



# Colours As Affect: Analysis Of The Expression Of Despair And Disbelief In Partition-Themed Paintings

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**Abstract:** Indian arts, often featuring myth, religion, and folklore, underwent a pathbreaking transition after the 1947 partition of India. Literature and arts produced post partition began navigating the trauma, pain and human suffering caused by the violence and human displacement. The inquiry into the academic scholarship shows a considerable amount of literature that has been published on this cataclysmic event and its aftermath, indicating diverse perspectives. Yet, studies based on the nuanced representation of trauma and emotional rupture in the visual arts are limited. Therefore, based on the select partition-themed paintings of artists like Satish Gujral and S.L. Parasher, this study examines how colours articulate emotions like despair and disbelief. Through the adoption of a mixed qualitative approach of interpreting the chromatic implications and the psychological aspect, this study also sheds light on how colour plays as an active agent of emotional communication, specifically how psychological and emotional resonances are evoked by colours. Through the ekphrastic analysis of the select paintings based on partition themes, it was exposed that the paintings have adapted a muted or monochromatic undertone to convey the idea of disbelief and to create the atmosphere of grief. Further expeditions on colour psychology, aligning with the historical context, unveiled the potentiality of paintings as visual documentation of the struggles faced by the people due to the displacement and violence. Based on paintings, further studies could also explore the possibilities of paintings as visual archives and as a capable means of information dissemination that underwent deterioration due to the rise of digital media and AI technologies.

**Keywords** - Paintings, visual elements, monochrome, ekphrastic analysis, partition, etc.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The partition of 1947 is a significant and catastrophic event not just in the historical pages of India, but also in the realm of art and literature. Amid the waves of turmoil, partition emerged as a powerful and transformative theme, amplifying the pangs, injustices, and struggles endured by ordinary people, rather than documenting the situation as such. It redefined the cultural, emotional, and political landscape of South Asia, leaving an everlasting scar on the historical topography. After partition, artists and writers started exploring themes of trauma, displacement, separation and loss, other than focusing on the conventional themes of Indian art and literature, such as myths and folklores, marked a major transit from the traditional to modern artistic paradigm. In literature, writers like Saadat Hassan Manto, Amrita Pritam, etc have discussed on the diverse perspectives of partition and the effect it created on the society and culture. When Saadat Hasan Manto depicted human suffering and violence faced by the people in the borderland, writers like Amrita Pritam narrated the situations undergone by the women during the partition. Her poem *Ajj Akhan Waris Shah Nu* is an example of literary work that details the heart-wrenching lament in response to the violent and traumatic

partition of 1947(Shahjadi and Aggarwal). Analysis of the existing literature indicated the significant contributions of literature and art in amplifying the voice of the voiceless. The sudden leap from the traditional to the modern is more cohesive in the artworks than in the literature, which is indicative of the narrative potential of the visual arts. Through the integration of ekphrasis and affect theory, this study attempts to analyse how paintings function as agents of emotional communication and also examines how colours articulate the emotions of despair and disbelief by focusing on the visual elements and the symbols implemented in the select paintings of Satish Gujral, Jogen Chowdhury and S.L. Parasher.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Examination of the existing literature showed that an enormous number of academic scholars have attempted to examine the diverse perspectives on partition, its influence and aftermath in society. Most of the studies conducted on the partition themes of arts and literature highlighted the impact of partition on the geopolitical contours and cultural fabric of the countries(Gupta and Somvanshi). Discourses on partition are still prevalent in Indian art and literature. Based on the analysis of the available academic endeavours, it is identified that studies particularly focused on partition-themed visual narratives emphasised how the intensive cultural traumas are represented in photography, art and other mixed media. The paper specifies major artists who have contributed to popularising painting as a testimony to the plight of millions who were dispossessed during the period(Kumar). While another article titled *Socio-Spatial Dialectics and the Right to the City*, identified common archetypes in the visual arts exhibiting the severity of the issue. Army checkpoint, barbed wire, desolate landscape, etc, are some of the prototypes determined in the illustrations of partition(Maity). Furthermore, the studies based on partition-themed arts and literature focused more on the themes and symbols implemented to convey the idea, which shows how much arts and literature have influenced the readers or the viewers in understanding and disseminating the matter. In the continued analysis of the academic scholarships, both a similar and diverse set of symbols was able to be traced. Studies showed that the women who have suffered more during the partition. Therefore, the female figures in the paintings of artists like Anjolie Ela Menon are also identified as emblematic, showcasing the intensity of the catastrophic event (Lab). From the extensive survey of literature, it is found that though research works are produced regarding the contribution of arts and literature in the propagation and illustration of the historical catastrophe, no works could be identified on the exact theme of studying how paintings act as a medium for conveying emotions.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study has adopted a qualitative and ekphrastic approach to learning and understanding the visual elements integrated in the selected partition-themed paintings. Ekphrasis is a narrative technique used for verbally describing a visual representation. The term etymologically means to speak out (Olson). Therefore, this study intends to read the paintings through the theory of affect, in understanding how paintings communicate and influence the viewers. Visual elements are the language of the visual arts, and they are colour, line, texture, size, etc. These visual attributes converge in the paintings to convey the meaning depicted(Thakur). The paper primarily focuses on the colour and the symbols used in the select paintings of the artists like Jogen Chowdhury, S.L. Parasher and Satish Gujral to trace the depiction of despair and disbelief that was affected due to the partition through the framework of Affect theory.

