

IJAZ UL HASSAN

The Way It Was

VOLUME II



For mini bk Chceci

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The Way It Was

VOLUME II

Mian Ijaz ul Hassan

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Layout & Design

By



Dedicated to my parents

With gratitude
and love

Also by the author:
Painting in Pakistan

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Preface

Just as Ijaz ul Hasan's art reflects his keen sense of observation, so does his writing. The multiple layers of meaning one discerns in every leaf he paints is echoed in the myriad themes he writes on. *The Way It Was* is a collection of Ijaz's columns published in *The Friday Times* over a period of several years. While many of the columns are topical in relation to the time frame they were written in, they retain the readers' interest because of the perspective the writer brings to the subject.

Writing on his own love of nature, and terming it as "the richest raw material for art and literature", he goes on to reflect:

"Nature is a flirt, ever eager to reveal. An artist on his part should have a wandering eye, ever alert to these revelations. There are subjects that can be painted over and over again. For instance, there is this jaman with vine clasped to its trunk outside our bedroom window... It is quite amazing how a familiar subject can constantly change its appearance. The moment you feel you have captured them, they present themselves in another guise, every season, every moment of day. It is an irresistible, constant provocation."

The above extract is from a column written in December 2005 and yet it remains timeless. There are several articles in this collection that dwell on the wonders of nature. In fact, Ijaz's paintings focus on nature primarily and his articles appear, in fact, to carry a corresponding thread in the written word. But whether it is his writing or his art, they are not simply pretty portraits created to please the reader or the viewer. Ijaz is a deeply committed, political person, even spending time in prison for his beliefs.

In *The Way It Was*, the reader gets a glimpse of the writer's political commitments. These are not in your face political commentary but nuanced observations on the state of Pakistan and the developments that give us reason to despair – or to hope. His columns on the ordinary people of Pakistan – their generosity or their idiosyncrasy – are warm-hearted and full of empathy. Those on the shenanigans of the powerful tell a different story.

The collection of articles includes several on Ijaz's own experience of politics and political figures. In *Forging a Myth*, he pays tribute to the memory of Salman Taseer recalling him as an elegant young man in "drainpipes" – an epitome of style at the time. Other articles also refer to his long association with the Pakistan People's Party and its members. But it is his writings on art and artists that have a special sense of intimacy to them. He appears to be happiest in the company of artists and their work.

Ijaz frequently uses allegories and folktales in his writings. These columns delight the reader with their storytelling style and the most difficult issues suddenly become clearer and more relevant.

The Way It Was, in spite of its title, is not a collection of nostalgia. The articles are not just comments on what has happened but questions about what is to come.

Zohra Yousaf

Ex-Chair Person, Human Rights Commission Pakistan

Ex-Editor, Dawn Magazine

8-7-2022



PART I

The Evolving Nation **Political Currents & Social Shifts**

governments, especially authoritarian government spent most of their time hounding and persecuting their own citizens. Any form of dissent was branded as the work of Indian or Russian agents.

It is one of the great ironies of our history that political forces that worked closely with the CIA to promote US interests, should today declare the US to be the principle enemy of the Muslim *ummah*. Up until the Afghan war, almost all religious parties considered it kosher to connive with the CIA to bring down popular nationalist leaders and replace them with US protégé General Zia ul Haq replaced Z.A. Bhutto through unconstitutional methods for similar purpose. There has never been a dearth of traitors in post colonial societies. Zia's decision to wage war on behalf of US against the Soviets in Afghanistan was a grand folly. What have we gained from it; illegal import of weapons, drugs and Talibanisation of Pakistan? The ideological fallout has been disastrous. Instead of gaining strategic depth that our Martial rulers thought was essential to secure our self against a hypothetical invasion from a neighbouring country we have ended up steadily losing control over our country. Today the same religious parties that defended the Afghan policy for bad mouthing the US for being a principal enemy of Islam.

I was listening to Qazi Hussain Ahmed, the Jamaat chief on one of the new private Pakistani channels. He was holding forth against the Americans for violating the sovereign Iraqi State. It was interesting to note how in one breath the Jamaat advocates the all-embracing notion of Muslim *ummah* and in the next contradicts it by admonishing the

Americans for violating legal sanctity of the state. I remember being asked by the *Daily Khabrain* to participate in one of its forums. The topic was whether or not Pakistan should sign the CTBT. Among others who had been invited were, Mr Najam Sethi, the editor of Daily News and an amiable young information secretary of a militant Islamist organisation.

During the discussion, I remember, Najam interrupted the young man, who was insisting that the treaty should not be signed and that to sign the treaty would be a violation of the tenets of the Holy Quran. Najam asked the young ideologue, "Do you believe in a nation-state?" To which the young man without batting an eyelid replied: "No, we do not!" At that point, Najam requested the young man that since some of us, rightly or wrongly, believed in a nation-state, he should allow them to proceed with a matter that strictly concerned the strategy and welfare of the state of Pakistan. I am baffled how those political parties or organizations that do not acknowledge the legitimacy of the State of Pakistan can legally exist.

