



Dramatization in S M Sultan's Painting

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Abstract

During British colonial rule, painting played an important role as a global medium of communication. With the spread of works by renowned artists worldwide, a new dimension was added to painting in the Indian subcontinent. Traditional classical and realistic painting styles developed, which later gained international recognition. In this context, the renowned painter of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mohammad Sultan (S M Sultan), held a special position. In his paintings, he depicted the beauty of rural life, the hard work of farmers, and the reality of the rural economy. His work deeply reflects the history, tradition, and struggles of the people of Bengal. Sultan believed that farmers were the center of world civilization and that civilization truly develops through their labor. Sultan's notable paintings, such as 'Masdhara-2' (Fishing-2) and 'Dhan-Marai-3' (Thresh Paddy-3), are famous for their dramatic presentation. Through these paintings, he depicted the vitality of rural life in Bengal and the contemporary social system of Bengal. The unique presentation and deep thoughtfulness of his artwork have brought Bengali culture to the international arena. As part of this research, Sultan's notable paintings,



works preserved in museums and art galleries, and documentary materials published in various media have been analyzed. Through this, the drama, content, and socio-cultural connections of his art have been highlighted. This research is not just an evaluation of Sultan's artwork, but rather an attempt to explore the deeper dimensions of Bengali cultural identity.

Key Words: Theatrical Aesthetics; Visual Poetics; Dramatic Language; Visual Narrative; Aesthetic Dialogue.

Painting, as a distinct medium, made a significant contribution to the development of civilization in the social, cultural, economic, and political contexts of British colonialism worldwide between the 17th and 20th centuries. This important medium influenced the societies, cultures, and landscapes of the colonized regions. As a result, a cultural fusion developed in the Indian subcontinent through the exchange of British colonial paintings. Artists in the colonized regions adopted European techniques and elements while blending them with their local styles. Similarly, British artists were inspired by the styles and materials of local art (e.g., 8th-12th century Pala miniature paintings, Mughal art). Painting, in order to spread the message of British imperial hegemony, highlighted the positive aspects of British rule, such as infrastructural development, education, cultural ideology, religious doctrine, and administrative discipline. With the expansion of maritime trade, various paintings and handicrafts in the British-ruled territories found commercial outlets in the international market. This created a new economic dimension for local arts. At one time, the British established art education institutions in the colonized areas on their own initiative. For example, the Calcutta Art College in India (founded in 1854) helped train local artists in European methods.



The mixture of European painting techniques and elements in art education with local styles still influences modern painting in many countries. Towards the end of British rule, local artists used painting to express the idea of the independence movement. Paintings reflected opposition to British rule and promoted indigenous ideas. During British rule, paintings by world-famous artists began to be printed to cultivate a new level of artistic consciousness among the modern generation, which spread from continent to continent. Various painters rose to fame. In the same vein, classical and realistic painting in India became appreciated worldwide and gained artistic prosperity. For example, the roots of ancient Indian painting lie in the Brahminical era, the Buddhist era, and the aesthetic practices of the Mughal period. The depiction of religious interpretations, stories, and myths was the main feature of the cave paintings of Ajanta, Ellora, Badami, Sigiriya, etc. These painting philosophies were rich in spirituality, aesthetic sentiment, balance, and restraint of form. During British rule, a new Realism developed with the influence of Western art and the beginning of modern art. Artists like Raja Ravi Varma, Abanindranath Tagore, Gaganendranath Tagore, Jamini Roy, and others played an important role in this trend. People, nature, the social system, and the reality of life began to emerge in the paintings. Traditional painting became one of the elements for fostering aesthetic communication. Painters of the Indian subcontinent presented woodcraft, crafts, and sculpture, along with painting in oriental styles. For example, Mughal, Rajasthani, or Pahari miniature paintings and the Ajanta–Ellora cave paintings. The history of the socio-economic, political, and religious contexts of the formation of the independent states of India and Pakistan from the framework of British colonial rule also emerged through the artistic language of painting. Among them are the life of Buddha in the Ajanta cave paintings, the birth of Jesus



Christ in Christian religious paintings, the scene of the crucifixion, Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* on the bombing of Guernica in Spain, and posters and paintings based on the Liberation War of Bangladesh (1971). At this time (1923-1994), the famous painter of the Indian subcontinent, Sheikh Mohammad Sultan, better known as S M Sultan, was a renowned Bangladeshi painter. His single and collective painting exhibitions, awards, and honors in both the East and the West not only introduced Sultan as an individual but also represented the entire Bengali nation.

He found the main melody and rhythm of his life in the rural life of Bangladesh, farmers, and agricultural work, and depicted them in his paintings. Despite the ups and downs of the subcontinent, Sultan maintained an anti-commercialist perspective and remained politically, religiously, and artistically neutral. The history and tradition of the people of the villages of present-day Bengal, their rebellions, protests, revolutions, and struggles, as well as the history of people's survival despite various adversities, were the main themes of his artwork. In his paintings, the perfection and vitality of rural life, as well as class conflicts and the state of the rural economy, are revealed. In his artwork, the glory of the secluded village as the center of world civilization emerges, and he portrays the farmer as its embodiment.

The dramatic language of his unique paintings, with their remarkable monumental figure style, rhythmic composition, symbolic use of color, poetic representation of folk life, and harmony between nature and man, along with magical techniques created by the sensitive use of light and shadow, made Bengali Janapad well-known by establishing worldwide communication. This painter, a true devotee of all living beings, was a fine artist, musician, playwright, and teacher who remained outside the crowd of the forties but was crowned with



