

## Art and the Writing of Sacred Words

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### Abstract

This article is intended to define the artistic caliber of three calligraphists in Pakistan, Arif Khan, Tahir Mughal (Bin Qullander) and Shiblee Muneer. Their devotion to the sacred words of Holy Quran and their ability to combine the two genres; the art of painting and the art of writing (calligraphy), very lucratively and that make them exceptional. They believe the shape of letters and words from the Holy Quran are divinely intended and ordained and its elaboration in the form of calligraphic expressions endowed by the artistic language would be adequate to bring a believer into contact with the divine power. The rhythm of the calligraphy, symbolic use of forms and vibrant colors, the flow of the writing script moving from right to left side, reflect the great aesthetic sense of these calligraphists which is similar to the beauty that is known to the western world as modern abstract art.

**Keywords:** Art of Calligraphy, Contemporary Art, Sacred

### Introduction

Writing is considered a way of communication which developed centuries ago besides the evolution of languages, and the art of lettering turned into a



fine example of art making in contemporary age. The art of beautification of letters is called calligraphy and contemporary calligraphists are coming up with more painterly approach in this domain to achieve spiritual appeal. During Muslim periods of history calligraphic art developed as a substitute of iconography of the other religious art to elaborate the holy architecture and got a high spiritual or religious esteem.

Calligraphy is an exclusive privilege of Muslim Art. Initially its purpose was to enlighten people, in particular the Muslims, about the divine revelation as it appears in the verses of the Holy Quran. The art of calligraphy, or beautiful writing, has been cultivated by the Muslims from the earliest times, and was held in higher esteem than painting. Their devotion and respect for the divine revelation of Quran compelled them to develop a perfect art of writing the sacred words.

There are two principal styles of Arabic writing: “a formal style with angular letters and a cursive style with rounded letters. The first type is known as *Kufic*, from the town of Kufa in Mesopotamia, where it was probably first put to official use; the second type is known as *Naskhi*. Both types of scripts were known in the seventh century, the beginning of the Mohammedan Era.”<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, a combination of highly decorative ornamentation coupled with beautifully fine writing styles were developed by Persian and Turkish calligraphists during successive Muslim dynasties (from the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. to the 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D.).

The Arabic language has its alphabetical order. Sentences are written from right to left. In a way, this art of writing stands diametrically opposed to the western style of writing, where the narration is made from left to right. In the Islamic world, this style of writing is sacred to the writer, as he writes by bringing the thoughts, embedded into the sacred verses of the Holy Quran,

from the outside towards his heart which is on the left side. Therefore, whatever he narrates in calligraphy touches the heart of the calligraphist and the reader.

### Calligraphy in Pakistan

The art of calligraphy has been practiced since the advent of Muslim rule in the Indian subcontinent. A majority of the Muslims were living in the area which now comprises Pakistan. Evidently, it was with a sense of pride that the Muslims inscribed the verses of the Holy Quran in various different styles. In Pakistan, a large number of artists haven't ignored this sacred art, and they have tended to concentrate their activities towards this aspect. However, a few of the recent calligraphists, instead of endowing their work with spirituality, have emphasized a more artistic and aesthetic articulation.

Among such artists, Shakir Ali's (1916-1975) name stands out as one of the main protagonists. He used calligraphy as a pictorial art for aesthetic purposes in painting, rather than to explore the didactic reason behind the inscribed verses. His adventurous effort encouraged other artists to convey the effectiveness of the verses from a painterly point of view (Figure 1).

