

ANNA MOLKA AHMED'S DANCE OF
DEATH—PHILOSOPHICAL, THEORETICAL AND FORMAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT:

Anna Molka Ahmed had a major contribution in Pakistani Art. Out of many conspicuous paintings revealing expression, one is Dance of Death. The focus of this research is to explore the concept and motivation of the theme Dance of Death. By using analytical means, this study includes philosophical, theoretical and formal analysis of the painting Dance of Death by Anna Molka Ahmed

Anna Molka Ahmed (1917-1987) was undoubtedly one of the most eminent artists in the history of visual arts in Pakistan. She is known as an expressionist painter, sculptor, drafter, and printmaker. Her major contribution in Pakistani Art is establishing the Department of Fine Arts in University of the Punjab in 1940. She was a foreigner and a converted Muslim, and was known for her aggressive and uncompromising general attitude. Her work reflects dynamic impasto colours with wild and feral strokes. She explored various genres including portraits, landscapes, and cityscapes with a diversity in subject matter incorporating religious, historical and war themes. Amongst her striking and remarkable works are her paintings on *Ashura Parade**, *Heaven, Hell, Qiyamat (The Day of Judgement)*, and *Dance of Death*.

The aim of this paper is to explore the concept and motivation of the medieval iconographical and allegorical theme *Dance of Death*, that is particularly a spell binding. It probes into, the way Anna and *Dance of Death* embrace and correspond with each other via longitudinal, ophthalmic and systematic ploy. By using analytical method, this study also includes philosophical, theoretical and formal analysis.

Dance of Death, or *Danse Macabre* (French), *Danza Macabra* (Italian and Spanish), *Danca da Morte* (Portuguese), or *Totentanz* (German), *Dodendans* (Dutch), *Dansa de la Mort* (Catalan) is a late medieval allegorical theme in art, literature, and music. This theme of death is derived from the Latin manuscript *Ars Moriendi* based on the Art of Dying. The theme *Dance of Death* was based on the popular belief or universality of death as an inseparable parallel of life

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* *Ashura Parade*: parade of *Shias* on 10th of *Muharam*

postulating the dance of the dead accompanying one's journey to the grave. It was a metaphor to remind people the fragility of life and inevitability of death. In medieval times, this theme was fostered by the plagues, the Black Death and wars of the 14th and 15th centuries.

Barbara H. Rosenwein explains in her article *Starvation and the Black Death* that, Black Death was an outbreak of bubonic plague. Victims of bubonic plague usually suffer from high fevers and swellings under the armpits or in the groin. Usually 60 percent of the infected were to die, often within the first five days. Bubonic plague struck Europe and the Mediterranean from 1347 through 1351. In 1309, heavy rains ruined crops in part of Germany causing severe food shortages and starvation. In 1315, another rainy season devastated the lives of people in North Western Europe; people sickened and died. Already weakened by continued food shortages, the people of Europe were hit especially hard by the arrival of the Black Death, appeared in Italy in 1348 and spread to the rest of Europe by 1350. Plague was worst in the cities where many people lived close together and sanitation was poor. In some cities, the plague killed as many as two-thirds of the population, however, the rural population and the wealthy, who had less contact with outsiders and who could afford to move to more secluded areas outside the cities, escaped the worst effects. Under the influence of epidemic, people aware of death approaching them wanted to spend their money on fine foods and luxuries. Many lords and wealthy merchants built churches and commissioned religious art, partly in thanks for being spared the horrors of the Black Death. Some of the artistic styles that developed in this period were very influential later during the Renaissance (Rosenwein).

In Renaissance, the Black Death became a figurative and symbolic theme for the artists, writers and poets. The last major outbreak of plague in Europe was in *Marseilles*[†] in 1722. Another cycle, which was less deadly, began in the late 19th century and continued until the 20th century.

