

## The Reflections of Sufism on Iranian and Malaysian Modern Art

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### Abstract

This paper explores the impact of Sufism on Iranian and Malaysian modern art. Sufism is the inner dimension of Islam and it can be used as a great source of inspiration for modern and contemporary artists. Some Iranian and Malaysian artists, such as Faramraz Pilaram, Monir Farmanfarmaian, Syed Ahmad Jamal and Sulaiman Esa are inspired by Sufism. Indeed, these artists and their inner world reflect a profound understanding of Sufism. In this research, the researcher used a qualitative method based on content analysis to get detail information regarding the topic enquired. The specific question which was investigated is: how Sufism as mystical tradition is related to Iranian and Malaysian modern and contemporary art? This article attempted to provide a better understanding of four selected artworks by these celebrated artists through different manifestations of Sufism. For Faramraz Pilaram and Syed Ahmad Jamal, the quality of sacredness in calligraphy plays a vital role. Moreover, the sacred geometry and its principals as the hidden architecture of the whole universe reveal through Monir Farmanfarmaian and Sulaiman Esa's artworks. It can be concluded that Sufism can be regarded as an international language that is not limited to a specific country or place.

**Keywords:** Sufism, Sacred Geometry, Unity, Malaysian Modern Art, Iranian Modern Art.

### Introduction

We need Sufism as an area for study in today's art world. Because, for instance, the study of Sufism in Iranian and Malaysian modern art can shape a deeper understanding of two cultures. Also, one of the main reasons that we need to explore the reflections of Sufism on Iranian and Malaysian modern art is to find the underlying connection between two cultures. In other words, we need to examine different layers of Sufism to find a common language between Iranian and Malaysian artists. This hidden shared language serves as a bridge between both cultures.

This study is significant because of the lack of published documents in a single study on a comparative study between Iranian and Malaysian artists. In addition, the academic study of Sufism in an interdisciplinary way is so significant, because it is inherently multifaceted and helps us to explore it from different perspectives. This study will be helpful to researchers,

artists and the public who want to know about Iranian and Malaysian modern visual arts and also it provides a better understanding of Sufism via modern art.

For more than thousand years Sufism has played an important role in Islamic faith and cultures. Generally speaking, Sufism had a huge impact on Islamic classical art and literature. But the main question is that how Sufism, as a spiritual meditative tradition in the Islamic world, is related to modern and contemporary art in particular Iranian and Malaysian art? To find the underlying connection between Iranian and Malaysian modern art with Sufism, we need to know about its aesthetical language. The richness of creative imagination in Islamic mysticism, or Sufism, gives a lot of unique ideas to Iranian and Malaysian modern and contemporary artists. This capability of creating new concepts can be seen in a wide range of arts. For instance, painting, calligraphy, calligraphy painting, sculpture, architecture, and even cinema can be traced back to Islamic mysticism.

Sufism is one of the most significant sources of inspiration for some Iranian and Malaysian visual artists such as Syed Ahmad Jamal, Sulaiman Esa, Monir Farmanfarmaian, and Faramarz Pilaram. To create a modern and contemporary piece of art, based on contemplation in the Islamic tradition, an artist needs a huge experience in the realm of art and these four masters succeeded to create a bridge between modern and contemporary art with Sufism.

When we talk about Malaysian modern art the first name that comes to our mind is Syed Ahmad Jamal. He is among *the* most influential figures in Malaysian art history. Also, he is the key artist in Malaysian Abstract Expressionism. Indeed, he is the father of Malaysian abstract art. When he was a member of the Wednesday Art Group, he had a different style than other artists. His works, in that period, were more expressionistic. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Syed Ahmad Jamal's artworks had influenced by Abstract Expressionism. As a result, his painting became more expressive and more abstract. As Mahamood (2007), points out, in most of his paintings he used bigger and harder brushes and his technique was thicker than watercolor. The Padi Field, Night, Angin Dingin (Cold Wind) and Umpan (Bait) which are painted in the late 1950s would be the best examples of this period. He used a modern language and technique in his works, but the content of his paintings had its roots in Malaysian culture and heritage which had a strong connection with Islamic thought, philosophy, and Sufism.

