



## Pictorial Poetry: A Tool for Self- Interrogation in Contemporary Literature

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### **Abstract:**

Any form of poetry is based on imagination and our introspection of what we see in reality. Poetry is a vision that reflects our visualization of reality. Poetry is an art of self-interrogation and it is indeed pictorial in its origin because without visualizing it, we cannot compose poetry. Every word which we choose to compose it

is symbolic of the picture which we have visualized in our minds. Herein, imagination acts like mute poetry which enables the poetess to shape it into words. Through this paper, I am willing to understand the power of pictorial poetry which can help us to self-interrogate and enhance our mind's quantum to integrate the inner world and outer world via using the lens of Zen psychoanalysis which emphasizes on integrating the self and the other. This associative narrative between the self and the other can help in resolving conflicts happening across the world. Thus, pictorial poetry becomes a visual lyric of transformation which helps in self-interrogation.

**Keywords:** Poetry, Pictorial Poetry, Zen Psychoanalysis, Contemporary Literature, Associative Narrative.

## 1. Introduction

Pictorial poetry can be defined as a 'treasure of wisdom' which can capture the mood hidden behind photographs. Photographs or pictures can help poets to get inspiration. Here, it is important to observe that every form of art requires a certain amount of visualization. Thus, they are associated with visual-spatial intelligence (Chatterjee, 2018). Visual-Spatial intelligence emphasizes a person's ability to remember, understand, and recall spatial relations between varied objects and forming vivid images to describe a certain situation with utmost lucidity.

Visual poetry is not just about describing vivid images in poetic verses. But, photographs can help poets to explain "feelings with no name" (Chatterjee, 2018). Visual poetry can help in expressing varied themes, subjects, or sentiments in varied shapes and forms. Pictorial poetry is 'a beautiful form of visual poetry wherein poetry and photography associate as a soul in the same body'. The language of a picture essentializes the theme of a verse or its contents (Sethi, 2018).

English critic Mike Weaver organized The First International Exhibition of concrete and Kinetic Poetry in Cambridge in 1964 and

identifies with three distinguished forms of concrete poetry: visual (or optic), phonetic (or sound), and kinetic (moving in a visual succession). Now, concrete poetry is being used to refer to a wide range of innovations and experiments in the language which is redefining the realm of poetry and art of expressing in varied poetic forms (Zank, 2018). Weaver stated that concrete poetry uses fewer words to convey a message through varied patterns, coloring, shapes, etc. The contemporary form of concrete poetry has multiple entry points that are visually dynamic in its origins (Basinski, 1996).

A text cannot explain itself without a picture as claimed by Freud and he treats dreams as the pictorial and experiential orientation of psychological being (Freud, 1901). A picture is real, substantive, mimetic, objective, earthbound while word describing the picture can be considered as divine, revelatory, and might need expert interpretation (Barkan, 2013). Thus, a text cannot be left out of the picture or at least not within the universe of representational, narrative, or iconological art. Pictorial poetry is a form of iconological art that will remain incomplete without pictures. Words are ‘the images of matter’ and without complementing each other, they would lose their specificity which forms the basis of pictorial poetry.

Images formed by our unconscious mind are getting synergized with our existence but the unconscious is the universe in itself which forms its identity by synergizing with our bodily experiences shaped by consciousness. Thus, biases, experience, knowledge, and context consciously or unconsciously form an associative narrative that helps us to make decisions and to express varied emotions. The quantum cognition theory emphasizes the observation effect which influences the way we think about the idea we are considering (Muller, 2015). Pictorial poetry affects the quantum field of our brains as it completely changes the reality as our mind does not act as a linear computer but it is a universe.

Understanding emotions is a complex process as it intertwines with our mind’s quantum which is centered around varied particles as stated in quantum physics. Emotions are generated while we

synergize with these free-flowing particles and waves. Emotions can be defined as wavelengths that our minds attract. This platonic synergy between our bodily experience and mind's quantum can be identified as a prominent feature of pictorial poetry. While John Locke (1689) stated that the mind is a blank slate when we are born and filled by experiences. Every form of creation is a piece of imitation as stated by Plato. Every image used in pictorial poetry acts as a semiotic. The meaning of each word is derived from its differences and these differences are formulated by our biases, experience, knowledge, and context as suggested by Saussure (1968). But, Derrida stated that there is no real meaning or truth as truth is partial and we can explore truth partially by falsifying existing theories as stated by Karl Popper (*Standard Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2018).

