

perspective

Keeping Up with Art

by Andaz

THE ARTIST IN TODAY'S TOPSY-TURVY world is under stress — to portray his own smouldering self-expressions; and to depict the changing society around him, in two or three dimensions, (with intimations of fourth, fifth, and the sixth).

His creations must stand the test of time (and Time is a hard taskmaster); that is, remembered by his contemporaries, and noticed by the succeeding generations.

With the generation gap ever widening each decade, the artist has to embark on new pilgrimages, in search of new tools and mediums. Also, in view of the increasing competition from the mass media, the artist is faced with the nuisance of keeping himself in projection before discerning eyes and probing minds, to separate the profound from the profane.

Being 'natural' might be termed archaic, but plasticity in creativity is the life blood of dynamic art forms, and that blood is squeezed out drop by drop from those who deign to create at mundane levels — perhaps in divine discontent.

Art frames the society within points of reference; and at the same time it has to keep one step ahead to stimulate other thinking minds. This dual responsibility is entrusted to many, but bestowed on a chosen few.

Like literature, art is also a carrier of culture, but, unlike literature, its patrons are limited and specialized; especially in the developing countries, where the communication gap between the artist and the viewer is more pronounced. In the developed (or industrialized) countries the society is also changing, but this gap is much narrower, as the curve has since flattened out at the top; and in fact, it is now going



Painting by Shahabuddin

down.

Therefore, there is a new parameter for the artist in a developing country — his role as a communicator. There is a further requirement: his role as a popular communicator. Perhaps he is not interested in this role. Whose responsibility is it — art is for the critics and other artists only, and not for the 'viewers' also?

How far has the artist succeeded in this national pastime? The term 'pastime' is used to leave some elbow room for the independent creators who like to be free from roles, assignments, and responsibilities — the Bohemianism of the human mind has always to be respected.

We are not at a cross road; and the goal of the artist is never well defined — and it should not be. But — and it is a big But — what is art without eyes to see? The cosmologists posed the same question: which came first, light or darkness? Light, we are told, was born out of Darkness; and then the visual tools developed in nature.

Perhaps, the exposure of human works of art might not be the goal of its creators. In that case, it is not necessary to read this commentary of a viewer.

Recently I (low-brow art viewer) went, along with my family, to have a look at an exhibition of art work from a foreign country. Less than half a dozen pieces attracted our amateurish atten-

tion for a while. Unfortunately, we could not 'relate' to most of the rest, so carefully selected by the distinguished organizers. We plead guilty; the short-coming was (or is) ours, definitely, being untrained viewers, (for example, it needs training to appreciate classical music).

Coming out, I was displeased with myself for not having 'clicked' at contemporary artwork coming from a country with a background of a couple of thousand years of culture. I also wondered what I had learnt, or unlearned, after going through such recognized names as da Vinci, Tolstoy, Ruskin, Read, Malraux, Sartre, Grombich; and after having absorbed a little of other disciplines such as Chinese, Japanese, Persian, and Moghul art, during earlier periods of life, while in hot pursuit of a planned programme trying to develop a "cultivated mind" — whatever it meant.

The thought arose that one might be out of tune with the times. It is not the communication gap of the older generation, but perhaps just the reverse. In this Information Age, the barriers are down, and it is a problem to keep pace with the huge amount of data produced, released, and dissimulated at a hectic pace, not only through the modern mass media, but with easier and fast travel facilities, which are now affordable.

There is always the suspicion that there is another aspect — the social impact of fast changing society on art in any country or on any culture. After the Second World War (1939-45), changes in societies every decade have been faster than that in each century in the past. Therefore, it is quite a handful for an art viewer to quickly get the hang of the work of foreign artists, not to speak of keeping pace with the local contemporary modern artists.



Painting by Monsur Ul Karim

'Modern' has a topical undertone. This is also an age of specialization (includes fads), therefore it is not easy for a generalist to maintain his aesthetics, or sense and sensibility, up-to-date — or whatever the experts call it. This is also the age of dissection, analyses of inner turmoils, the fondness for psychological probes. The epidemic has spread into literature also — the inward look, the drugs, the fast life, the erosion of moral values...

A quarter of a century ago, it was

possible to linger for a while in an exhibition hall, and come out and recommend to friends to go and have a look. Now the mind is strangely vacant. One is reminded of such 'cultures' as the campus violence, the eroding morals, the dawn-to dusk struggle to keep one's self alive in this lifeless life...