his own glory. A personality with an exceptional philosophy of education, he became a hero of Bengali legend through his creative activity. The journey of the artist's life began in the late forties, and within four or five years, he brought worldwide fame to Bengal. He received the highest national award in the field of culture - Ekushey Padak (1982), a Special Honor (1986), and Swadhinata Puraskar (1986) from the Bangladesh government as a 'Resident Artist,' and the Chanderhat Padak (1986) for his special contribution to painting. In 1950, he visited America as the only selected artist from then-Pakistan at the invitation of the International Educational Exchange Organization. He held about 20 solo exhibitions at the Institute of International Education, New York YMCA, Washington DC, Chicago, International High School, Boston, and the University of Michigan. In the late 1950s, Sultan's paintings were exhibited along with works by world-famous artists like Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dali, Dufy, Braque, Klee, and Henri Matisse at the Victoria Embankment and Leicester Gallery in London. Needless to say, Sultan is the only Asian to have had this rare honor. Due to his rare talent given by nature, he showed a remarkable ability to create art using his own intellect and ideas without significant institutional training. In 1982, he received the 'Man of Achievement' award from Cambridge University and the 'Man of Asia' award from *Asia Week* magazine. His first formal introduction to the people of the country was in 1976 through the first painting exhibition organized by the Shilpakala Academy in independent Bangladesh. Among his notable paintings are 'Mother and Child' (canvas, oil, 1969), 'Nair' (canvas, oil, 1969), 'First Tree Plantation' (canvas, oil, 1975), 'Behind the Plough' (canvas, oil, 1976), 'Nisarga and Baisakhi' (canvas, oil, 1976), 'Rice Breaking' (canvas, oil, 1986), 'Fish Quota' (canvas, oil, 1987), 'Rice Threshing' (canvas, oil, 1987), and 'Slaughter Sacrifice' (canvas, oil, 1986). The history of Bengali class struggle was revealed in the content and dramatic style of all the artist's



paintings. He depicted the strong, muscular farmers and workers of Bengal in their struggles and expressions, and he proved through his paintings of different dimensions that these working people, full of activity and movement, have made nature fruitful by embracing it, and they themselves are the masters of their own destiny. The respect and dignity of the working people were shown in the dramatic language and content of Sultan's paintings, which became a powerful medium for social change and human rights movements over the ages. The artist Sultan highlighted the spirit of struggle and self-reliance of the artisans of the agricultural economy, reminding them of their important role in building the country. In his paintings, women and men appear healthy and fit, active, with thousands of questions reflected in their expressions. The lifestyle of the common people in the agriculture-based social system of Bangladesh was the central theme of his paintings; he changed the history of painting in this country through his works and created a new trend. The language of his paintings has a dramatic outline. He shed light on an epic poetic quality in the speed, movement, color, style, perspective, and arrangement of the subject matter to create visual communication in his works. He made the details of the struggling life of the poor people of class-struggling Bengal visible in his paintings.

By selecting two paintings from the famous collection of S M Sultan, namely '*Masdhara-2*' (*Fishing-2*) (Picture-1) and '*Dhan-Marai-3*' (*Thresh Paddy-3*) (Picture-2), it is necessary to analyze the dramatic language of visual communication in the paintings and explore the elements of drama in Sultan's paintings for the purpose of recording comparative drama criticism. It is noteworthy that each painting creates the atmosphere of the dramatic event, brings to mind the beauty created in the place, time, utensils, clothing, props used, light



projection, color arrangement, which overwhelms the viewer, makes them think, and creates dramatic curiosity in the heart. Judging from the artist's perspective, Sultan's paintings 'Masdhara-2' (Fishing)- and 'Dhan-Marai-3' (Thresh Paddy) have thoroughly depicted the atmosphere in color and brushstrokes. Sultan has inevitably mixed the fictional world with the fictional reality in the creation of the subject matter of the film. He has drawn the tender rural people with an abundance of dark colors, evoking the imaginary feeling of movement in each picture, creating a reality. He has given a message not to compromise with the opponents of the depiction of the symbolic scene. To portray the story of the pictures 'Masdhara-2' (Fishing)- and 'Dhan-Marai-3' (Thresh Paddy), Sultan has strengthened the structure of the story by using contemporary symbolic materials. In terms of reality, he has presented the reality of the story in an emotional tone by taking the sick rural town as the subject. He has created drama by depicting the movement of the human body of the backward township due to exploitation and deprivation over the ages. The work was recorded in a research-based evaluation of the dramatization he gave to the oppressed marginal agricultural people of the deprived society, without specifying either form or color, and to bring out the keenness of professionalism in the exciting subjects of their happiness and sorrow.

"It is true that the pursuit and establishment of special shapes or forms in paintings reveal special significance. The shapes, and the harmony or discord of lines and colors, reveal the artist's belief. The shapes exist both in the visible world and in the artist's mind." – Sultan's Painting, EXHIBITION OF PAINTINGS BY S M SULTAN,



sponsored by the German Cultural Institute, Dhaka (1986), published by Syed Ali Ahsan.¹

The mainstay of Bangladesh's social structure is the rural society, which is the custodian of the country's history, tradition, and culture. About 65% of the country's people live in villages, which are the center of -the country's culture and lifestyle. Sultan's painting style is not just a vision of beauty, but also a philosophy, where rural society and the working life of people find language through his brush. His paintings are a visual drama that powerfully portrays Bengali culture. He abandoned the charm of city life and depicted the beauty of rural towns and the hardworking life of people. His drawings reveal a deep love for the indigenous society and natural environment. Through versatile drawings, Sultan has highlighted his faith, joy, and the simplicity of rural life, which is one of the main characteristics of his painting style.

Sociologist Herbert Spencer's concept of social structure is reflected in Sultan's paintings. He highlighted the struggling life of professional people and the basic elements of society through lines, colors, and shapes. Just as Bankim Chandra, Dinabandhu Mitra, and Mir Mosharraf Hossain protested against injustice towards farmers during British rule, Sultan's paintings also reflect the struggle and conviction of farmers. Sultan expressed the self-esteem of farmers and the triumph of life in the socio-economic, political, and religious context through his paintings. However, he did not limit himself to depicting reality; rather, he tried to establish

¹ *Sultan's Painting, EXHIBITION OF PAINTINGS BY S. M. SULTAN, sponsored by the German Cultural Institute, Dhaka (1986), published by Syed Ali Ahsan.*



an ideal agricultural social structure. In contemporary reality, where the agricultural social structure is gradually disappearing and capitalism is developing, Sultan's paintings stand as a monument to resistance and tradition. Sultan's paintings do not merely depict farmers, but rather present their strong, muscular, and confident forms. Despite the influence of private ownership, capitalist market systems, and class discrimination, he saw the lives of farmers as a central force. In his paintings, the peasantry emerges as a picture of a potentially prosperous life, where they are the heart of production and the main driving force of the nation's progress. Sultan's paintings also highlighted the backward social, cultural, and religious position of women in Bangladesh. Victims of child marriage, the dowry system, and lack of rights, these women played an important role in the agricultural village but were neglected. Sultan paid tribute to their contribution and struggle by depicting the colorful lives of these women in his artwork.

