



## EXPRESSION THROUGH COLORS: ANNA MOLKA AHMED

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### Abstract

Expression in the form of art is practiced through-out the world. Anna Molka Ahmed is a pioneer Pakistani artist Inspired from Western Impressionism and Expressionism. The exuberant colors, distinctive style, and evocative subjects of her painting make her stand out among the artists of Pakistan. The expressive compositions visually communicate her thoughts, feelings, and concerns. The thick impasto strokes are the representation of her bold and firm personality. Through her art practice she comments on the material realities of modern life, enriched by inspirations drawn from her personal life, experiences, as well as religion. This article analyzes the technique, compositions, and themes of the paintings of Anna Molka Ahmed, while paying tribute to her inimitable contribution to modern Pakistani art.

**Keywords:** *Expression, Anna Molka Ahmed, Pakistani artist, Impressionism, expressive compositions.*

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## 1. Introduction

Anna Molka Ahmed, well experienced in the field of arts, has a notable contribution in the Sub-continent's art scene. Having a unique style, quite different from then existing style in South Asia, her art pieces depict her daring and lively personality. Born on 13th august 1917 in London to the Jewish parents, Anna Molka Ahmed had a curious mind about the life and her religion. She studied Fashion Drawing and Design at St. Martins School. At the age of 18 she converted to Islam as a result of her quest for the truth. At the Islamic meetings in London, she met Sheikh Ahmed, student at Central School of Arts and Crafts, who later became her life partner (Husain, 2007, p. 9-15).

Besides being a painter and a sculptor, Anna also studied book crafts, typography, and marbling at the Central School of Arts and Crafts. She graduated in 1939 as Associate of the Royal College, with the subjects of Wood Engraving, Lithography, Copper Engraving, Etching, Dry point and Aquatint. Moreover, she was also qualified in the History of Art and Architecture, Technical Methods of Sculpture and Graphic Design, Techniques of Painting and Pigments, Methods of Art Teaching and Art appreciation (Husain, 2007, p. 11-15).

In 1940, she joined the Punjab University and laid the foundation of the Fine Arts Department, introduced the syllabus, and trained the upcoming teachers as well, including Khalid Iqbal. She continued to live in Pakistan with her two daughters, after her marriage was over in 1951. Being the pioneer of art education in Pakistan, she was awarded Tamgha-e-Imtiaz in 1963. Her devotion towards art continued after her retirement in 1977. It was the phase when she started painting allegorical works. She took her last breath on 21st April 1994 (Husain, 2007, cover page). Her paintings reside in private as well as public collections in Pakistan, and most of her works are in Germany and America.

## 2. Style of Painting

According to her, "...I practice coloristic painting, using colors of different light values for each shade of light and dark." The earlier paintings are characterized with the subdued colors, and are less bold than the later works which seem to have been influenced from the Impressionist's. The boldness of her style is the expression of her emotions. The bright sunshine of the sub-continent, its landscapes and architecture illuminated with such light transforms into her strokes of radiant colors. The uniqueness of her perception is depicted in her mode of expression, which is more important than the subject matter.

### 3. Influences

Her use of thick impasto brush strokes and rough application of paint with the palette knife recalls French Impressionism. Her treatment of subjects is bold (fig. 1). Her impressive and domineering personality is reflected in her paintings. She blended impressionistic technique with expressionistic tones and shades which made her work unique. With the knowledge of impressionism and with her own strong and creative personality, she originated her own style (Atteqa Ali, 2004, para. 4).



Figure 1. Anna Molka Ahmed, *Self-portrait*.  
Source: Collection of Tahira Ayaz.

### 4. Characteristics of her work

Her paintings are characterized by visible and impasto brush strokes besides free color application. Like the Impressionists, there is a frequent use of short and broken brush strokes. The colors used are both pure hues and mixed tones, which are never blended smoothly, allowing the viewer's eye to mix the colors perpetually. There is always a play of light in luminous and variety of color tones, layering complementary colors side by side for lights and darks. Freshness of the colors represents boldness in her personality.

The compositions are mostly open where emphasis is laid on light effects. Her paintings focus more on overall visual effects instead of the details. The distorted figures show a skilled approach towards depiction of meanings.

Other than large oil paintings she also did miniatures, especially when she was ill. She prepared the *wasli* herself in the Mughal technique. However, she didn't copy the Mughals; rather she painted reality in her miniatures. The style is somewhat the same as her oil paintings and painted in broken strokes (fig. 2). Mostly gardens, village scenes, games and festivals are depicted in her miniatures.



