



## RESEARCH PAPER

### Reflection of Traumatic Emotions through Painting: A Cathartic Experience

Sidra Liaquat\*<sup>1</sup> Dr. Masooma Abbas<sup>2</sup>

1. Assistant Professor, Visual Arts Department, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Professor, Visual Arts Department, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

\*Corresponding Author

sidraliaquat48@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

Creative process is known as a powerful mode of expressing emotions. The research intends to investigate the relationship between traumatic experience and painting, as artist's emotional outlet. The study delves into probing the cathartic potential of the act of painting. It emphasizes the role of creative expression through painting in regulating and coping with traumatic emotions resulting from an adverse experience. Employing qualitative research methods, the article studies the impact of emotional struggle on artistic expression. Paintings by the Western artists Vincent van Gogh, Edvard Munch, and Frida Kahlo are analyzed in the light of psychological theories after which the paintings of contemporary Pakistani miniaturist Attiya Shaukat are examined. The in-depth examination of her paintings enables to comprehend the process of painting as an outlet of expressing and relieving from traumatic emotions, termed as catharsis. The discourse on artworks by these artists from diverse backgrounds and in different time-frames, signifies the unanimously shared human experience of coping with trauma. The analytical research contributes to the field of art and psychology by highlighting the emotional benefit gained through creative visual expression.

**KEYWORDS** Catharsis, Contemporary Pakistani Miniature Painting, Emotions, Painting, Psychological Theories, Trauma

## Introduction

Adverse experiences in life bring about different kinds of emotions in different individuals, depending on their mindsets, lifestyle, culture, and most particularly expressive tendencies. To cope with unpleasant distressing emotions, every individual employs a certain kind of self-expression in accordance with their personal inclinations. Creative expression is the one of the most effective means for channeling or releasing these emotions (Davey, 2015, para. 2-5). The emotional discharge vents the inner self, providing emotional relief termed as catharsis. This research examines the traumatic emotions as creative expression of painters, to comprehend the cathartic potential of painting.

Austrian neurologist, Sigmund Freud's (1856-1939) theory of the unconscious mind proposes that repressed thoughts, memories, and emotions have a detrimental impact on human psychology. Through psychoanalytic methods, he posited the release from repression by making the unconscious conscious. Demonstrating the significance of art, he states that the artist "can transform his phantasies into artistic creations instead of into symptoms. In this manner he can escape the doom of neurosis..." (Frederickson, 1987, p. 261). Furthermore, Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung (1875-1961) emphasized the importance of

creative expression in deeper understanding of the self and emotional release, which promotes psychological healing. He presented the idea of catharsis as a therapeutic cure, given that the beholder expresses his inner being not intellectually but by heart. However, Jung acknowledges the limitation of catharsis, mentioning that an individual does not necessarily have to dig into his unconscious, as they already have enough to express (Sharp, 1991, para. 134-137).

Literature reveals three different tragic conditions that result in traumatic emotions i.e., psychological disorder, adverse life event like losing a loved one, and physical illness (Forgeard, 2013, p. 246). To analyze the phenomenon of catharsis, the research presents the study of three Western painters, each suffering from the respective condition. Vincent van Gogh's (1853-1890) psychotic experience, Edvard Munch's (1863-1944) loss of mother and sister to a deadly disease, and Farida Kahlo's (1907-1954) severe physical injuries and miscarriages – the respective adversity imbues the paintings of each of these artists with the reflection of traumatic emotions. The selection of these artists is also based upon the chronological gaps, different geographical contexts, and pertinent social circumstances, all of which contributed to their creative expression. Industrial age, World Wars, and the rise of modernism, which these artists encountered respectively, have unfavorable effect on human psyche. These social circumstances are responsible for the rise in different kinds of psychological problems all over the world as never before. The research examines the expressions of these artists in the light of psychological literature related to art and its therapeutic abilities. Their artworks are clear reflection of the emotional turmoil, revealing their emotional states.

The advent of Industrial age not only in the West but also in the East has its impact on human psychology. The present-day globalization and technological innovations have although created communicative ease to connect over vast distances, yet it has led to increased emotional distance among individuals, resulting in emotional distress. South Asian artists especially of Pakistan are highly responsive to the prevalent socio-political scenarios and they draw influences from distressing circumstances. Unfortunately, the literature on Pakistani Art rarely explores the cathartic dimension of art-practice in depth. This research selects a contemporary Pakistani artist Attiya Shaukat (b. 1980) who suited best to study the phenomena of catharsis through painting. The research explicates the correlation of traumatic emotions and creative expression, by shedding light on the tragic experience expressed in the miniature paintings of Shaukat. It endorses the virtue of creative expression in providing the Artist with the coping mechanism against difficult emotions.