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The 1947 partition not only resulted in political upheaval, but it also created issues of cultural trauma and identity crisis. Apart from the official documentation, artists and writers have adapted literature and paintings as a medium to voice the brutality of the situation. The artists like Anjolie Ela Menon, Arpana Caur, Satish Gujral, and SL Parasher have used their art as a medium to convey the issues, which marked a new shift in the perception of art. Analysis of the partition-themed paintings showed similarities with each other, mainly in terms of the visual semiotics applied. Visual semiotics or elements are the primary agents in an art that communicates with the audience. The paintings chosen for the study are SL Parasher's *Confining Grief*, Satish Gujral's *Wail* and Jogen Chowdhury's *Partition*. Sardari Lal Parasher who has worked as a commandant of the Baladev Nagar Refugee Camp in Ambala, created paintings during the partition about the human sufferings and chaos that he experienced in the camp. His paintings are immediate and abstract sketches captured from the camp, which were painted in scraps of available paper. The partition series by SL Parasher is no less than a photographic depiction of the harsh realities faced by the refugees in the camps. The painting titled *Confining Grief* is a portrait captured from the Ambala Camp("S.L. Pasher"). In the plain

background, the sketch portrays a group of women sitting in grief. The painting is a simple and raw illustration reflecting the bygone days of their life. The characters portrayed in the painting are the symbols that the artist has adapted to convey the idea. *Wail* by Satish Gujral is a prominent painting in the partition-themed arts, which reflects the agonies of the people who are displaced. Similar to Parasher's painting, this painting also reflects a group of people, including both men and women, sitting together in despair (Wong). The painting has a monochromatic hue arrangement with no specific background. Gujral's artworks mirror the human condition, which usually explores the themes of suffering, identity, culture and history. This painting exemplifies how his artworks highlight the theme of trauma and suffering. The 2017 painting by Jogen Chaudhury titled *Partition 1947* is a remarkable expressionist artwork that depicts the trauma and hardships faced by the people during and after the partition (Majumdar). The painting depicts women sitting in disbelief amidst a dying man and other symbols representing their cultural ethos. Mahatma Gandhi was also portrayed in the paintings along with the symbols indicating the sociopolitical involvement in the matter. The colours chosen for the painting are primarily monochromatic, which signifies the intensity of the situation.