Sultan's '*Dhan-Marai-3*' (*Thresh Paddy*) painting is comparable to Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* or Pieter Bruegel's *The Harvesters* from the Renaissance. The painting emphasized muscular strength and radiant humanity, but he focused on showing the muscular strength of the hands, ribs, and chest region instead of idealized physical proportions. Following the anatomical dissection traditions of Indian sculpture, he depicted the structure of the human body from a new perspective. The blend of life, faith, and conviction in his paintings gave his artwork a unique characteristic.

Sultan's paintings are entirely centered around the rural villages of Bangladesh. He depicted rural life in his paintings through elements such as arable land, the plough-yoke,



unpaved roads, small rivers, trees, birdsong, and clustered houses. The characteristics of rural society in Bengal are clearly visible in their low population density, social stratification, slow change, and strong family bonds. Sultan resisted this classification and division in his paintings. He created a new concept of heroism centered around marginalized people, which saw people as simply 'human,' regardless of caste, religion, or economic class. By presenting the common people of this country above the caste system in an extraordinary way, Sultan gave a message of patriotism and courage. His painting style celebrates a deep love for Bengal and the greatness of the common man. Sultan's paintings reveal his deep love and respect for the people of Bengal, which easily conveys the artist's inner message to the viewer. His painted world is not just a visual delight; it is a transformed theatrical stage - where the pain, struggle, hope, emotion, and deep social messages of life are reflected in the form of epic drama. Therefore, it can be said: *"Every message of his is full of epic drama"*—this is not a mere metaphor, but the real soul of Sultan's art.

Sultan, who was fond of Eastern and Western sculpture, experimented with the connection between tradition and foreign cultures. By adopting the movement, style, line, and expression of sculpture, he embodied the idea of sculpture in painting by depicting physical fragmentation. Sultan's paintings emphasize the social life and interdependence of people. Inspired by pantheistic belief, he depicted the environment in which people live and the role of professionals through color and line. He presented the lower-class people in an aesthetic and dignified manner, recognizing their labor in society. They are no longer just a deprived class, but the pride of the nation, the drivers of the economy, and their contribution to the development of civilization has been presented in a refined manner in his painting style.



The life, worldly beliefs, and professional struggles of the hardworking people of Masimdia village in Narail are reflected in Sultan's paintings with dramatic intensity. He depicts the effects of climate and the struggles of professional people, such as fishing for their livelihood. For example, in his 1969 oil painting *Machdhara-2 (Fishing-2)*, the scene of fishermen fishing in groups is depicted in a festive atmosphere. The risky work of fishing in canals, haors, and ponds, and the strong and sturdy physique of the fishermen, are evident in his paintings. He celebrates the role of fishermen in tradition and the economy and presents the story of their struggling life in bold lines. Sultan's *Machdhara-2 (Fishing-2)* painting tells a well-structured story through a dramatic presentation. The well-formed physical structure of the subjects in the painting and the plot behind the subject matter bring the folk life and culture of Bengal to life. The use of colors and brushstrokes brings out the contemporary Bengali style. Even amidst the stillness in the painting, there is an aesthetic of movement, which transforms the fishing festival into a dynamic work of art with the sweetness of color. The traditional Bengali fishing festival of fish and rice is turning into a fairy tale today. Ponds, lakes, haors, baors, and even rivers have been encroached upon, and unplanned dams and road construction have narrowed them. As the movement of fish in natural water bodies is obstructed, the diversity of fish is on the verge of extinction. Yet this festival, which has been passed down from the time of our ancestors, still survives. Sultan witnessed the struggling life of fishermen and painted the patterns of rural development. At the end of the monsoon (in the months of Ashwin-Kartik), everyone in the beel area goes down to the beel together at a certain time and participates in the fishing festival. This has been captured in his paintings as a symbol of mutual respect and unity among people.

The fishing festival has different names in different regions of Bangladesh, such as 'Bautnama', 'Bawait', 'Hait', 'Palobawa', and 'Baor Dewa'. Thousands of men, women, and children go out to fish together with poles and sticks -some with poles, some with nets, and some with bare hands. At the end of the day, the fish bags are filled with shoals, taki, bowal, tengra,



Painting-1 'Masdhara-2' (Fishing-2)-Oil Color, 240 x 120 cm, 1969, Arts of Bangladesh, Series-4, Page:40

pabda, puti, and other local species. At this time, people laugh and joke with each other while getting dirty in mud and water. Jokes are shared on the way back home and inside the women's quarters. However, nowadays, due to the natural disasters caused by the climate crisis, the navigability of rivers and the changes in water flow, along with the lack of fish reproduction, production, and availability, have greatly reduced the glory of this fishing festival.

Sultan created drama in the characters of professionals by using shades of color and strokes in his painting *Machdhara-2 (Fishing-2)*, which highlights their characteristics. For example, just as characters in dramas are brought to life through makeup, Sultan brought his characters to life through color in his paintings. This created a sense of respect and connection among the audience. In the painting *Machdhara-2 (Fishing-2)*, muscular women and men are



depicted in a three-dimensional manner, where there is no communal division. Without the distinction between Hindus and Muslims, the painting highlights the unity and cultural heritage of the rural society of Bengal. In his paintings, Sultan embodied the surreal character of the hardworking people of rural life in contrast to urban culture. He discovered the basic elements of Bengali culture within the decaying rural life, which reflects the philosophical depth of his painting.

In Sultan's words:

The subject of my picture is the symbol of energy. This muscle is being used in war—the war with the soil. With the power of his arm, the plow goes underground, and the crops grow. Labor is the basis. And this region of ours has stood on the labor of these farmers for thousands of years. Yet those farmers have been oppressed for thousands of years... I have shown the energy of the farmers, their inner strength, by depicting them. I have shown the feelings of work in a grand way.²

And here, Sultan is incomparable. Leaving his degree unfinished at the Calcutta Art College, Sultan went out to explore the world. He lived and painted in various parts of the Indian subcontinent for a while - sometimes under the patronage of the contemporary government and sometimes without sufficient food. He analyzed the physical structure of the Buddhist statues of Gandhara art on the border of North and South India, as well as the statues of gods and goddesses influenced by Western art philosophy, and drew their lines on his canvas. The

² Kotha Porompara: Grihito & Vashantorito Shakhatar, Shahaduzzaman, Page 19



decorative line

painted images resemble the characters of myth. The characters in these myth-inspired paintings are merely a reflection of Sultan's personal experience. He conveyed his message by arranging them in layers or rows, in the form of a continuous story of three-dimensional art. But Sultan also expressed his anger and protest through his geometric lines, which remained tasteful and impressive.

