

Satish Gujral- The Phoenix Who Rose From the Ashes of Partition
Dr. Kavita Singh

Satish Gujral- The Phoenix Who Rose From the Ashes of Partition

Dr. Kavita Singh

*Assis. Prof., (Selection Grade),
S. Sobha Singh Department of Fine Arts,
Punjabi University, Patiala
Email: singhart6@yahoo.com*

Reference to this paper
should be made as follows:

Dr. Kavita Singh,

*Satish Gujral- The
Phoenix Who Rose
From the Ashes of
Partition,*

Artistic Narration 2019,
Vol. X, pp.30-37

[http://
artistic.anubooks.com/](http://artistic.anubooks.com/)

Abstract

Through this research paper it is endeavoured to unveil the artistic journey of artist Satish Gujral who rose like a Phoenix from the ashes of the Partition of Punjab. It also envisages to explore his deep thoughts and artistic sensibilities which triggered his creativity towards the creation of masterly works on the Partition as this internationally acclaimed artist, sculptor, muralist, designer and architect rolled into one is basically best known for his paintings on Partition which not only depict the collective sorrow of the uprooted Punjabis but also magnifies his inner tormented psyche during the period of his loosing the hearing power. Through his earliest paintings on this theme, he unloaded his thoughts how outer tragedies are capable of influencing the inner deepest chords of one's soul and intellect of a creative person.

Keywords: *Punjab, Partition, Satish Gujral, Mayo School of Arts and Crafts, Lahore, Mural art, Diego Rivera, Siqueiros, Jose Orozco, Marxist Political Thought, Baroque, Chiaroscuro, Grottesque, Amrita Pritam, Guernica, Pablo Picasso, Inder Kumar Gujral, Kiran Gujral.*

Introduction

While India attained her freedom from the British rule on 15th August, 1947, it also saw the Partition of Punjab. The communal riots broke out on both sides of the border between India and newly formed country- Pakistan. The brutal and horrific happenings resulting in tearing apart the secular fabric of humanity, inflicting a deep wound on the bosom of all Punjabis on both sides of undivided Punjab. The venom was in the air and hatred reigned supreme like a wild beast in frenzy. Millions of people lost their lives, hearths and livelihoods and the mass migration of Punjabis to Indian side of the border plunged the nation into a deep gloom. Rows and rows of refugees trickled towards Punjab. There were mass massacres and a feeling of restlessness and hopelessness with wailing survivors who lost their near and dear ones in this man-made devastation. The fear and despair was lit large on the faces of refugees who had lost everything while the whole country was rejoicing over the new found freedom. Amongst the stream of refugees, there was a lad in his twenties arrived from district Jhelum in Pakistan who was witness to this gory bloodshed, deeply disturbed and anguished over the helplessness of the humanity in thwarting the communal slaughter. The lad was no other but our own celebrated internationally renowned artist- ‘Satish Gujral’ whose family despite all odds helped the other refugees in settling down, finding their lost ones and starting a new life. The shock of the Partition was so massive that it shook the psyche of all Punjabis. The sensitive mind of Satish Gujral experienced the turmoil first-hand and he outpoured his saddening experience in the form of very expressive and haunting drawings and paintings which are considered perhaps the true depiction of the collective scream of the humanity. To a question asked by art critic- Madhu Jain of India Today in 1986 that whether the agony of Partition was the real trigger to set him on a serious artistic journey. Satish thoughtfully replied that, *“Ofcourse I was witness to the true account of this cathartic event but an outer happening never creates anything. If there had been no Partition, I might have invented one. Partition only provided me a reason to discover my inner temperament. If I had not been suited to that tragedy, I would not have been able to paint it.”*¹

