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**AN ANALYSIS ON ANNA MOLKA AHMED'S PAINTINGS 'HUNGER' & 'BEGGARS':
A SEMIOTIC APPROACH BY CHARLES SANDERS PEIRCE**

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
<p>Anna Molka Ahmed, Pakistani Modern Art, Paintings, Semiotic Analysis, Charles Sanders Peirce, Resilience & Suffering</p>	<p>Anna Molka Ahmed (1917–1994) was a leading artist shaping modern art in Pakistan through her fusion of the Western methods with the native cultural understanding. Her paintings, <i>Beggars</i> (1964) and <i>Hunger</i> (1984), depict the critical socio-political realities like poverty and suppression. This research seeks to conduct a semiotic analysis of paintings through Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of semiotics, representamen, object, and interpretant, there is a better analysis of how the paintings of Ahmed are communicative acts that document and criticize the socio-political realities of Pakistan in the 1960s and 1980s. By qualitative approach, the images of paintings and background historical information were analyzed to understand the deeper symbolic meanings embedded in visual forms. The evidence suggests that the Ahmed's application of earthy color schemes, human poses and textured methods speaks strongly of the human resilience and suffering caused by political distress and instability. The study provides significant information to the body of literature about the harsh realities faced by the marginalized in society and placing Pakistani art in the international semiotic and socio-political discourses.</p>
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INTRODUCTION

Anna Molka Ahmed (1917–1994) was one of prominent artists in bringing modern art to Pakistan. She was brought up in England and trained at St. Martin's School of Art and the Royal Academy of Art in London, she created artwork that blended Western methods with Eastern insight. She got married and moved to Pakistan in 1938 with her husband, it was time before partition of Pakistan. She established department of Fine arts at Punjab University in 1940. She was a Jew later converted

to Islam. She was the one who did not belong to Pakistan, but remained involved and comprehended so well, its people, culture and economic conditions. Her paintings often discuss the issues of poverty, struggle, and human condition, reflecting the sociopolitical situation of her time. Her persistent the application of color, use of impasto technique, and focus on social causes have etched an indelible stamp on nation cultural environment. While Ahmed's work as Pakistani artist is well documented, there is a lack of scholarly work utilizing semiotic theory to illuminate her work. A sign enables all things within the universe to be translated and comprehended by humans. A sign serves as a symbol for something else.

A sign draws attention to someone, which leads to a mental reaction in the form of an equivalent or a higher sign, the mental reaction is referred to as the interpretant of original sign. Further, the sign points to something outside, and that is object (Vera, 2014, as cited in Tjahyadi & Jatmiko 2021). In particular, employment of Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of semiotics, which examines the relation among the representamen, its object, and interpretant. Riaz, Qureshi, Tahir and Waheed (2024) explores semiotic analysis not only reveals the evident meaning of an image, but also reveals implied meanings and broader ideological and mythical narratives that create impact on public consciousness. It is not explored to much extent in investigating the symbolic nature of her paintings. This deficit inhibits deeper understanding of meaning layers conveyed in her paintings, especially those relevant to Pakistan cultural and historical background. The study aimed to perform semiotic analysis of the Anna Molka Ahmed's paintings "Beggars" (1964) and "Hunger" (1984) using Peirce's theory of semiotics to uncover intricate relationship of signs and symbols. The study seeks to shed light on subtle manner in which Ahmed's work portrays issues of poverty, devotion, and identity in Pakistani context.

Research Question

How do Anna Molka Ahmed's works of art "Beggars" (1964) and "Hunger" (1984) employ semiotic elements recognized by Charles Sanders Peirce to signify themes of poverty and resistance in socio-cultural context of Pakistan?

LITERATURE REVIEW

As mentioned by Tjahyadi and Jatmiko (2021), a painting is not just work of art, it is communicative tool for artist to engage with the audience and communicate social and cultural messages. Authors employ Peirce's triadic model, representamen, object, and interpretant, expressing that deciphering sign involves examining three elements concurrently to understand embedded meaning (Tjahyadi & Jamiko, 2021). Peirce's semiotics is used in diverse visual media. Thellefsen and Friedman (2023) explores analysis of visual sign semiotics studied images of past U.S. President Donald Trump using Peirce's notion of iconicity to decipher pictorial communication. The semiotic roots of research on pictures have been studied with focus on fact that representational, non-representational images work as signs under Peirce's system & highlight applicability of Peirce's theory of iconicity in visual communication. Their work proves that how images are hypoicons, signs that look like their objects, enabling better conception of visual metaphors and symbols in paintings. This sympathetic is useful in analysis of paintings wherein the visual elements are not aesthetic per se but vessels carrying complicated meaning.