*It's time to improve his paintings from various perspectives of modern painting. Whether he would prove to be a modern painter, I mean, I wouldn't be very surprised. If he does something new—not within 1 year, maybe 10 years, 20 years, or 50 years later-his paintings will be evaluated, and evaluated very positively.*³

Tarek Masud also shared this artistic evaluation, but the artist's painted subject matter is also based on drama. Studying the art theories of various countries, Sultan sometimes portrayed different characters. Sometimes he would walk around dressed as a shepherd, sometimes dressed as a crouching man. In this way, Sultan pioneered a form of 'performance art,' long before it became widely practiced by many artists in Bangladesh in the 21st century. Sultan's strong lines and the movement of lines in his drawings are original-the well-built physiques of the women, the rhythm of the lines, and the dramatic strokes follow the grammar of art in the Indian region. Sultan said: *"The people of our country are very sick-the farmers. Even the farmer himself is very thin; his two cows, two bullocks are also thin. It is in my mind to make them strong in my pictures. I have tried to portray them in the way I love them from the bottom of my heart. This farming community of our country once built the British Empire. They were*

³ artsbdnews24.com published a telephone interview with Sultan on August 9, 2011



the ones who provided the country's financial resources. The gigantic bodies of the farmers in my gigantic pictures raise the question: Why are they thin? Why are they sick-those who provide us with food, who grow crops? They should be strong."

In a joint exhibition with Pablo Picasso at the Victoria Embankment and Leicester Gallery in London in the late 1950s, both S.M. Sultan and Pablo Picasso did not see art as a simple imitation of reality, but rather believed in art as a powerful means of re-perceiving reality. Picasso's famous quote-*"Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth"*⁴- expresses the idea that the artist conveys the deeper truth of reality through imagination. For example, Picasso's *Guernica* symbolizes the horror of war with distorted shapes and dramatic contrasts of light and darkness. Similarly, Sultan does not simply imitate reality but symbolizes the labor, strength, and struggle of the farmers of Bengal through large, fleshy, and strong bodies. Although the bodies of the farmers are not so large in reality, they serve as a metaphor for their hard work and inherent strength. Like Picasso, Sultan also uses art as a language of protest. While Picasso depicted war and social crises, Sultan set his painting style against the struggle and exploitation of the agricultural people of Bengal. In short, the works of both artists are dramatic, symbolic, and powerful means of expressing the deeper truth of reality.

The relationship between art and humans is deep and delicate. Art, although an inanimate object, is alive in its expression and reflects humankind's connection to nature. Art expresses the depth of human feelings through aesthetics by absorbing the different seasons, climates, moonlight, and sunlight of nature. Each painting is a silent witness to nature,

⁴ written by Muhamad Nova (1112021040/V A), https://www.academia.edu/5490777/art_is_A_Lie_That_Makes_Us_Realize_the_Truth



awakening and inspiring the inner feelings of humans. Through the use of color and brush, art speaks of humanity and reveals the power within it, the reality, and the vastness of life. By establishing a relationship with nature, the artist portrays every aspect of life: hope, struggle, and beauty. The presence of the Creator is felt through the painting, as if the artist himself is a symbol of the power inherent in the creation of life. Therefore, every color, line, shadow, and shape of art sends a deep message, which has influenced human mentality and culture for ages. In the language of literature, art is a strong reflection of human feelings, which not only attracts the viewer but also prompts them to think and feel deeply.

Sultan has deeply presented the relationship between human social life and nature through painting. He has depicted the formation of cities and towns through rivers and boats and illustrated the development of people's relationships with each other. The kinship and mutual bonds of rural villages are the foundation of human society, where relationships are strengthened through sacrifice and help in times of danger. Sultan has given importance to this relationship between people and their connection with nature in his paintings, which reflects the inevitability of human life and its social progress.

Exploring the drama of the image of 'fishing' shows how much development the fishermen of the rural areas of Bengal have achieved. Sultan realized that this issue has remained largely unchanged. For centuries, these fishermen have been cultivating fish or making a living by catching fish from the water bodies provided by nature. Yet, many aspects of their daily lives remain hidden. Fishing is a festival, and the fishermen of rural areas participate in this festival in groups, using various types of traps, including bamboo poles, boats, nets, and other objects,



to catch fish. Sultan has rendered these small materials as motifs. The film *Fishing* becomes meaningful by depicting even the smallest aspects of the existence of fishermen.

The fishermen of society have long been victims of exploitation and deprivation. While developing fishing techniques, they have created fishing tools of various types and shapes. These tools are made from materials collected from nature, such as fishing poles, which are usually made of bamboo or cane. Proper weaving is required to shape the poles, and jute rope is used for weaving; the nets are made of sharp iron and bamboo. These tools become instruments of resistance in various ways against the exploiting regime. The exploiting class of society was not afraid of the fishermen themselves, but of their collective voice. The psychological position in the film *Fishing* clearly presents this everyday protest. By standing on the side of the exploited, the film depicts the success of the fishermen's lives in its imagery.

Fishermen are an integral part of society and are oppressed, and various symbols and similes have been used to express the language of the painting. The subject matter, diversity, and elements of the painting have been outlined through a special process. Keeping in mind that different feelings will be awakened in the viewer, Sultan expressed meaningfulness and drama, emphasizing that the artisans of the rural economy are not neglected in his mind; rather, he sought to consolidate the rural economy through the hidden emotions of the subconscious.

Fishermen make a living in the midst of the world's anarchy through various experiences. They contribute to the economy by giving form to existence through proper responsibility and creating meaning. The drama is meant to show the emotion that Sultan evoked while portraying the real-life struggles; it is important to enter the world of the



oppressed and exploited people in the villages who are searching for roots, and the artist Sultan painted this to create a sense of interest and connection. The picture of *Fishing* takes modern people back to their roots.