Sulaiman Esa is one of the most important artists who has a significant role in the development of Malaysian contemporary art. He has experienced different methods and styles throughout his career. For example, in the 1970s, he had collaboration with Redza Piyadasa in a conceptual artwork called *A Mystical Reality*. According to Ali (2008), "In it, they stress that to conceptualize reality, the artist must perceive it in its mystical light a term denoting the dimensionality of absences that defines the essence of an object, or a situation as a given time and place". In addition, he had challenged the Malaysian modern art scene with his controversial artwork called *Waiting for Godot I*. It was in the 1980s that Sulaiman Esa opened a new horizon in his artistic life. Indeed, he started to discover Malaysian traditional art and culture and its connection to the Islamic aesthetics and mysticism. It was in this period that the concept of unity flourished in his artworks. In general, unity in diversity and diversity in unity play an important role in Islamic thought and art. As Nasr stated (2014), "Islam is based upon unity (tawhid) and is the means toward the integration of human life,

and in fact of all multiplicity, into unity. Every authentic manifestation of the Islamic spirit reflects the doctrine of tawhid. This doctrine is the principle of all the Islamic arts and sciences.”

Monir Farmanfarman is one of the most distinguished artists in the Iranian contemporary art scene. She is mostly famous for her complex mirror mosaic, sculpture and reversed painted glass. She was amazed and mesmerized when she first visited the Shah Cheraq Shrine in Shiraz. She explained her experience of Cheraq (2013), “Imagine stepping inside the center of a diamond and staring at the sun”. She was inspired by Iranian mirror mosaic or aynehkari, Sufism, especially Sufi cosmology, and Sufi geometric principals which are the study of the origin and structure of the universe. The Sufi metaphors and Sufi geometric principals are the keys to understanding Monir Farmanfarman’s artworks.

Faramarz Pilaram is another key figure in Iranian modern art. He graduated from Tehran faculty of fine arts and continued his study in Europe in the 1960s. He was one of the pioneering artists of calligraphy painting in Iran. Also, he played a significant role in the Saqqakhaneh art movement in the 1960s. His main idea and goal were to create a new style of writing and calligraphy especially a new interpretation on Nasta’liq style of script. According to Porter (2012), “He later examined various styles in which calligraphy especially calligraphic forms inspired by Nasta’liq played the main role”. He focused on Iranian mystical motif and heritage to create modern Iranian art. He was so influential on the modernization of the Persian calligraphy.

#### **Faramarz Pilaram and Syed Ahmad Jamal**

There is a continuation of the calligraphy painting movement in Faramarz Pilaram’s artworks. In some of his paintings, circular shape dominated the whole canvas. For instance, in a painting which is called the Circle of Light the main shape is a circle and inside the circle is full of minute calligraphy and writing. Indeed, the minute writing shaped like a circle and the distinction between writing and the circular form of the artwork is impossible. Here, the idea of unity in diversity and diversity in unity is obvious. As Shabistari (1999), mentioned, “All these forms of otherness are in reality, only illusion from you, what makes the point appear a circle is simply the speed with which it moves.” The idea of unity versus diversity and plurality is an essential characteristic and theme in Islamic philosophy and mysticism. In a nutshell, the Circle of Light by Faramarz Pilaram can be read as a manifestation of Absolute Being through the light and words.

