

Fish preparing- Oil on canvas



Farmers in confrontation- Oil on canvas

SULTAN

-- Artist of the land

Sheikh Mohammed Sultan (better known as SM Sultan) was a type by himself as a painter in the artistic tradition of Indian sub-continent. His works, the vigour and movement of brush, the gracefulness of the figures, their worldliness and sensual beauty, completely free from any sort of mystifying symbol apart from the inherent logic of aesthetics, bear ample testimony of Renaissance paintings, so said by Ahmed Sofa. An avant-garde artist, Sultan chose peasants as his muse. His works depicted their stoic valour, power of survival and unceasing commitment to the land. On his 92nd birth anniversary, we publish an interview of the art maestro, where he spoke about the practice of art in Bangladesh, his inspirations and much more. The interview was first published in Weekly Prahar on May 6, 1987.

When did you begin painting?

During my school life. I used to paint pictures with coal back then.

We often see muscular farmers in your paintings. Is there any particular reason behind that?

Farmers are the actual heroes of the country. Can a hero ever be weak? Farmers are at the heart of everything. Thus they absolutely need to be muscular. They push in the blade of the plough into the rough land to harvest produce. But they live without food in their stomachs, without clothes on their body. The truth is we are alive because of them. If they weren't here,

their valuable lives during the Liberation War. They tilted lands to harvest crops. They are the valiant children of the nation. I painted a valiant portrait of these children in my own style. I felt like this is the way I could give expression to their heroic tale.

To what extent is there a relationship between an artist and politician? Do you think that an artist should play a role in national politics?

An artist is not beyond the society. They find the elements of their art from within the society. That's the reason why they need to be socially conscious.

of this grand sacrifice. I believe that there is something great behind sacrifice. Thus, people have sacrificed to achieve something great. And I painted pictures depicting the resistance of the people of Bengal. At this moment I remember how Sheikh Mujib had said, "Be prepared with everything that you have." He had said an amazing thing. In my picture, farmers were shown to be putting up a resistance but they held local weapons in their hands. They jumped into the war carrying weapons made in their own land. This struggle was a spontaneous one; they carried with them the belief that in return for

In your paintings, you painted soft, delicate women standing alongside muscular men. Just as how the men express the desire to combat, the women express a sense of delicateness. It's as if women are the messengers of peace. Could you please elaborate on this positioning of mutually opposite images in the same canvas?

Men struggle and women work behind the scene to turn this struggle into success. With their love, women mould life to be sweet, luscious. Men work hard and harvest crops from the land. Women work at home, raising their children. Nobody encroaches on the other's rights. Both of them are equal but both of their work spheres are separate. In their respective sectors, they work with dignity. Thus, life could be made beautiful. This is what I had in mind when I painted these pictures.

Everyone desires to be an artist. However, it's only possible for a true artist to immerse themselves completely in art. And your thoughts and ideas are reflected in your art. There must be some influence working in this regard. What would that influence be?

Everyone wants to paint. That's true. I believe that inspiration is needed to be able to do that. It is important to envision every beautiful thing in the world; this could help to come up with an inspiration.

Arun Rai, a zamindar of Narail, stirred up such an inspiration within me. He helped me expand my vision from that young age. He showed me old masterpieces. That inspired me; I began to believe that I would be a great artist. Later, eminent art enthusiast Hasan Shaheed Suhrawardy inspired me. All of this influenced me to be an artist.

Many famous artists of the world brought forth different movements that have a number of followers. Do you support this?

Of course, I support art movements. However, this is not the way it happened in our country. The main reason could probably be that the artists of this country are not willing to come together. Artists don't have a separate neighbourhood, where they can get together to exchange views. I guess professional envy and hostility work here. For example, I held an exhibition but many artists didn't show up. How can movements be started in this manner?

The creator resides in creation. How would explain this?

There are so many aspects of this beautiful world. I am sure that there must be a creator behind all of this. However, he doesn't listen. In order to

get him to listen, one needs to be completely devoted. In life, dedication is important in every sphere if you want to achieve something from it.

You are an artist of global standards. Young, aspiring artists could benefit by staying close to you. But why don't we see you as a teacher at Charukola Institute (Institute of Fine Arts, Dhaka University)?

I could exchange views with the youth, and that could benefit them. Another thing, I create my own canvas and paint colours. Many have claimed that these paint colours don't last. However, the colour of the painting that I painted in 1946 is still intact. I could inform young students about all of this. But no one invited me to teach at their institute. They probably think that I am not skilled enough. That's possibly why they didn't ask me to teach.

While painting, what do you give more preference to – new ideas or the attachment to the subconscious mind?

I try to give importance to the subject's deep-rooted truths, implanted in their subconscious. This leads to some changes in the subject's outward appearance as well. I want to move forward by continuing with this practice.

Have any of our artists created a movement through their artwork?

I am not aware of any specific movement. However, I am not being able to accept the 'Bengal School' of art practice, credited to Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose and Jamini Rai, as this art practice is taken from the Ramayan and is shaped on the tradition of the West. On the other hand, our Zainul Abedin created his art based on the realities of the entire Bengal. He was the first to view Bengal in a new light. However, at present one doesn't really notice that many of his followers.