Looking at the scene layout of Sultan's *Fishing-2*, it can be seen that the fishermen are mainly located in a reservoir in riverine Bangladesh, and their physical practicality is evident in the way they insert and arrange the fishing equipment. The skillful arrangement of the fishermen's planned actions in the painting creates the entire environment and the dramatic story presented to the audience. The important elements of the scene layout are the characters, and the realistic positioning of the characters - where the fishermen will stand or sit within a frame. The relationships, power, and emotions of the characters are reflected according to the importance of the dramatic content. For example, the main characters are in the foreground in a centralized position, while the other characters are in the background. This makes the importance of the main characters more visible.

One of the most important means of portraying drama is light. The use of light in the scene layout has created a scenic atmosphere for the drama. The characters are clearly illuminated, while the shadows create mystery. Bright light expresses joy or clarity, whereas darkness or shadow symbolizes mystery or crisis. Various objects in the painting-such as nets, boats, houses, water, pitchers, and benches-form a realistic environment within the scene. The structure, shape, color, and other features of the objects help express dramatic emotions. For example, old and decayed houses, nets, boats, and benches become symbols of a certain kind of mental or social prosperity.



The clothing of the characters reflects their personality and time; at the same time, it indicates social status, emotions, and the dramatic time and place of the character. For example, the clothing of the fishermen presents the strength of a society, while simpler clothes portray the character of common people. In the visualization of the fishing scene, the movement and gestures of the male and female characters within the frame help create dramatic tension and emotion. For example, a slowly moving character could symbolize a calm or depressed state, while a fast-moving character could express excitement or anxiety.

The setting of the scene not only creates visual beauty or surprise but also plays a significant role in shaping the dramatic essence and meaning for the viewer. Character expression is an important element of drama, expressing the eager mental state and emotions of the fishermen. The face, eyes, and graceful body language reveal the inner crisis and emotions of each character. The concentrated gaze indicates devotion and affection for the profession. Muscular gestures symbolize strong confidence and bring the dramatic feeling to life. Subtle changes in facial expressions - frowning in curiosity or smiling with self-satisfaction-convey the message to the viewer, making the characters lively and profound. The use of color in the fishing scene plays an important role in expressing emotion, mood, and message. Although color enhances dramatic beauty, its symbolic meaning reveals the depth of the character and situation. The red-brown color, symbolizing love or emotion, conveys the intensity of the soil depicted in the painting and the muscles of the body. The blue color, symbolizing peace, creates the natural environment, and green symbolizes nature, freshness, and hope. The black of the physical structures elevates the environment, while yellow,



symbolizing brightness, joy, and enthusiasm, clearly conveys dramatic emotion and message by embodying joyful moments. The geometric symbols-circle, square, triangle, and line-indicate the life cycle, eternity, unity, power, and balance, expressing the combination or alliance of the three forces. These symbolic elements increase the dramatic complexity and depth and help the audience understand the underlying meaning.

SM Sultan broke the boundaries of colonial aesthetics and gave birth to a new, independent, indigenous pictorial language. He was a worshiper of the rural nature of the working people and the indigenous spirit. That is why he did not give in to the temptation of Pakistani hegemony, the colonial tradition of England, or the capitalist industrial movement of America. Rather, keeping his own ethnicity, culture, and history in mind, he developed an art of the land and the people-patriotic, protest-oriented, and aesthetic at the same time. The artistic sense of colonial painting has always devalued oriental indigenous painting, preventing it from taking its place in the history of world painting. Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1978) explains: "European colonialists portrayed the 'Orient' as an imagined, mysterious, backward, weak, and 'other' entity in order to establish the superiority of their own modernity, rationalism, and civilization." Artists like Jean-Léon Gérôme and Eugène Delacroix portrayed the people of the East as 'dominable,' depicting them as lifeless, lazy, and oppressed. Local art, such as traditional and Mughal paintings, was denigrated, while European styles were imposed as ideals. The perspectives of local artists were controlled through Western training. As a result, art became a tool for the "colonization of consciousness," where local artists lost confidence and became accustomed to imitating the West. The colonizers presented the art of the East according to their political and cultural agendas, suppressing the psyche and cultural expression

of the people of the East. They controlled the subject matter of art for the purpose of colonial rule, distorted native traditions, and presented them as “exotic” or “romantic.” They reduced the art of the East to being “raw” or “unsophisticated,” keeping the artist’s psyche bound to cultural domination. As a result, artists were forced to express the colonizers’ message, losing their creative freedom. However, Sultan focused on the people at the lower levels of society and depicted their nobility in his paintings. While the modern social system treats the peasant class with hostility and the mentality of modern society has matured, the voices of the people



Painting-2 'Dhan-Marai-3' (Thresh Paddy-3)-Oil Color, 120 x 96 cm, 1990, Arts of Bangladesh, Series-4, Page-50

of marginalized villages-struggling to survive in modern society-remain largely unknown. The colorful, hardworking, independent-

mind Sultan loved nature with the passion of a romantic poet, and with such intensity that he rejected mechanized city and civic life.

Inayatullah Khan, a resident of Amritsar, took the example of Islam and his original tradition, and began accepting members in the activities of the Khaksar Party in 1931, regardless of caste or religion. Sultan joined that party in 1943 and went out on the roads of the subcontinent. During the Second World War, he reached out to the lower-class people in



various parts of India. As a representative of the lower-class people and an embodiment of their aesthetic thoughts, he presented the village as the center of the world, and the farmer as the real artist of life. The painting *Dhan-Marai-3 (Thresh Paddy-3)* is worth mentioning as an example. Agriculture is the beginning of human civilization, and in Bangladesh, it is an integral part of cultivation and culture. In Bangladesh, the land of rice, Pohela Agrahayan marks the festival of rice harvesting. The scent of new rice used to fill the houses, and agrarian families celebrated the Nabanna festival. "Nabanna" means new food, celebrated on the first day of the month of Agrahayan when the new harvest of Hemanta is brought home. This is the oldest non-communal tradition. Bangladesh is full of nature and diverse seasons. In Hemanta, the rice fields of farmers take on a golden appearance. The air, filled with the scent of ripe rice, signals the beginning of the rice-harvesting festival. After harvesting, the rice must be brought home and threshed. Earlier, village women used to beat the rice and trample it with their feet. The farmers prepared for threshing the rice after cutting it from the fields. Despite the busy work of threshing all night, the farmers rejoiced in the joy of Navanna. The rural areas are vibrant and busy. In our own culture, in our identity, most of the farmers of our country live below the poverty line. They work hard to provide food. The daily life of the rural areas may seem simple, but the wheels of the economy are propelled by these hardworking farmers. Sultan shapes the consciousness of rural farmers from his bohemian life experience. To inspire them, he expresses it in a powerful tone derived from deep experience. In Figure 2, Sultan finds inspiration for creation from the village and the people. In his *Dhan-Marai-3* painting, he presents the working life of agricultural people in a modern and abstract artistic style. The deep reflection of the simplicity and desires of rural people is revealed in the colors and shapes of his work, where the yellow and saffron colors of the soil are prominent. The figures of Sultan's



farmers are monumental, which makes them dramatic. The male body is gigantic, muscular, and primitive, while the female body is graceful and full of rural charm. In his paintings, men are deeply connected to the soil, the rice fields, and the land, while women symbolize tenderness.