Unfortunately, recent literary criticisms focus on the post-modern doctrine which withers the essence of integration in literature. Literature itself is an integration of our senses and perceptions. Without understanding how we perceive the world; we cannot imagine or create our fantasies to compose any form of art. Visualization requires a certain form of conviction about universal integration which leads to the formation of this body. Historically, we have developed language in form of pictures to express day-to-day activities. Sensory perceptions helped us to draw our desires which form our unconscious and conscious existence. There is no other whom we picture. We are picturizing ourselves to integrate with energies who can fulfill our desires. Therefore, this paper would explore the concept of associative narrative which will synthesize subjectivity and objectivity. The concept would be derived from Zen psychoanalysis and Chinese philosophy wherein masculinity and femininity unite to form holistic energy. Even the concept of *Ardhnarishwar* in Hindu philosophy is emphasizing in the integration of masculinity and femininity.

This paper would focus on pictorial poetry which could be considered as a tool of self-interrogation. I believe the self is a combination of both Yin and Yang. Both the energies combine to

form the universe as human minds cannot exist without reason and emotions. Our lives revolve around mitigating the differences between them but they are not different from each other. They co-exist in the same universe to form the essence of being. Thus, this paper would emphasize integrating the spirit of literature which exists due to pre-psychological conditions. Psychology focuses not just on reason rather it focuses on emotions. Thus, it is important to synergize both the energies which are different but complementary. This union or associative narrative could help us to resolve conflicts emerging within us and outside us.

Until we look inside, we would not be able to understand or interpret what is happening outside. Often, our inner conflicts stop us to resolve conflicts that are happening outside. Literature can help us in self-exploration and pictorial poetry is one of the best-suited examples to ideate the concept of associative narrative because it is a blend of pictures and visual poetry which can help in raising self-consciousness as pictures could help poets to understand the situation from varied angles which would help them to integrate their experiences and form associative narrative while composing pictorial poems.

## **2. Review of Literature**

‘Sometimes, pictures though being silent, speak much more than the words, lines or poems do (Sethi, 2018)’. Pictorial poetry has helped us to waive off the language barriers to some extent as readers can judge the composition by understanding the nature of the picture and its features. Painting and writing can belong to the same person but in most cases, they are not equally developed. Writers like, D.H. Lawrence, have chosen painting as their hobby and painters like, Wyndham Lewis, have chosen writing as their hobby. William Blake was not just a poet but he was a pioneer painter and a professional engraver. Now, poets use pictures to exemplify their poems and create a long-lasting impression on the reader’s minds by using fewer words (Florescufrom, 2018). The history of Chinese poetry has seen different stages of development, from the use of

descriptive, metaphorical, and emotive expressions to the creation of pictorial image and figurative image. Chinese poets like, Shu Shih and Huang T'ing -Chien have composed poems on paintings during the mid-eleventh century. In modern pictorial poetry, “narrative illustration” has been loosely tied with a diverse array of works. The synergy of texts along with poetry can transact and transform literature (Florescufrom, 2018). Lawrence R. Sipe defined this synergy between texts and pictures as ‘trans meditation’. Here, we can see how texts and pictures share an associative narrative that has the potential to integrate the self and the other.

A picture carries details about the history of the place, characters, cultures, joys, and traumas (Swarn, 2018). Pictures help us to personalize our experiences. It creates memories which can form the associative narrative, helping the poets to create a powerful piece in a fewer word but creating an ever-lasting impact on reader’s minds. ‘As a painting so a poem’: Barkan (2013) stated that painting is mute poetry and poetry is a speaking painting. Therefore, the associative narrative between poetry and pictures is complementary. They complete each other.

Pictorial poetry is closely associated with the modern technique of imagism, pioneered by T.E. Hulme and Ezra Pound. Hulme defined imagism as an accurate and precise description of each word which has the potential to create an image just like a photograph. But, imagism merged into a wider conceptualization of symbolism. The use of pictorial images symbolizes various concepts that give poetry a picturesque frame and helps poets to reflect upon their hyper-realities or surreal imagination (Singh, 2018). The images drawn, colored, and framed by the poets need verbal colors and pictorial images. The associative narrative between images and texts creates a poetic structure and form (Singh, 2018).