## Literature Review

Some of the scholarship which highlights the emotional experiences and creative expression of Western artists are mentioned as a concise perspective on the literature dispensing art as catharsis. *The Agony and the Ecstasy* is a novel giving a comprehensive glimpse into the life and artworks of Michelangelo reflecting the emotional highs and lows (Stone, 1961). *Georgia O'Keeffe: A Life* presents biography of O'Keeffe exploring her life experiences, emotions, and expression through artworks (Robinson, 1989). *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* is a biographic study of Pollock's troubled life with reference to his gestural paintings (Naifeh & Smith, 1991). *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* observes the link between suicide and creativity through the lives and works of Western writers and artists (Alvarez, 2002). *Tortured Artists: From Picasso and Monroe to Warhol and Winehouse, the Twisted Secrets of the World's Most Creative Minds* examines the lives of forty-eight individuals from the field of literature, performing arts, and visual arts, who had suffered mental health challenges. This book studies how their practices have facilitated them with

catharsis (Zara, 2012). *Francis Bacon: Revelations* delves into emotive and relieving character of Bacon's paintings reflecting his complex psyche (Stevens & Swan, 2021).

The books mentioned above provide an overview of the lives and works of Western artists. For the investigation of relation between traumatic experience and creative expression, the research presents the review of following literature, which fosters an insight into painting as a cathartic device.

Andreasen (1987) studies the link between mental instability and creative tendency in an individual. She claims a direct relation between the two. Most of the psychologically ill patients belong to the creative fields, because of the reason that pattern of the brain function during art-making and psychological instability has similar features (p. 1288-1292).

This co-relation is further elaborated by a great Pakistani scholar Ashfaq Ahmed (1996), who relates any kind of adverse experience with creativity. He states that an artist is enabled to create a powerful art-work by some kind of traumatic experience. In his opinion, an undisturbed artist undoubtedly produces great works of art, however experience of trauma adds emotionally compelling quality to an artwork. He emphasizes an artist to have an awareness of pain in order to gain self-realization, which further leads towards strong creative expression.

Aldwin and Sutton (1998) claim that tragic experience during young age triggers social withdrawal or disconnection from peers, which is linked with bizarre personality. Such circumstances are responsible for developing an unconventional perception of an individual which in turn sparks an unusual kind of expression (p. 53).

Reynolds's (2004) study of the experiences of female textile artists, having chronic illnesses, shows the positive impact of disease on the creative urge (p. 79-89). The creative process has been a means to encourage them to face the suffering, thus yielding emotional resilience to harness the distress resulting from the illness.

However, contradictorily, Roepke's (2011) research deduces that good experiences have an equal share in giving rise to creativity and person's growth. Her study is endorsed by Forgeard (2013) according to whom creativity does not inherently stem from adverse experience (p. 245-264).

On the other hand, Asim Amjad (personal communication, May 18, 2023), a Pakistani psychologist, art therapist and artist, claims that traumatic experience leads to strong expressive artwork, for which he uses the phrase "distortion is growth." However, Amjad agrees that many successful artists are not impacted by trauma in their creative practice, as it is their profession and not a means of emotional expression. He further states that medium of emotional outlet varies from individual to individual depending on their personal interests.

## Materials and Methods

The research is based on qualitative method, adopting the documentation style of American Psychological Association (APA). Data collected from primary sources include interview with the artist Attiyya Shaukat and discussion with a psychologist Asim Amjad. While secondary sources include books, research articles, and online material. Scholarship and art of the West provides the knowledge of emotional expression and its capability to reduce the effect of traumatic emotions.

## Review of Art

The history of Modern art in the West is evident of the fact that many great artists suffered from traumatic emotions which clearly make appearance in their paintings. A Dutch Post-Impressionist artist Vincent van Gogh's (1853-1890) psychologically traumatic life is highly interlinked with his works. At this time, most part of Western Europe was undergoing industrial development causing both economic growth and economic disparity among different social strata. The public was in the state of poverty and economic depression (Barzun, 2023, para. 1-25). Van Gogh himself was struggling financially, searching for a stable career in different regions of Europe. Having an empathetic heart with an urge to do something for the betterment of the underprivileged, he lost his own self. In June 1879, he started preaching in a coal-mining district of Borinage, Belgium. He intentionally adopted a lifestyle like that of the laborers in order to create emotional resonance with them (Van Gogh Museum, n.d., Looking for a Direction). But his psychological condition did not let him stay longer there. Facing persistent hardships to find a career that could well align with his mental health, the sketches that he abundantly produced in the District directed him to paint. However, financial crisis accompanied him throughout his life. His brother Theo van Gogh, an art dealer, became his constant support: financially and emotionally (Uhde, 1994, p. 5-25). The letters that Vincent wrote to him provide a great deal of insight into his mental health and emotional expression through painting.