Sultan's peasants are the antithesis of bourgeois culture in the industrial world. They are strong, combative, and ready to reclaim power. His work reflects the primitive strength, love, and reality of rural working people. In Sultan's mind, the peasants are timeless and outside the influence of their country, yet they cannot completely overcome colonialism and modernity. They are also neglected by the minority society in their own country. Sultan identifies this limitation through his figure drawings, which express their consciousness in a calm, natural way. His figure drawings are created in geometric shapes and diagonal lines, rejecting colonial influence. They are symbols of labor and the realization of rights.

Audience evaluation shows that Sultan's work vividly portrays the farmers' sense of justice and struggle alongside the rice harvest festival. In the rice-threshing oil painting, the nature and human life of marginal villages of Bengal come alive. He focuses on the houses, courtyards, and the movements and techniques of the working people within the narrative structure. He portrays the formation of Bengal through the revolution of the backward agricultural system and the hard work of the laborers of this land. In Sultan's canvas, the working people are not only muscular and visually striking, they are also symbols of the country's liberation struggle. His artwork reflects the stories of sacrifice and struggle of hardworking people, awakening their presence in the minds of the audience. In Sultan's creativity, the narrative has found a charming and powerful form in this painting.



The dramatic movement and motion of the rice-threshing scene is an important element, expressing the physical presence of the characters, their emotions, and the dynamics of the dramatic story. The movement of the characters' bodies and their motion in the scene not only enhances the aesthetics of the scene, but also affects the emotional tone and story development. Dramatic power and mood are revealed through motion. The dynamics of the farmers' figures have played a significant role in expressing the inner emotions of the characters. Slow or fast movement clearly reflects the mental state of the characters. The farmers' body language and gestures are fundamental in expressing the dramatic emotions and messages of the painting. The characters' state of mind is conveyed through specific postures or gestures. The farmers' bodies are straight, and their heads are held high, symbolizing confidence, strength, and victory. Sultan's rice-threshing scene is a visual poem, where men and women express a strong sense of life through well-formed physical lines. The painter's brush organizes the story like a playwright, where the reality of life is reflected through physical expression. The movement of the subjects in the painting is not limited, as in a play; rather, they become protesters and living representatives of society through their free movement.

The technique of threshing rice and the mobility of the farmers create dramatic tension, highlighting the joyful atmosphere of the working people. This scene, without showing fatigue, reveals the dynamism of agricultural life and the depth of tradition. Sultan has connected tradition with the present in his painting, where the farmers are neither dead nor exhausted; instead, they are muscular, rebellious, and the driving force of modernity. Although they are victims of real-life class discrimination, they are presented in a glorious, alive, and dignified



manner through the form of art, creating a resistant aesthetic. The rice-threshing painting, symbolising the power of tradition and labour, represents the living reality of society in symbolic language and transcends the limitations of colonial art.

In his oil paintings of rice threshing, artist Sultan has depicted the glorious reality of the lives of neglected lower-class farmers in a narrative format. The muscular bodies of the rural peasantry, their hard work, and their contribution to creating social values are clearly visible in the paintings. Sultan has shown that these agricultural people symbolize simple, ordinary life in contrast to the exploitation of mechanical modernity. To give drama to the paintings, he presents the struggle of the farmers' lives from a new perspective, where the fruits of their labor are exploited by civilized life while they themselves remain deprived. This reality emerges in the paintings as a story of exploitation and oppression, adding folk attitudes and context. Sultan's experience particularly reflects the physical performance of the farmers and their inseparable relationship with the rural economy. His paintings not only depict the lives of the farmers, but also carry a strong message against the exploitative tendencies of modernity. That is why his paintings are still relevant, inspiring, and dramatically modern.

In this context, Syed Manjurul Islam said, *'He did not give importance to the examination of form, but gave importance to the rise of inner strength in people, the fight against colonial powers and the various manifestations of colonial struggle, which he presented in the context of the demands of the time. This was "modernity" for him, that is,*



*instead of Euro-centric, city-based, mechanized modernity, he explored the world of human work much like the Renaissance artists of Europe.*⁵

Across the country, time and geography, Sultan's painting style clearly shows a Himalayan pride in his country and nation, his indomitable pride and compassion for the common people, as well as his strong protest against the injustices of society, anger, and agitation, which were embodied in his vast canvases with vivid fascination. The subject matter is the people of rural Bengal, the workers, the farmers, those who have a spiritual connection with the muddy waters of this country, whose bread and livelihood originate from the fields, the wilderness, the green paddy fields, where the farmers are cultivating the land, the shepherd is absorbed in the tune of the flute, the fishermen are busy catching fish, the village women are attentive to household chores, the fish quota, the picture of a happy family busy sowing rice. The hut, the courtyard, the haystack, the row of banana trees, the story of a happy family busy with a housewife on a lazy afternoon. The scene of a village bride going to her father's house after raising dust on a distant path at dusk. Coconut trees, forests, boats sailing on the river, the sound of the boatman's bhatia, the fishermen busy fishing with their nets, and the village bride looking at the salt water as she brings water in a pitcher from the river ghat.

S M Sultan did not just paint the physical form of the farmer-he sought to express the emotions, dreams and resentment hidden in that body. In his thinking, the human body is not just a structural structure, but rather an external expression of inner emotions and mentality.