Figure 2. Anna Molka Ahmed, Miniature Painting depicting Garden.  
Source: Collection of Tahira Ayaz.

## 5. Themes

The subject matter of her paintings ranges from personal to cultural, historical, and religious themes. The diversity of her artistic approach is evident from her landscape paintings, expressive portraits, large figure compositions, paintings depicting war and partition riots, religious and philosophical subjects, alongside many drawings and even sculptures. Her paintings have a strong association with life and culture in Pakistan, suggesting her love for the country (Amjad Ali, 2000, p. 96).

### 5.1. Rural Landscapes

Instead of painting idealized landscapes like other artists, she chose to paint the common scenes of rural life, which were the source of fascination for her when she came to Pakistan. *Sajanagar Kashmir* painted in 1945, depicts the rural life with architecture in the background (fig. 3). Along with the trees there are groups of people. Here the application of colors is still rough but the paint is relatively less thick than her later works. Fresh greens of the trees with the play of sunlight on them create a soothing effect. The straining light of the sun from the trees is creating fascinating shadows on the ground. The chiaroscuro is very impressive especially in the draperies of the people. Shadows are painted in the shades of blue and mauve. The browns, peach and ochre tones of the earth show the relation of the man with mud.



Figure 3. Anna Molka Ahmed, *Sajanagar Kashmir*, 1945.

Source: Husain, *The Sun Blazes the Colours Through My Window*, 146-147.

She has mostly depicted people in her landscapes to show their connection with the earth like her famous *A Village Outside Lahore* (fig. 4). The upper half of the canvas consists of a cloudy sky with the sunlight illuminating the area of the sky where there are no clouds. The sky is painted spontaneously with thick strokes. Tones of yellow in the blue sky give a warm effect. The lower half consists of Punjab landscape, depicting villagers, both men and women involved in various activities in the crops. The perspective is painted very skillfully with colors creating depth in the landscape. Crops are painted with various tones of green and yellow. Human figures and mud houses are painted with no details and just impressions of them are captured. Mud ground is painted with tones of oranges,

browns and yellows. The play of lights against darks is very impressive with rough application of colors, suggestive of a hot sunny day. The overall impact is very strong, and it differs from the landscapes of other artists in its treatment and choice of colors. In her figure compositions, there is little characterization, and major emphasis is paid on her mode of expression. In fact, according to her daughter Tahira Ayaz, “Her paintings are the character themselves.”

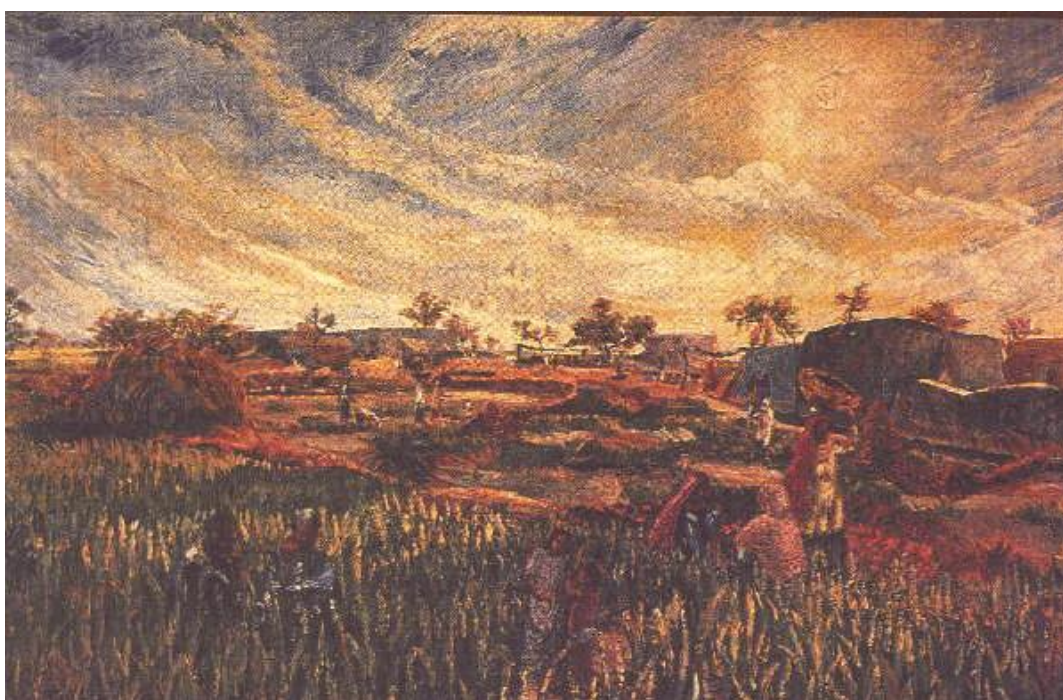


Figure 4. Anna Molka Ahmed, *A Village Outside Lahore*.

