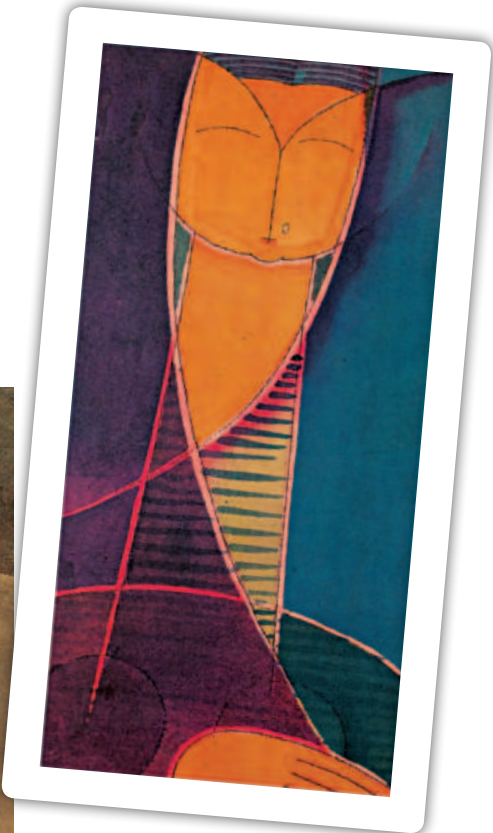


#REVIEW

THE FACELESS STRENGTH OF WOMEN IN ZAINUL'S ART

They appear with indistinct facial features. Rather than having doe eyes and full lips, the eyes and the mouths are often reduced to bear lines. Clad in the most traditional of sarees, these women are seen to engage in activities that define pastoral Bengal. Still, they are anonymous, almost faceless. Zainul Abedin was a master of drawing. Then, why does he adhere to this



simplistic notion while painting women? The answer probably lies in the fact that indistinct should not be confused with blankness or lack of entity. These apparent simplistic drawings are indeed filled with meaning that goes beyond art!

In rural Bengal, women often lead lives marked by obscurity, where their lives and works and endless contributions go grossly unnoticed. Zainul somehow overshadows that stark, social invisibility and gives women in general a platform. Many would go to claim that the by omitting details, Zainul Abedin was in fact reinforcing the identity of the women. By making their faces and features blank, he was making them more real. She could have been our mother, grandmother, or sister...an identity open to interpretation. With careful examination, it is easy to understand that he was not trying to draw the individual rural women. He attempted to paint the universal Bengali experience. The paintings turned every other rural woman of

Bangladesh into a global symbol that went beyond portraits. Painters are often accused of imparting a sense of sentimentality in the depiction of pastoral topics. Zainul, however, is



free from this prejudice. In his art, he not only romanticises the subject he draws but also honours their resilience without diminishing them to mere decorations. He

honours their privacy, and dignity, and allows viewers to focus on their strength and actions, not their individual beauty or emotion. His simple but moving brushwork added rhythm to the imagery rather than expression. Shifting attention from the faces, Zainul makes the body language of these women his focus. The bent back, the long neck, or the weight of a load on her head spoke more powerfully than eyes or lips ever could. It is, however, not just the social commentary of the series that leads to their immortality. His art bears semblance of folk art that presents figures in symbolic, non-individualised ways. Abedin widely drew from these sources and blended their forms with modernist interpretations. The women Zainul Abedin drew rarely speak and in their silence, there is profound meaning, for he depicts the quiet endurance of women of the countryside not their outward beauty. By not giving them detailed, expressive faces, Abedin lets their silence speak louder. And it is up to the audience to give them individuality, if they wish to. And this is exactly what makes these portraits of rural women so powerful.

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Photo: Collected