I have met Qazi Hussain Ahmed Sahib only once and found him to be a warm and courteous gentleman. I have also heard his daughter, an MNA, expressing her views on a few occasions. I may not agree with her entirely, but she puts across the party line in a quiet and learned manner that is impressive.

I beg Qazi Sahib to resolve the contradiction, because if there is an *ummah* in the traditional sense, which impels Muslims to transgress the national borders of another country, for any cause or reason, then in the words of Qazi Sahib, that act violates the legal sanctity of that state. Logically speaking, the notion of Ummah negates the concept of the state; you

cannot have both. The Islamic clerics find it impractical to acknowledge, that there are today only nation states in the world. Let us not forget that the allied forces launched their offensive against Iraq from Kuwait, a Muslim country. Kuwait was attacked a decade earlier by Iraq, another Muslim country, that had a decade before attacked Iran, another Muslim country.

People from all over the world have opposed the invasion of Iraq. It has never happened before that people should oppose a war before it even began. People of different countries and faiths opposed it. People representing communists, socialists and capitalist countries should oppose it. People of all continents opposed it. People of different colour, race and ethnic backgrounds opposed it. Even most people of Britain and US opposed it, whose governments have conducted this so-called holy war against evil. There were more people on the streets in London and New York than there were in Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi. Why can't we embrace all of these good caring people of the world as part of the *ummah*? Why can't we broaden the meaning of *ummah* to include all those who stand up for humanity, against war, violence and injustice? To face the vicious and predatory New World Order, we need to adapt a new strategy. The opposition to the Iraq invasion has proved Samuel Huntington wrong. There is no clash of civilisations. Sardar Aseff Ahmed Ali pertinently pointed out the other day that since civilisations were inter-dependent, they couldn't clash. There can be a diffusion of civilisations based on universality of knowledge and human experience but not a clash. The clash concept, he believed, was meant to mentally

prepare the US citizens for what was to follow. What the US designed to embark on.

US went to war in Iraq, not against the Muslims, but for purely political and economic reasons. There are of course Muslims all over the world. There are several states where Muslims are in a majority but there is also no evidence of an *ummah*. Is there? Most of these Muslim majority states are divided and have different political systems ranging from democracy, autocracy to monarchy. It seems that the Muslim clerics now want to create their hegemony by establishing a theocracy. There are twice the number of Muslims in India than there are in Pakistan. There are Muslims living in China, in the US, and in scores of other countries in all continents. They may be in a minority but they are as loyal to their countries as we are loyal to our own.

It is ironic that a Muslim from Pakistan can become American, British, and for that matter German, Swedish and Australian citizen, but difficult and rare to become a Saudi or Kuwaiti citizen. What *ummah* are we talking about? The fact is that the "Muslim" countries pursue their own respective state interests. An *ummah* run by the clerics as a theocracy with Samuel Huntington as their Caliph is the last thing, which the Muslims of the world deserve or need.

(15 April, 2003)

Better Safe than Sorry?

In Abu Gharaib prison the Iraqi prisoners were tortured and humiliated, "resulting from failure of leadership at the highest levels" (Reuter, Washington). Here in my country, Qari Noor Muhammad was detained and tortured to death in police custody and 'not a lice moved'. Let alone acceptance of responsibility at a higher level, even the assistant superintendent of police, a certain Sheikh Naeem, feigned ignorance of Qari's death.

The Faisalabad police had detained Qari Noor for alleged connection with Al Qaeda. Later, he was shifted to a place near Lahore for questioning. In newspaper photographs of the corpse precisely inflicted wounds were clearly visible on his feet and in his face. It has been reported that there were other injuries on his body. However, Kotwali police claimed that Qari Noor had died of a heart attack. According to one report his body was brought to the hospital twelve hours after his death.

It frightens me to think that almost anyone can be picked and detained on suspicion of having a link with Al Qaeda and put to police persuasion. To survive police hospitality for an evening, a person needs to have a strong heart. If an unfriendly heart unexpectedly ceases to function there is little the police can do; just bad luck. Many old cars have

carburetors that can conk off without warning, leaving the passengers stranded in the wilderness. Apparently, that is what the devious *imam* of a local mosque did – died, leaving the innocent police stranded. What could the police have done under the circumstances? The two MMA leaders detained along with Qari Muhammad Noor were honourably released and the Qari himself was nimbly buried under the cover of darkness? It is held that the people of Faisalabad have expressed their satisfaction with the police for its vigilance against terrorists. Apparently, they were extremely pleased at Qazi Noor's death and did not respond to MMA's appeal to observe a strike to protest over Qari Noor's 'murder'. The police are once again back to work, tracking down terrorists and intimidating citizens while criminals walk the streets - in short, business as usual.