The psychological turbulence that he experienced reflects in arbitrary color schemes and the quality of brush strokes, as he states "I use color more arbitrarily so as to express myself more forcibly" (Kleiner, 2016, p. 856). Thick impasto and broken strokes form swirling forms, unusual for a normal human vision. Apart from the colors and strokes, distortion is observed in other compositional elements as well, like in perspective and proportions. Such distortions suggest his anguish and the way he perceived his surrounding, creating a visual of his emotions (Bersson, 2004, p. 506).

In a desire to start an artist colony, he persuaded Theo who convinced the artist Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) to start living and working with Vincent. The last two months of the year 1888 that he spent at the Yellow House in Arles, France with fellow artist Gauguin proved to be very productive, because of slight improvement in Van Gogh's mental health condition as a result of a companionship. However, this only lasted until an argument about their different approaches to painting, on which Gauguin decided to leave. His decision devastated Vincent Van Gogh, causing a psychotic breakdown. He tried to attack Gauguin with a razor, who managed to escape. However, Van Gogh lost his control and cut a portion of his own ear (Van Gogh Museum, n.d., South of France). He depicts his wounded ear in *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear and Pipe*, painted in early 1889 (fig. 1). Against a background of sharp red and orange, is Van Gogh, wearing a contrasting green jacket, making him stand out against the warm hues. His ear covered in white bandage and head covered in grey cap makes his gaze even deeper, while he smokes a pipe. The composition is made intense not just by the context but also by the strikingly complementary colors and textured strokes. The somber expressions that he portrays strongly suggest the traumatic emotions (Ocvirk, Stinson, Wigg, Bone, & Cayron, 2006, p. 264-265). However, at the same time, there is a conflicting sense of contemplation and pacification delivered by the composition. This portrait marks his honest self-expression, where he is not hesitant to reveal his agony and vulnerability.

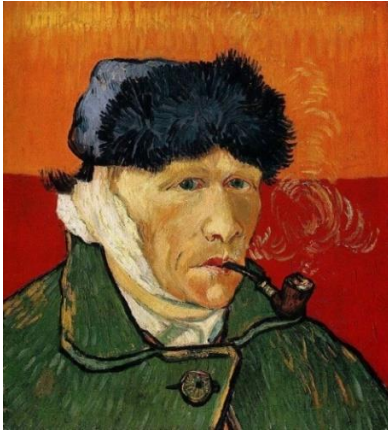


Figure 1. Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear and Pipe*, 1889, oil on canvas, 51 x 45 cm.  
(Source: Vincent van Gogh, <https://www.vincentvangogh.org/self-portrait-with-bandaged-ear-and-pipe.jsp>).

The year 1890 was harsher, as Theo, the closest person to Vincent, was in health and financial crisis (Van Gogh Museum, n.d., *Vincent's Final Months*). Vincent, himself psychologically weak, felt even more disturbed. The emotional turbulence led him to create one of the most expressive painting *Crows over the Wheatfield* (fig. 2) (Schapiro, 1985, p. 126-127). What he wrote to Theo about the painting demonstrates his emotional state.

“Returning there, I set to work. The brush almost fell from my hands... I had no difficulty in expressing sadness and extreme solitude” (Vincent van Gogh, 2009, para. 1).

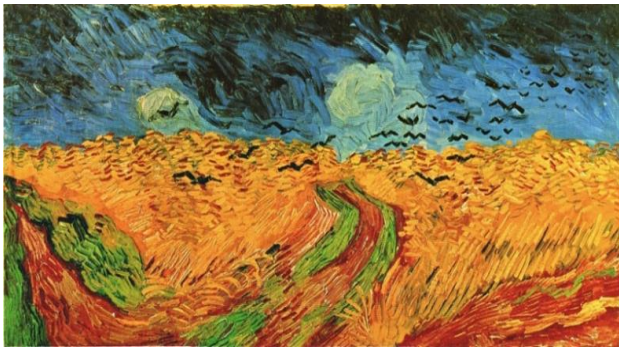


Figure 2. Vincent van Gogh, *Crows over the Wheatfield*, 1890, oil on canvas, 50.55 x 100.33 cm.  
(Source: Schapiro, 1985, p. 126-127).

