

Phulan Rani: A Peep Into The Soul of A Punjabi Woman

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Abstract

This research paper is an attempt to examine and explore the role played by prominent artist Phulan Rani to bring Amritsar on map of the art scene of Punjab and her contribution to the Contemporary art of Punjab which had a far-reaching impact all over the world. The artists born in Punjab have made an immense contribution to the Contemporary art scenario by incorporating exceptional concepts and modern techniques. In this paper, an attempt has been made to comprehend and do analysis of some prominent works of Phulan Rani whose subject revolves around the heritage of Punjab, love legends and contemporary personalities.

Keywords

Contemporary Art, Cultural Heritage, Indian Academy of Fine Arts, Amritsar, S.G. Thakar Singh, Sobha Singh, Bhava, Raagmala, Sikh Art, Love legends, Composition, Nature, Hills.

The region of Punjab had its geographical extent from Afghanistan to Delhi which led to the synthesis of its religious, spiritual and cultural values which were vividly represented through its built heritage along with its various art forms. The art scenario in Punjab is a by-product of the continuous process of exchange of ideas and traditions across borders which created a distinct mosaic of colors and patterns. In present times, the Contemporary artists of Punjab have made a noteworthy impact on the artistic movement at the State as well as national level further leading to the International art scene.

Phulan Rani- a prominent artist of Punjab, born on 12th December in 1923 in Amritsar to mother- Saraswati who was a housewife and father- Sardar Ram Singh who by profession was a doctor. She was thus raised in a well-to-do family of Amritsar. She acquired the traits of Fine arts related to painting during her childhood. She got initial exposure to art from her parents as an artist she was able to handle her emotions and provided concrete shape to her ideas by using canvas as a medium. She got married to Sardar Shamsher Singh Bhamra in 1943. Her Husband rendered poetry lessons that provided rhythm to her thoughts. She learned the finer nuances of art from Sardar Sobha Singh as she stayed in Andretta (H.P.) for some time as she bought a house there but due to domestic compulsions she had to come back to Amritsar.¹ She started painting her art forms as early as 1945 by using pencil and drawing human forms in a linear pattern. Her father-in-law was really impressed by her art forms and she was given rupees 100/- as an award by him which encouraged her a lot.

Phulan Rani did her matriculation and bachelors from Amritsar and Masters in English literature. The first appearance as a professional artist happened in 1948 when she received an award at Shimla Fine Arts exhibition for her work- “The Dancer”. This painting was done in the Wash technique. She received a coveted Gold Medal for her well-known painting titled- “Twin Sisters or Day and Night” at the Silver Jubilee Fine Arts Exhibition of the Indian Institution of Fine Arts, Amritsar.² During her lifetime, she was actively engaged in running a ‘High School’ along with it she established an ‘Art Gallery’ to give voice to her innermost thoughts and get desired aesthetic satisfaction.³ The land for this gallery was given by the late Chief Minister of Punjab- Sardar

Beant Singh for her selfless service devoted to art as she painted in the medium of water as well as oil colors with amazing proficiency. She was perfect in painting human forms and use of colors through delicate inflections, light, and shade in her paintings that discloses her expertise over human frame. **(Plate No.1)**

The paintings of Phulan Rani create direct appeal both to the eyes and minds of the onlookers. Her Art Gallery is one of its kind in the region having an individual collection of about five hundred miniatures covering the majority of art schools such as Pahari, Mughal,

Chughtai, Bengal School and Sikh art. Her philosophical position and love for poetry always stimulated her to paint love legends like 'The Deserted Majnu', 'Sassi of Sorrows', 'Mirza Sahiban' and 'The Luster of his Flute'. These paintings are notably sensationalized and appealing which have been rendered sensitively. Some of her other paintings such as 'The Poet', 'Time and Beauty', 'The Poet and the Muses', 'Meghdoot' and 'The Street Singers' are the greater source of romance and together with her *Raga* paintings like 'Madhuvanti', 'Peelu', 'Desi', 'Rageshwari' and 'Assa' are unique and passionately convey the spectator into unmapped expanse of imagination. Her diverse attention to portraiture both in water and oil colors is highly respected. The artist expressed her skills by penetrating into her subject's inner world and transforming it into genuine motive power.⁴ She was awarded the 'Sardar Mohan Singh Book Award' for her work titled- 'Life of Guru Nanak Through Pictures' on 23 October, 1970. Phulan Rani has been a renowned Women artist who has many interesting stories to depict the Contemporary art scene as she refers to works of S.G. Thakar Singh who painted an illustration related to system of slavery and the fall of the British empire in newspaper- 'Kirti' published by Shaheed Bhagat Singh and Comrade Sohan Singh Josh. Phulan Rani states that as an artist she has been successful in her work as she got the full support of her husband and children whose help provided her art to reach various corners of the world. She elucidates, "*Nature is like an open book and we can see many beautiful things through it*". She has worked tremendously to promote the art scene in Amritsar by restoring the lost heritage related to frescos and murals of Baba Atal located adjacent to Sri Darbar Sahib. To promote this art heritage for common people she has reproduced the murals on the canvas.⁵