In another study, semiotic analysis was conducted by [Palinoan et al. \(2024\)](#) reveal that the movie *Sound of Freedom* has human values. These are respect for human dignity, solidarity, and sacrifice for humankind. Human values gained by author from this research are then pondered over so that it becomes a thorough research outcome that can render explanation and illumination to readers and viewers who watch this movie. [Tjahyadi and Jatmiko \(2021\)](#) contend that signs do not express meaning on their own but serve as indicators to be interpreted by people according to their socio-cultural experiences, so each painting can be a site of multiple interpretations. When discussing Pakistani art, [Riaz, Qureshi, Tahir, and Waheed \(2024\)](#) investigate the semiotic aspects of visual media, pointing out the ways in which images communicate interpretations of realities and symbols embedded within artwork and how they communicate meaning. The authors' critique stresses the significance of considering denotative and connotative meaning in visual text, which is significant if one is to examine artworks that portray social issues. [Al-Bzour and Al-Khazalleh \(2021\)](#) offers a cognitive semiotic approach to study visual signs, explaining how cultural and social aspects affect signs' interpretation.

Their results verify that the reception of artwork such as Ahmed's is grounded in the cultural and historical context of the observer. In addition, [Elkins \(2003\)](#) explains the use of Peirce's sign theory in art history, claiming that Peirce's model provides a holistic framework for the interpretation of artworks beyond their beauty. This method is applicable to analysis of Ahmed's paintings, where the visual aspects are given symbolic meanings based on societal problems which defines meaning making as a triadic relation between the representamen, the thing it represents, and interpretant. Through this lens, it is possible to view Ahmed's paintings holistically and understand how visual elements operate as signs, building & communicating rich cultural and emotive narratives. Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic sign model reveals an engaging dynamic among three vital elements: the Representamen, object, and interpretant. All the parts are inseparably entwined so that meaning becomes an active, interactive process. The Representamen is perceivable expression of sign, such as a word, image, or symbol. The object is what the sign points to or represents, and Interpretant is the meaning or understanding that arises from interaction between representamen and the object ([Fatin & Zulfah, 2024](#)).

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research incorporates a qualitative design to meet the desired objectives. As this is descriptive research, I am going to write it in narrative form. The source of the paintings, the researcher obtained for this research is from the Internet and ethically mentioned the sources and I use semiotic analysis in line with Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model for paintings analysis. The purpose of this study is to discern the symbols and signs used in the chosen pieces of artwork so as to identify implicit themes of poverty, persistence, and cultural identity. Qualitative method is appropriate to research inscrutable meaning imbedded within visual artwork & understand socio-cultural circumstances portrayed in it.

Data Collection

To visual data collection, most significant data includes images of Anna Molka Ahmed's paintings *Beggars (1964)* and *Hunger (1984)*, obtained from reputable online art databases: *Beggars (1964)*

Grosvenor Gallery, Hunger (1984) Sotheby. The resources like exhibition catalogs, artist statements and critical essays are published on open-access platforms and institutional repositories offer the in-depth visual descriptions required to conduct semiotic analysis. Extensive examination of the current semiotics analysis, especially Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model, provided theoretical foundation for the research. The historical and sociopolitical contexts of Pakistan in the 1960s and 1980s were examined to gain more accurate understanding of conditions that led to development of paintings. This involved reading scholarly articles includes historical perspectives and archives on socio-political environment relevant to the respective time frames. Through the convergence of different data collection methods, the research ensured a comprehensive semiotic analysis method based on interpretations drawn from both the visual data and contextual comprehension based on the existing literature.

Data Analysis

In this research, Anna Molka Ahmed's paintings *Beggars* (1964) and *Hunger* (1984) are analyzed with the help of the visual features and contextual backdrops of these masterpieces of art we want to explore the layers of meaning embedded in them. With Charles Sanders Peirce's model of triadic semiotics which refers: Representamen: (The Physical Form) Determining the shape of the sign, i.e., color, composition, and iconography. Object: (subject matter) (Determine the meaning of the sign, which involves subjects such as poverty, resilience, and cultural identity. Interpretant: The meaning interpreted by the observer, discovering the meaning obtained by observer, adopting into account cultural and historical contexts. The process is motivated by methodologies found in visual research and literature, which place great concern on the role of context and cultural specificity in analyzing the visual texts.