The turbulent blue-sky hovers above the bright yellow wheatfield stirred by the wind. The three pathways in the field, instead of conventional converging at the horizon line, converge towards the foreground, thus distorting the perspective. The paint, laid with knife instead of brush, creates a violent expression, which is aggravated by black strokes of the flying crows. The formal elements of the painting offer a glimpse into Van Gogh's emotional state. The roughness in color application and swirling movement of strokes suggest the inner disturbance (Schapiro, 1985, p. 46, 126-127). The loss of focus in the inverted perspective and absence of human figure in the vast field, portray his ambiguous and isolated journey of life and his perception of how life had become hostile towards him. The painting reveals his uncontrollable emotions, the unrest and chaos he was grappling with. The black crows, which are usually associated with death or ill-omen (Shepherd & Shepherd, 2002, p. 202), anticipated his tragic death. After this painting he was constantly attracted by the wheatfield, where some days later he shot himself (Van Gogh Museum, n.d., *Vincent's Final Months*). Van Gogh's paintings are a testimony to his remarkable aptitude to express his emotions. The emotional authenticity imbues the paintings with an ability to interact with the viewers and to encourage them to introspect. The fact that his act of painting provided him with an emotional outlet is evident through its tendency to evoke viewers emotions. Art practice did serve him as catharsis, but certainly not with the remedy due to which he harmed himself (A. Amjad, personal communication, May 18, 2023).



Another artist known for emotional expression is the Norwegian Symbolist Edvard Munch (1863-1944). Munch's psychological insight was shaped by the unfavorable economic conditions and unstable family health, amid the rising modernism. The unrest was later aggravated by the massive destruction and massacre caused by the Great Wars. Munch's paintings draw influence from natural life events like death or love and from modern advancements, and the emotions linked with them (Kleiner, 2016, p. 866). His painting *The Scream* is representation of the overburdening challenges of modern time (fig. 3). The painting resonates his personal experience of anxiety, which he encountered while walking across a bridge with two of his friends (Kleiner, 2016, p. 866). He depicts himself as a distorted figure in a melancholic gesture, silently screaming the lungs out. Through this act he externalizes his distress which is echoed in the fierce red and orange waves of the sunset sky over the blues of land and water. The distortion in the structure, colors, and figures, wails about the agony he had been suffering with (Bersson, 2004, p. 516-518). Munch's expressive explanation about this painting is quoted by Bersson (2004).

"I was tired and ill - I stood looking out across the fjord - the sun was setting - the clouds were colored red - like blood - I felt as though a scream went through nature - I thought I heard a scream - I painted this picture - painted the clouds like real blood. The colors were screaming" (p. 518).

There is a sense of hopelessness in the silent yet tumultuous scream (fig. 3). The painting is an indication of artist's agitated emotions. These emotions besides resulting from the modern life, are also the consequence of losing his mother in his early childhood, and his sister in his teenage, both to tuberculosis (Kleiner, 2016, p. 866).

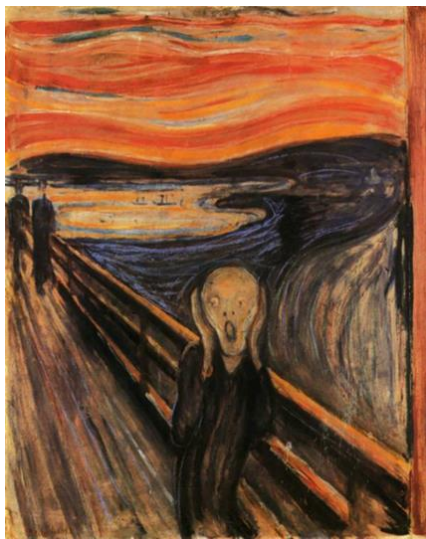


Figure 3. Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, 1893, tempera and pastels on cardboard, 90.8 x 73.7 cm. (Source: Kleiner, 2016, p. 866).

The fatal disease of tuberculosis had a devastating impact on Munch's emotional state, which changed his perception of life altogether, in turn shaping his art practice. He recalls the memory of his loss by painting a boy with fractured leg attended by his sister who is sitting beside his bed in distressed gesture (Tate, 2019, para. 1) (fig. 4). The emotion of helplessness and sense of mortality is embodied in the figure of the boy lying on the bed. While the presence of his sister is the representation of a loved one being suffering emotionally (fig. 4). The expressive roughness of strokes along with dark and somber colors evoke the traumatic emotions linked with the tragedies of his own life (Tate, 2019, para. 1). The depiction of human suffering in the Painting suggests Munch's heartfelt connection and shared feelings with his two siblings. The painting is an expression of his own grief associated with the transience of life and pain of loss.



Figure 4. Edvard Munch, *The Sick Child*, 1907, oil on canvas, 118.7 x 121 cm, collection of Tate Modern, London.