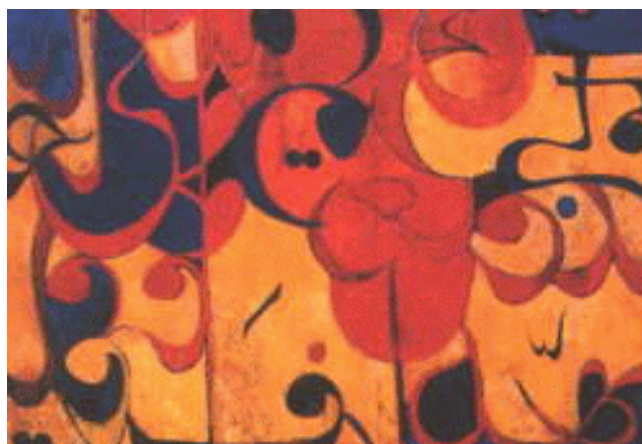


Figure 1: Shakir Ali, *Calligraphy*, 1968, oil on canvas, photograph from collection of Shakir Ali Museum New Garden Town Lahore

These days, inscriptions in paintings have become fashionable. The modern manifestation of calligraphy is more expressionistic than narrative. The presentation of words or alphabets takes on the shape of more personal interpretations. Most modern calligraphists use words to create pictorial design instead of as a means of presenting a particular message or thought. Similarly, such an approach has emerged in the heavenly designs of Pakistani calligraphists.

Among all these there are a few recent young artists who need to be put in focus. Two of them, Arif Khan and Tahir Mughal, have emerged as prominent proponents in the art scene of Pakistan, with their painterly innovations and experimentations in the field of calligraphy.

### **Arif Khan's Transformation of Calligraphy from Traditional to Modern**

Arif Khan is one of the famous calligraphists of Pakistan who amalgamated the modern trends of painting with the traditional art of calligraphy. And this exercise was not a new tributary in the history of art in Pakistan, since many artists like Shakir Ali and Sadeqain had attained great renown in matters having to do with the presentation of their calligraphic expressions by means of painterly devices. This in itself is an innovation in pictorial art. The combination of Quranic verses with a modern manner akin to the styles of cubism, suprematism and the expressionism of action paintings has brought forth a touch of mysticism in Arif Khan's calligraphy. Writing as an art form has taken a modern way of expression. In its earliest times it was written for conveying a message latent in it.

Arif Khan spoke about the impulse behind his expressions by saying that "I love to write the name of Allah Almighty. To me, the objective of my work is

to Portray God, not as a tyrant waiting to condemn us but as Merciful, Beautiful and Forgiving”<sup>2</sup>. In the light of this statement, the element of mysticism is obvious.

He uses a classical style of script writing which included *Kufic*, *Nastaliq* and *Thuluth* in his mystic works. His art reflects maturity in the handling of colors, which he applies in such a way that the ensemble brings his work closer to the modern Color Field painters. The colored areas and patches are used as a tool to reflect an inner necessity. This consists in expressing himself, which is further heightened by adding some recognizable shapes. He is surely an abstract painter of great intelligence as he maneuvers different flat and textured areas which are of multiple varieties. His calligraphic paintings ultimately evoke a sensation in the viewer involving him in the piece of art. This virtue has brought him great acclaim and today he occupies a prominent place among the leading artists of Pakistan.

His romance with Quranic calligraphy developed as a quest for more expressionistic presentations. He plays with his compositions as if he is working with a design rather than a didactic ensemble. The art of calligraphy has been transformed into a source of great inspiration. It has taken on the role of a painting in which there is ample room for experimentation and innovation especially for upcoming artists.

In his calligraphic art he has used his basic prerogative in order to employ iridescent colors which reflect the rainbow palette of the impressionists. He has also delved into the concept of Baroque art, by suddenly exposing some areas of his paper in the light while the remaining areas are shaded. This way it seems as if he infuses the painting with a breath-like quality because of the receding and exceeding areas.

