Ramblings of a Painter

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Abstract
My memories of being taught to read are painful, letters of the alphabet had a will of their own and never came together in any predictable way. Lines were different, one could make up stories as one went along, bending each line to one's will. Growing up in a house where the word was paramount may perhaps explain the escape into a parallel realm. The tactile pleasure of moving a line across an alabaster surface - the physicality of colour.
My memories of being taught to read are painful, letters of the alphabet had a will of their own and never came together in any predictable way. Lines were different, one could make up stories as one went along, bending each line to one’s will. Growing up in a house where the word was paramount may perhaps explain the escape into a parallel realm. The tactile pleasure of moving a line across an alabaster surface – the physicality of colour.

There were surfaces to draw on and to colour, since the beginning of memory. My mother, who taught me to read, was the provider of the colour pencils and chalks; and, later on, the paintbox, a standard birthday request. There were paintings on walls, and pictures in books to look at; dearly familiar, long before words revealed their meanings. My father, who was often absent, I believed to be the author of all the paintings on the walls. I never knew the reason my aunt squealed with laughter when, at age 6, I solemnly told her that my father had painted all the pictures in the books that lined the living room shelves.

The realization that poetry was his gift came when I turned 8, and he went to prison for five years. Each poem from prison, received by letter post, was passed around like a talisman; and when published, fetched twenty rupees, which happily translated into new shoes for my sister and myself, a visit to the cinema, storybooks and the dreaded vitamin supplement, dedicatedly thrust down our throats by our harassed mother. That poetry was important to so many people, and elicited strong responses, was evident. But one also learnt as a child that deeply felt emotions, in response to external events, could somehow find form and a voice of consequence.

Some time later, coming back to painting after an interruption of several years spent as a young mother, I tried clumsily to voice the pain, caused by the blood-shed in the struggle for Bangladesh, in a series of paintings called ironically ‘Sohni Dharti’ (Beautiful Land). Only two of the works in the series have survived, both in public collections, the Punjab Arts Council Lahore, and the National Gallery in Islamabad. Encountering them now, they seem crude as a record of a trauma of great magnitude, but they were an attempt to be truthful to my time. And perhaps the attempt itself is part of one’s inherited baggage, like the colour of one’s eyes, inability to sing in tune, a passion for green chillies, and a weakness
for giggling in the face of pomposity.

Once the decision to study at the National College of Arts in Lahore had been made at the age of 17, I was inclined to study design, not being convinced that I had either the talent or the passion to be a painter. But, going to the Bath Academy of Art at Corsham in 1962 or, more specifically, to Howard Hodgkin’s painting class changed that. He had the reputation of being a caustic tyrant in the classroom and students quailed before his piercing eyes. But I found him to be soft-spoken, almost diffident in the way he gently steered one through exercises in traditional painting methods. His seminars were brimful of provocative ideas and drove me to sit in the library, night after night, trying to encompass the myriads of references which emanated in all directions in his two-hour sessions. The dazzle of colour in Bonnard’s bathtub nudes and the sensuality of Rajpur paintings were part of the mosaic experienced in Howard’s classes. As one lost one’s fear of his presence, one saw a glimmer of the possibility of saying things in paint. Adrian Heath was another influence at Corsham, witty, kind, with an insistence on the strength of composition emerging from the centre of the space one encountered. The intimidation of scale was experienced and overcome in his studio. The three years at Corsham, eight miles from Bath, were kaleidoscopic in influences, experiences, friendships and the shaping of some sort of vision, occasionally through a camera lens, moving and still, and on a canvas.

Much before that, years before, at home in Lahore, there were always painters coming and going out of the house. Moyene Najmi, Shemza, Ali Imam, Safdar, Shakir Ali – all ‘uncles’ whose work and persons were taken for granted. Only Chughtai was the elusive hermit, reputed never to come out of his studio in Ravi Road – but there are vague recollections of his being somewhere in one’s childhood. The others were all noisy, flamboyant, who came at odd times, drinking, eating, arguing. Except Zainul Abedeen, who would visit from Dhaka, gentle, unobtrusive house guest. He would entertain us by making deft sketches with an instantly produced reed pen. It became apparent in time that what all the painters painted was ‘still life’ and ‘landscape’ and ‘nudes’, never real life.