⁵ Jonmosatobarshiki Upolokhe Daily Star Banglai S M Sultan: Banglar Mati & Manusher Shilpi, Monday, March 10, 2025



Therefore, in his painting, the muscular body of the farmer becomes a symbol of physical labor, where there is a memory of suffering, yet a hidden inner strength and resistance. The farmers depicted in Sultan's painting "*Thresh Paddy-3*" do not seem to be in a specific rotation - they are located in an open, free space, where their life practice, mobility and existence have gained vastness. This vastness is not only morphological; it also expresses a kind of mental greatness. The farmers here are not just laborers, they have become like the heroes of the artist's imagination - monumental, symbolic, and a form of strong resistance. He did not directly portray the suffering, oppression and neglect of the farmers in real life. Rather, he wanted to reveal the stubbornness, dreams and mental beauty within their existence. This emotion, this compassion and sensitivity are like a kind of merciful divine gaze in the eyes of the artist. Sultan's perspective is based on three strong cultural traditions - Baul philosophy, the politics of the peasant movement and non-communal secular consciousness. As a result, the choice of subjects in his paintings is as simple as his expression is clear, combative and analytical. In Sultan's paintings, the farmers are seen as resolute, rebellious and full of confidence. They are not defeated by oppression but are protesting it with a mental firmness - through the touch of color, the play of lines and the music of space. The artist did not just paint the life of the farmer; he wanted to convey the farmer's feelings and inner philosophy to the viewer. As if saying - "Understand and love these people, because they are not just workers, they are the bearers of life and culture." In this way, Sultan's painting becomes a human and political commentary, presenting the drama of marginalized people's lives, poverty, struggles, and dreams with a strange dignity.



We know that various things are needed for a play to become a play, including manuscripts, utensils, dialogues, costumes, decorations, time, atmosphere, music, and stage. In the discussion of the above scenario, it can be seen that there were no limitations to village sports, festivals, entertainment and joy. An analysis of Sultan's play in manuscript form shows that the Bengalis are a very lively nation, and they do not lose enthusiasm even when they are half-starved. They fight with great determination to survive, and the drama in the fight scenes is clear. It is precisely this nation that had the ability to continue the great liberation war of 1971.

This vitality still exists today, and it cannot be exhausted in any way. The style and acting technique of Bengali plays were narrative. In assessing the excellence of the pure dialogues and character acting, it can be seen that the content of Sultan's play has inspired a lot of life even though it is not life. The silent structure inherent in the linear arrangement of the painting has created a dynamic language that silently carries the entire content. Every twist of the line, every nuance of the shadow touches the viewer's intuition - awakens an inner emotion, which, through a deep resonance, gives rise to a wave of thought in the viewer's mind. In this stream of feeling, the viewer does not just see the painting, but a kind of decision, understanding and light of perception are formed in their inner world. Here the painting becomes a bridge for the exchange of views and experiences - a silent yet sublime dialogue, in each line of which the theatrical tension, stratification, and the passage of time are clearly captured. This interaction of inward beauty and outward expression is what makes the drama of the painting alive, and the aesthetics reach a deep emotional impact.



Sultan, who was opposed to urban civilization, saw that in reality, a garden decorated with nature cannot be arranged in the midst of urban civilization, but the image of a garden can divert people's minds from the decorated garden of the countryside. But even though nature could not be tamed, Sultan brought together the subordinate people with nature. The people of the rural society were neglected, exploited, and deprived by colonial power, capitalism, and industrialization, and Sultan portrayed the driving force of society that these people were through the light of his personal experience. In the subject of art, there is drama in the physical movement within the combination of nature and people. The people in the picture did not move like ordinary people, but were given various forms in a completely ancient Indian classical style, which touched the aesthetics of the drama. The expression of subject, style, and form in the picture is manifested in a unique aesthetic form. With the skillful combination of light and shadow, the artist has created a visual language that is not just a visual experience - but also creates a deep impact of emotion and perception in the mind of the viewer. Especially in the paintings 'Fish Catcher-2' and 'Dhan-Marai-3', through the subtle and thoughtful use of theatrical elements, the artist has portrayed the inherent rhythm, struggle and drama of life on the canvas. The linear arrangement, the dynamics of the figures and the interrelationship of the environment - all the elements together create an unprecedented aesthetic and theatrical form, which has been analyzed in this discussion as a brilliant example of an artistic achievement in the combination of the artist's insight and reality.

Although oriental art and literature stagnated somewhat after 1857, significant changes occurred in the tradition of Indian painting. The court and landscape painting of the Sultanate period was artistically reorganized to meet the needs of the British. Although the prestige of



Indian artists increased under British rule, this was mainly the result of economic necessity and changing European perspectives. The establishment of art schools during the Company rule and the influence of European painting ushered in modernity in Indian art. This modern trend added a new dimension to the painting of landscapes and public life, which is reflected in the continuity of artistic practice from the colonial period to Bangladesh. The spread of colonial education and culture in Bangladesh laid the foundation for a modern sense of life, which played a major role in the development of painting.

The Bengali Renaissance and the emergence of a middle-class society contributed to the evolution of drama, color, style and form in painting. Artists combined local traditions and European trends to transform contemporary reality into paintings. Since the post-World War II period, the issues of post-independence struggle have had a profound impact on painting. Political chaos and the decline of human values have found a place in the thoughts of artists. They studied and adapted the opinions and aesthetics of domestic and foreign art scholars and art theorists. The influence of French painting is noticeable in their artwork. If we look closely, it can be seen that French art theorist Eugène Véron (Eugène Véron) presented an important theory on the aesthetics of art in the introduction to his book *L'Esthétique*, published in 1878, and mentioned:

'No other science has so completely surrendered the dream of the metaphysician to the world as aesthetics. From Plato to the popular doctrines of our time, people everywhere have turned art into a strange mixture of pure fantasy and mystical mystery - the



*greatest expression of which is the idea of a pure ideal beauty - that beauty is the unchanging and divine original form of earthly objects.*⁶