(Source: Tate, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/munch-the-sick-child-n05035>).

Munch's expressive paintings have an evocative quality, with a deep sense of empathy. His personal and shared human experiences add to the authenticity of emotional expression. Through the creative process he found the means to release traumatic emotions, gaining the courage to share the sufferings of others and in turn encountering his own agony.

The heightened sense of suffering is observed in the paintings of Mexican self-taught painter Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) who is known for her autobiographical artworks, depicting her own body as it suffered. Her age was the time of social, political, and economical changes in Mexico after the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) and the rise of modernism in Mexican art (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023, para. 1-3). Unfortunately, various life events provided Kahlo with traumatic experiences, which includes polio, bus accident which caused major physical injuries, multiple surgeries, an unsuccessful marriage with the artist Diego Rivera, couple of miscarriages, infertility, death of mother, and constantly declining health. She started painting while recovering from surgeries as an emotional outlet (Zelazko, 2023, para. 2-5).

The year she got divorced in 1939, she painted one of her masterpieces *The Two Fridas* (fig. 5). In this painting she has painted herself twice, seated on a bench placed in a barren land, with overcasting heavy clouds. The right-side figure in Mexican Tehuana dress denotes her as Rivera's wife, while the left one wearing white colored European festive dress denotes Rivera's rejection (Zelazko, 2023, para. 7). Hand in hand, she portrays both the figures connected with the same artery extending from the exposed hearts of both figures. The artery on the left-side ends on surgical instrument, and the heart of this side is cut opened to show the inner anatomy, symbolizing vulnerability. While the artery on the right-side ends on a small portrait of Rivera, and the heart of this side appears in a raw form. She intends to depict two different aspects of her personality: the survivor in most adverse health conditions, and the sufferer of an unsuccessful relationship. The blood dripping on white dress creates a contrast of colors as well as varied emotions of bravery and unease. The turbulence in her life and emotional state are well reflected in the sky, while barrenness of the land signifies her strength despite fertility challenges (Bruce-Mitford, 2008, p. 25).

Created during the phase of emotional trauma, *The Two Fridas* sums up her life experiences, the combination of physical and emotional pain, which she tends to release through her practice, as she states, "I am not sick, I am broken. But I am happy to be alive as long as I can paint" (Phillips, 2023, para. 8) (fig. 5). Painting fills the void in her life caused by miscarriages, about which she writes, "Painting completed my life. I lost three children and painting substituted for all of this" (Phillips, 2023, para. 8). Without any hesitance, she opens herself up through her artworks, projecting her agony by depicting herself, and freeing herself of the distress.



Figure 5. Frida Kahlo, *The Two Fridas*, 1939, oil on canvas, 173.5 x 173 cm.

(Source: Artchive, <https://www.artchive.com/artwork/the-two-fridas-frida-kahlo-1939/>).

In 1940, reconciliation with Rivera and starting career as an art teacher, brought some hope in her life. However, her health continued to deteriorate, which was aggravated by drug addiction (Zelazko, 2023, para. 8). Despite her condition, she did not stop painting, as it served her as survival mechanism by providing her with emotional strength, which is demonstrated in the Painting *Tree of Hope, Remain Strong* (fig. 6). The painting is vertically divided in halves, lighter part with a bright sun, and darker part with a moon in the gloomy sky. In a dry landscape with fissures, she again paints herself twice. Injured Frida, partially wrapped in white drapery, lying in a hospital trolley is seen with surgical cuts in her back, blood still oozing from them. In front of her, seated Frida appears in darker portion, dressed in Red Tehuana dress, with melancholic facial expression, holding an orthopaedic corset, ready to accept her trauma. The other hand holds a flag with words translated as "Tree of Hope, Remain Strong."

The despair depicted in the dry land fissures and surgical cuts of lying Frida is intentionally balanced with signs of hope embodied in the corset and flag. The red of Tehuana dress speaks of her acceptance of life with physical impairment, as red in Mexican culture symbolizes life (Olesen, 2013, para. 12). The seated Frida apparently awaits the broken Frida to embrace the ill-fated afflictions with hope. By depicting herself in two opposite states, as victim of trauma and as triumphant survivor, she consciously tends to take herself out of the trauma.

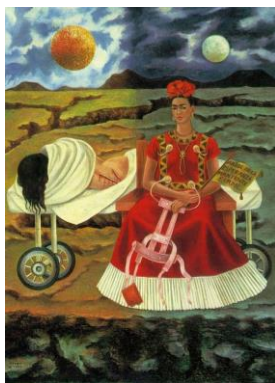


Figure 6. Frida Kahlo, *Tree of Hope, Remain Strong*, 1946, oil on masonite, 55.9 x 40.6 cm.