Poetry can help us to integrate all the merged and submerged layers of our being and bring out realities hidden in our minds. We can shape our reality through our imagination. That is why pictorial poetry can help us to integrate ourselves with the other because pictures will help us to form varied perceptions and an overflow of

emotions in tranquillity would lead to choosing accurate words to describe the picture. Thus, it would help us to raise our consciousness and for composing a poem, it is often important to self-interrogate and self-explore to self-integrate.

William Blake is considered an influential pictorial poet and visual art during the Romantic Era. His poetry is read with allied artworks (Frosch, 1979). John Keats is also a pictorial poet as his poetry comprises of odes which are built on sensory exposure and he used words to shade his lyrical images (Sharma, 2017). Keats' interest in pictorial poetry developed when he studied poets like Spenser and found his poetic muse from paintings of Raphael, Titian, etc. Hunt was Keat's mentor and guided him to appreciate pictures. Keats was fond of visiting art galleries and giving shape to poems after getting inspired by the paintings in the art galleries. The pictures of Cupid and Psyche painted by painters like Romano and Raphael helped him to compose his masterpiece 'Ode to Psyche' wherein he described the mythological characters like Cupid and Psyche. In his poem "Ode to Grecian Urn", Keats presented pictures that were carved on the urn.

Imagery is foundational to poetry as stated by Jamwal (2018). Sylvia Plath in her poem, 'Daddy' uses vivid holocaust imagery to express her hatred towards her father and the system. Using images in poems comes from the poet's experiences as Bradley (1901) claimed that 'an actual poem is the succession of experiences-sounds, images, thoughts, emotions while reading poetically'. Bradley also emphasizes the ulterior value of poetry which can raise the consciousness of the poet. There is no perfect form of a poem and all form is expression. Poetic style is a part of aesthetics and poetic styles determine the poet's moods and how thoughts are getting formulated in the poet's mind (Bradley, 1901). Pure poetry is not the decoration of a preconceived and clearly defined matter but it is the spontaneity in emotions that leads to development while composing poetry and upon completion, the poet would exactly know what they wanted to express. The poetic composition is similar to the self-definition of the meaning (Bradley, 1901).

Feminist poet Amelia Alderson Opie uses physical landscapes to bridge the gap between a real experience and an imagined response to the ‘aesthetics of shared suffering’ in her poetry (Wake, 2001). Her poems depicted metaphorical and formal dilemmas of women who are conscious of their femininity and their right to be political. Thus, we can see how poetry is significantly embracing the other and integrating with self.

Nowadays, poetry has lost their decorative value as they are situated and informed by burning issues and revolutionary content. Even the content of pictorial poetry is changing along with the images used with the poetry. These creative pieces are powerful enough to help a poet to self-interrogate his/her actions and proceed further to self-reflexive integration which forms the basis of the poet’s identity and his/her worldview (Rodriguez, pp.399, 2002). It is quite relevant to state that ‘the product of the social activity, culture including, oral and written literature is dependent on poetry and poetry cannot be separated from history’ (Laraque, 2002). Poet is considered as the organizer of dreams both individual and collective dreams (Laraque, 2002). They act as a bridge to form an associative narrative between the self and the other. Poetry provides insights about what will happen and depicts what is hidden behind appearances. Poetry is interior and exterior at the same time and thus, it recreates the world (Laraque, 2002). Laraque believes that poetry is the conscious of the world through sensation, emotions, and feelings but it has its psychic reason to emerge from within yet merging with the outside world. Poetry is dialectical but it aims at resolving all contradictions. Thus, we can consider poetry as a tool for self-interrogation which can help us to take actions while integrating our self with others and by reconsidering others as a part of the self. Pictorial poetry tries to condense the differences between reality and individuality. Pictures act as sources and our imagination foresees the consequences in the form of verses.