As Veron says on the subject of aesthetics in the book *L'Esthétique*, going beyond the conventional definition of art, aesthetics does not depend only on beauty but is an expression of emotions and experiences. Veron believed that the definition of art changes with time and culture. He said that the art of a particular time or place may be interpreted differently at another time or in another culture. The variability of art is only the artist's feelings and human expression. Art is not a perfect imitation of nature but a reflection of human emotions and experiences. He said that art is a powerful language that expresses human feelings. Sultan reflected and embodied the changing aesthetics in his paintings, giving priority to the views of this French aesthetician. He created new discussions among art critics and philosophers about the functionality and beauty of art. His ideas influenced the development of modern art movements such as Post-Expressionism and Abstract Art. Veron believed that art is not an imitation of nature, but rather a powerful language of emotion and feeling. Sultan's paintings are also a reflection of human strength and struggle, combining reality and imagination. According to Veron, art changes and develops with time. Sultan also did not follow the Western trend and depicted the life of rural Bengal and the hard work of farmers. Veron considered art to be an expression of human emotions and thoughts, which is reflected in Sultan's paintings - especially the fleshy bodies of farmers symbolically depicting their labor and strength. According to Veron, art is a means of social change, which is also evident in Sultan's art. His work is a protest voice for rural struggle against urban life. Like Veron's theory, Sultan's art

⁶ *L'Esthetique*, 1878, pg.5



highlights human emotions and social reality, which take shape in a powerful language beyond mere imitation. The language of the painting is created based on the physical movement of the subject of the painting. Sultan went in search of European painting, read and observed the educational philosophy and mentality of the best artists of the British Empire, and he tried to adapt and reflect this in his painting style. The story of the painting became lively; as if in a wordless dialogue, it aroused a dramatic taste in the viewer.

Artists like S. M. Sultan depict the struggles of rural life and resistance against exploitation. Sultan's paintings not only represent reality, but also romanticize the beauty of rural heritage and the strength of working people. His work conveys the message of social change in local and international contexts. The subject matter, colors, and style of his paintings have changed to suit the needs of the times and the mentality of the audience. In this way, painting has remained relevant and has played an influential role in contemporary society. Sultan's paintings are essentially dramatic poetic representations of rural life. The physical structure of the subjects in his works is exaggerated, which highlights their strength and inherent power. Sultan has created a kind of epic glory in painting, which becomes symbolic, like a literary metaphor. Just as the heroes of epic poems are endowed with superhuman qualities, so too do Sultan's peasants and workers possess almost superhuman strength in their daily struggles. His paintings convey a message of indomitable resistance among the oppressed people of rural society, which highlights the depth of class struggle through literary imagery. Sultan's brushstrokes are like Jibanananda Das's poems, where nature and human life merge together. An examination of the subject matter and literary symbols of the paintings of fishing and paddy-threshing shows that the fishermen or farmers are physically large and strong. This



is like the "symbolic man" of literature, which is both a picture of their resistance against exploitation and a symbol of their inseparable relationship with nature. In his paintings, the rivers, trees, fields and farms are like poetic forms of simple rural life. This is comparable to Rabindranath Tagore's nature-centric literature, where nature becomes a part of life. The beauty of nature is depicted through human illusion. Sultan's brushstrokes capture the smell of the soil, the sweat of the fields, the source of the river's fresh water, and the rhythm of life. It is similar to the rural literature of Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay or Maitreyi Devi, which takes the form of a dramatic lyrical poem of human labor. The exaggeration seen in the depiction of the physical structure and scenery of rural people in the form of images is similar to the romantic trend of literature. It gives epic glory to the struggle of people. The tireless enthusiasm of the workers is seen in the scenes of fishing and threshing rice, and from a literary point of view, it is a symbol of the indomitable morale of the people and their eternal struggle. Sultan's love for folk life and the use of traditional rural scenes is like literary folk tales or Bharatshashadhava. This connects his work with the traditional background and spirit of Bengali literature. The prominence given to rural life in Sultan's paintings is, on the one hand, romantic and, on the other hand, a projection of reality, which keeps him away from urban modernity. The exaggerated physicality of the painting, while symbolizing power, creates a certain distance from reality. It is comparable to the romantic depiction of the peasant in literature. Sultan's painting is not just art; it is a political and social commentary of its time. Like literature, his work is a document of reality. However, critics feel that his painting sometimes tries to convey a direct message, which can affect the subtlety of the art. Sultan's drama did not limit painting to just a visual art. It became a message of class struggle and a symbol of the inherent strength of rural society. The scene created by his brushstrokes unfolds step by step like a story, similar



to the painting method of theatrical art. The drama of Sultan's painting did not only create visual beauty; it was an expression of a deep social message and a sense of life. The struggling life of rural society, the indomitable strength of people, and their love for nature are revealed in his work in a way that is as dramatic, deep, and meaningful as an epic poem. Sultan dramatized the ordinary activities of rural life - fishing, threshing rice, and working in the fields. This rendition reflects the inherent strength of rural people and their intimate relationship with nature. This is not just a biography; it is a moving theatrical scene, where the characters merge with nature and take on an epic form. Each of Sultan's paintings tells a story. The depth of the scene, the physical posture of the characters, the use of color, and the combination of light and shadow gradually reveal a story. It is like the structure of a play, where each episode leads to a central message. His paintings are as emotional and thrilling as a play. It is not just a visual experience; it is a feeling that deeply affects our thoughts and feelings. His paintings make us respect the struggle and glory of human life, which arouses excitement and curiosity like a play.

Before colonial rule, painting was a popular subject, appreciated and accessible to everyone in its own way. Painters used to organize art exhibitions every year, and the media constantly provided news, publications, and communication. During the Pakistan period, painting emphasized the problems of the middle class. After independence, painting became established in social life along with political truth. A complete analysis of Sultan's paintings in the political, social, and economic context of Bangladesh shows that he added a different art form to the field of Bangladeshi painting in terms of subject selection, stylistic experiments, and artistic originality. The drama of Sultan's paintings is an expression of the depth of his



creativity and sincere love for rural life. His work is not only visual art; it is a poetic and epic presentation of social, cultural, and economic realities. Through the use of exaggerated body language, color and light, and the symbolism of the strength of nature and the working people in his paintings, Sultan presented the struggle and success of rural life in a way that is romantic on the one hand and dramatic on the other. In Sultan's paintings, each character and each scene tells a story. With the strokes of his brush, the characters become actors on the stage, and the entire painting is like a scene from an epic drama. By elevating the strength and struggle of rural people to dramatic glory, he not only limited himself to art but also presented it as a symbol of class struggle and the eternal glory of rural life. Fishing and rice-threshing in his paintings are not only signs of art but also a visionary tribute to rural society. His work immortalized the roots, traditions, and history of struggle in our society through dramatic techniques.



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