

To Mrs. Ahmed with Love

Shaazia Mukhtar

It is about an event that took place two years after Partition. An English lady with her artist's equipment, along with a few Pakistani students, was painting the life around Lahore's 'Mochi Gate'. At a small distance a mob of people gathered and began to comment on her 'unethical activity in loud harsh words. The artist, unnerved and smiling sarcastically continues to paint and instruct her female students. The mob flares up and starts throwing stones at them. She angrily reprimands them but to no avail. An emotionally charged man attempts to snatch the painting, but the extraordinarily strong, swift and bold artist grabs him with one hand and with the other hand smears his face with all the remaining paint from the palette. Bewildered, he flees from the scene without causing any damage. As the colors were finished that day, the painting could not be completed; the next day the same lady with her students, this time accompanied by the police officers, returns to the same place and completes her work. The lady was no other than Anna Molka Ahmad, a vociferous and dynamic force who trained many generations of art students and teachers in the Department of Fine Arts of the University of the Punjab that she established and headed for more than three decades.

This event is a preliminary sketch of the character of a strong-willed, unwavering and passionate lady whose extraordinary vigor and outstanding courage promoted art and art education in my country and it is in memory of those qualities that I pen these words.

A non-conformist from her early years, she led a vigorous and daring life, full of determination knowing the ways and means to fulfill her ambition. She was adamant to study Art against the wishes of her father, got married to Sheikh Ahmed without his consent and much to his annoyance embraced Islam. When she got married, the world was overcast with the thick clouds of war which outpoured on 3rd September 1939, in the form of World War II. Not to be intimidated and frustrated in their private plans, the two married on 9th September and set sail for India.

This dynamic, energetic personality was made Head of such a Department that was not yet established, she was to teach students that were not yet enrolled and she had to teach according to a syllabus not yet devised. There was no syllabus, no staff, no tables or chairs for the new art classes. Everything had to be improvised by the 22-year old art teacher. To contend against many odds, she had to get her proposals approved in the Academic Council of the Punjab University but her flaming enthusiasm was not matched by their cool and critical approach. She would scold them and sometimes even shout and leave the meeting, banging the door behind her. She was a person in a hurry who wanted to get art education moving quickly. Any obstacle in the way aroused her rage and everyone was scared of an angry Mrs. Ahmed.

Nagori says, "Anna Molka always reminded me of Stalin without moustaches but surely, unlike the Russian dictator, had a great sense of humor and appreciated witty remarks. In most cases Mrs. Ahmad proved to be a benevolent dictator for the Department of Fine Arts and the battles she used to fight with the University administration etc. were of a lioness in fetching the lion's share from the University's annual budget allocations." Realization of Mrs. Ahmed's efforts came to Nagori when he had to struggle for his own Art Department's survival at the Sindh University.

She was an expert in public relations, and knew whom she should talk to for any of her missions: promotion of art education; arrangements for All-Pakistan Artists exhibitions; struggles for opening Art councils; writing on artists and the current situation of art in Pakistan and efforts to generate a fund to publish them. She lived to see all those achievements she strived for. Her status as an artist, art reformer and an art educationalist was widely and completely acknowledged in her lifetime. She was showered with many national awards and medals which included: the President's Medal for Pride of Performance, the Tamgha-e-Imtiaz, the Khadija Tul Kubra Medal and many others. Much of the organizational background and structure of Art in

Pakistan today is due to the patience and practicality of this restless and rebellious woman. Mrs. Ahmed is the only women 'Professor Emeritus', a distinction awarded by Punjab University in recognition of her dedicated services.

Her extra vigor and strong determination are fully permeated in her authoritative personal style of painting. Her inwardness is combined with the fierce love of energies of nature particularly the bright morning sun. Through the source of her energetic ideas, the tempo of vigorously applied paints becomes faster. With the rise of emotions, the colors are blazed, vibrant and exaggerated. These rapid applications of paint give her paintings an exquisite freshness, adding to the emotional urgency and generate heat and warmth. This the most distinctive feature of her art whether executed by the pastel crayon, the brush or the palette knife. The sharpness of light and piercing pure color corresponds markedly with her strong personality and outspoken stance on the authenticity of her own vision. Occasionally, when she is being too impetuous her yellows and purples, her oranges and blues, appear to shriek at a loud pitch. She takes the paint directly from tubes and applies it thickly with brush, knife, her thumb, fingers and palm thus achieving an intensified expressive brilliance. She worked with a gusto and skill that gives us a notion of the grandeur of nature. She also used painting as a therapy and cathartic release to come out of depressions and times of sufferings.

Whistler once said, "He mixed his paints with his brains", in Germany they say, 'A man paints with his blood', and similarly, one can say that Anna Molka diluted her paints with her extra vigor. These phrases imply that the elements of a picture cohere by virtue of the personality, dominate direct emotional apprehension of the subject. Her brushwork gives an air of excitement and urgency to the picture which appears as handwriting, a mirror to her personality and of her mood.

Time often slowly softens the sharp edges of dynamic forms used in the works of such emotionally charged artists and finally settles down to subtle and meditative style of expression. But this is not true of the work that Anna Molka painted in the last phase of her life. Throughout her life, she maintained in her art, the emotional element that she introduced in her youth.

With all her vigorous and unwavering traits, she was a person with deeply thought-out convictions on art and life. She secured a perfect focus and balance over the whole composition by ignoring



Self Death, Oil on board 121 x 75 cm



The Circle of Life, Oil on board, 121 x 75 cm

mechanical details and summarizing the essential features of personality and environment thus creating an ideal pictorial wholeness that eliminated the separateness. Just like her art works her whole life is also the best example of her planning and discipline; distributing her energies equally to all the responsibilities that she has taken in life. Whenever she suffered diversity, at the end she was always able to control and reorganize her inner tensions to march on. Such kind of energy and emotions were not easily handled by other artists of her kind, they deeply disturbed Edvard Munch and destroyed Van Gogh.