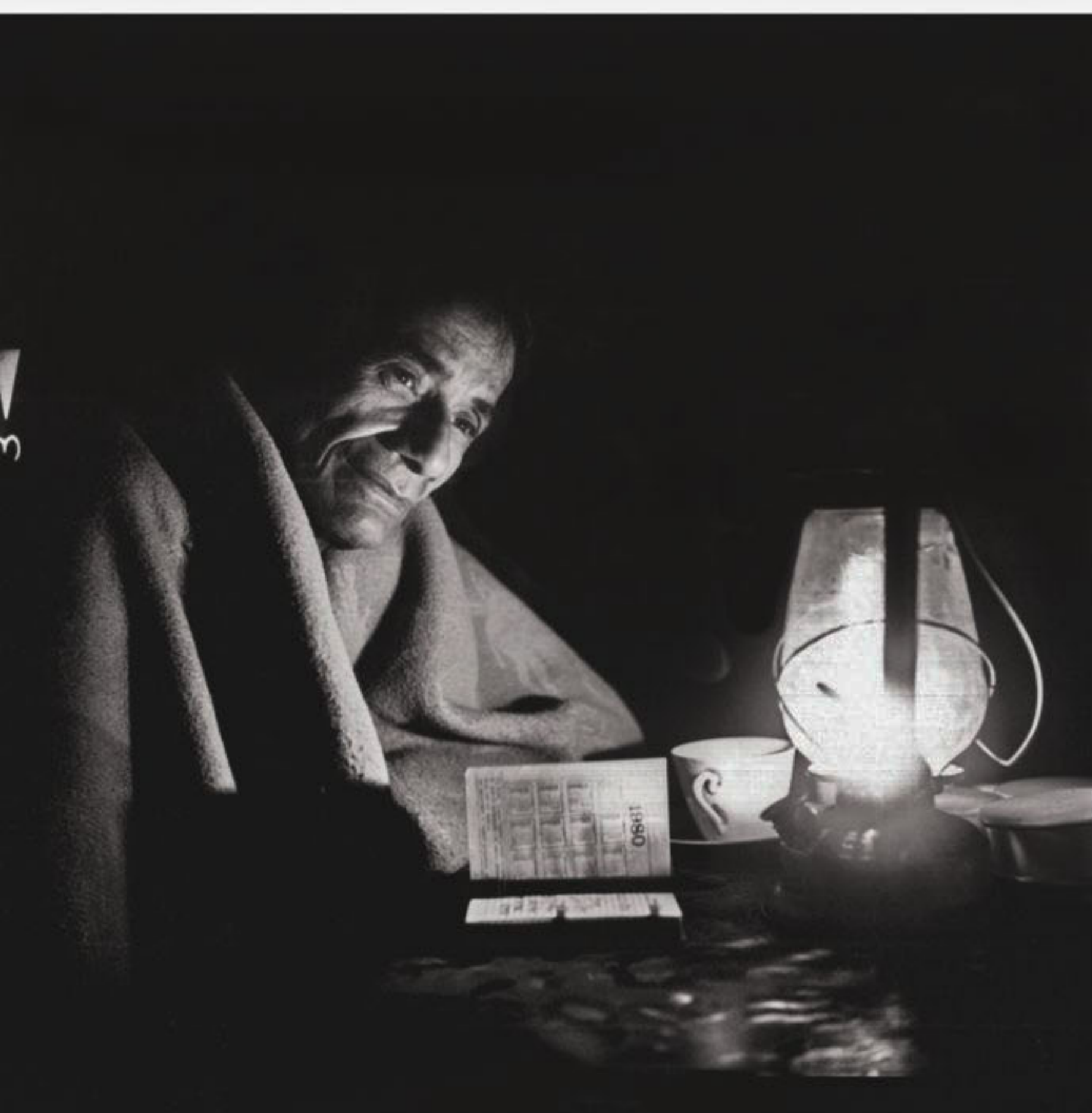
Do you prepare any outline before you start painting on the canvas?

No, I directly start applying colour on the canvas. No matter what I paint, its image is etched in my mind before I start painting.

Bright colours are not observed in your paintings. Is there any particular reason behind that?