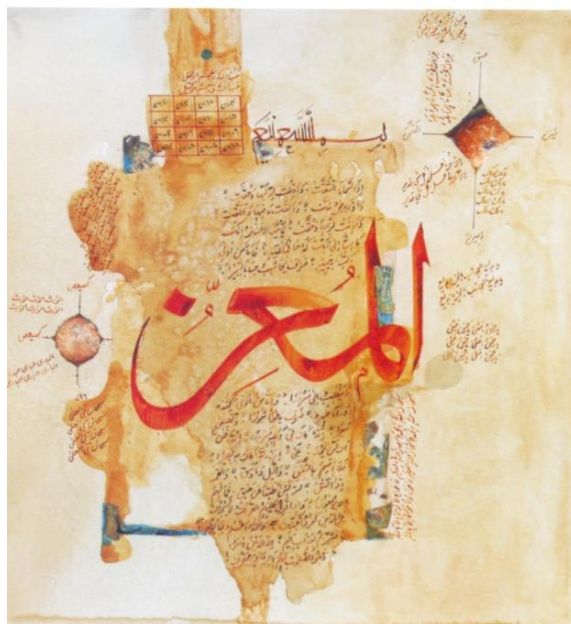


Figure 2: Arif Khan, *Calligraphy*, 2005, water color and inks on paper, photograph from Artist's own Collection

In a few of Arif Khan's calligraphic pictures his approach is very straightforward and didactic in purpose. This can be seen in one of his earlier works (Figure 2). He has used the name of the Almighty in *Nastaliq* script. The image of God's name is inscribed against brown washes of tea color, whereas a considerable margin is painted in a very dim wash of almost the same hue. On this margin there are circular, square and oblong shapes. A diamond shape at the upper right corner projects four lines from each corner and at the end of each the words from *Loh-e-Qurani* are written.

The upper left side also contains an oblong shape divided into sixteen boxes containing Arabic numbers. These are probably suggestive of the numerical form of various verses of the Holy Quran. The same situation recurs with the circular form towards the mid-region of the left side. In a haphazard manner he has written a number of holy verses in a somewhat scattered state. All these

verses and the name of Allah Almighty do not synthesize with each other. At many places the eyes of the spectator are left in a lurch to find a center of interest in this composition. Therefore, a cohesiveness and unity in the design has been lost in the process and this picture serves a didactic goal rather than an aesthetic function.

This motif continues in many of the other early calligraphic pictures which are not paintings, because at this particular stage, Arif Khan's calligraphies can be pigeon-holed into a traditional frame of reference (Figure 2). As time proceeded, he made further studies and amalgamated the element of picture making in his calligraphy. This sensibility appeared gradually in his later calligraphic expressions (Figure 3 and 4). In all these paintings he has applied large washes of different colors and in these colored areas he has inscribed the verses of the Holy Quran as well as the names of Almighty God.

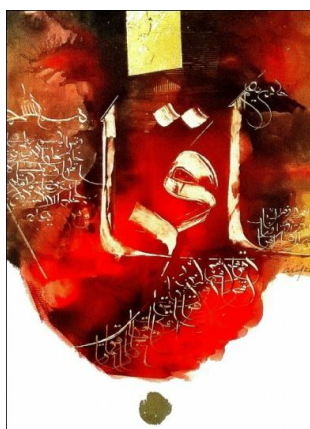


Figure 3: Arif Khan,  
*Calligraphy*,2009, mix media,  
photograph from Artist's own  
Collection



Figure 4: Arif Khan,  
*Calligraphy*,2009, mix media,  
photograph from Artist's own  
Collection

This approach reflects a kind of a resemblance to a number of western artists who have utilized large areas of color, such as Rothko and Robert Motherwell as well as Franz Kline and Clyfford Still. However, he has not tried to become a violent expressionist as is the case with abstract expressionism. He has utilized resonance, juxtaposition of colors and a palette of aesthetic tools. In this way the various colored areas seek a kind of union with one another. With this cerebral device he has created a cohesive painting irrespective of the fact that there is a wide area in white, which in fact plays its part as a hue to help in the building of a picture.