Satish Gujral was born in 1925 in Jhelum, the Pre-Partition West Punjab. His father Avtar Narain Gujral was a leading lawyer who was associated with ‘Gandhian Nationalist Thought’ and worked for ‘Swadeshi Movement’ in the 1920s. While on vacation in the hills, an eight year old Satish met with an accident and broke his femur and as a result he lost the power of hearing. This was perhaps his first encounter with a real personal tragedy inspite of all efforts by various doctors his hearing power could be restored. He was so disturbed during this period he writes that, *“I used to bang my head against the wall and was at a*

loss to understand for what wrong God has awarded me this punishment.” As the time passed, the young boy started expressing his physical despair in sketches and drawings.² It was decided by the elders that he can be relieved of this mental pain through art. Satish studied at Mayo School of Arts and Crafts, Lahore where he acquired excellence in arts and crafts.³ The language of art became his sole saviour. He was later on sent to Mexico where he studied under the great Muralist- Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros.⁴ He deeply attended J.J. School of Art but left it due to recurring illness. He started his career in 1947 at Shimla as a Graphic designer⁵ and came in contact with Ted Bower, an American Architect from where he picked up some fine nuances of architectural drawings and concepts. But painting murals like the great Mexican masters was his dream as he was heavily inspired by the stylisation and brushwork of Diego Rivera.⁶ Deeply rooted in his mind were the wailing and mourning sounds of the uprooted millions during the Partition who needed not only physical rehabilitation and social upliftment but also needed great empathy and psychological support from the fellow citizens. So it was natural for an artist like Satish Gujral to rehabilitate his inner self and unload the agony and trauma of the shattering dishevel. The journey to Mexico was like a pilgrimage for him where he met and saw the works of David Alfaro Siqueiros and Jose Orozco. These muralists drew strength from the Marxist Political Thought and especially the works of Orozco possessed great emotional concern for human situations and tragedies heaped upon man.⁷

Well equipped with styles of Baroque and flashings of *Chiaroscuro*, his figurative paintings oozed with emotions, loaded gestures and dramatic expressions with deep and empty eyes staring into vacantness and the twisted and turning tormented limbs highlighting the dramatic presentation of deeply moving grotesque faces and figures.⁸ The mural-like painting which justifies the sombre mood and human desperation is titled ‘Snare of Memory’ done in 1954 A.D. Costume folds and fingers turned into a fist are surrounded by waves of anger against unseen forces. **(Plate No.1)** In yet another powerful painting- ‘Mourners’ (1947-48) with half-visible faces are shown sitting in a row, resting their heads against arm or each other, transport the viewer to the prevailing atmosphere of gloom where each person was struck with some personal tragedy or the other. Their eyes are searching for the glimpses of lost ones. Many a times, Satish Gujral accompanied his parents to the resettlement camps set up to locate lost and kidnapped women. One could almost hear the sobbing and the moaning figures juxtaposed in his works which are till today considered the purest portrayal of displaced and uprooted masses. **(Plate No.2)** ‘Days of Glory’ (1942) is another painting which shows two figures wrapped in folds with strong knuckles and fingers and a stressed hand begging for support. This was perhaps the common sight those days on the streets in the refugee camps and on the platforms of railway stations. To this day no other

artist has come up too near to express the anguish of Partition which is lit large in the paintings of Satish Gujral. **(Plate No.3)**