Among the Malaysian modern and contemporary artists, Syed Ahmad Jamal is one of the first artists who mixed calligraphy with the modern painting technique like spontaneous brushstrokes. As stated by Mahamood (2007), “Syed Ahmad Jamal succeeded in relating the spontaneity of his brushstrokes to the characteristics of Islamic calligraphy.” For example, he used this new style in a calligraphy painting called Tulisan or writing in 1961. He succeeded to make a bridge between modern painting technique and Islamic calligraphy as a motif. In the Tulisan or writing the golden yellow color is dominating the whole space. Indeed, this golden yellow color is the source of everything, and other shapes and colors are influenced by this golden yellow color. According to Itten (1970), “golden yellow suggests the highest sublimation by the power of light, impalpably, radiant but weightless as a pure vibration.” The

calligraphy, in the center of the artwork, is painted in darker colors which prove that the source of the light is behind the words.

Generally speaking, there are some differences between Syed Ahmad Jamal's artwork and Faramaz Pilaram's calligraphy painting in particular for the formal elements. For example, Farmraz Pilaram's artwork is based on a circular form but Syed Ahmad Jamal's artwork has a different language. In addition, a close analysis of both artworks demonstrates that the calligraphy style in Syed Ahmad Jamal's calligraphy painting is based on Jawi style which is related to the Malay culture and language but Faramarz Pilaram used a Persian calligraphy style which is called Nasta'liq.

Despite some differences in formal elements between Syed Ahmad Jamal's artwork and Faramarz Pilaram's calligraphy painting, there is some significant common ground between both artists. For instance, both of them used the words as a spontaneous element with bold colors. Moreover, for both artists the first and the most priority is the quality of sacredness in writing and calligraphy. Indeed, they cannot violate the reverence of calligraphy and writing. In traditional approach in calligraphy and writing, letters are distinguished from each other and they are readable but it can clearly be seen in Syed Ahmad Jamal's artwork and Faramarz Pilaram's calligraphy painting, the writing is not readable and the meaning is hidden from the viewers. As mentioned by Khatibi (1996), "it is the absence of meaning which gives rise to the distinctive form of this calligraphy transforming it into the realm of the mystical." In this way, both artists created spiritual artworks with a fresh modern composition and abstracted scripts.

### **Sulaiman Esa and Monir Farmanfarmaian**

In a general sense, calligraphy, Eslimi, and geometry are the three main forms of Islamic aesthetics and art. Calligraphy and revelation, Eslimi and decoration are related together. But geometry is related to the basis of any form. In Sufi cosmology geometric shapes are so important and there is sacredness in geometric shapes. Indeed, sacred geometry, with its proportional system, can be seen as invisible architecture in our universe. As Nasr (1993), mentioned, "This order is, moreover, related to an incredible harmony which in the technically musical sense pervades the realms of nature from the stars to subatomic particles. The proportion of the parts of animals and plants, of crystal structures or of planetary movements, when studied geometrically from the point of view of traditional or Pythagorean mathematics, reveal the presence of a harmony pervading all orders of the universe. It is as if the whole cosmos were music congealed into the very substance of things, which not only have their existence according to the laws of harmony but also move and live according to the laws of the cosmic dance."

One of the main characteristics of Sulaiman Esa's works is unity which is based on the Islamic concept of tawhid. This distinguished quality can clearly be seen in some of his major series such as Nurani and the Garden of Mystery. His artworks were inspired by Sufism in the 1980s and one of his major works in this period called Nurani. The Nurani is based on octagon shape and he used different geometric shapes inside the octagon. In this way, he succeeded to create a rhythmical motion with a minimal geometric composition. The concept of tawhid, in Sulaiman Esa's works, expresses through a geometric language. Indeed, the concept of tawhid, unity and Islamic aesthetics manifest themselves through the geometric shapes and

the mathematical characteristics of his artworks. As Bennett stated (2010), “the octagonal base represents the beginning of a movement toward unity with the divine.”

