



From Popular Tradition To Contemporary Canvas: G.M. Sheikh's Transcultural Reinterpretation Of Kawad Art

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Abstract: This paper explores the transcultural reinterpretation of 'Kawad' art in the contemporary works of Ghulam Mohammed Sheikh, a pioneering figure in modern Indian painting. Through an examination of his visual language, the study analyses how Sheikh draws upon the narrative depth and devotional storytelling structure of traditional Kawad shrines to construct a hybrid pictorial vocabulary that mediates between folk idioms and cosmopolitan modernism. The article investigates how the artist employs the logic of itinerant storytelling, mnemonic panels, and folded spatiality of the Kawad, transforming them into metaphors for cultural memory, identity, and transnational mobility. Drawing upon art historical references, semiotic reading, and iconographic parallels, this research underscores the ways in which Sheikh reclaims a space for vernacular imagination within the global contemporary art discourse.

Index Terms - G.M. Sheikh, Kawad art, transculturalism, hybrid visual vocabulary, cultural transmission, contemporary Indian painting, vernacular traditions, narrative form

I. INTRODUCTION

G.M. Sheikh's oeuvre reveals a lifelong engagement with layered histories, fractured identities, and the power of storytelling—both personal and collective. A poet, painter, scholar, and pedagogue, Artist Sheikh traverses geographical boundaries and cultural idioms in constructing a visual language that is simultaneously rooted and diasporic. Among the many influences that shape his art, the folk tradition of the Kawad—a mobile wooden shrine used by Rajasthani storytellers—occupies a crucial position in articulating his method of narrative structuring. Kawad boxes, with their compartmentalized panels and unfolding architecture, are more than devotional artifacts; they are pedagogic tools, community histories, and living archives. Sheikh does not merely mimic the form but reanimates its spirit into a canvas-based reconfiguration of time, space, and memory.

2. Cultural Rearticulation of Kawad – an appreciation

In his celebrated series *Katha Collage*, Sheikh evokes the Kawad's format by juxtaposing fragments from mythology, miniature paintings, modern history, and personal memory. These paintings unfold like visual epics—layered, recursive, and polyvocal. A painting such as *Returning Home* (1999), for instance, functions much like a Kawad: it beckons the viewer to move through registers of time and meaning. There are Mughal miniatures quoting scenes from Tulsidas, contemporary political references, and reimagined portraits of cultural icons like Kabir and Gandhi, cohabiting the same surface. Sheikh's technique here is not linear storytelling but rather a circular, unfolding narration—mimicking the performative aspect of the Bhopa who would open the Kawad panel by panel while narrating episodes. Thus, Sheikh transforms the canvas into a living archive of plural narratives.

Unlike conventional historical painters who rely on chronology and central perspective, Sheikh's spatial organization is non-linear and flattened. The flattening is deliberate, recalling both the spatial logic of the Kawad and the non-perspectival nature of Indian miniature painting. His figures are not set against illusionistic depths; they inhabit a shared field, emphasizing collective memory over individual identity. This echoes the function of the Kawad as a communal device—meant not just for visual consumption but for performative sharing. By embedding his imagery within these structures, Sheikh reconfigures the canvas as a site of participatory cultural memory.

The transcultural aspect of Sheikh's work lies not only in his subject matter, which often includes figures from Persian, Chinese, and European visual traditions, but also in the way he mediates between indigenous and global frameworks of storytelling. His citations of Western art—from Giotto to Bosch—are not appropriations but dialogues. When Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights appears in his compositions, it is not merely as an aesthetic homage, but as an epistemic bridge between medieval Christian allegory and Indic moral cosmology. In doing so, Sheikh reinstates the folk and vernacular traditions such as Kawad as vital, dialogic elements within the global contemporary canon rather than relics of an ethnographic past.

One of the most illustrative examples of this dialogic engagement is his painting *City for Sale* (2004), which presents a cacophony of urban life interwoven with fragments of medieval cityscapes, Mughal domes, and modern billboards. The spatial dispersal here is reminiscent of the Kawad's episodic structure—each quadrant a story in itself, yet all coalescing into a unified narrative. The work critiques the commodification of memory and history in contemporary India while proposing the Kawad format as a resistant template—one that insists on multiplicity, contradiction, and coexistence.