There is always the consoling thought that one was in the company of the majority of artless souls, the majority is always right — is it? — Dharitri Feature.

fiction

Design to Disaster

by Purabi Basu

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN MY husband had a number of beloveds. Of course, since we got married I am the sole woman in his life. And that he has told me on numerous occasions in numerous ways. Even now, after three and a half years of our married life, as he holds me fast to kiss in a somewhat crazy fashion, he says, "I just can't believe that you have become my wife." One cannot expect such ecstasy from a thirty-five year old person, one who has crossed the borders of youth, no matter, if he is a husband! But I should confess that I enjoyed such good humour. May be he failed to hide his pleasures in his apparently serious disposition. So he made efforts to express in words, novel and attractive.

In the friends' circle he has some renown as a man of taste, marks of which I can see in everyday life. He is equally excellent in interior decor, selection of saris and choice of gifts. Especially I love the style of his conversation so much. His lovely words and his fresh and spicy utterances do colour my everyday life. To many, married life develops into something monotonous and unbearable. To me it is not so, yet. May be I have in me something special to find where pleasure is.

I am quite beautiful to look at, I was, however, never concerned about that. Before I got married I was a little indifferent about beauty or its importance. After I got married, by interaction, I understood how important it is for a woman to be beautiful. It's pleasant to think that my husband is proud of my beauty. These days I often sit in front of the dressing table. If there is nobody I put off every clothing just in a moment. I look at me from different angles, through my eyes, through the eyes of my husband. I try to analyse as I conceive what's there in this body that has tied the outdoor bird of wilderness in this way. My female friends say my figure is very attractive. He, of course, adores my lips most. I am ceaselessly careful to make myself attractive. If not to my liking, I undo hairdressing and do it again and again. Over my thick lips I use the natural colour. Eyeliner leaves a soft mark on the eyes. Of course I apply the colour on the upper eyelids. I know that putting on collyrium on the lower eyelid or in the eye is out of fashion these days. During those moments I feel I am the happiest and most fortunate person in the world. Then I deliberately try to depress myself with remembrances of misfortunes of many of my acquaintances.

But that does not last long. One who is dipped in pleasure so thoroughly, how

long can she pin other's distress on her? These days I have found a new kind of pleasure. Since I am not a male I am deprived of the eyes that ecstatically searches the young woman in her bloom. But in spite of that, for some time past, a beautiful woman has given me a new and unusual pleasure. Needless to say, the woman is known to my husband from the early days. And if vilifier's words are not always untruth, she was at one time his beloved. She is married too, now a wife and companion of somebody else. We were almost disconnected. We even didn't know since when they are here on transfer of job. I seem persuaded to say 'we' since my husband did not conceal anything about the women in his life in the past. So the woman who was once a partner of his life for every moment, whom I had never seen in the past, is actually quite known to me. He did not like to raise it to a new and respectful relations which at one time had met its natural death. His experience says this brings in many complications. Besides, we had simply different views about a happy life. My husband says — the happiness of married life is in your own hands. You have to give efforts, should always be alert of making it lasting and decent. He says, here lies the difference between conjugal and other relationships. But I insist if love is there and true, effort has nothing to contribute. Sincere and true love would make everybody happy, will make life a pleasant one. Love is not an object, it's a spontaneous emotion, you can't shape or reshape it with your hands or brain. But he would never pay any heed to these words of mine. However, he doesn't oppose them very much. To him this conforms to the nature of youth. When emotions will recede I will shift from my position. He thinks, in post-marital life love can not play the absolute role. He would refer to a certain woman off and on. She was a widow at her middle-age with a lofty idea about marriage. Once she had said to my husband that married life was like a sapling. It requires regular care and nourishing. You have to put off the dry leave, fix up the post to keep it erect, expose it to light, protect it from wind. To do all these one has to make efforts coupled with love. Only love can't make the plant live, and even if it does, it won't have its expected growth.

However, on the whole, my husband would always resist any unwelcome shadow that might disturb our present happy life. So he wanted to consider his past as dead. Probably that caused the grave look as he heard that the woman had wanted to see him and I was



Sketch by Biren Swam

also enthusiastic about that. "What's the use" he said. Then I applied the final weapon. I tried to make him understand that his unwillingness would give her a different hint which is not true. That worked. Since I was never aggrieved over his past life, he always felt grateful to me. He could not misinterpret my generous move. So, just an ordinary January day became memorable with her visit to our place. In the black wrapper, she appeared to be a woman of very fair complexion. One can be just rapt in attention to look at her shoulder. My first look at her even perplexed me. How can a man control his passions! I entertained her as best as I could.

From then on, she used to visit us often. All alone. She had a daughter but never did she bring her to our place. Probably she felt shy to show my husband the daughter whose father is somebody else. After this, many more of my husband's beloveds came to our house one by one, all at my initiatives. At one time they envied each other over a particular person; they vied so earnestly among themselves to show off their beauty. Any one of them could have enjoyed the similar privilege as I

do now. But they are my guests now. All of them sit together to dine at the same table. Their faces beam with smile. Most interesting of all is that we live in a city wherein almost everyone of his erstwhile sweethearts are staying with families. So, our house became warm within a short span of time.