(Source: Artchive, <https://www.artchive.com/artwork/tree-of-hope-frida-kahlo-1946/>).

Kahlo's paintings are a testament to her strength to visually translate her emotional experiences. Her vulnerability and determination are simultaneously reflected amidst all the physical and emotional trauma. The strength she gained through painting is the crucial element that provides a comprehension of art as a relieving outlet.

The analysis of the paintings of three Western artists lay a ground for the understanding of the link between traumatic emotions and cathartic art practice. The study



of emotional experiences of these artists prompts an investigation of similar art practiced in Pakistan. The scholarship on Pakistani art is inadequate to provide a deeper insight into the emotional experiences of the artists and the emotional benefit that they gain from art practice. This research, by delving into traumatic experience and related art practice of the contemporary Pakistani miniature painter Attiya Shaukat (b. 1980), grants an awareness of shared human ways to regulate emotions.

## **Discussion**

Art practice in Pakistan is influenced by various internal and external factors. The most influential aspects in the contemporary art scene are the unstable socio-political circumstances, and personal experiences. Both the factors are responsible for an emotional drive in the artist because of the intensity of the impact these conditions have on them. The study of traumatic emotions linked with adverse life experiences, and their expression are aptly observed in the life and works of Attiya Shaukat. Her prolific professional career as an artist and reflection of traumatic experience in paintings strongly resonate with that of Kahlo's. There are couple of magazine reviews written on Shaukat's experience and exhibited artworks, however, these do not delve deep into the relation of adversity, creative expression, and catharsis. After conducting interview with her and discovering the gap in the existing literature, the novel cathartic dimension of her art practice has been taken for investigation. The critical analysis, analogy, and symbolic representation of forms and colors in her paintings, elaborated in the research, are defined by the artist herself.

Shaukat hails from Lahore, a city known for its rich cultural heritage. Currently working between Lahore and Karachi, her deep passion for miniature painting and a profound understanding of visual expression, has made significant contributions to the art scene in Pakistan and abroad. Her expressive journey starts from the year 2003, when she encountered a tragic incident. While hanging her paintings for Mini Thesis display at National College of Arts, she accidentally fell from the ladder, injuring her spine which left her lower body paralyzed, restricting her to wheelchair. The physical trauma of being unable to walk even after surgery and treatments, lead to the emotional trauma. However, physical restriction did not keep her from expressing her trauma. Collecting strength from the art community, she resumed her art practice and successfully graduated in 2004.

When she resumed her work after injury, nature served her as the main source of inspiration. She particularly gained motivation from the growth pattern of Semal tree visible from her window. She closely used to observe how the tree is pruned and the way it grows back with renewed vigor each year, which serves as a reminder for her not to lose hope or surrender to despair. Her early artistic career was confined within her studio, not exposing her work or herself as an artist. This was the phase when she was practicing art for her own sake, for her emotional regulation. The medium of miniature painting besides aiding her to restore hand-grip on the brush, provided her with the ease to paint while being restricted on bed. With every painting she revived her inner strength, ultimately earning courage to share her traumatic emotions with the audience, while realizing the importance of galleries. Since then, she has been actively exhibiting her artworks, both nationally and internationally.

What sets Shaukat apart as an artist is the fortitude with which she paints her personal struggle and experiences. She constructs her compositions by creating a balance between two contrasting elements i.e. the organic and mechanical. The fragmented human body parts appear in juxtaposition with surgical and medical devices, the way Shaukat's body experienced the external objects. Spine, vertebrae, head, feet, jaw, surgical incisions, stitches, threads, metal corset, shreds, fan, knife, scissors, nailed slippers, wheelchair, and

all the objects of first-hand experience, impregnate her paintings with emotions, allowing the viewer to experience her pain, while strengthening herself to embrace the pain. Through her paintings, she says “I am constructing myself” – to be resilient amidst adversity (personal communication, May 14, 2022).

One of the first post-surgery miniature paintings *Pain* is a vertical panel, divided in two portions (fig. 7). Here Shaukat presents a glimpse into what can be said as a personal surgical journal. The first lumbar vertebra of her spine, which was damaged by the injury, appears in the upper portion of painting, overlapping the flesh having surgical incision. While the lower portion shows the artist’s self-portrait in an elliptical format, over which is laid the jaw, thus hiding the portrait partially. The reds of the veins and blood clearly suggest the physical pain. The exposed vertebra is given a centralized position, depicting its significance over the superficially appealing world. The semi-obscurated facial features represent the similar notion: the inner functions of human body hold much more worth than the outer appearance. The intricate details from the veins to the hair strands speaks of the agony experienced during the process of painting (fig 7.). The intense pain, that the painting has been loaded with, evokes viewer’s emotions as well. Shaukat creates for her audience the understanding of severity of her suffering.