One of her paintings titled- 'Sassi of Sorrows' in the size of 18" X 20" done in watercolors, portrays the famous love legend of Sassi-Punnu from North-west India which has been source of inspiration for many stories and songs of Northern India. **(Plate No.2)** According to this famous legend, Sassi was the daughter of chieftain of Bhombor in Sind and Punnu was a merchant and young prince who traveled with a caravan to Sind. Both of them fell in love with each other. The broken-down tree is the center of attraction with its arms outstretched. Perspective is shown in the background with distant trees in the background with shades of blue and mauve color. Sassi in beautiful attire is shown right in front of the composition. Careful details of the clothing of Sassi are mirrored in her finely platted long black hair gathered in a veil. The clothes are layered in delicate shades of soft yellowish-green and pink as her body is turned towards the right. She steadies her position and looks upwards as her face is shown in profile which is sweet and demure. Her thin arms are shown stretched upwards skillfully. She has kept her one hand on her forehead which depicts the state of sorrow. The posture of the figure is perhaps the main focus which depicts the desperation on the face of Sassi which is figure

of Sassi is shown wearing jewelry which adds charm to the painting. The picture creates a convincing impact of the movement which is also depicted through trees. The tree symbolizes the sadness of Sassi. Phulan Rani is more concerned with clear and forceful structures and rendering artistically her brushstrokes.

Another painting titled- 'Family Group' is 24" X 20" in size and done in watercolors. **(Plate No.3)** One of the favorite subjects of the artist is Family Series. In the family series, personal relations were given visual representation. The composition is a mature style particularly beautiful. Her compositions are many times dominated by nature such as a tree, vegetation and flowers where she uses dull colors. One might be inclined to say that the simple, graphical linear structure of the painting has a certain story about them. She always shapes her figure more precisely and paid more attention to their arrangements within the picture. Here the artist has beautifully done the self-study with her two children in their childhood. The artist face is in side profile which represents the feeling of affection and her sympathy in brushstrokes. The scene seems to be of everyday life where the figure seems to be resting in the garden, The younger child is shown sitting in the lap of artist while the elder one is sitting by her mother, the artist embraces the elder child with one hand. She efficiently distributed a glow of peaceful lines where she drew clearly and accurately. The scene also reveals her love for children whom she has painted with love and affection and better understanding. The foliage in the painting is artistically rendered with the drapery folds are shown in the dress of an artist and children. Soft and pastels shades have been applied. The color of the tree synchronizes with the color of the sky. Brick wall is shown in red color. In the background, flowers in red and yellow colors are shown.

Phulan Rani's one more painting titled- 'His Last Solace' is in size 10" X 14" painted in watercolors. **(Plate No.4)** Her paintings display boldness in the subjects which portray the last days of the Mughal ruler- Shahjahan who is lying on his death bed. His daughter princess- Jahanara is shown sitting near his feet, the emotions of traditional Indian artistic concept of *Bhava* or emotions have been painted by the artist. The daughter is shown holding the hands of her father whose face is filled with despair and dis-enchantment This painting is pictorial in origin has provided a clearly defined view of the distant Taj Mahal from the Red Fort which is exhibited in this painting.

