

Modern Indian Painting: The Presence of the Past

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Abstract

A study of modern Indian art brings forth the understanding that even as artists have over the decades experimented with mediums and styles subject matter too has expanded, ranging from the personal to the universal. A very significant engagement has been the concern with the social reality and the human condition. The modern Indian artist has repeatedly returned to such themes that while drawing from traditional associations present reflections on contemporary conditions as seen in the work of artists such as M. F. Husain, Tyeb Mehta, Arpita Singh, Nalini Malani and Sheba Chhachhi to name just a few. In such works the concern with the ordinary and everyday is expressed through the prism of history, legend and myth thus linking the present with the past. This paper aims to examine how in modern Indian art history and myth and social reality conjoin to reveal meanings, perceptions and associations that enmesh the old and the new while initiating an enquiry into different facets of the present - communal violence, feminist concerns, environmental exploitation and degradation among others.

Keywords: *Tyeb Mehta, Krishen Khanna, Nalini Malani, Sheba Chhachhi, modern Indian painting.*

Introduction

The concern with the present, its social reality and the human condition has over time come to be acknowledged as a significant engagement in the work of the modern Indian artist. Beginning in the early 1940's as seen in the response to the Bengal famine in the works of Chittaprosad,¹ Somnath Hore,² Paritosh Sen,³ Zainul Abedin and Ram Kinkar Baij and then in 1947 and onwards in the works on the partition by artists such as Manishi Dey, Satish Gujral, Sailoz Mukherjee among many others, the enmeshing of art and the social context have taken many avatars over the years. Interestingly a number of artists have drawn upon the historic and the mythic to pictorially articulate their concerns with the issues and situations of the present for example as seen in the paintings of Gujral in the 1950's where works such as 'On the Mountain' or 'Agony in the Garden' are not simply Christian themes but present a narrative of human suffering linked to the partition saga. Artists such as M. F. Husain, Krishen Khanna, Tyeb Mehta, Arpita Singh, Nalini Malani, Sheba Chhachhi, among many others cutting across genders, generations, styles and mediums, have drawn from the past, its legends, myths and histories to reflect upon the contemporary. This paper aims to examine how in modern Indian art the historic, the mythic and social reality conjoin to reveal meanings, perceptions and associations that enmesh the old and the new while initiating an enquiry into different facets of the present - violence, exploitation and feminist concerns among others.

Tyeb Mehta (1925-2009) born in Kapadvanj, Gujarat and brought up in Bombay initially worked as an assistant to a film editor before joining the J. J. School of Art (1947-1952) even as in his own words films remained his first obsession. Part of the Muslim minority community⁴ he closely felt the mayhem unleashed by the partition of the country and an incident witnessed during those days, of a man being killed by a mob, his head bashed in, was to remain with him and consequently underlie his work as well. Mehta's work has largely been viewed through the primacy given to the use of formalist elements, the pictorial discipline and the balance established between the figurative and the abstract, though increasingly the content and context of his paintings has begun to be given centre stage – that is, violence against man and animal, the state of the marginalized in India and the dichotomy of the good and the evil within the self. Mehta has consciously chosen to renounce the narrative and his figures have been rendered almost iconic with the forms refined and pared through the years. The forms that people his oeuvre are the victimised and the marginalised namely the trussed bull being lead for slaughter, the human figure falling headlong into an abyss as the victim of violence (Fig. 1), and the rickshaw puller as the marginalised, and the iconic Kali, Durga and Mahishasura. Many mythic/historic associations can be read into the imagery evolved by Mehta. A compelling "claim" and argument emerges of a deeper link of the "tragic vision" and imagery visualized in Mehta's work with his inherited background of the Shi'a Muslim.⁵ Central to this is the martyrdom