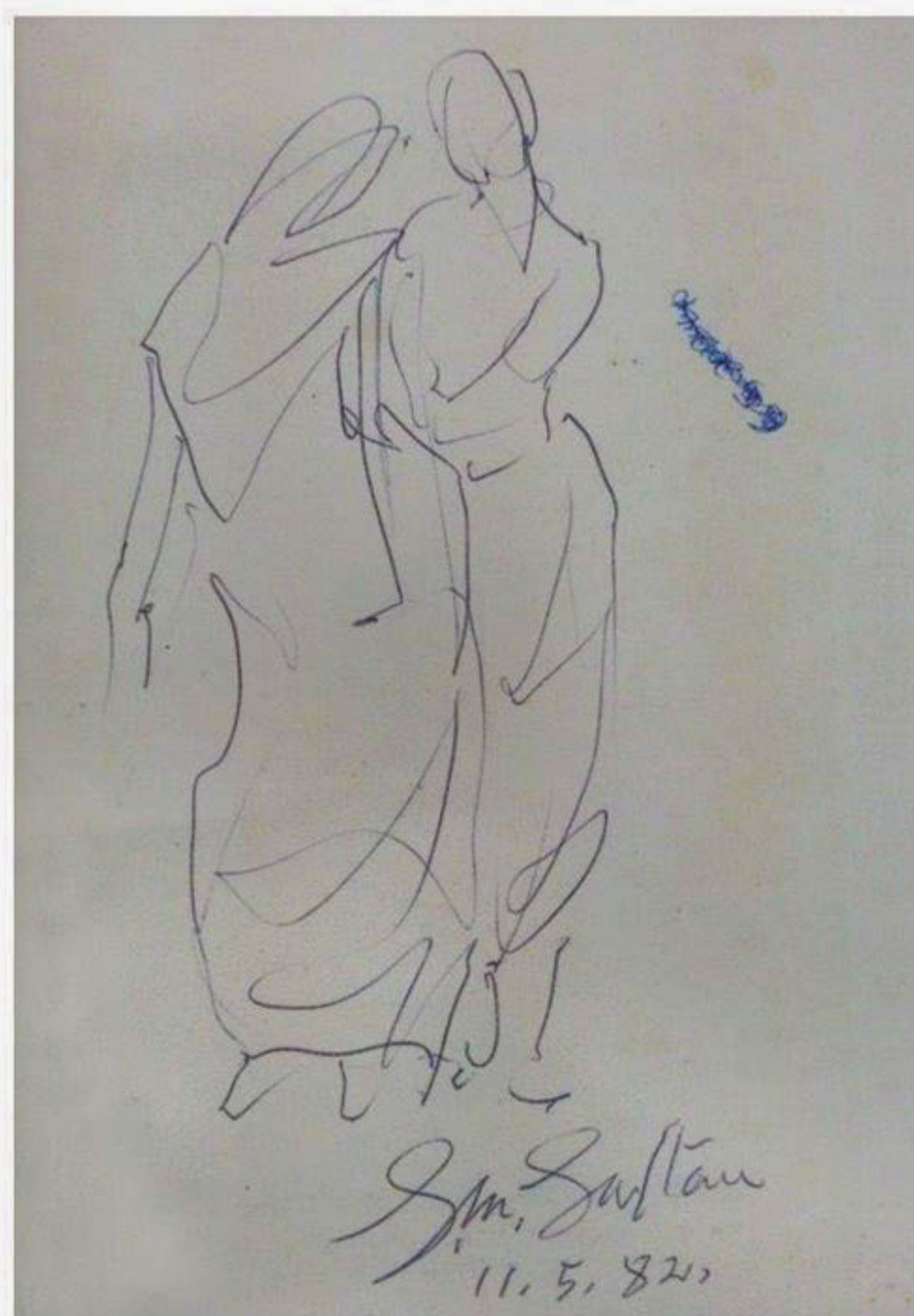
I use the colours of the earth. Human beings and the earth become one here. The person at the heart of a nation is the farmer. He cultivates the land to grow crops. He has an intimate relationship with land. That's the reason why this colour of the earth has found place in my paintings. I paint my pictures in the colour of the earth.

Translation: Upashana Salam



S M Sultan, December 1979 Masimdia, Narail

PHOTO: NASIR ALI MAMUN (PHOTOSEUM)



A rare piece of sketch

COURTESY: FAYEKA ZABEEN SIDDIQUA

our existence would be in danger. Even though they are emaciated, skeletal and undernourished in reality, I want to imagine them as a symbol of strength. I hope for a prosperous life for them.

When you were in Pakistan, you painted abstract paintings. At present, why don't we see you painting abstract work that much anymore?

The Liberation War could be one reason behind this. After the war, I felt more of a pull to paint ordinary people and farmers. Their contributions were what helped build the city, and that's why their gaunt bodies moved me. These emaciated farmers laid down

In that way, an artist is not beyond politics.

Picasso created Guernica to protest against the brutal oppression of people living in Spain. However, why aren't there any notable artworks to protest the brutality of the Pakistani army against the people of Bangladesh?

It's not like there are no paintings in this regard. There are. I painted on this subject but the violence was not the subject of my painting; I painted a picture of self-sacrifice. The people of Bangladesh sacrificed themselves without any hesitation, they thus embraced their death. I painted pictures

their sacrifice, they'd receive the ultimate gift. The neglected people of Bengal did not jump into combat because they were patronised by any powerful force. They did so impulsively, for the sake of their existence.

I believe that I need to say one more thing, though. There are some differences between Picasso and me. Picasso shifted from figurative art to non-figurative art and I shifted from non-figurative art to figurative art. Picasso painted a picture of the violence inflicted on Guernica. I painted a picture of sacrifice.