Phulan Rani's other fantastic painting titled- 'The Artist's Daughter' in the size of 18" X 24" is done in oils. **(Plate No.5)** This portrait has a special place for her as she captured her own daughter's beauty in the painting. This painting portrays the face of the artist's younger daughter who is sitting in a calm posture on a raised platform; her feminine grace is handled carefully by the artist. Her facial expressions and movement of hands are shown in a knot-like position on her knee. The portrait seems to be a picture in perfection as time becomes standstill to behold the Nature in the background as mountainscape is shown of

various hues and shades. Snowcapped mountains along with are shown as her daughter loves the hills. A tree is shown in a perspective that emerges out of the portraiture. A hill house is also shown in the background which is at a far way distance which seems to be a hostel dormitory where she was residing eventually she died untimely in an accident near Dalhousie. Thus artist expresses her innermost thoughts which are full of sorrow and sadness as this painting depicts her longing for her daughter. The painting is fixated on time and space. Three layers of clouds are shown with white columns clouds spreading out and mingling with mountains. The drapery of the *Saree* is represented very softly and beautifully which clearly portrays the texture of the cloth which is in pink shade. The smooth fold of the *Saree* has no jagged creases but clings around the figure very elegantly. This detailing of the drapery folds catches our attention toward the artist's conscious mind and creativity. The portrait represents the beauty and grace artistically. The modeling of the head is done in proper proportion. The hairstyle is traditionally done which is black in color. The hairs are parted from the center and a bun or *Jura* is done at the back. A beautiful flower is decked in the hair bun that balances the composition. The lighter tones of blue, white and mauves tones are used to balance the background. A gentle smile is shown on the face. The head is inclined towards the side position, eyes glaze towards the right side, and piercing features are shown intensely by the artist. This painting depicts the togetherness of womenfolk and Nature which tries to provide answer to her solitude and loneliness. The painting is based on the spirit of love and affection associated with parents. Proper alignment is given to the object, and the subject is the daughters and mother bond which is expressed in this painting. The colors are used in the transparent technique where very thin colors are applied. The model is presented with poise and serenity as she lives forever in her mother's dreams.

Phulan Rani's paintings are shaped through chain of emotions that transverse through the canvas to create the objects which represent various aspects of society related to *Bhavas* of a woman, her association with worldly desires and spiritual love. She has dedicated her art to a specific phase of her life as she tries to weave each character in the paintings. She expresses her emotions in watercolors as well as oil colors. She carefully represented space through the use of light and shadow in her paintings. She always realized her intensity to do work. Her paintings are imparted with tempo and grace. Her projection of women's anatomy is astonishingly aesthetic. Artist's imagination power is always visible in her paintings. She has been always inspired by Nature, portraiture, and still-life which are the subject matter of her paintings. Her contribution is pivotal to understanding the emergence of art scenarios in Punjab especially with regard to Amritsar which has been put on world map by the artist who is associated with various art forms and galleries such as the Indian Academy of Fine Arts at Amritsar.

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Plate - 1

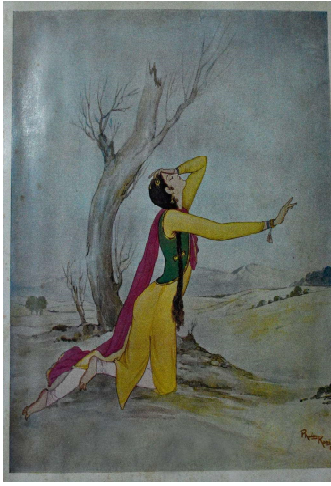


Plate - 2

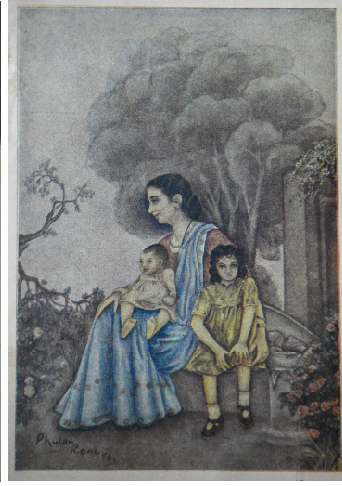


Plate - 3



Plate - 4

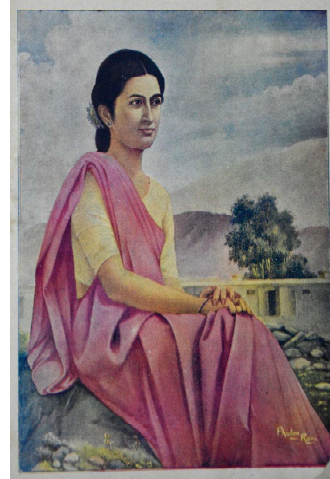


Plate - 5