The pangs of Partition were expressed in several literary works, poetry, films and stories by eminent poets, writers and filmmakers. The poem ‘*Ajj Akhaan Waris Shah Nu*’ by the legendary Punjabi poetess- Amrita Pritam became the lament. Such was its impact and poetic expression that it touched every heart. ‘*Tamas*’- a great literary work by the well-known Hindi writer- Bhasham Sahni also depicted a blow by blow account of the horrible happenings before and during the Partition which was later turned into a very sensitive movie by eminent filmmaker Govind Nihalani. A novel titled ‘*A Train to Pakistan*’ by stalwart author, columnist and historian- Khushwant Singh is also considered a benchmark literary work on the Partition which again was turned into a very impactful film by eminent film director- Pamela Rooks. The paintings of Gujral are akin to the acclaimed work titled ‘*The Scream*’ by Edvard Munch and internationally renowned painting titled ‘*Guernica*’ by Pablo Picasso. Once in a conversation with an art critic Satish Gujral replied that, “*Picasso may simply have been in that mood when he created Guernica- as I was during Partition. Guernica is not particularly about the atrocities committed during the Spanish Civil War. I believe Picasso would have painted Guernica had there been Guernica or not. An artist finds an outer happening to symbolise an inner feeling. Not the other way around. Otherwise the work will not provoke.*”⁹ One can see the urgency to release his own fragmented self in his ‘*Self-portrait*’ painted in 1959 A.D., it is often believed when a tragedy occurs people don’t mourn for others but in the heart of hearts they release their own agony and sadness. This portrait is shown wrapped in the skeletal imprisonment of sorrow. Black and brown tones encircled by heavy brushstrokes of white veil like forms depict a snared soul. **(Plate No.4)** In a similar vein, one is reminded of an expressive oil on canvas work titled ‘*Before Suicide*’ painted in 1948 A.D. A lonely man is shown sitting staring at his blank future surrounded by symbols of death, skeletons and bones swirling around in the dark background. This perfectly captures the mood of the moment again using brownish and dark tones. The figure is in typical Punjabi attire resting his left arm on a plank and his left leg is twisted wearing Punjabi footwear. **(Plate No.5)** This period resulted in landmark works on Partition theme. In 1957 A.D., he painted an important painting ‘*The Shrine*’ wherein one could smell the revolt against tyranny. A muscular face defined by strong brushstrokes symbolises the determination against suppression. One can also find a bullet like form tied to a dark fluttering flag. **(Plate No.6)**

In an equally powerful painting-‘*The Condemned*’ done in 1959 A.D., Satish has painted a lamenting woman half-naked in dark cloak holding her hand to her mouth and

Satish Gujral- The Phoenix Who Rose From the Ashes of Partition

Dr. Kavita Singh

looking upwards to the skies. **(Plate No.7)**A bold work in permanent collection of Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh is laden with a fall of gloom wherein a few veiled figures are shown against a dark background and a frail figure of an old man with tilted head on his left shoulder wrapped in a shawl is shown clutching a small Punjabi style cloth bag with his few household belongings. **(Plate No.8)**But one also find some hope and glimpses of ray of light in another work titled 'The Vendor Boy' sitting in hope for some customers as life goes on. **(Plate No.9)**

Conclusion

The role of his elder brother Inder Kumar Gujral who became the 'Prime Minister of India' is of immense importance in the sense that he helped his brother to surmount his personal agony and sorrow. He used to recite poems of great Urdu and Punjabi stalwart poets for him and uplifted his spirits. Kiran Gujral who was herself an established artist and ceramist left her career to help her husband to learn the sign language sharing thoughtful anecdotes and stories of courage and wisdom. They successfully created a happy and harmonious atmosphere around him in the family. She became his voice and dedicated her life so that Satish could pursue his artistic activities in true spirit of fulfilment. The story of Partition is not only the story of sorrow but it is the story of the journey of a very sensitive and brave artist who adopted himself to the new scheme of things and excelled in a variety of mediums from painting to drawing, collages, sculptures and architecture. He infused his own imitable spirit into these highly aesthetically charged works and rose like a Phoenix from the ashes of the Partition.

References

1. *Jain, Madhu*; December 31, 1986, Partition provided me a reason to discover my inner Temperament: Satish Gujral, India Today, India.
2. *Datta, Santo*; November 2000, Satish Gujral: Selected Works 1947-2000, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, p.3
3. *R, Shilpa*; December 21, 2017, 'I didn't paint Partition, I paint my own suffering', The Hindu, Chennai, India.
4. *Lochan, Prof. Rajeev*; February, 2006, *Satish Gujral: A Retrospective (1948-2006)*, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, p.3

5. *R, Shilpa*; December 21, 2017, 'I didn't paint Partition, I paint my own suffering', The Hindu, Chennai, India.
6. *Datta, Santo*; November 2000, Satish Gujral: Selected Works 1947-2000, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, p.4-5
7. **Vasudev, Uma**; October 5, 2003, *Passage from pain to peace*, The Sunday Tribune, Chandigarh.
8. *Datta, Santo*; November 2000, Satish Gujral: Selected Works 1947-2000, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, p.4-5
9. *Jain, Madhu*; December 31, 1986, Partition provided me a reason to discover my inner Temperament: Satish Gujral, India Today, India.