During 14th Century, the Black Death offered intense prompt to artists. In an article *Danse Macabre*, it is mentioned that, the *Dance of Death* was first embodied in murals and a poem (1424-1425) in the Church of the Holy Innocents in Paris. There were several versions of the *Totentanz* on buildings around Basel (Unknown 47). The Parisian printer **Guyot Marchant** published a version in woodcuts and verse entitled *Danse Macabre* in 1485, which was circulated throughout Europe.

In the same century, we find one of the earliest illustrated books printed in England including *Danse Macabre, Des Hommes* (1485) with woodcuts by **Albrecht Dürer**(Illustrations). Through the linear technique of engraving, Dürer

[†] Marseilles: the second largest city in France after Paris

was able to create tones of varying darkness and he used them to describe three-dimensional form. **Michael Wolgemut**, a German painter and print maker produced *Dance of Deads* in woodcut, which was printed in 1493. **Manuel, Niklaus** (1484-1530), a Swiss painter, poet, and reformer painted a series of frescoes entitled *Dance of Death* (1516-1519) for a monastery in the Swiss capital of Bern (Manuel). Afterwards we find this theme painted on walls of many churches. This theme also inspired a German painter and printmaker, **Hans Holbein the Younger**. In his young age, he mainly worked in Basel and painted murals with religious themes. He produced a famous set of 41 wood engravings from 1523 and published in 1538 with a later addition of some more wood engravings re-published in 1549. Ford Madox Huffer writes that, in the original conception of a *Todtentanz*, each man or woman danced, not with Death the Abstraction, but with a dead mortal of his own kidney. Of such "dances", there were many on the walls of cloisters all over Europe: at Basle. (Hueffer 61). The death usually personified as a skeleton, plays a musical instrument and leads people of different social levels dancing on its tune and head towards the graves. The theme continued to attract attention of the artists from various art disciplines.

The poets and musicians also worked on this theme for instance; **Johan Cotton** (1584-1652) wrote the *Pious Lives and Happy Deaths* for puritans. **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe** the German poet of 18th-century wrote verses on the subject, **Franz Liszt**, a Hungarian composer, composed musical pieces on the theme *Totentanz* 1864. **Camille Saint-Saëns**, the French composer also produced music on the theme *Danse Macabre* in 1874. Lately **Iron Maiden** an English band presented an album entitled *Dance of Death* in 2003.

Charlot, Jean (1898-1979) in Mexico, was a modern painter, a creative writer and a historian wrote a book entitled *Dance of Death* in 1951. **W. H. Auden** British-American poet of 20th-century also wrote verses on the same subject.

Anna Molka Ahmed painted the same theme in 20th Century. About her selection of the theme, Bibigul writes, "this is a natural stimulation, for a sensitive person who had seen the suffering of mankind in the advent of a war, in Europe, the hounding of families on the basis of religion and nationality" (Bibigul 1)

Anna's idea, *Dance of Death* is also an expression of man's history and the cycle of life. Nabila Zar writes for her painting, *Dance of Death*, "The presence of death, in form of dancing skeletons in the background of each stage, emphasizes the triviality of man's activities on this earth. The nuclear holocaust followed by rebirth of life on earth completes Anna's view of the circle of life" (Zar 16).

In the painting *Dance of Death*, Anna showed different types and ranks of people varying in age and dancing with the skeletons, which stood up from their graves and tempted them to join in their dance that finally take all of them to death. This painting is in form of a large mural consisting of six panels of 8"x 4" on the whole it is 24"x 8".

S. Amjad Ali writes in his book that this painting shows the skeletons dancing in the background and laughing at the futile foolish doings of men. The entire rise and fall of human civilization is shown from its first blossoming in Egypt and India to its senseless self-destruction by a nuclear blast and the final relapse into the Stone Age from which man began (Ali, *Painters of Pakistan* 101). According to Saira Dar, Anna appears to be a visionary and her compositions encompasses not only socio-political satire of an obvious sort, but also spiritual and metaphysical concerns showing a preoccupation with the certain but unknown realm of death. Her large mural like canvas *Dance of Death* is an eerie and macabre but powerful work, which shows a gory spectrum of individuals, who bring death and destruction to humanity through their lust for power (Dar 18).