In the reading of paintings as a text, visual elements like colours, space, forms, techniques, etc, are the prominent factors that contribute meaning to the image (Thakur). Among them, colours and symbols are the most expressive factors in an art construct. According to colour psychology, it has the potential to evoke emotional responses in the viewers. In the paintings, *Confining Grief*, *Wail* and *Partition 1947*, the background is solid, and the primary colours used in the paintings are monochromatic. Monochrome is a colour technique used in painting and photography to highlight the details of the image or artwork. It is rather the incorporation of any one colour and its shades or variations (Killen). Unlike the polychromatic paintings, monochromatic artworks shift the focus from the colour diversity to the details and themes portrayed in the paintings. Monochrome is not permitted to be black and white; it can be variations of any colours. But in the partition-themed paintings, it is mainly black and grey, which is to decipher the severity of the issues as black is indicative of serious, intense and mysterious ideas (Batavia). Along with the cultural symbols, colours in the painting are an 'affect' which makes the paintings more readable and relatable to the viewers. Affect is the immediate, non-conscious experience or stimulus that arises from the interaction between the artwork and the viewer's body. Therefore, when combined with art criticism, an 'affect theory' understands how artworks evoke preconscious, bodily and emotional responses in the audience beyond the traditional cognitive interpretation and rational knowledge. It invites reading and responding from the audience to the idea that is depicted (LeMahieu).

In the paintings, the monochromatic colours are emotional signifiers carrying emotions like mourning, loss, pain and sorrows of partition. In Gujral's *Wail*, the distorted and abstract sketches of a group of people sitting, their outward body language represents both the physical and psychological ailments that they have undergone, especially trauma and anguish. The black colour symbolises helplessness and collective trauma. Parasher, in his *Confining Grief*, has adopted a clean and muted way of depicting the psychic dilemmas caused by partition. The inward sitting position of a group of women is reflective of the collective trauma and helplessness. In the simple and shadowy composition, Parasher unveils the grief over the past, isolation and silent suffering caused by the disbelief. Unlike these paintings, Chowdhury's painting titled *Partition 1947* is an explicit representation of reality. He has incorporated other symbols like wailing women, dying men, cultural archetypes and a fragmented land in the background to demonstrate how it was before and after the partition. Colour and archetypal symbolism converge to define the seriousness of the matter. The black background and the symbols are emblematic of loss, despair and displacement.

Black colour in the paintings transcends its role as a colour to a significant emotional signifier. It symbolises despair and disbelief through its association with the solid background, positioning of the characters and the shadings given in the paintings, creating a response or reaction in the viewers. The placement of characters in seclusion in a solid monochromatic background, when associated with the heard arguments about the aftermath of partition, creates a sensory impact of directly witnessing the scenario, making it more relatable and understandable than reading about the issue.

The examination of the paintings recognised the narrative capacity of the visual arts in the dissemination of ideas, like the textual narratives. The visual semiotics, like colours and symbols, are significant contributors to the meaning-making in a painting. Symbols in the paintings are generally things or things that are a part of social life and the cultural ethos of a country or a community. In the partition-themed paintings, a common visual element that is found is the representation of people. The people in these paintings are the victims and metaphors of the harsh reality. The elusiveness of material belongings in these paintings indicated the loss and displacement. Other than the archetypes, colour acts as an agent of communication, creating an impact

on the onlookers. Black colours are mostly associated with the serious, intense and mysterious matters, but they also have a culturally implied meaning for denoting 'bad omen' or 'negative'. Black, as the prominent colour in these images, also idealises the notion of bad and serious. In the paintings, black is representative of the collective trauma, helplessness and also the reflection of reality.

## CONCLUSION

In Indian history, unlike the Western tradition, art has a definite purpose of conveying an idea. The ideas it intends to communicate are mainly cultural traditions, myths and folklore. With colonial invasion and partition, people began to use art as a medium to propagate and discuss serious social issues relevant to that time. The partition-themed paintings are also created to amplify the voice of the voiceless and the discarded. Through the incorporation of visual semiotics like cultural archetypes, secluded human images and black colour, these paintings evoked emotional resonance in the audience, allowing them to converse, relate, realise and empathise with the situations that were faced by the people in the borderland. Colour in the paintings acts as an effect that triggers the sensory engagement and creates experiences that can surpass conscious control. Moreover, black colour in these paintings acts as a language, breaking the linguistic barriers and making it understandable to everyone who is aware of the effect of partition, which marks the potential of colours as a medium to evoke intense and serious emotions in the audience.

## II. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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