Source: <http://pakistanpaedia.com/ana/ana.html> (accessed July 6, 2025).

## 5.2. Depiction of Natural Calamities

Natural calamities appear in some of her paintings to depict her concern about the victims. *The Flood* is a figure composition consisting of curvilinear lines (fig. 5). It conveys a sense of grief through the use of colors and through curvilinear lines suggesting waves of the flood which appears to swallow the human bodies. The blues, purples and beige colors represent the disaster and sorrow, while the black of the figures represents mourning. Moreover, the figures are distorted suggesting destruction. The application of colors is uneven and impulsive, making the overall composition emotionally evocative and dynamic. The figures are impressionistically painted with a main focus on their emotion

of grief. Expressions are represented through colors and arrangement of figures in curvy patterns. This painting embodies the misery and sorrow of the flood-affected people.



Figure 5. Anna Molka Ahmed, *The Flood*.

Source: Husain, *The Sun Blazes the Colours Through My Window*, 150.

On the same theme is painted *The Raging and Ravaging Flood* (1975), which is somewhat realistic as far as the formation of figures is concerned (fig. 6). This crowded composition represents the destruction caused by the flood. The part of the sky visible is very small and painted with blues and purples with black raining clouds to create gloomy atmosphere. The background shows destruction and the middle ground is painted with flooded water and a boat which is meant to rescue the victims of the flood. In the foreground an old man is lying half dead on *charpai* with mournful people around him including an old man, a child, and a woman in grief. Features are captured with lack of characterization but still expressive.

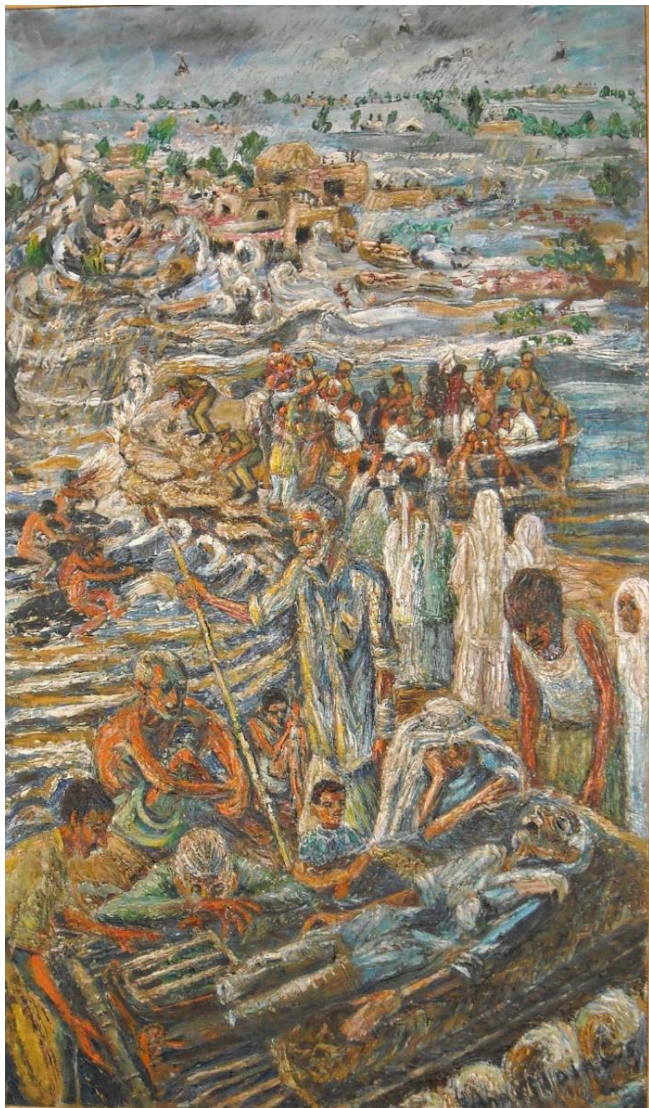


Figure 6. Anna Molka Ahmed, *The Raging and Ravaging Flood*, 1975.  
Source: Collection of Tahira Ayaz.