Picture 1 *Beggars* (1964)



Oil on Board

35 5/8 x 25 5/8 in. (90.5 x 60 cm)

Signed and dated 'Anna Molka 64' lower right

Source: https://www.grosvenorgallery.com/privateviews/ee22_ac60af6fd1042dcd6d/7393-anna-molka-ahmed-beggars-1964/

Representamen: (Visual Elements)

Beggars (1964) describes visual elements as signs. There are three kinds of visual elements that are visible in this painting 'Beggars'. There are 4 skeletal human beings standing in diverse poses, two uprights, one behind with arms extended & slumped shoulders, one sitting figure, all are with half nude body, signifying wretchedness and pleading.

The overacted movements and facial expressions are visual representations of their wretchedness. The sitting figure, his position depicts vulnerable position of that man. There is a brick wall in the background to depict mundane background of local street. Ahmed combines earthy colors, browns, ochres, and muted reds, to convey the gravity of setting and dark background indicates gloominess as well as despair.

Bold strokes, Impasto, the method of applying paint in thick layers, produces texture and depth, the juxtaposition of lights, darks and the figure's shadows in the painting heightening the intensity of feeling. There is no proper detail of the hand's portraits and in other body parts but her style depicts the bold expression. Spatial Arrangement: The characters are positioned close to each other in the foreground, creating the feeling of crowding and desperation. The composition also had the well balance as two figures on the right-hand side are standing while other two figures are in different positions and their body posture is creating the feeling of movement which allows the eye to move around the composition. Thus, background is restricted, concentrating the attention of the viewer on the subjects.

Object: Socio-Political Context & Themes

The painting, painted at time of great political and social upheaval in Pakistan, shows poverty and inequality ravaged by President Ayub regime (1958-1969) drastic modernization & industrialization programs. The portrayal of beggars as critique of state's inability to offer for its most marginalized citizens at a time of alleged progress. The title of painting is unvarnished form in which the painting conveys its message.

Interpretant: Social & cultural link

There is likely to be empathy in addition to stress among audiences, which instills the need for introspection by society about its errands toward underprivileged. The painting is overwhelming in Pakistan, as poverty still exists. Thus, an individual can relate the paintings of the period and up to the current times.

Picture 2 Hunger (1984)



Oil on board

59 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 29 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (152 x 75.3 cm.)

Painted in 1984

Signed and dated 'Anna Molka 84' upper left

Source: <https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2022/modern-contemporary-south-asian-art/hunger>

Representamen (Visual Elements)

Central Figure: A solitary, skeleton figure sits with bowed head with hands posture indicates that he is soothing the hands, which are rising for help, like requesting something. The entire painting is symbolizing physical manifestation of hunger and despair. The posture and face of the figure are strong indicators of suffering.

The populated background with chaotic patterns can be representative of societal instability and personal turmoil. The indistinct forms suggest chaotic surroundings, mirroring the inner disarray of subject. Color Scheme: The yellows & blues predominate, realizing strong contrast that underscores the seriousness of subject. Impasto achieves an almost tactile feeling that provokes the emotional reaction of observer.

Object: Socio-Political Context and Themes

As per [Imran, Chawla and Awan \(2017\)](#), artwork done during General Muhammad Zia-ul Haq's regime of military government, portrays a powerful political subjects and symbolism. Hunger had been generated under the General Zia-ul-Haq's authoritarian regime (1977-1988), wherein it was characterized by the strict Islamic laws and the elimination of political unrest. It can be seen as a response through art to the level of suffering and the erosion of the fundamental rights. The forceful images and emotive expressions in the painting illustrate the suffering and desire for freedom and justice of the people.

Interpretant: Cultural & Social Connection

The solitary figure evokes a strong emotion, symbolizing not only material poverty but also spiritual and accountable hunger in an oppressive culture. The painting affects viewers to reflect on harmful consequences of the repressive regimes and societal abandonment. In [Hunger \(1984\)](#) Anna Molka Ahmed painted A male figure sits cross-legged over a sea of hands and faces, a peaceful figure in striking contrast to the social disquiet on the ground below. The hands of the figure are reminiscent of bhumisparsha mudra, Buddha's earth-touching gesture, which bids humanity, come witness his awakening. This man brings peace to the frantic bodies that constitute ground upon which he sits ([Sotheby's, 2022](#)).