of Imam Hussein, a historical event that has become mythic in collective memory. The grandson of Prophet Mohammed and son of the Caliph Ali, Hussein along with his followers were slaughtered by the Ummayyad forces at Kerbala. In this story lies the narrative of the victim of betrayal and of struggle against injustice. The art critic Ranjit Hoskote is of the opinion that “many of Tyeb’s recurrent images allude to secular and occasionally subaltern avatars of Hussein”⁶ linking thus the artist’s marginalized figures and victim’s of violence to a “subconscious” historic-mythic retrieval.⁷ Interestingly the falling figure imaging tragedy is said to derive from a number of sources - the man he saw being killed in 1947 and the headlong free fall traced to Icarus/Phaethon from Greek mythology.

With the events in Punjab taking on a communal hue and Operation Blue Star in June 1984, which later was followed by the assassination of Indira Gandhi and the anti-Sikh riots, Tyeb Mehta, in a letter dated 16 June 1984 addressed to Krishen Khanna, expressed his deep anguish at the events unfolding stating “the whole country is on fire. And sometimes it makes me think that our work is not the ‘affirmation of life’ as you put it but an exercise in self-indulgence and failure.”⁸ In that period during his stay as artist-in-residence (1984 to 1986) at Visva Bharati University at Santiniketan emerged the image of Kali in her terrible aspect, her mouth a red-smear gash open in a primeval scream, an artistic response it seems to the violence battering the country - depicting the “one who destroys all that is manifest”⁹ (Fig. 2). The many partitions witnessed, 1947, 1984 and 1992-93, the third that saw the pogrom against the Muslim minority in Mumbai, have repeatedly kept the theme of evil inherent in society and within us on Tyeb’s canvas. In the 1990’s Mehta returned to the image of the Goddess fighting Mahishasura, pictorialising the battle between the opposing forces of good and evil raging in our social landscape. This is seen in the Mahisha series of 1997-1998 where Durga Mahishasurmardini is locked in a cataclysmic battle with the buffalo-demon, the end of which is pre-ordained (Fig. 3). In his interpretative approach to the theme the artist goes beyond the particular yet timeless narrative to engage with the elemental and the universal tale of the primeval struggle between good and evil, both external and internal. As the two battle the forms are entwined, the mouth of the goddess open in a cry and the bulk of the buffalo-demon distinguish them, their limbs are dismembered from the bodies appearing all around and conveying the force of the encounter. Gradually along the series the goddess disappears and Mahishasura alone occupies the picture space and having earlier been represented as a beast mired in irrational desires he also appears as a victim of violence and has been read as appearing in the role of the “antihero” of modern cinematic sensibility.¹⁰ Somewhere within this entire narrative of the betrayed, victimised and exploited lies also the voice against the majority dominance that is increasingly intolerant of the other. The almost cyclical recurrence of communal strife in the country has made violence and the recognition of the evil within a continuing theme in Mehta’s work. His engagement with the historic and/or the mythic brings forth an interpretative approach to the subject that aims to present through it the artist’s deep concerns with the realities of society and human

existence.

Krishen Khanna (b. 1925) born in Lyallpur (Faisalabad) in Pakistan is another artist deeply engaged with the human condition. Having borne the anguish of the partition when his family migrated to East Punjab in 1947 Khanna from the 1970's increasingly turned to the depiction of the marginalized and the poor Indian in his paintings. Labourers loaded into trucks along with construction material appear in the 'Rear View' series and the subaltern and the homeless in the urban environment sleep huddled with street dogs in the 'Nocturne' series. These works firmly establish Khanna's interest in the ordinary and the suffering Indian and this gets translated into his paintings on Christ, works that can be viewed in a continuum of a social-humanist context. The subject is historic and yet has acquired a mythic aspect, which the artist transposes in an indigenous environment. His Christ is an indigene,¹¹ and the apostles too are drawn from the subaltern figures that people his 'Rear View' or 'Nocturne' series and the context of the depiction effects a further indigenisation. Here even as the biblical episodes are represented the artist limns a narrative of contemporary times focussing on the violence, betrayal and struggles of the ordinary everyday life in India. In reference to these works the artist articulates how he began to see a "correspondence between social and political events and what happened at the time of Christ" going on to state how corrosive corruption, betrayal, barbarity exhibited by the system and "the pain and suffering of mothers over their dead sons" continue to happen over ages, what he refers to as "a season of repetition and return."¹² So his *Pieta* (Fig. 4) is not just Mary mourning her son but any mother who has lost her child to the barbarism that lurks in contemporary India in different guises of differences of religious beliefs or caste identity or simply inhumanity.