### 5.3. Use of Symbols

A symbolic painting *Tree of Life* depicts a tree growing on the distorted dead bodies, which are painted in tones of blues, purples and gray, which represent the end of life and helplessness (fig. 7). From these dead colors rises a tree of life, whose trunk and roots are painted yellow which is the representation of optimism and hope. Red is also used in its roots, which symbolizes life as red color relates with blood. On the branches of the tree human bodies are growing, depicted in distorted form with no characterization and painted in spontaneous strokes of different colors. Various kinds of emotions and

characters in the life are represented through the use of meaningful colors. These colors are symbolizing both positive and negative characters, like red is used for both love and anger; green for peace and envy; yellow for hope, happiness and deceit; and black for the power and harshness in the lives. The sky is painted in rough impasto strokes to represent restlessness, and painted in dull colors of blues suggesting that the life in front of it will have to face death in any case. The painting represents that the same earth gives birth to life, and in the same earth the dead bodies are going to be returned.



Figure 7. Anna Molka Ahmed, *Tree of Life*.

Source: Husain, *The Sun Blazes the Colours Through My Window*.

#### 5.4. Anna's Belief in Life After Death

Her belief on death is well depicted in the painting discussed above and also in *Death and the Spirit* (fig. 8). As her daughter told, "She has painted her own death in this painting." It shows the artist dead and her spirit being taken up by two angels. Her body is depicted as an old woman while her spirit gets up as a younger person. The direction of strokes and colors takes the eye upward, which represents that the spirit is supposed to go in upward direction. Colors are sharp and strokes are loosely applied.



Figure 8. Anna Molka Ahmed, *Death and the Spirit*.

Source: Husain, *The Sun Blazes the Colours Through My Window*.

She had a deep faith in the life after death, which is represented through a series of large paintings towards the end of her life. Tahira Ayaz mentions that she was always very religious and was eager to paint this series before her death. The themes were all brought from the Quran. This series include the paintings titled *Dance of Death*, *Hell*, *Heaven* and *Day of Resurrection*.

*Dance of Death* is also known as Nuclear Holocaust which is painted on six vertical panels (fig. 9). It is an allegorical painting which depicts skeletons laughing and dancing on the foolish deeds of men and cruelty of mankind to mankind. Different civilizations have been shown from panel to panel. In the fifth panel nuclear blast is painted due to

which life comes to an end. And in the last panel the life starts again from the Stone Age. The figures are painted in bright colors of red, white and blues, while nudes are painted with different bright tones of flesh. The foreground of the first four panels shows dead bodies in tones of blues and ochre, creating a horrific atmosphere. The last panel shows skulls of the devastated mankind in the foreground. The overall effect is made gloomy and terrifying by the colors of the background, depiction of skeletons, skulls and bones, and the nuclear destruction. Death in the form of skeletons is laughing on the evil doings of the society (Amjad Ali, 2000, p. 101). This highly detailed composition is representation of the climax in artist's creative journey.



Figure 9. Anna Molka Ahmed, *Dance of Death*.

Source: Husain, *The Sun Blazes the Colours Through My Window*, 174-175.

“*Qiyamat*” *Day of Resurrection* is a large sized composition, made up of three panels, each of which carries an individual worth (fig. 10). The painting portrays the Day of Judgment as explained in the Holy Book. A crowd of human bodies and skeletons are depicted resurrecting from graves and heading towards the central panel where judgment would be held. There is a visual depiction of the sound created by *soor* in the flanking panels, masterfully translating Quranic verses in pictorial form. The bright and vibrant colors add to the enormity of the scene. The sun in orange and yellow colors dominate the composition. Impressionistic strokes in blue and gray constitute the skeletons, while orange is employed for the nude figures. Horses carrying the human figures are painted in the top left, with no facial features and anatomical details. All the compositional elements are painted with a conceptual approach, rather than realistic approach (Amjad Ali, 2000, p. 102).



Figure 10. Anna Molka Ahmed, “Qiyamat” Day of Resurrection.

Source: Husain, *The Sun Blazes the Colours Through My Window*, 168-169.