The objective of the painting *Dance of Death* by Anna Molka Ahmed is to draw attention towards people who are lost in the worldly attractions. They know that one day they have to die but they are mindlessly dancing being unaware of the corpses.



The painting's fastidious association trails a significant plot. Although all the six panels possess absolute and comprehensive compositions but when we see them as a whole, we can notice that the regularity has been severed in the fifth panel. If we ignore the fifth panel, the figures in the foreground are positioned symmetrically. The broadest and simplest composition gives the sense of excitement ignorant of past and future. It is almost the symbolic order of the painting. The spaces between the groups of figures are linked with the skeletons in the background and corpses in the foreground. There is a continuous driving

force compelling our gaze from first panel to last. The series of panels is harmonious because of placement of panels and by their similar proportions with uniform blue-green skeletons in the background. There is no doubt that each panel has been very artfully composed, but, the great achievement of this mighty mural is in composing the human figures in striking groups and placing each against the background of the dancing skeletons and the foreground of corpses (Ali, Anna Molka Ahmed An Artist An Institution 58-59).

Quddus Mirza gives his view for Anna that, her imaginative theme, innovative scheme of composing her visuals and then treating the whole surface as a purely retinal delight; reaffirm her status as an important visionary painter (Mirza 28).

Anna Molka, in fact painted all figures and details in the real sense of the word but with complex imagery. Ali writes, the figure drawing avoids the details that could make it convincing. Rather, it sweepingly renders the outline of the limbs and the body in flowing lines, as long as the posture and the gestures are clear enough to be plausible. This slurring and glossing is understandable because the intention is to caricature the figures and therefore this simplified stylized rendering and these smoothed out contours are adequate for the purpose (Ali, Anna Molka Ahmed An Artist An Institution 58).

Importance of the foreground figures cannot be undermined as the presence of the laughing skeletons and corpses along with the content humans has a symbolic meaning i.e. life towards the death. Anna dressed up the figures according to the requirement of the character. Costumes are the main source of the recognition of the characters presented. For instance, the cloaks are draped over long coats of the plutocrat and the landlord. Ali mentions that the dresses are unruffled and evenly rapped over the figures, as if on cushions, and where there are wrinkles, these are shown in stylized patterns, not in the true form of wrinkles appearing on dress. Sometimes the dress is so flatly drawn that it does not indicate the body and the limbs, which are clothed in it, as on the case of the Pakistani turbaned landlord. (Ali, Anna Molka Ahmed An Artist An Institution 58)

Anna Molka was an Expressionist painter; she used palette knife to give vigorous, colourful, impasto texture over thin washes in her irrepressible and aggressive style. Depiction of multiple patches of heavily laden paint with abundance links her to English painters **Leon Kossoff** and **Frank Auerbach**. She said in one of her interviews, "At first, in my youth, I practiced a more Romantic Expressionism. Now the subjects are more serious. I draw in paint, mostly with a knife and impasto colours- drawing are exaggerated for a meaning, for releasing the inner urge- colour get thicker as emotion is aroused, either violent or sombre" (Habib 30)

In Anna Molka's painting *Dance of Death*, there is no striking variation in colours but they are bright and well adjusted with each other. One of her contemporary Khalid Iqbal wrote that the intensification of colours in her work is because she sees them that way. Even the artist with the most objective approach cannot prevent his vision from being coloured by his temperament, and Mrs. Ahmed is an artist of a highly emotional nature (Iqbal 28).