In examining the image *Speaking Tree* (1997), one observes how Sheikh collapses ecological symbolism with mythic figuration and allegorical layering. The tree, a recurring motif in Indian folk and miniature traditions, is rendered here with roots connecting different epochs and branches carrying diverse figures—rishis, kings, beggars, and revolutionaries. The influence of Kawad's tiered storytelling becomes evident as each branch unfolds a new chapter, a different voice. The painting is not meant to be 'read' in the traditional Western left-to-right model but explored like a shrine: slowly, reflectively, with ritual care.

What distinguishes Sheikh's method is his ethical commitment to the idea of cultural transmission as a dynamic, lived process. For him, traditions like Kawad are not to be preserved in vitrines but to be reactivated through reinterpretation. His role, therefore, is not of a mere chronicler but a cultural interlocutor. In reimagining the Kawad's mnemonic architecture within the language of modernist painting, Sheikh asserts that contemporary art can be simultaneously local and cosmopolitan, sacred and political, personal and archival.

Sheikh's hybrid vocabulary is thus not a result of eclectic borrowing but a considered response to the ruptures of modernity, exile, and identity formation. In many ways, his project can be seen as a counter-narrative to the Euro-American canon of modernism, which often saw modernity as a break from tradition. For Sheikh, modernity is the reconstitution of tradition through new episteme. His reactivation of Kawad's visual logic allows for a participatory model of viewing—where meaning emerges not from the image alone but from the act of its unfolding, much like the performative ritual of the Bhupa and his Kawad.

The cultural transmission in Sheikh's work is not unidirectional but dialogic. His reinterpretation of the Kawad is neither nostalgic nor purely formal. It is a radical proposition to see folk as philosophy, not just folklore; to reclaim the vernacular as a legitimate site of theoretical and aesthetic inquiry. In this lies the subversive power of his canvas—to remind us that traditions, when creatively inhabited, are not boundaries but bridges.

In his seminal painting, *Returning Home after a Long Absence* (1969–73), Sheikh delves into personal memory and collective history. The central figure, inspired by a photograph of his mother, is set against a backdrop that amalgamates the townscape of Surendranagar with elements from various artistic traditions. This composition reflects Sheikh's endeavor to connect his personal experiences with broader cultural narratives, embodying the essence of the Kawad's storytelling tradition.

City for Sale (1981–84) stands as a poignant commentary on urban transformation and communal tensions. Painted in the aftermath of riots in Baroda, the artwork portrays a cityscape teeming with architectural fragments, religious symbols, and contemporary motifs. The chaotic assembly of elements mirrors the fragmentation of urban life and the erosion of cultural harmony, echoing the multifaceted narratives found in Kawad shrines.

In Speaking Tree (1997), Sheikh presents a chinar tree adorned with leaves of varying hues, interlaced with a creeper that unites the foliage. Embedded within the tree are figures representing diverse spiritual and cultural identities—Sufi saints, sadhus, musicians, and even the Bamiyan Buddha. This intricate composition symbolizes the interconnectedness of communities and the symbiotic relationship between humanity and nature, themes central to the Kawad tradition.

Sheikh's Katha Collage series further exemplifies his innovative narrative approach. By juxtaposing fragments from mythology, history, and personal memory, he constructs visual tapestries that invite viewers to engage with multiple layers of meaning. The non-linear arrangement of images challenges conventional storytelling, encouraging a participatory experience akin to unfolding a Kawad shrine.

In his later works, such as those displayed in the Kaarawaan and Other Stories exhibition, Sheikh continues to explore themes of migration, coexistence, and cultural memory. Utilizing formats like double-sided panels and miniature shrines, he creates immersive environments that reflect the complexity of human experiences and the fluidity of cultural identities.

Through his art, Gulammohammed Sheikh redefines the boundaries between tradition and modernity, personal and collective, local and global. His reinterpretation of the Kawad tradition not only preserves its narrative essence but also revitalizes it, offering new perspectives on cultural transmission and the role of storytelling in contemporary art..

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