### 5.5. War Paintings

Apart from this series, she also painted large canvases on other themes like *International War* (fig. 11). It depicts different scenes of a war in general. In the left background horses have been painted with the warriors on them with swords. In the middle of the painting in diagonal position all the war affected countries have been represented through their flags. This diagonal composition takes our eye in the right background where the atomic blast ends the world. In the right side some tanks have been painted, and torture and rape of women have also been depicted. Red color is dominating which symbolizes war. Armies are painted in tones of green. Brush strokes are loose and movement is created through the diagonal arrangement of composition. Its diagonal composition recalls Delacroix’s *Death of Sardanapalus*.



Figure 11. Anna Molka Ahmed, *International War*.

Source: Husain, *The Sun Blazes the Colours Through My Window*, 190-191.

### 5.6. Depiction of Tragedies in her Life

Apart from the role of religion in her life, which caused her to paint religious themes, there was a phase in her life which caused her to be upset. *Final Parting* 1952 is the painting which she painted after her divorce on the theme of separation (fig. 12). It is symbolic and very different from her typical style. The painting shows two faces of her ex-husband, due to whom her life turned into a tragedy. The features of her ex-husband are like that of evil. His face is divided into two; his right side is blue symbolizing his carelessness about his family that he left, while the left side is in dull light-greenish tones with red eye which depicts anger. Moreover, his ears are pointed like devil representing his evil personality. A white and black colored fish, with red eye and red tongue, biting the tree of their family with pointed teeth, represents divorce. On the branches of the tree are depicted her two daughters, Zahra and Tahira, with three of her own portraits. This white colored tree represents the innocence of herself and her both girls. The composition is very strong and her feelings at the time can be felt. The deep and dark tones of blue in the background are creating sad and gloomy effect, with curvilinear work of reds and blues creating tensed and depressed scene.



Figure 12. Anna Molka Ahmed, *Final Parting*, 1952.

Source: Husain, *The Sun Blazes the Colours Through My Window*, 194-195.

Another tragedy is painted in *The Party* which shows the life of her daughters (fig. 13). On the left in the middle-distance, Tahira has been shown with her husband all the way along. In the middle of the painting Zahra is shown with Colin David. Whereas in the right foreground Colin David is moving forward and Zahra is left behind, and further in the distance Zahra is painted left alone, divorced. The painting is full of meaning, painted in fresh tones and well composed. Design quality is seen in both these works.

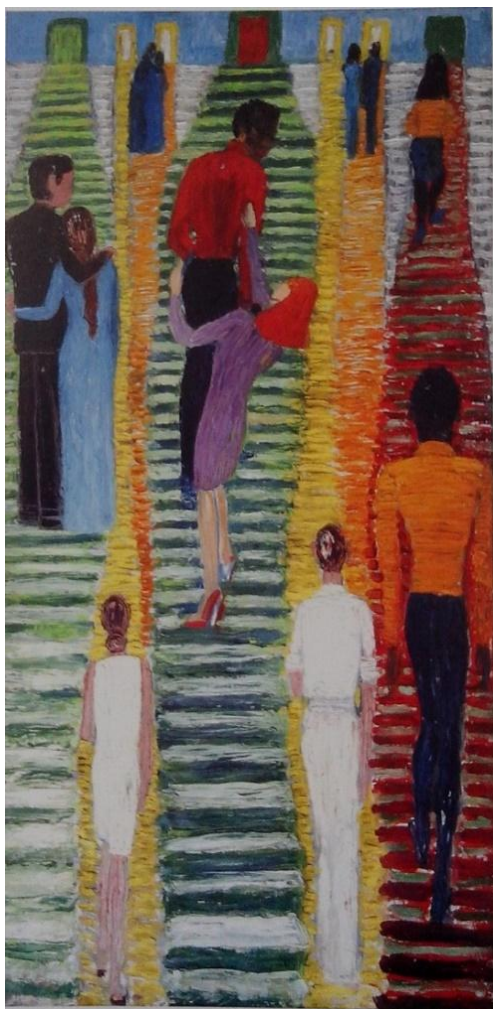


Figure 13. Anna Molka Ahmed, *The Party*.

Source: Husain, *The Sun Blazes the Colours Through My Window*, 176.

## 6. Conclusion

Anna Molka Ahmed's paintings are bold and full of expressions as the strokes are applied in impasto technique and the colors are used according to the theme of the picture. Every color and every individual stroke has its own meaning, collectively forming a meaningful composition of colors and brush strokes. Through the symbolic compositions, expressionistic strokes and vibrant colors, she has been able to express her inner feelings about the life and its reality. Her contribution is a milestone in the development of art in Pakistan.

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