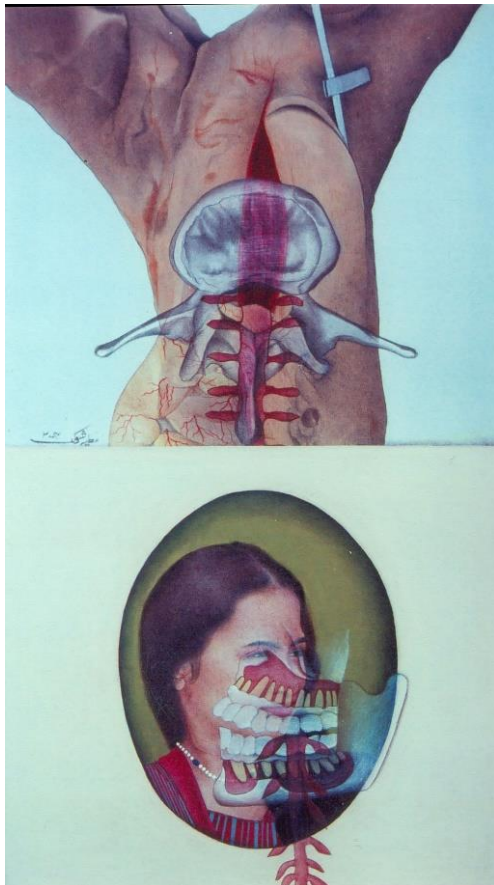


Figure 7. Attiya Shaukat, *Pain*, 2004, gouache and tea wash on *wasli*, 21.34 x 11.18 cm.  
(Source: Courtesy of the Artist).

In the painting *Middle of Nowhere*, Shaukat reduces the imagery to distinct objects that contributed to her adverse experience (fig. 8). The feet in the foreground with red colored warmer opens the composition, which further leads to the diverging tracks – the distortion also observed in the pathways of Van Gogh’s *Crows over the Wheatfield*. Above the feet is a vertical chunk of body with surgical incision. The incision leads to the ceiling fan above in linear form against cobalt blue background. One of the blades of the fan is replaced with a decorative dagger. Though a symmetrically laid composition, yet creating a visual disturbance, this painting is indication of an artist’s emotional turbulence. The

tracks opposing the conventional perspective, contrast the well-placed feet, implying the halted progress. In this distortion, she embodies the state of despair which she encountered post-surgery, regarding the effect of her disability on her artistic career. However, with her art practice she has overcome this challenge like a sturdy tree trunk which continues to grow naturally despite the calamities, as reflected in the incised body. During her state of rest, while her body was going through the process of natural healing, a constant visual of the ceiling fan got engraved in her sight, which agonized her as if it was a dagger. The prolonged resting state itself was a torment for her, which she considered as a threat for her art practice. However, she has embellished her dagger to represent her combat against disability. It is definitely her suffering which has provided her with the motivation to paint, that further facilitates her in getting rid of the emotional distress.



Figure 8. Attiya Shaukat, *Middle of Nowhere*, 2006, gouache and tea wash on *wasli*, 24.6 x 13.8 cm. (Source: Courtesy of the Artist).

The next challenge that awaited her was moving about with support or mobility aid. The painting *Step by Step-I* shows her feet in four varied states entering from the upper perimeter of the painting (fig. 9). The foreground is occupied by overlapping surgical scissors. The painting reveals her personal struggle to cope with the trauma. She daringly exposes the physical impairment in her feet through red colored snagged warmer. The pain is reflected in the foot with nailed slipper. Blue colored foot on wheelchair's footplate denotes the numbness or dysfunctionality. While, a normal foot that she had before the incident appears in the corner, which she regrets to lose. Among the feet, she paints a white colored sneaker with its lace being cut by the scissors, representing a state of despair, as the broken lace potentially leads to a fall. A pair of red colored scissors among many blue ones signify that the intensity of pain is being reduced by the amount of hope that she is getting through the creative expression. The brown paper tape of *wasli*, which is normally meant to be covered by the frame, is showing from the two sides, suggesting Shaukat's willingness to share the unseen reality of her suffering and existence (fig. 9). This visual sharing is a source of her emotional ease.



Figure 9. Attiya Shaukat, *Step by Step-I*, 2008, gouache on wasli, 29.2 x 47 cm.  
(Source: Courtesy of the Artist).