RESULTS OF STUDY

Semiotic analysis of Anna Molka Ahmed's works [Beggars \(1964\)](#) and [Hunger \(1984\)](#) over Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model (representamen, object, and interpretant) brings forth compelling narratives of human pain, sociopolitical commentary, and cultural critique inherent in her visual structures. [Beggars \(1964\)](#) employs heavily textured human bodies, a ground color palette, and a densely packed composition to visually express the desperation, poverty, and marginalization with unstable political situation which may not able to fulfill a man's basic needs. The somber physical image of half-clad people, outstretched hands, and a dark, sorrowful background climaxes poverty of the subjects. The result after applying the semiotic analysis of the painting aligns perfectly with Pakistan's sociopolitical condition of the 1960s, highlighting the aggravation of inequality through Ayub Khan's speedy modernization efforts. The interpretant, or received meaning from the viewer, evokes empathy, social obligations, and awareness that poverty was national concern decades after painting was created.

[Hunger \(1984\)](#) shows a single skeletal body being encircled by disorderly hands and faces, with a harsh juxtaposition of blue and yellow hues. The iconographic reference to bhumisparsha mudra, an enlightened gesture, juxtaposes inner peace against outer unrest ([Sotheby, 2022](#)). The artifact stands for the repressive sociopolitical environment under Zia-ul-Haq's military rule, which was defined by repression, Islamization, and the desecration of human rights. The interpretant is one of not only physical hunger, but spiritual lack and aspiration for freedom from oppression. The overall findings reveal Anna Molka Ahmed's paintings' profound relevance to the historical, political, and social circumstances of day. Her deliberate use of color, composition, gesture, and symbolism offers the multilayered narrative that speaks to both local socioeconomic issues and broader existential questions. The semiotic reading climaxes that Ahmed's pieces are not merely representations; they

are deeply complex communicative acts demanding analytical thinking on part of their viewers. Her paintings ultimately become visual records of popular suffering & endurance within Pakistan's sociocultural context.

Visual Representation of Socioeconomic Struggles

[Beggars \(1964\)](#) illustrates desperation & exclusion visually by its composition, somber color scheme, and rendering of poor characters.

[Hunger \(1984\)](#) accentuates physical & spiritual hunger through skeletal bodies, chaotic movements, and contrasting hues.

Historical and Political Reflections:

[Beggars](#) is consistent with sociopolitical context of 1960s Pakistan, characterized by Ayub Khan's speedy modernization, which further exacerbated class divides.

[Hunger](#) portrays repression in Zia-ul-Haq military dictatorship, with symbols invoking suffering, Islamization, and human rights abuses.

Semiotic Depth and Interpretants:

The interpretants from pieces create intense emotional and intellectual engagement, empathy, recognition of systemic poverty, and spiritual longing for freedom and justice.

Cultural and Symbolic Communication:

With symbolic movements (bhumisparsha mudra), color opposition, and figural deformation, the paintings function as cultural criticisms imbued with spiritual and existential meaning.

Art as Socio-Political Documentation:

Ahmed's paintings are not passive recordings but active, layered communications that serve as historical and social records of suffering, critique, and resilience.

DISCUSSION

Anna Molka Ahmed paintings [Beggars \(1964\)](#) and [Hunger \(1984\)](#) are grieved visual commentaries on Pakistan's sociopolitical environment during that period. Applying Charles semiotic model, we can examine these works on the basis of the elements that are interlinked of representation, object, and interpretant ([Atkin, 2006](#)). [Beggars](#) illustrate representamen as numerous gaunt individuals extending hands and hunched shoulders, rendered in earthy hues and suggestive brushwork. This visual form conveys desperation and appealing. The object here is socioeconomic disparities that prevailed in 1960s Pakistan, period characterized by accelerated industrialization under President Ayub Khan regime. Economic development notwithstanding, benefits were unevenly distributed, leaving vulnerable groups in abysmal poverty. The interpretant arises as audience internalizes the emotional scene, creating thoughts regarding the societal neglect and human toll of irresponsible industrialization. [Beggars \(1964\)](#) may be read as powerful social note on socio-economic disparities of the period.