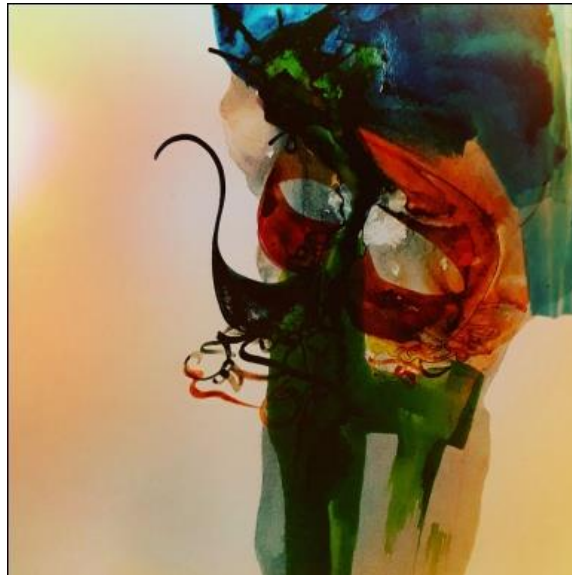


Figure 5: Arif Khan, *Calligraphy*, 2020, mix media, photograph from Artist's own Collection

Thus the colored surfaces inscribed with holy verses and the white blank spaces function in perfect union and aesthetically create an interesting visual (Figure 5). This playful game has also created a sort of a rhythm in the design. The tempo of the colors ultimately creates an effect of musical quality

and the viewers not only get charmed by the calligraphy and colors, but also feel the ups and downs in the musical rhythm.

### Tahir Mughal's Mysticism and Expression in Calligraphy

Tahir Mughal is also among one of the maestro of this genre, who prefers to be called Bin Qullander (which means a wandering ascetic or a Sufi dervish). This young man has accomplished massive achievements of convincing credibility in the field of calligraphy. His work reflects self-assurance in the power of his pen (Reed *Kalam*) and an unmatched style of performance gained by persistent endeavor and careful cultivation. He is a graphic designer, but very early in his life he decided to follow the profession of his father, who was a blacksmith. He had to do this in order to financially support his family. His father, besides handling the ancestral profession recited *Naat* (a song in praise of the Holy Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) which is endowed with religious auspiciousness). It enthralled Bin Qullander to no end. His father's surname was also Qullander and it looks like the covert mystic message behind this title deeply moved this young man. As a result, he has pursued the shrouded mysteries of *Naats* and the obvious outlet for this was found by the inscription of the script of the Holy Quran.

A painting (Fig. 211) entitled  $\text{هـ م}$  (*Haa - Meem*) shows the artist's aptitude to merge *Thuluth* with *Shikeste* script along with modern cubic designs and lively colors. In this oblong calligraphic image, the basic word of *Haa Meem* occupies a central position although it tilts towards the left. And yet it remains within the ambit of the focal point because the other images, in calligraphic form just opposite to *Haa Meem* in a light bluish color, balance the main pictorial theme in white (Figure 6).

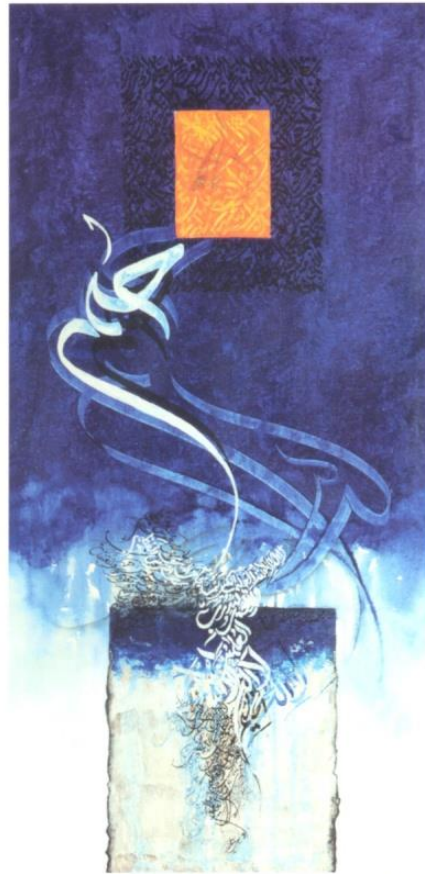


Figure 6: Tahir Mughal (Bin Qullander), *Calligraphy*, 2008, mix media, photograph from Artist's own Collection

Primarily the painting is rendered in indigo, whereas the light blue mauve and daub of light vermilion red also play a significant role in the work of calligraphy. Above all, this painting suggests that it is a picture in pure calligraphy. Whereas, when we look at the total ensemble of this calligraphy, it gives an impression of being a painting. A small oblong shape has been

superimposed on a large shape indicating a borrowed composition from the modern art painters Kazimir Malevic or Newman from western world.