Despite of inability to walk, she is grateful to have functional hands. The painting *Lucky Hands* portrays her seated on a wheelchair, which is shown from the back (fig. 10). Although this placement does not allow the depiction of the frontal body, yet she paints the front side of torso with bowed head, and arms and hands visible through the wheelchair. The marble chips, in various earth tones, are shown scattered throughout the background space, telling how devastated she felt after the injury, with her dreams shattered to scattered debris. However, the back of the wheelchair, like an X-ray, revealing the inner structure of arms and hands in the tones of grey, shows that same marble chips assemble together to give strength to arms and hands. Her pain becomes the provider of strength. She expresses her gratification that even if she cannot walk on her feet, she can still use her hands to express her emotions. In the simultaneous depiction of two different emotions: despair and gratitude, the latter stands triumphant, the ultimate source of emotional healing.



Figure 10. Attiya Shaukat, *The Lucky Hands*, 2014, gouache and gold on wasli, 14.48 x 33.53 cm.  
(Source: Courtesy of the Artist).

She feels herself as conqueror of her trauma as she depicts in the painting *The Warrior Queen* (fig. 11). The heroic figure of herself stands valiantly holding her own spinal column with the tailbone in her hand. The first lumbar vertebra is painted blue with a red stitch showing the injury-inflicted part. Wearing armor of a warrior on the torso with baldric belt holding a pair of surgical scissors, she conveys the idea of how bravely she has faced the physical trauma and post-surgery phase. Through the rolled-up pants, revealing her perfectly and courageously standing limbs, and through bare feet she articulates her gesture of success and triumph. Despite presenting herself as a warrior, the face is obscured, giving a sense of unwillingness to recall the incident and trauma that came along. She exhibits her conscious efforts in keeping the thoughts of calamity from distressing herself. In fact, she considers her trauma as a direction towards her belief in fate.





Figure 11. Attiya Shaukat, *The Warrior Queen*, 2020, gouache, silver, paper tape and thread on *wasli*, 44.5 x 31.8 cm. (Source: Courtesy of the Artist).

It is the will power that has transformed Shaukat's misfortune into acceptance of fate. She exposes her inner sentiments, without the fear of being judged. Her pain provides her with the subject of her painting, and her painting in turn provides her the relief from pain. Miniature painting serves her as a cathartic and therapeutic activity. "It is because of miniature painting that I am surviving with all my strength. I cannot think of being alive without it," she says (personal communication, May 14, 2022). She proudly adds, "miniature is a part of my body" which has constantly been accompanying her since post-surgery to the phase of recovery (personal communication, May 14, 2022). The constant indulgence in the intricate process of miniature painting, has induced patience within her, while the resulting paintings add to her gratitude.

Apart from autobiographical painting she also paints socio-political subjects, in an endeavor to distract her thoughts sometimes (fig. 12). But eventually she returns to the same subject again and again, of her life experiences.



Figure 12. Attiya Shaukat, *Patterns of Politics*, 2013, gouache on *wasli*. (Source: Artavita, accessed June 4, 2022, <https://www.artavita.com/artists/12285-attiya-shaukat>).



The traumatic experience of the accident served as a solid foundation for her artistic journey. Her paintings sum up her painful experiences, and the ultimate strength and her faith in God. Her exhibitions have been met with great admiration, not just for her paintings but also for the robustness and resilience that she has been blessed with. Her paintings are not merely expression of her emotions, but also an invitation for the viewers to feel the pain and to be grateful for their abilities. Her paintings convey a sense of hope and belief in nature's power of healing that she has ultimately gained through her practice.

### **Conclusion**

Traumatic emotions resulting from adverse experiences need to be processed through positive means in order to relieve the individual. Creative process not only helps in providing the emotional outlet, but also contributes in improvement of the mood. This research endorses a significant transformation of traumatic emotions in the form of paintings. The traumatic experiences faced by the documented artists provide them with an urge to express. The in-depth study of the life and works of Vincent, Munch, Kahlo, and Shaukat, reveals that traumatic emotions play a pivotal role in evolution of their art practices. Their experiences have undoubtedly led them to discover the new possibilities of emotional relieving. Though their art practice has not significantly improved their physical health, yet the process of painting has a momentous impact in distracting their thoughts and emotions, whether for a limited or longer period of time. In any case, the emotions, particularly encountered during the art-making process, are characteristically positive ones. The duration of these positive emotions varies from artist to artist, depending on the respective psychological state. Apart from benefiting themselves emotionally, the artists evoke a sense of introspection for the viewers to connect with the deeper layers of human conditions and existence. The research opens avenues for further investigation of emotional benefits through art practice.

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