Khanna's focus on Christian themes dates from his early period and has continued to be part of oeuvre over the years. And in his treatment of this subject his subtle shift from a purely religious theme to one with underlying symbolism and increasing concern with his times becomes visible. His 'Betrayal' (1950) images Christ embracing Judas who kisses him, a focussed depiction of the betrayal of Jesus and his acceptance of divine will. Whereas another 'Betrayal' (1980) again pictorializes a swarthy Judas leaning across to kiss Jesus. But here the similarity ends. Included in this are the three apostles Peter, John and James the three figures on the left here transformed into Indian types – a Nehru jacket and Gandhi cap attired figure standing along with a turbaned man and a topi wearing figure - turn away to from the unfolding drama. These figures who stand by seemingly have come to symbolise various communities, religious and political, responsible for the betrayal of man (Jesus) and consequently humanity, with the blame for the cruelty and bestiality thus engendered being apportioned to all equally. One may conjecture from this that when compassion and humaneness fall victim to dark forces, as it was during the genocide of 1947 and the communal conflagrations that have reoccurred in India over the years, the blame is collective and is ours as a people and a nation. These works while based on a

historical narrative are de-particularised with the artist placing them in a space that is timeless and universal in human terms while at the same time referring to Indian society and situations as we experience in our lives. While enmeshing the ordinary and the everyday with the biblical Khanna mythologizes the former and contemporizes the latter. His Christ is not the Son of God but a man who embodies the suffering and betrayal that are part of human existence, a brave figure enduring pain and anguish.

Nalini Malani (b. 1946) was born in Karachi now lives in Mumbai and has studied at the J. J. School of Art in the city. She has over the years turned to the mythic, historic and literary to engage with issues of power, exploitation, violence and betrayal including in the pictured-text the individual and the nation. She claims an unabashedly feminist or woman's view of situations as they occur and of the narratives unfolding.¹³ Malani has in her reflections of the present and particularly its dystopian aspects drawn from varied sources, both from Eastern and Western mythology, such as the Bhagvata Purana, and the stories of Radha, Sita and the Greek myth of Medea via the dramatised interpretation by Heiner Muller.¹⁴ She turned to the theme of Medea in 1992 and has drawn from it over the years turning to painting, installation and performance art¹⁵ to convey the varied layered meanings that emerge from the tale. Medea the sorceress princess of Colchis fell in love with Jason who had come for the golden fleece and helped him obtain it on the promise that he would leave taking her along. She leaves behind her dead brother and the destruction caused by Argonauts the companions of Jason. Bearing him children she exacts terrible revenge when Jason abandons her for Glauce, killing the princess with a poisoned robe and later her own children as well.¹⁶ Malani through the myth and its interpretation in Mueller's work maps the narrative of the colonized, exploited and betrayed. The myth deals with betrayal, of family and of love, exploitation by the dominant power, here of the barbarians by the Greeks, and Mueller's fiercely political text provides a rich canvas for Malani's expression of historicized exploitation.¹⁷ Apart from this wider universalized context of the Medea myth it also holds within it the pain and anguish of a woman betrayed who exacts revenge not just upon her betrayer but also upon herself in the murder of her family and her children. In Malani's work a somewhat similar space is occupied by Sita who, like Medea follows her husband into exile only to face rejection by him twice before returning to mother earth. Malani brings these two protagonists together in *Sita/Medea* (2006) where they sit facing each other, mirror images, women who sacrificed and in turn were betrayed and rejected, while around them lies detritus seemingly of their lives and love. For her these two emerge "as supremely tragic and potent symbols not only for deeply ingrained gender-biases in Indian and European mythology, but also ... for desire, violence and betrayal as basic characteristics of human behaviour."¹⁸ The definition of the form by pigment that runs, envelops the forms loosely seemingly revealing what lies beneath further pictorialises the narrative of pain. Malani's representations of ancient tales transpose the narrative and its readings on to a contemporary context that interestingly continues to reflect similar concerns even today.