The basic intention of the artist was to mainly write calligraphy in a fluent fashion. However, to give it more impetus he has created the composition while under the spell of aforementioned western modern artists. The calligraphy has been rendered in a somewhat traditional manner. All the same, Bin Qullander has taken the liberty to explore the properties of the alphabet and elongated these as the human figure is elongated in the art of El Greco, a Spanish painter (late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> century A.D). To make it more interesting he superimposes one word onto another word and in this way engenders a dynamic effect and also creates an impression of a relief. Ultimately, this calligraphic art enters the category of a full-fledged painting.

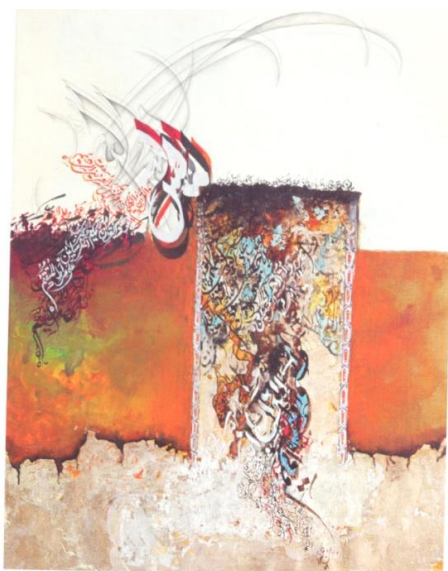


Figure 7: Tahir Mughal (Bin Qullander), يس (Yaaseen), 2009, mix media, photograph from Artist's own Collection



Figure 8: Tahir Mughal (Bin Qullander), قل (Qul), 2009, mix media, photograph from Artist's own Collection

Similarly in the paintings *یس* (*Yaaseen*) (Figure 7) and *قل* (*Qul*) (Figure 8) the artist has painted holy verses from Quran in a fluent style. He has also applied colors in flowing strokes which drip at the base. This way, a unity between calligraphy and the application of colors has been achieved. Whereas the shadows, like the reflection behind the script, produce a three dimensional effect and rise against the unknown infinite, the calligraphy has been written in quite a mature style.

In Figure 7 the artist has composed a bordered rectangle against an orange surface. This has been fused with a bare background from the upper left side by the judicious help of calligraphic inscriptions and diagonal lines. Similarly, in Figure 8, once again he has superimposed two oblong shapes on each other and merged out the right side corners of the square shapes with a white background. However, it does not synthesize well with the remaining design of the picture. Thus, he has given an effect of two episodes taking place at the same time. This is something he needs to work at and to develop further so that it could come out as a comprehensible and cohesive design.

In another calligraphic impression *Al- Qayyum* (Figure 9) an effort has been made to inspire a painterly effect. The total pictorial design represent a phenomenon of uniting two end; in symbolic manners this composition suggest a role of Qullander, a Sufi saint between common men and the Supreme Power. This image also reminds a very famous fresco painting of Michelangelo on the ceiling of Sistine chapel, *The Creation of Adam* (1508-12). The art of writing calligraphy is superb and more fluent in this image. These verses of the Holy Quran are painted in scribbled form in black ink against a dark blue narrow portion in the center. There is thus unity between the less complicated left side and the more intricate right portion. The intricacies of the design at the right side and in the central narrow portion

make these inscriptions difficult to read. The left side inscriptions and the name of God, *Allah*, in the central part of the composition behind the narrow strip are clearly comprehensible. More over it is artist's attempt to narrate the mystic relationship of man and God in his own way.