We observe a magical use and interplay of colours in Anna's work. For example, scarlet colour is used with light Prussian blue and deep Cerulean blue. Orange is also used on many parts. The repetition of orange, scarlet and blue from panel to panel holds the whole composition together. The bluish green colour in the skeletons adds coherence in the composition and balances the orange and blue colours. This use of colour was something deeply related to Anna's temperament. Saira states that the vibrant, at times even garish colours seem to be born out of an inner agitation as well as a passion for life, which could not be contained and spilled over on her canvases. (Dar 18)

Like figures, colours also serve the symbolic function in Anna's painting. The red is deep-seated, and colour of patience. White refers to a state of innocence, but in the painting *Dance of Death*, white is worn by the cruel and ignorant people: ignorant from the ultimate reality of death. The black background is an image of sorrow supported by gray skeletons. She also used colours in contrasting appearance, i.e. the opposition between black and white, red and blue at times giving impression of greys and browns.

The diffused light that illuminates the scene seems to originate from a source behind the viewer, and reveals itself through bright blue reflections on the white dresses. White light on the red cloaks and the whitish reflections on the faces show the highlights in front of the dark background. The equal white light is present on the gray skeletons. The absence of the shadows helps in maintaining the suspended figures dancing like puppets without emotions.

In the first panel we can see macabre skeletons' dance, smirk behind the scene. Egyptian and Greek people can be seen as representing the ancient civilizations in front of the dark background. The characters are wearing white dresses for they are not part of the present seem to be discussing with the skeletons about the ignorance of the living who are shown oblivious of death and dancing in joy. Two dancers are shown in the foreground, a Hindu and a Buddhist. They are painted in archetype poses identifying their characters, which are reflected in the sculptures shown in foreground. Corpses are scattered under their feet animating distress and mortality.

The second panel depicts ministers of the Christian, Jewish and Muslim religion. They are standing in perky poses seem to be indifferent about human sufferings. They lead a mere worldly life laughing at their momentary deeds,

while death is hovering over them in the background in form of skeletons. In Hans Holbein's drawings Popes, priests and nuns are depicted with venom. Holbein showed an old Bishop who is unwillingly taken over by death. Unlike Anna, Hans' representation is symbolic instead of real; he does not show postures of dance in his painting. We find Anna's depiction as if the theme is morphed into characters.

In the third panel, Anna showed three soldiers, a woman, public officials, generals, and dictators, who are known for their cruelty towards humanity. These lords used to push the feeble into the fires of hostilities and irrational massacre now have joined the death. She added red colour under their feet to symbolize their cruelty, which they have shown to the feeble. The landlords, the plutocrats and the warlords are revealed in the fourth panel. The heartless landlords are pandering in this snappy pageant only to be assailed upon by death.

The confrontation between two super powers America, represented by US Statue of Liberty, and Russia is depicted in fifth panel. The destruction of the whole humanity is shown in the result of nuclear holocaust. Anna showed that the nuclear holocaust is overwhelming and nothing would survive whether it is the Statue of Liberty or the super powers of the world. Therefore, neither the strong structures will remain nor is the freedom long lasting. The sixth panel displays the characters of the immaculate animal form and the Stone Age.

The *Dance of Death* by Anna Molka is a work that has a multilayered theme. Albert Einstein once said that he is not sure that with what rather weapons the third world war will be fought but he knows that the fourth one will be fought with sticks and stones (Chaulia). This thought resonates in Anna's painting as after the nuclear explosion shown in fifth panel, we observe a revisit to Stone Age. The six panels reflect events in human history in a way that one can see at one side the human progress and on the other hand, the destruction brought forth by humans. The metaphor of death has been used to depict the power of destruction that man has accumulated over centuries. She also bluntly reflects the fact that even though the characters kept on changing with time but human cruelty remained all along and approaches its climax in the era of nuclear weapons. The painting therefore stands as a satire to human progress and points towards the fact that beneath the contingent sophistication that man acquired in the history of civilization a fundamental insensitivity lurks; the insensitivity underlying Man versus Man.

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