The imagery of poor figures is symbolic of the marginalization faced by the masses during Ayub Khan's "Decade of Development," when economic planning benefited powerful sections of society, while leaving behind the weaker sections in bad conditions ([Batool, 2024](#)). The gloomy color palette and expressive brushwork of the painting convey the despair and neglect suffered by poor, as a veiled commentary on the inability of the regime to respond to social imbalances. [Hunger](#), on

the other hand, shows gaunt, skeletal figure seated with bowed head against a chaotic background. The representamen is characterized by harsh imagery and melancholic tones, capturing the physical expressions of hunger and grief. The topic describes the awful sociopolitical environment in 1980s Pakistan during the oppressive government of General Zia-ul-Haq, marked by extreme Islamic laws and upheaval. General Zia-ul-Haq's reign was manifest by strict Islamic laws, political oppression, and human rights abuses, as seen in painting *Hunger*. The rigid Islamization policies of Zia-ul-Haq, which repressed cultural manifestations & personal liberties, themes vividly portrayed in Ahmed's *Hunger*.

The artwork captures the shared pain of people yearning for liberty and justice. The interpretant occurs when audience members grapple with the overwhelming emotional response conveyed through the piece and think about the impact of rigid rule and social abandonment (San, 2012). According to Khan (2019) Zia used Islamic ideology tactically as a political weapon, enforcing strict Islamic laws that infringed on civil liberties and resulted in widespread violations of human rights. There was also increased censorship, with expressions of culture and art being looked at with suspicion. In General Zia-ul-Haq rule, artistic freedom in Pakistan experienced growing censorship and ideological limitations, reflecting broader suppression of civil rights representing the broader issue of poverty, deprivation, and inequality. This climate substantially impacted the cultural terrain, especially for visual artists, works deviated from state's puritanical narrative. According to the Guardian (2023), the art exhibition emphasizes the rebellion of artists and intellectuals at this time had to integrate critique into their artistic practices as explicit political commentary was no longer accepted.

This atmosphere of the repressed expression is echoed in the symbolic language of Anna Molka Ahmed's *Hunger* (1984), wherein the isolated skeletal form and turbulent background may be read as a quiet act of resistance to the socio-political repression of the time. Her heavy impasto and expressive distortion speak not only of material pain but also of a spiritual and societal hunger, echoing the stifled voices of the period. Early years of a nation are always hard in every field. Not all things get established in the beginning. It takes centuries for countries to get progressed and developed. After the partition of the subcontinent. In 1947 Pakistan came into being. In Pakistan's scenario, the early decades were full of the struggle for the government, nation and economy. The paintings 'hunger' and 'beggars' narrate the beginning time of Pakistan development and progress era. In this linking, the viewer, upon observing these icons, understands the painting as commentary on the devastating effects of poverty and hunger. In this regard, together, these works transcend mere aesthetic representations, as semiotic tools that convey & comment on sociopolitical conditions of their time.

Ahmed's paintings enable the viewer to participate in a wider discourse on social issues through the triadic relationship of representation, object, and interpretant, highlighting the strong role of visual art in shaping and representing public consciousness. Anna Molka was a real visionary artist who was not a Pakistani but she delves herself so deeply into the roots of Pakistan, its people and played a vital role and she is one of those people who struggled hard with a newly born country. The success of modern art in Pakistan is due to the pioneering efforts of leading teachers like Anna

Molka Ahmad, Shakir Ali, Khalid Iqbal, & Colin David. These artists weathered period of Partition and built up a resilient pedagogic legacy that guided successive generations of artists. (Arshad, 2016). The physical signs of disheveled clothing, dirt, and stretched hands are indicative of poverty. The act of begging itself is a symbol of social neglect and economic disparity. Anna Molka Ahmed's role in growth of fine arts in Pakistan was so important that most artists used German Expressionist style, inspired by Edvard Munch and Vincent van Gogh, with the palette knife instead of a brush. (Arshad, 2016).

CONCLUSION

This research points out the way Anna Molka Ahmed's paintings, *Beggars* and *Hunger*, employ visual semiotic forms to tell the socio-political struggles experienced in Pakistan's past within the Ayub Khan's and Zia ul Haq's regime. Using Peirce's triadic model, her paintings are shown not only as works of art but also as multi-layered texts of cultural resistance. The results show the strength of art as communication tool that goes beyond mere representation, inviting people to think critically about societal injustices. Ahmed's artwork survives as a crucial visual record of resilience, struggle, and collective memory. The research adopts appropriate ethical research guidelines and it employs publicly accessible artwork and is strict with citation ethics. Cultural sensitivity is practiced in interpreting religious and historical transformations. Thus, no human subjects were involved, with complete ethical fulfillment. Interpretations are respectful and do not distort the cultural meanings present in artworks.

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