Figure 9: Tahir Mughal (Bin Qullander), *Al- Qayyum*, 2008, mix media, photograph from Artist's own Collection

Another calligraphic painting which stands a bit different both from a calligraphic and a pictorial point of view is shown in the following image (Figure 10). In this calligraphic expression, the upper portion of the painting is rendered in red, gray, green and white tones which melt into each other and ultimately create an effect of a sky which has a resemblance with Chinese paintings. Among this cloudy atmosphere in the sky, the name of God, *Allah*, flows downwards. The artist has dreamt and thought about the phenomenon of descending from the heavens towards the earth. This divine act is engulfed in palpitations and recites the name of the Creator of the universe which is *Allah*. This painterly calligraphy reflects the continuation of the phenomenon presented in the above mentioned figure number 9.

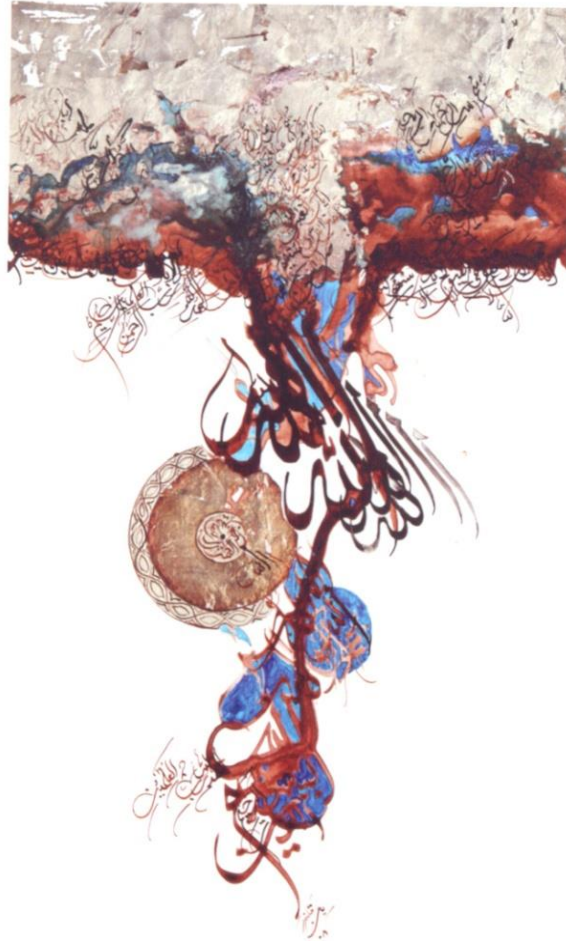


Figure 10: Tahir Mughal (Bin Qullander), *Al-Qayyum*, 2008, mix media, photograph from Artist's own Collection

The artist's experiments with calligraphic lines, cubic design structures and a mystic atmosphere suggest an ability and wisdom which can surpass the renowned calligraphists in Pakistan. These compositions evoke the spiritual passions of the viewer and act as a kind of a bridge between the esoteric truth of the artist and the naïve gaze of the viewer. Some of his calligraphic paintings have effectively and with loud assiduity served a didactic purpose.

His passionate approach in some of the manifestations of the sacred writings is embedded with spirituality, which is a very rare aspect in the calligraphic art of Pakistan. Through these virtues distributed throughout his work, one can also see the mystical element which is an intrinsic part of Qullander.

### Shiblee Muneer's Contemporary Ideas and Calligraphy

Shiblee Muneer is another name from the most talented modern calligraphists and painters of contemporary age in Pakistan. He belongs to a family of traditional artists.