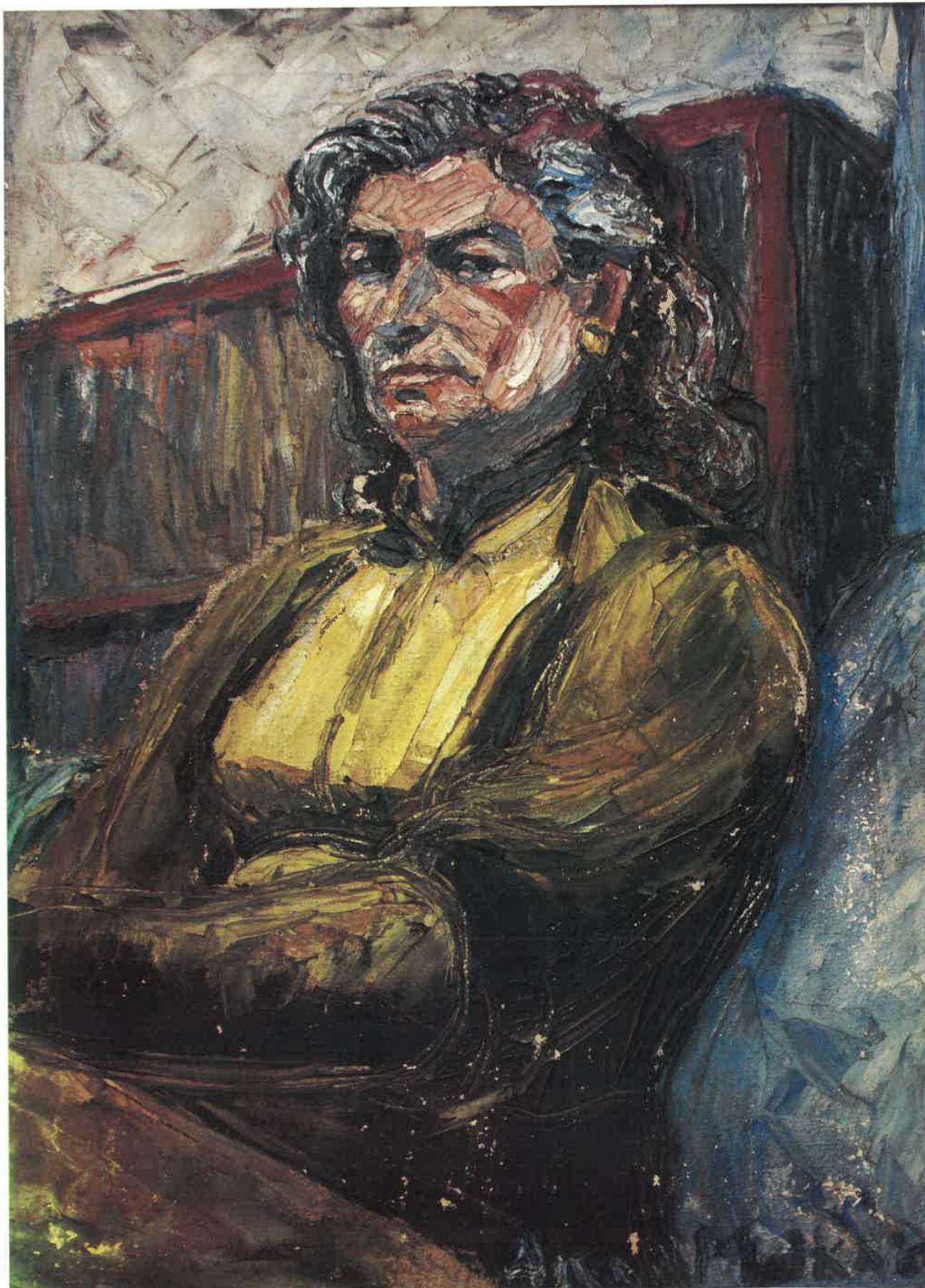
Her hypersensitivity and passion for work amounted to an obsession. Her brush was never still no matter where she was, at home, out in open or with a model in the studio. She worked all the time with a punishing schedule, juggled with multifarious duties and found her own time in the quiet hours of the night. Those hours helped her creating an overwhelming body of work that she produced with speed and scale that now adorns many private and public buildings in the country and abroad. The natural force of impulse, which she shared with artists like Monet, Matisse, Van Gogh and Emile Nolde had a special value for her that she cultivated.

We have seen how her enthusiasm, ardent feelings and strong determination, which I call 'Extra Vigor', took care of her personal life, supported her in achieving her goals in the field of art education and promotion of art and helped her to develop a strong and individualistic style of her own in painting. She used this sentiment to create a balance in her life and above all she cultivated that natural force to perform all her duties effectively. No work of art can be rated as a master piece on the basis of academic merits, it can not be of any worth because of mere mannerism in brushstrokes, but a true work of art is surely the one that surpasses all kinds of criticism when an artist has something original to say. An original thought comes through sincerity and a kind of dedication that does not change with the passage of time.

Anna Molka portrayed a life that she lived and presented ideas that fired her mind. She always had something original to say. She believed in the eternal values of art, established and refined over the centuries and not the art judged by the consumerism. The loyalty and devotion which all her students show to her as their teacher bespeaks of the love and rage she had showered on them. As one of her students, in spite of recalling her as a "Stalin without moustaches", I still dare to present all these lines "To Mrs. Ahmed with Love".



The Party, Oil on board, 59 x 120 cm



Anna Molka (Portrait 3), Oil on canvas, 44 x 59 cm