This geometric language, which is based on sacred geometry, plays a crucial role in his works and the viewers should be familiar with the alphabet of this unique language to understand and perceive the hidden beauty in his works. Sulaiman Esa did a great work to visualize or give a visual form to the notion of unity. To put it briefly, the Sufi metaphors and Sufi geometric principals are the keys to understanding Sulaiman Esa and Monir Farmanfarmaian’s artworks. Monir Farmanfarmaian’s works also are inspired by Sufism in particular Sufi geometric principals. There is symbolical meaning in terms of form, pattern, and proportion in her artworks. Indeed, her artworks as human-made are a perfect reflection of all levels of creation from microcosmic (molecular) to the macrocosmic (galactic). Sacred geometry can be seen as an ideal system of beauty. In addition, we witness the same structure of geometric shapes in the microcosmic world to the macrocosmic world. For example, the structures of a hexagon shape, the snowflake and the Saturn planet (Saturn cloud pattern) are the same. This proportional system expresses a deeper order, as Ardalan and Bakhtiar (1973), mentioned, “The beauty observed in a snow crystal depends as much on its geometrical order as on its ability to reflect a higher and more profound order.” One of the best examples of Monir Farmanfarmaian’s artworks that reflect this profound order is Flight of the Dolphin. She used different materials to create this artwork but the most notable is the mirror. She conveys her core ideas through the mirror and geometric shapes.

The Mirror is one of the most significant and fundamental symbols in Sufism. The Mirror is a metaphor for the divine self-manifestation. The Mirror as a key symbol is expressed by some great Sufi mystics such as Ibn Arabi, Rumi, and Bayazid. As described by Ernst (1985), “The mirror held up to the divine reality denotes the purified conscience that reflects the form of the real self without obscurity or distortion.” The reflection is one of the main characteristics of the mirror and it depends on its surroundings and light. In Sufism, there is a connection between our hearts, the mirror, and its reflection. Our hearts should be polished to reflect the divine beauty and only the pure heart can reflect the face of Beloved. As Rice stated (2017), “The 'heart' is capable of knowing the divine essence itself and, therefore, the true inwardness of all things. When lit up by the light of faith, it becomes the mirror in which all divine knowledge is manifested.”

Another significant element in this artwork is geometry. Monir Farmanfarmaian’s Flight of the Dolphin like Sulaiman Esa’s Nurani has a focal point in the center of the work. A hexagon shape in the middle of the artworks plays a crucial role. This hexagon shape in the center can be read as a metaphor for the universal man. As Ardalan and Bakhtiar (1973) mentioned, “The six-sided hexagon is, therefore, a symbol of the universal man.” The perfect man or the universal man in the Sufi context refers to the saints and the prophets. But if we realize all our possibilities; man and woman have the potential to reflect the fullness of human nature and become the universal man. Indeed, we can reflect names and qualities of Absolute Being.

## **Conclusion**

At the beginning of this article, I raised an important question about modern and contemporary art and its connection to the mystical tradition of Islam. The findings that I have presented suggest that the different manifestations, of the inward dimension of Islam, reveal

in Iranian and Malaysian modern and contemporary visual arts. The manifestation of Sufism in Faramraz Pilaram's Circle of light and Syed Ahmad Jamal's Tulisan is more related to the quality of sacredness in writing and calligraphy. Truly, these calligraphy paintings, by Syed Ahmad Jamal and Faramraz Pilaram, are some of the most eye-catching manifestations of Sufism in Malaysian and Iranian modern painting. But in Monir Farmanfarmaian and Sulaiman Esa's artworks, Sufism reveals itself through the sacred geometry and its principals. Proportion and order are the main characteristics of Sulaiman Esa's Nurani and Monir Farmanfarmaian's Flight of the Dolphin. The sacred geometry as the hidden architecture of the universe is discovered by both artists and they represented it by a complex composition through the geometric shapes. Both artworks start with simplicity but both of them are finished with complexity. Moreover, these two artworks can be read as a reflection of the pattern of creation and unity in the human realm. In terms of formal elements, there are some differences between these four artists but regarding the content, they share the same value based on the inner dimension of Islam. This is really significant because of the universal perspective of Sufism.

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