I observed our old servant was feeling uneasy. He could smell my imminent danger. But servant as he was, he could not utter words of caution. That made me smile.

Frankly speaking, I somehow found pleasure in all these. There were elements of pride, cruelty and generosity — all mixed up. As a result, these women of amazing character claimed a good part of my everyday life. That made my husband frightened. He wanted to protest but to no avail. The craze which took over would not leave me so soon. My husband probably did not understand that. So he just remained silent, helpless. And sometimes he sat alone in a disengaged fashion on the verandah. He felt the tremor created by those unwanted women. Finally, it was simply impossible for us to find out so uninterrupted and peaceful time. Going

out with my husband in the evening or the mid-day gossip on Sundays became impossible. He was quite unhappy over that. I became scared. But there was no way out. An inevitable attraction dragged me towards a definite mode of action. So my days passed in some identical way. My pleasures paid me. My figure gradually assumed greater charm. As days went on, I proceeded further. Now I love to be busy in household chores leaving my husband with one particular woman or with a number of them. This I did for different reasons. I felt bad as they could not speak frankly with my husband in my presence.

However, my delight was ever increasing. My generosity made me proud and my husband amazed. But this simple joy got a shock at one noon-time. I sank in a natural and inevitable pressure. Like the shrinking of spongy roundish red blood cells under the osmotic pressure, I felt crumbled in pain.

The day before, I went to my brother's. He himself took me there. It was past 1 pm when I came back. I crossed the gate. And to my surprise I found the door of the bed-room open. Instantly I remembered today was a half-day for him. But something seemed odd to me as I stepped forward to the bed-room. For the first time a thought tickled me — I'm not free to enter my own bed-room. I found my husband with that fair-complexioned woman sitting intimately, nothing obscene though. It was something that would have been natural for him only with me. I retreated. They didn't take note — nobody does at such a moment. The woman came out after some time. Her steps were slow. She crossed the long verandah. And then her eyes met me. She didn't converse long with me today. Putting up a smile she asked, "When did you come back? I was here for quite some time. My husband must be waiting for me at the dining table."

There was a soft rhythm in her walking pace. This time her steps, her voice, her smile everything seemed very obscene and ugly. I turned my face. My husband was still inside without any knowledge of my presence. I kept on standing on the verandah. The car moved away and with its sound I turned my eyes to the road. I saw the lady in the blue car putting down her veil on her face. I felt a turmoil inside me. I felt as if I didn't know myself. Oh, what intense the sufferings were! Why? A pain rolled inside me and pressed hard to come up to my throat. I felt restless. I begged kindness from the sky. Peace didn't touch me. I thought of tales

of chaste wives taking their husbands to the prostitutes — that didn't strike me as admirable. I wept bitterly. I tasted the salt of my tears. The tower of joy that I built so far with every care broke down into pieces.

The whole day went by this way. With efforts I behaved as naturally as I could. At night, as usual we met on the bed. The noontime incident invaded me. So my husband's warmth could not brim me to the full. I missed the feeling of disregarding everything in the world which was my experience so far. Very casually I raised the name of that woman. He seemed not to notice anything unusual in my voice. Since such talks were frequent between us, he did not suspect anything. My husband had no knowledge of the blast furnace seething in my heart. He couldn't understand that from the noon to midnight — this long pretension of his is so very unbearable to me. Hatred was squeezing me. To me he now seemed to be a disgusting cheat as he drew me near and wished to claim me as his woman. I was inert, irresponsible. He soon discovered the restlessness in me. So he started the conversation in a compulsive way.

- The woman is in a deep distress.
- Why? Her husband is a moneyed man!

- Do you think rich people's spouses are always happy?
- What ails her?

- Never did she find happiness after her marriage. These days her husband is critical of her coming to our place. She was so sad today. She even wept.

- What did you say?
For some moments he seemed to have lost his voice. Then he spoke, revealing the misfortune of a dear one. He said that this noon the woman was very upset. She needed some consolation. The woman left as she overcame her restlessness.

The heat of my brain was being transported to elsewhere. My inner agitation was vanishing gradually. Within me I felt the queer pleasure spreading again. My husband is very clever, I felt. How wonderfully and cleverly has he wiped off the newly-grown pocket of the insect from the plant. Inside me I felt the tenacious, egotist, proud and self-projecting snake raising its hood in an expansive way. I could not resist myself. The loving wife in me uttered words of sincerity and compassion: "What a distressed woman is she! Maybe you can do something for her. Your sympathies can offer some pleasure of living to the unfortunate woman."

Translated by Shafi Ahmed