Sheba Chhachhi (b. 1958), born in Harar, Ethiopia where her army engineer father was stationed is an activist, writer, designer and artist. She has worked in a number of media - photography, sculpture, installation and performance.¹⁹ While doing documentary photography her work by its very nature was political, issue based and engaged in the women's movement. Gradually she turned to installation art arriving via the medium at a more communicative and contemplative expression. She articulates the two major concerns in her work as "the need to investigate and articulate the history, experience and power of feminine consciousness ... and a desire to generate a process of reflection through interactive communication."²⁰ It was in 1993 that Chhachhi turned to multimedia installations finding in them a medium suitable for addressing her concerns. She brings into her work a belief in subjectivity allowing the meanings to emerge in a contextual and relative manner. What characterises her work is the intense involvement with the subject, forging a deep cerebral engagement and creating works that are deeply immersive. Chhachhi's work is anchored firmly in the present and its myriad issues, of migration, of the suffering of the innocent whose voice is unheard, of the loss of human discourse in the so called larger national concerns and the Indian urban situation, all concerns that while being particular are also universal in nature. She turns to the mythic and the historical to articulate a process of contemplation and reflection on the present. In her work she initiates a process through which "the myth and the social conjoin to open up new forms of perception and new forms of reflection on" the current situation.²¹ In the multimedia installation 'Neelkanth: poison/nectar' (2002) she draws upon the story of Shiva drinking the poison created by the churning of the ocean thus rescuing the world. The myth here is displaced on the Indian urban situation and articulates the concern with the rapid urbanization that has created a toxic underbelly in our cities. The arrangement of the elements of the installation, comprising of a video loop of a swallowing throat, aluminium towers, photographs, light, is in a mandala/yantra formation that draws in the viewer. The aim is to evoke questions and initiate active thinking on the hyper-urbanizing space we occupy and on our current living environment suggesting that we have become unwitting neelkanthas or drinkers of poison in the process. In the work 'Winged Pilgrims a Chronicle from Asia'²² (2006) provoked by the unreasoned shooting down of birds moving from the East to the West on their migratory paths and the staggering, in numbers and across-borders, culling of birds evoked by the panic triggered by the 'Asian avian flu.' It contains within it the narrative of the Asian migrant, referring here both to China and India, symbolized by the pilgrim robes that speak of migrations of the past and the present. In this work the images of the different birds incorporated in the pictorial imagery bring in a wealth of myths, fables and parables associated with these winged creatures and the rich diverse cultural ethos they inhabit. Chhachhi through recuperating the myth seeks to restore the philosophies embedded within these tales and to calibrate an enquiry into the present by revisiting an ancient iconography and establishing a relationship with the past and heritage.

Summary

The above study of the works of Tyeb Mehta, Krishen Khanna, Nalini Malani and Sheba Chhachhi reveals how time and again the artists have revisited the historic and the mythic to contemplate on the present bringing to it deeper reflections and associations that draw the mind to a more nuanced understanding of the issues addressed. All have continuously expressed their concern with the condition of the human in the current narrowing intolerant socio-political and consumerist times. Whether they wield the brush or construct art through found objects the historic and the mythic have provided them with a rich pictorial vocabulary that allows the visible image to suggest images within, presenting layers of meaning, both pictured and memory-imagined - the reference to the past bringing subtler nuances to the contemplation of the present.