Before 9/11 no one knew that Al Qaeda even existed. Today they can be found almost anywhere in many forms. If the Chinese archaeologists could discover an army of terracotta soldiers under a pomegranate grove, is it unrealistic to assume that there can be bearded terrorists in the flesh hiding under domes of mosques. At one time our secret service could produce a communist from under every leaf. It is always better to be vigilant than to be sorry. The reader may recall how in a matter of a year, in the second decade of the 14th century, the bubonic plague spread from Crimea to Ottoman Turkey and then to Sicily, Sardinia and Provence. In the following few years with the exception of Poland it spread throughout Europe. In a space of three years, the Black Death, as it was called, claimed a quarter to one third of Europe's population - frightening!

In the 21st century it is the scourge of terrorism that threatens the 'free world'. Should that also make it a matter of concern for the 'captive world'? Any person, who is even remotely suspicious of having come in contact with Al Qaeda or any one of its auxiliary bodies, even if it were a prayer mat, must be dealt with like a rat - without mercy. If such precautions are not undertaken the plague, we must all know, can rampantly spread and destroy the entire human civilisation. Some liberals have readily enlisted their support for the cause. They will not tire of denigrating politicians, highlighting human rights issues and the need for individual freedom but will not raise their small finger in support of legitimate right of a person who holds different views. Actually, their vision of individual freedom does not stretch beyond their individual precious skin. A *desi* with a local beard is a totally different animal, the less of them the better. In fact, all the *loosewala* who wear their *shalwar* above the ankles should be considered suspect. But, really, if some of us like wearing shorts why not let others who may want to wear slightly longer long shorts? It's a shame that when it comes to others some of us liberals become so thrifty with our professed values?

Most citizens in our country while condemning terrorism resent for being kicked about in the name of combating terrorism. Some 'liberals' have welcomed this intervention as a "kick in the right direction". I find the idea of being kicked revolting. Hoping that somebody would benefit from being kicked in the right direction reminds me of an idiot who day after day lay under a tree hoping that a ripened berry would fall into his mouth. The solution to our problems lies in winning peoples support by taking people into

confidence and reviving legitimate politics; not a kick in any direction.

It is history now but there is no harm in reminding the reader that if Zia ul Haq had not enforced Martial Law and executed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the elected government would not have caved under US pressure to wage the Islamic *jihad* in Afghanistan and elsewhere in Central Asia. There would then have been no need to establish thousands of religious seminaries and scores of training camps to recruit and train *jihadis*. Those who mistakenly believe the President is pursuing a liberal agenda forget that it was the General in the first place who was instrumental in promoting the religious parties in order to marginalise the mainstream political parties.

Even today the Musharraf Government would rather work with them, the MMA, than forge an alliance with Benazir Bhutto. It is a matter of record that what the PPP advocated 10 years ago is being partially pursued now under duress. Unfortunately for Musharraf, politics is like the 14th century plague. He would rather dispatch warplanes and tanks to repair the widening rifts in the Federation. He would rather encourage the interrogators to emulate the American experts of the Abu Gharaib fame and apply the skills to their fellow countrymen. He would rather be with bigots and pat poodles than work with the PPP, the biggest political party in the country; the party that instead of dividing the country into religious, linguistic and sectarian fragments unites the nation in its rich cultural diversity. PPP is the only truly liberal and federal party in the country. It is a national asset being wasted because of 'Mighty' Musharraf's whim.

Confused About Culture and Purity

An idle pursuit of culture is pursuit of the uncultured. Culture is product or bi-product of constant engagement in creative endeavour and collective labour to advance or reinvent culture to the larger interest of man and the needs of the times. Culture in this sense is a product of social practice and conduct of humans and vision of gifted and inspired individuals. It is the sum total of what a society believes and aspires to be, which it expresses in words and images, and social practice and interaction. Culture in fragmented societies is also layered or fragmented

Culture is thus not inert. It is a living organism; grows and advances and at times of momentous historical change may seem to advance into a terrible state of disarray and then resurrect itself again in a new form. The social and material needs of people and society impel it restructure itself. Ironically a person is product of an inherited culture and simultaneously the very means of its change. People are also a product of the geographical environment in which they live since that determines what they wear, eat and how they build their dwellings.

The Eskimos live in Igloos made of blocks of ice and go about their chores on boats or sledges pulled by dogs. The Arabs live in tents woven of goat and camel hair and go about their business on camels and horses. But an Arab and an Eskimo are both fed on their mother's milk. Both marry, procreate and teach their children to fend for themselves and be useful members of their communities. Both have blood flowing in their veins; experience a range of feelings from love, joy and compassion to envy, hatred, anger and fear. These attributes define their common humanity that we often forget. Cultures cannot be Exclusive.