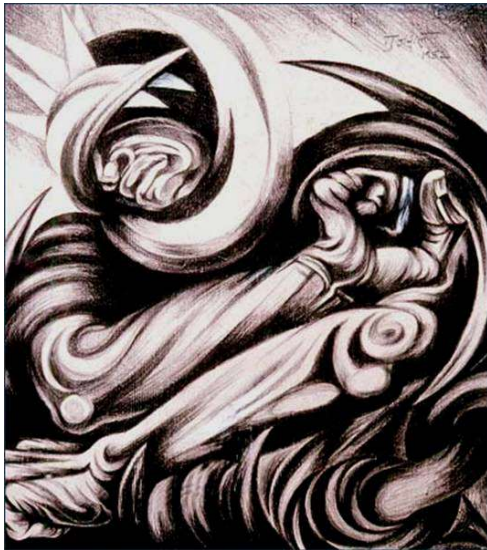


Plate -1



Plate -2

Satish Gujral- The Phoenix Who Rose From the Ashes of Partition
Dr. Kavita Singh

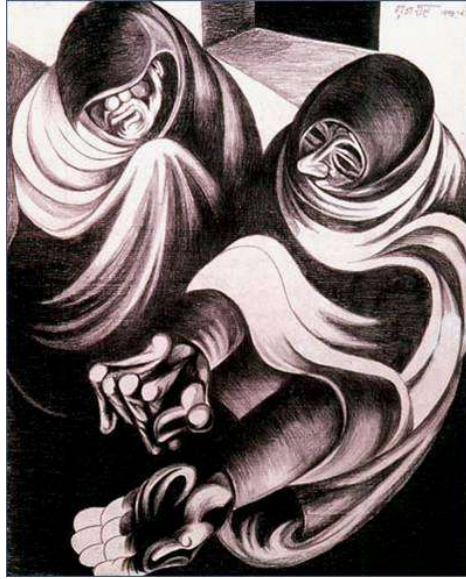


Plate -3



Plate -4

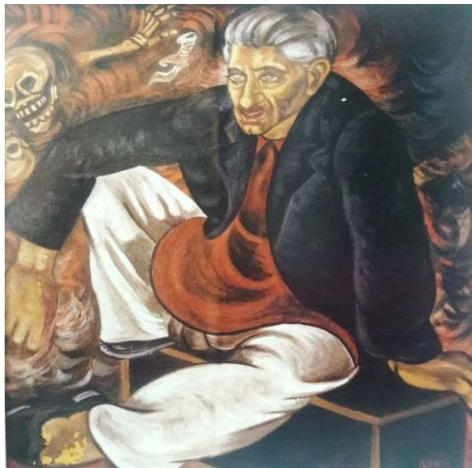


Plate -5



Plate -6



Plate - 7



Plate -8

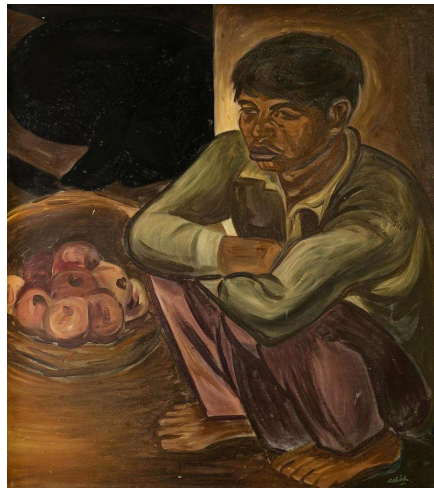


Plate 9