References

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- ³ Paritosh Sen, *Contemporary Indian Art Series, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, 1975.*
- ⁴ Tyeb Mehta is from the Dawoodi Bohra micro-minority within the Gujarati Shi'a community. Hoskote, Ranjit, "Images of Transcendence, Towards a new understanding of Tyeb Mehta's Art", in Tyeb Mehta, *Ideas Images Exchanges*, Vadhra Art Gallery, New Delhi, 2005, p. 8.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 22.
- ⁶ *Ibid.* p. 22.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- ⁸ Sinha, Gayatri, *Krishen Khanna, A Critical Biography, Vadhera Art Gallery, new Delhi, 2001, p. 155.*
- ⁹ Danielou, Alain, *The Myths and the Gods of India, the Classic work of Hindu Polytheism, Inner Trading International, Rochester, Vermont, 1991, p. 274.*
- ¹⁰ Sen, Geeti, *Feminine Fables, Imaging the Indian Woman in Painting, Photography and Cinema, Mapin Publishing, Ahmedabad, 2001, p. 196.*
- ¹¹ It was his father's observation that the Muslim pilgrims and students coming to the dargah and madrasa at Nizamuddin would have a greater resemblance to Christ than the popular Anglo-Saxon version, an observation that was to greatly influence Krishen Khanna's representation of Christ. Khanna, Krishen, "In Retrospect", in Ranjit Hoskote, Marilyn Rushton and Tanuj Berry *Krishen Khanna, Images in My Time, Mapin Publishing, Lund Humphries, Ahmedabad, India, Hampshire, UK.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ In an interview when questioned on being referred to as a feminist artist Malani said, "I am a woman so I only work from the point of view of a woman. Do you ever ask a man what point of view he works from? I would love to hear a male artist say that I am a feminist and I work from the point of view of a woman. I haven't heard it so far. So far we haven't heard women's problems being discussed as our problems." Tripathi, Shailaja, "Listen to Cassandra", *The Hindu*, January 30, 2014.

¹⁴ Kapur, Geeta, "Body as gesture: Women Artists at Work," in *When Was Modernism, Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*, Tulika, New Delhi, 2000, p. 33.

¹⁵ Malani, Nalini, "The Genesis," *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 43, p. 54; Malani staged 'Medeaprojekt' a video and theatre installation in which she collaborated with the performer Alaknanda Samarth. Yashodhara Dalmia, "Home/Nation", in Yashodhara Dalmia and Salima Hashmi ed. *Memory, Metaphor, Mutations, Contemporary Art of India and Pakistan*, New Delhi, 2007, p. 152.

¹⁶ *Encyclopedia Mythica*. <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/m/medea.html> Retrieved on 20.3.2014.

¹⁷ Geeta Kapur takes into account Greek mythology and Muller's play bringing in the past and present to unveil the meanings in the treatment of the myth by Nalini. Kapur, Geeta, *op. cit.* p. 36.

¹⁸ Sambrani, Chaitanya, "Apocalypse Recalled: The recent work of Nalini Malani," www.nalinimalani.com Retrieved on 10.3.2010.

¹⁹ Chhachhi, Sheba, "Wild Mothers", *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 41, 1995, p. 44.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Quoted from a lecture by Sheba Chhachhi titled "Politics of Contemplation" given at the Chandigarh Lalit Kala Akademi Amrita Sher-gil National Art Week, 2013. In this paper the discussion of her work draws upon this lecture.

²² A video of the installation depicting the 'Plasma Action' Electronic TV toy, the Buddhist pilgrim robes and the mov

ing eliding images of urban/rural landscapes and images of birds from Volte Gallery can be viewed at <http://vimeo.com/28400497> Retrieved on 22.08.2014.