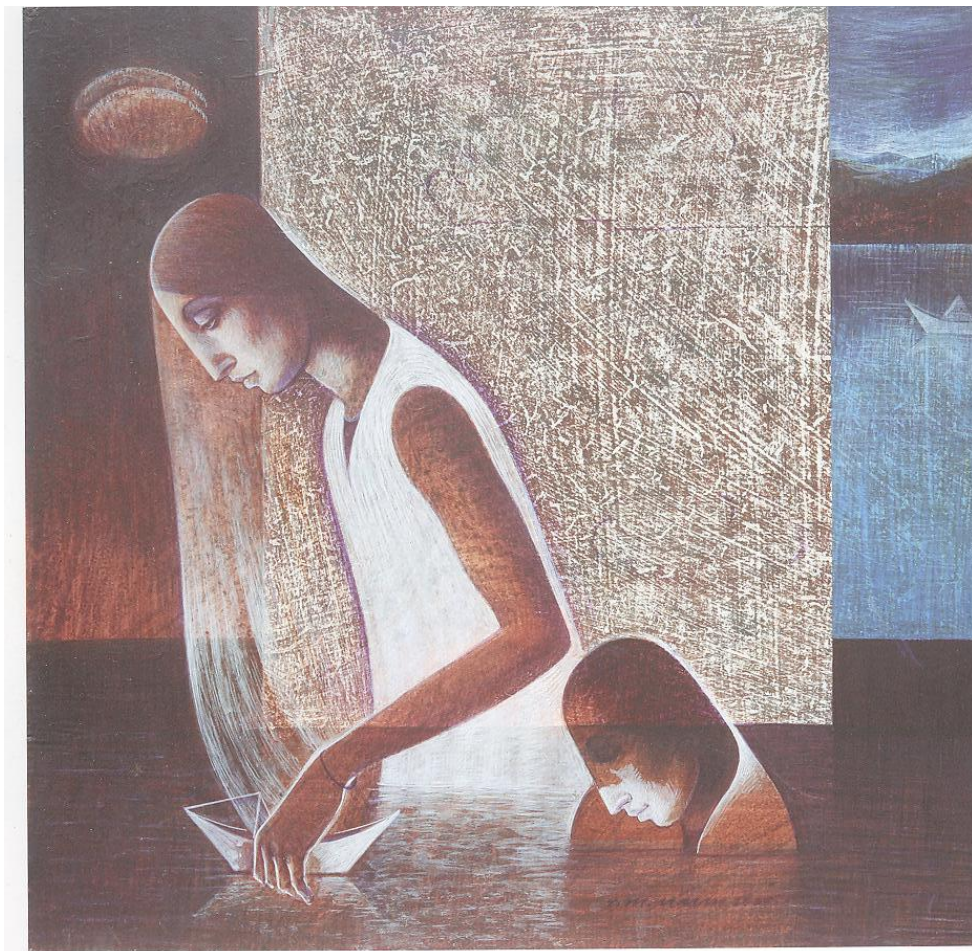


Fig 13 R M Naeem, *Lesson I*, 2006, acrylics on board 30.5 x 30.5 cm, exhibited in Paradise Road Galleries Colombo

2007.