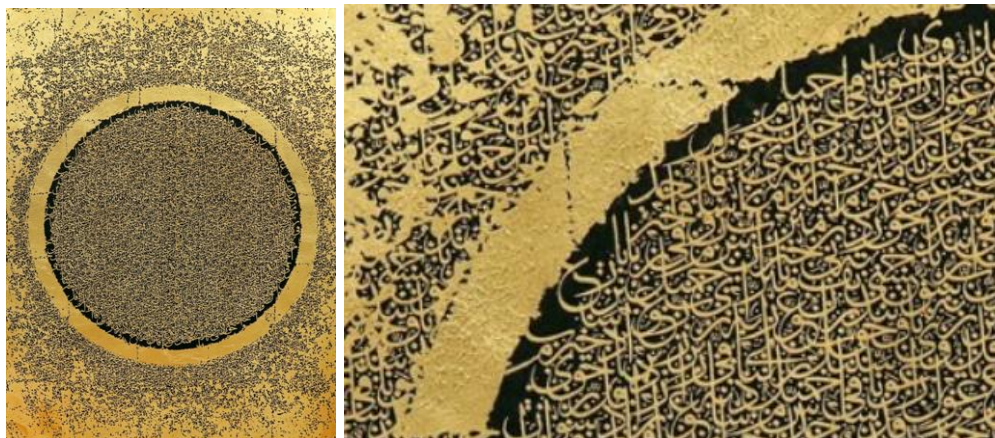


Figure 11: Shiblee Muneer, Calligraphy from his exhibition *Adha Musلمان*, 2019, mix media on paper, photograph from the Collection of O Art Space Maratib Ali Road Gulberg, Lahore

His great-grandfather Allah Ditta was a *Rajput Pahari* style miniature painter from the princely states of Patiala and his grandfather Haji Muhammad Sharif was also a well known miniature painter from the early days of Pakistan. He observed and learned the mannerism of traditional miniature painting within his family. “Both male and female family members begin learning the philosophy and techniques involved in creating a miniature—from paper production, to the mixing of pigments, to calligraphy, coloring and shading—at home. In addition to being a practicing artist, Muneer considers himself a guardian of miniature painting tradition but he also finds inspiration in post-modernist philosophy and new techniques”<sup>3</sup>He mounted an unusual set of calligraphic paintings under the title of *Adha Musلمان* (half Muslim) on 12<sup>th</sup> November 2019 in O Art Space gallery Gulberg Lahore Pakistan. In the field of calligraphic paintings he presented a kind of self dialog. His approach to utilize the script to manipulate the symbolic

ambiance in his paintings makes him different among the other practitioner. His thought provoking visuals are a scorching satire on the Pakistani Muslim community. Indirectly the visuals and titles of his paintings narrate the actuality behind the mindset and religious practices of the majority of public in our society. The exhibition seems as a reminder for the people about the authentic message of Quran “enter into Islam completely (and perfectly)” (2:208); whereas the Muslims have abandoned the real essence of their religion and rather turn out to be half Muslims; who actually do not practice a complete code of Islam. The lavish use of golden hue with the overlapped layers of writing script under a very satirical title of the exhibits potentially narrate the genuine concern of the artists about prevailing situation and misguided Muslim community in Pakistan. Muneer’s calligraphy thus constitutes a withering, witty comment on society’s believes and ritualistic practices. His satire, bluntness and bitter comments in the wake of glittery words bring him near to the philosophy of Saadat Hasan Manto; who was famous for the “brevity of writing about the bitter realities of the society”<sup>4</sup>. Muneer’s fusion of oriental mannerism and occidental bluntness brings him to a unique place among the contemporary artists and calligraphists in Pakistan.

### **Conclusion**

With the passage of time writing of sacred words is evolving into very intricate symbolic visuals by Pakistani calligraphists. The above mentioned three maestros present their aptitude to handle the meticulous and calculated art of calligraphy with a very interesting blend of contemporary expressions and painterly devices. To somehow they are successful in creating contemporary calligraphy with more spiritual and celestial appeal.

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<sup>2</sup> Arif Khan’s Interview to a reporter of Nawa-i-Waqt Group of Newspapers, “Preview of Arif Khan's Calligraphic Paintings”, *The Nation Daily Newspaper*, January 6, 2009.

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<sup>4</sup> M. Suleman Riaz, "A Stylistic Analysis of Manto’s Urdu Short Stories and their English Translations." (PhD dissertation, University of Leeds, 2018), 10.