Later, as a teacher at the National College of Arts, I was confronted with issues, such as the imposition of colonial genres, and the struggles of multiple visions and choices. Shakir Ali – painter, teacher, Principal – was a benign presence, but it was my contemporaries in the 1970s and my students who were in continual disturbing dialogue.

Then television became my new medium, and painting took a back seat as performance in satire became a preoccupation. Shoaib, my husband, wrote the shows, our small group rehearsed, bantered and ad-libbed our way through the absurdity of life as we lived it. Pakistan was always ground for the humour we put across for an audience which was alluringly large and receptive. The public response after each week’s
show was phenomenal; the feedback, stimulating, provocative, lively.

All came to a halt in 1977, with General Ziaul Haq’s martial rule. Television was contra-indicated in no uncertain terms for the likes of us. It was back to the personal format of camera, paper, canvas, paint and a minuscule audience.

I suppose it has been described before as the best of times and the worst. Friends turned informers while the timid withstood the worst with poetic valour. One witnessed the insidious way of dictatorship, when life went on as usual with its relentless comforts and reassurances. As tongues froze and hearts disintegrated, small gestures of loyalty held one entranced, with faith and promise of the future.

So painting became both a refuge and an act of defiance. The medium struggled to become a message, as one worked around the images that permeated one’s being. I took journeys around Pakistan, with a camera, on an ostensible quest to record women and children. Tribal areas, the lakes of Sind, the boat people, dusty villages on the edge of the desert, streets, apertures, tents. It was as though one was re-establishing one’s sanity, in an increasingly insane environment of public floggings and hangings. This was not the world I knew, there was no explaining the brutality and its acceptance. Photography became a deliberation about the other realities that had always existed. I spent hours, days, nights in the darkroom, juggling with image, texture, tone – piecing together messages which spoke with persistence and, hopefully, with truth.

My children’s photo exhibition in Islamabad in 1980 had a poem specially written by Faiz for the brochure. Now in self-exile in Beirut, his poems came in letters, awaited eagerly, recited, memorised, published by friends – sung also, at private gatherings, recorded, passed around, talismanic once again. A strange transposition, he was the one who was ‘free’ in the confines of Beirut; at home, all were in custody.

In March, 1981, Shoaib was arrested, 30 years to the day to Faiz’s arrest in 1951. My daughter Mira was, not strangely, exactly my age, in the surrealist re-run. It was a short stint, a couple of months, unlike my father’s – but the cycle imposed itself on the canvas. I spent a summer in Beirut, with the children visiting their grandparents, and witnessed the intricate complexity of the civil war, the Palestinian struggle, the daily bombings, street battles, and the manifold ways of survival – all appeared in the work of the next few years. The Shatila and Sabra refugee-camp massacres began a series of works which borrowed imagery from many sources, including news photos of the camps; but, back home, other images appeared – birth and rebirth, the tree, leaves withering, dying, reappearing, insisting on hope in the face of grief.

For years, I had resisted having a solo exhibition of my paintings – convinced that I had nothing to say of great significance. Once, bantering with the senior painter Khalid Iqbal who had also foregone the chance of a solo show, I had promised him I would show my work ‘when I am 40’. 
Forty was now here, and the work struggled in its many mediums and messages – in crayon, collage, ink, water-colour, oil on canvas, the motif of leaves ‘runs through like a frieze, a placement suggestive of its symbolism of life, resistance, non-acceptance and rebellion’.

The donning of the chaader as a matter of policy by women ‘representatives’ in parliament, at a time when the legal status of women was being eroded, underlined the hypocrisy of state edicts. The female body, so dangerous, so challenging, – smothered and silenced, it took on fresh meanings of vulnerability and tenacity.

The nudes in my work were either odes to the poetry and celebration of life or defiant witnesses flouting restraint. The image, although emblematic, was always lyrical, a counterfoil to the culture of violence. Press-clippings of police action against women and political workers were laid onto the paper in layers, with washes of water-colour and gouache, subduing their intensity, making the images go quietly into undertones. The paintings were small, reflecting the desire to be deciphered close-to. They were also easy to move in a hurry, in case of a raid on the Gallery, which was a familiar occurrence. Together with two other artists, I had the dubious distinction of having my work removed a few hours before the opening of the National Exhibition in 1980. The work of one of the two artists was labelled ‘obscene’; the other, like mine, was ‘subversive’. I was surprised, since I thought the message (in this case, a comment on Bhutto’s execution) was intelligently camouflaged and the references obscure. I had used cuttings from ads for Punjabi movies but the inclusion of a noose in one of the cuttings must have rung the right bells. The painting was titled ‘Carnival-I’; and its partner, ‘Carnival-II’, although not carrying an equally offensive message, was also taken down for good measure. A polite query on my behalf to the Minister of Culture (who, incidentally, had shared a prison cell with my father many years earlier) was received with an equally polite but blank look. Obviously, the right bureaucrat had ensured a ‘trouble free’ national artistic event. The paintings were never put back on exhibition.