The concept of integrating and merging others with the self seems utopic because of our biased bodily existence. Therefore, trans meditation could help us to understand that we are part of the same

system and energy networking. In this paper, I would like to use some aspects of Zen Philosophy and Chinese philosophy to understand how pictorial poetry can generate self-awareness and become an effective tool for self-interrogation while using associative narrative as a core method which would help me to synthesize subjectivity and objectivity. Bradley has commented that poetry has no subject but its content defines its subject but I would like to state that the poet's consciousness about his surroundings and how others are participating in particular areas form surreal images that he/she often dreams about. Here, the conflict between self and others gets resolved as the subject is no more a subject but it becomes a part of the poet's imagination. It merges with the poet's self. Thus, it is important to understand the link between self and the integration of energies with self.

Turok (2012) commented that our feelings, our existence, and our experiences shape our ideas. We can't think about anything if we have not felt it antecedently, by our internal or external senses (pp.23). Turok discusses Leonardo's careful use of geometry and scientific employment of perspective and shadow, as well as his deep appreciation of anatomy, which led him to capture the real world but used imaginary landscapes in the background of the *Mona Lisa* or historical scenes in *The Last Supper*. Imagination cannot surpass realistic experiences. Thus, we can state that pictorial poetry can help us form an associative narrative between imagination and reality. While I am focusing on pictorial poetry, it would be significant to understand that the images which we have in our minds might lack details but yet they are representing our realities. In pictorial poetry, photographs are objective and poetry is subjective because photographs have elements of rationality, and poetry comprises emotions and sensitivities. Rationality and reason are considered masculine traits and being emotional and sensitive are considered feminine traits. The human psyche comprises both reason and emotions. The principle of Yin and Yang states that things coexist as they are inseparable and complement each other. For instance, female-male. This is a fundamental Chinese

philosophy which represents that Yin will have elements of Yang and vice-versa. There is no superiority complex between them and they should be balanced to achieve harmony (Cartwright, 2018). The universe is based on the interactionist model which gets balanced only if Yin and Yang are together to support the natural and universal laws. Pictorial poetry has elements of both Yin and Yang.

Feminists would argue that Yin is still described as passive which seems contradictory as Yin provides the spirit to all things. Without spirit, energies cannot be channelized by Yang to form a body which experiences through senses. Our life is based on consciousness. Only if we are enough mindful about being in present, we can understand how our mind functions because the mind is not a computer but it is a quantum field (Muller, 2015). The quantum-cognition theory emphasizes studying the mind as an elegant universe. Thus, we can observe that the universe believes in integration and our minds seek harmony. This harmony is not possible until and unless we synthesize the self by merging with the other (Fromm, 1970). Full awakening to reality is associated with attaining productive orientation wherein ‘there are no veils which separate me from the not me’ (Fromm, 1970).

To interpret pictorial poetry as a tool of self-interrogation is a promising endeavor to re-define self which is comprising of others too. The concept of associative narrative is a product of the interaction between Yin and Yang and integration between self and the other. This paper would focus to elaborate on how pictorial poetry creates an associative narrative between the mind and body while critiquing the process of othering as othering is delusory because it leads to the subjugation of women as women have always been considered as ‘other’. Thus, this paper will re-define the self by using integrated approaches and philosophies including, Zen Psychoanalysis, the concept of Yin and Yang, and elements of radical feminism via analyzing poems written by Keki. N. Daruwalla and Kelli Jae Baeli.

### 3. Analysis and Discussions

Poetry is based on atonement where there are alternative images of art-truer than fact yet integrally woven into life. The relationship between art and life is not binary. In poetry, nature meets culture as yin complements yang and as the 'self' integrates with the 'other'. Because often poets do not realize the origin of their emotions but as Muller has claimed that our mind is a quantum field and it is interacting with various energies for harmony as claimed by Fromm (1970).

Keki N. Daruwalla's pictorial poem '*In Night Country*' tries to create an image of a female farmer who is working tirelessly in farms without any break wherein he says:

*'She has almost become invisible  
The plough can't reach her under the furrow  
Though dealers in the occult have seen her image  
Splash for a moment in deep wells'*

While looking at the structure of the poem, we can see a woman sitting with her hands over her knees, hopeless and unrecognized. He defines the plight of a female farmer whose work is often not taken into consideration but his last lines try to integrate the reader's mind with her struggles and experiences, he says:

*'there is a small hooded flame  
That belongs to her, she, grain-giver  
Barley goddess, goddess of word and melody'*

While this poem is centered around a woman's life but we can see how a male poet is transcending his self by picking a female subject. Daruwalla tries to integrate himself with the female farmer and reveals her struggles as poignantly as possible. Therefore, there is a self-interrogation happening in both poet's and reader's minds which can help us to address the invisibility of women in agriculture. Eventually, we can see that Yin is complementing Yang.

While the female farmer becomes the subject, she is adding spirit to the poem while Daruwalla, a male poet is trying to give it a form. Thus, we can observe that pictorial poetry acts as a tool of self-interrogation and helps us to form an associative narrative between our body and mind.

Daruwalla in his poem ‘*Still Life*’ describes the life of a female farmer who is living in a village inside a mud hut. He says:

*‘Mud hut-woman at the door  
Shading her eyes against the morning sun.  
Distance flowering yellow with mustard  
Rice straw drying  
The blue jay brilliant on the mangrosa tree.’*

This poem depicts a female farmer who is willing to take rest after working for long hours in the fields wherein mustard plants are decorating the fields. It is the month of September because Mustard seeds grow during Rabi season and even the rice is harvested during this time. Rice is only dried after harvesting. We can observe that poet has drawn images from reality, experience, and knowledge. Thus, we can conclude that we can re-define self by exposing it to different context and realities of other people and then, we can self-interrogate to have compassion for people which could lead to harmony because there is a balanced interaction between Yin and Yang and here, the self is not disintegrating other but the self is embracing the other which can help in addressing the conflictual relationship between the interior and exterior world as suggested by Fromm and Turok.

Kelli Jae Baeli, a female Chinese poet explores her sexuality by narrating her experience of being a ‘closet lesbian’. She says:

*‘I call you honey in public  
Much to eavesdropper’s chagrin  
To horrify some passer-by*

*We'll never see again.  
Should a John or Jane Q. Public  
Raise eyebrows at this sin  
I'll simply tell them slips occur  
When you're a closet lesbian.'*

It is interesting to observe the dilemma which she faces because there is a description of an unknown event in the poem but yet, it sounds like it is already known to her. This poem clearly describes that she is struggling to come out as a lesbian but poetry helped her to self-interrogate her sense of being a lesbian. Here, the scope of integrity is only possible if people are self-conscious and are aware of homosexuality. Here, the consciousness of the other would help the self to resurrect her identity. Images used in poetry are certainly reflecting that homophobia is acting as a major disjuncture between the self and the other but to address it, we need to raise consciousness among people and poetry can act as a tool that could transform the reader's minds.

Through the aforementioned analysis of poems, we can see how images can become significant as Singh (2018) has mentioned that imagism and symbolism are the core thrust of pictorial poetry and as Barkan (2013) has lucidly highlighted that texts are images of matter and content of poetry is not just based on imagination but it is ideated from our experiences (Turok, 2012). Poetry is a form of self-expression and pictorial poetry is a tool for self-interrogation as we have seen in the poems of Daruwalla and Baeli wherein both the poets have used images which are reflecting realities and experiences and it is dialectical which can help us to resolve conflicts (Laraque, 2002).

#### **4. Conclusion**

Pictorial poetry is an art of embracing our weaknesses and using them as our strengths to create a milestone. It seems like a life lesson which prepares an artist to embrace his/her individuality with

integrity and as Bradley has mentioned that poetry is powerful enough to raise the self-consciousness of the poet and it could also help us to understand that empathy is a tool which could generate harmony otherwise the process of othering would lead to discrimination. It is important to understand that Yin and yang are complementary to each other whereas I disagree with the concept when yin is posited as passive because it is important for both the energies to synergize so that there is a balance. Pictorial poetry is the best-suited example of integrating the self and other because when Daruwalla composes a poem on a female farmer, he can feel the pain and visualize her struggles and it could only be possible if the poet is interrogating himself to empathize with her. Likewise, when Baeli self-interrogates herself, she finds out that she is a lesbian. Therefore, we can observe that poetry helps to re-define ourselves by merging others with the self via our experiences and knowledge because our mind is a quantum field. We can change our reality by perceiving things differently.

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