Accompanying the image of the female form, other symbols and metaphors appeared. The political and social bleakness created a desire for escape on every level. Suddenly, windows and doors, marking outward passages and inward access, appeared. My visits abroad to Britain, India, Norway, Sweden and France were intermissions, and brought personal solace, tender friendships and precious courage. Artists separated by space and time seemed close of kin – Edward Munch in Norway, Kitaj in England, Tapies in Spain, and, closer to home, Subramanyan, Arpita Singh, Naline Maline, Vivan Sundaram and Dilloo Mukurjee in India.

There was the personal loss of Faiz’s going in 1984. Unmanageable in its vastness and meaning. Painting slowed down as images altered once again. There were now storm clouds, glimpsed through window-panes,
and hands as emblems of wandering thoughts and gentle despair. But then a phrase remembered from Ghalib, and requested by Faiz – Daste-Teh-Sang (Hand Under a Stone) – altered the significance of hands. A sign of commitment now, they were eager, strong, loving in their steadfastness.

Almost prophetically, ‘Lilies of the Field’ became a new series in 1988 - vivid, alive, colourful in a sea of dark textures contrasting with flashes of white light. The format widened, the works were large and buoyant; suddenly, inexplicably, the Dictator died.

Nights were blissful with sleep; technicolour dreams of open yellow mustard-fields and purple fruits on viridian trees. There almost was no reason to paint again.

In 1989, a year away from home at the Rhodes Island School of Design brought another kind of introspection. It was a year of intense concentration, loneliness, intellectual stimulation and self-discovery. Printmaking, painting, writing came together. The layered reality of the earlier work was giving away to a more overt way of using the medium. Re-discovering charcoal, and handling pure pigment in a tactile way, unhindered by an intermediary medium, seemed to be both direct and suggestive of subterranean emotions. These works now had to do with nostalgia, the distancing from one’s roots. For the first time, landscape appeared in my work. It becomes a metaphor, revealing an expanse of memory, emotion, and the possibility of symbolising both the inner and the outer. A series of prints and charcoal works, entitled ‘Inner landscape’, revised the visual device of the window. The window was now a formal divide for spatial order and a proscenium for the ongoing drama. The social, political and personal turbulences one had witnessed were being recalled to envelope and to disturb.

Other events, international and national, crowded in upon the senses. The Gulf War, and the reported instances of violence against women, made one’s response inevitable. The series – ‘Sisters of the Third World’, ‘I wonder why the caged bird sings’ and ‘A poem for Zainab’ – investigated contradiction yet were celebratory. Explaining human motives in never ending cycles of despair and pain as well as the joys of desire and fulfilment, made up some of the underlying themes in these works.

Working on hand-made rag paper, which is heavy in weight and texture, sent me back to collage, experimenting with papers of delicate substance. A visit to Dhaka led to the discovery of paper made from water hyacinths by women. Fragile, skin-like, the paper demanded attention, tearing to reveal the body of work beneath it. A dialogue established itself between the different layers used. As I worked with photo-transfers, rubbing pigment into the tough rag-paper beneath, the layers on top alternately wrinkled and tightened, behaving like human skin. Pen, ink, graphite, conté and charcoal came together in these works.
which were sensuous in their mixture of mediums. The colour palette also succumbed to the desire for the organic; soaking the rag-paper in tea-wash seemed to add age to it, and using powdered sienna, terraverte, indigo and rose-madder mellowed the message.

The message itself now wanders between the maze of experiences and possibilities, searching for appropriate marks and gestures. Sometimes intimate, occasionally passionate, the desire still persists – to articulate a response to one’s time, and voice it in an idiom which attempts to be at ease with one’s temperament and sensibility.