An individual as argued is not a passive product of culture but in participation with fellow humans also contributes to it; propels, develops or transforms. This definition may not go down well with those who uphold the status quo or feel threatened by any kind of change; would rather stop the Earth on its axis.

Some of my countrymen scowl on advanced means of information technology. They feel bombarded with revealing images and ideas that make them up in their seats, raise an eyebrow, even blush. I am all for freedom – more rather than less - as long as no one bruises the others precious sensibilities? Surely not!

At the same time, I plead that we also, howsoever cautiously, accept changes that are in the air. In history, anyone who arrogantly or self-righteously stood his ground against change either perished or was laughed out. Time has no patience for anyone. I think it was Picasso who observed that if you keep on looking back you are likely to twist your neck. Aren't some of us becoming a pain in the neck for all?

Recently there has been a debate in *Daily Times* on culture. Some writers were of the view that benefiting from other cultures can be enriching, while others argued that we should keep our culture pure. I wonder if a pure culture exists anywhere. If Islam, and for that matter Christianity or Buddhism, had insisted on the purity of their respective cultures, then Islam would have remained the preserve of the Quraish, Christianity would not have travelled beyond Judea and Buddhism outside Ayodhya. Muslims have made considerable contributions to world culture, in the fields of jurisprudence, science, mathematics, engineering, cartography, philosophy, literature, art and architecture - to name a few. But not all the great men who excelled in these fields were Arabs. The Moors built the great mosque at Cordova and the Alhamra Palace. Jalaluddin Rumi who penned down the *Dewan-e-Shams-e-Tabriz* and the *Mathnawi* was a Persian poet. Abu-Ali ibn Sina, philosopher, physician, and natural scientist of Central Asia, played a considerable role in spreading among the Arabs, and through them in Europe, the philosophical and scientific heritage of the Greeks. Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty being a descendent of Taimur and Changez Khan, was half Turk and half Mongol. How impure can you get! Babur's grandson, Akbar the Great, married Jodha Bai, a Rajput princess and had Jehangir for a son. Jehangir a Turkish-speaking Sunni, in his turn, married Nur Jehan a Persian-speaking Shia widow. Let me not complicate matters any further. Suffice it to say that Jehangir's grandson Aurangzeb had more Rajput than Turkish blood flowing through his veins.

While taking pride in the Taj Mahal, the architectural marvel of the Mughals, let's not overlook

that the form of central dome, which rests on petals of an Indian lotus flower, has a striking resemblance with a lotus bud just about to open its fragrant eye. The two smaller copulas flanking the main dome are entirely Rajput. Does that make the Taj impure? Many of the famous artists working in the Mughal atelier were non-Muslims. They were instrumental in synthesising the indigenous with the Central Asian and Persian traditions. Does that make the school impure and any less our own?

The lesson to be drawn from history is that confident and vibrant cultures have no hesitation in borrowing and seeking knowledge and inspiration from foreign sources. Only weak and degenerating cultures insist on being exclusive. None of the great religions was exclusive because then they would have ceased to be universal. The Muslims of the world have an incredible diversity. They speak different tongues; eat different foods and dress differently. They have their separate arts, crafts and architectural traditions. Even their mosques are built and embellished differently, except that they all face Mecca. The mosque in Peking is so different than the Great Mosque at Samarra and the Badshahi Masjid at Lahore.

In certain cultural aspects a non-Muslim can be closer to you than a Muslim. Surely Lahoris would feel more at home in Amritsar and even Delhi, than in Bahrain or in Tehran. If for no other reason than that it is easier to communicate. Can there be a better reason? If you crack a joke at a Sikh brother, he laughs. If you try to share a joke, even at your own expense, the Arab brother doesn't even understand. What is the fun? Should a culture not have a sense of fun? Doesn't the sight of our terrific South Asian mangoes excite us

greatly more than the dates, traditionally eaten by us as a ritual at *iftar*?

Getting back to impurity, I ask, can there be a nation culturally more impure than us? The vast majority of us are recent converts to Islam. The Jats, Gujjars, Raos and Ranas, and the Butts in the Punjab alone are all indigenous people. Most of them are also thriving across the eastern border as Sikhs and Hindus. Some of my friends' grandparents were Sikhs. Many Muslim Butts have Brahmin ancestors.

The point is, it is not the purity or exclusivity but inclusiveness that makes our culture unique in its diversity. It is always through friendly union that new ideas are born. Cultures that are exclusive and inward-looking, peering at the past for their *raison de etre* become frigid and perverse. From the historic point of view, it cannot be denied that Islam incessantly absorbed what came its way and denied only that which came in a fundamental conflict with its vision. That was the reason it spread at a gallop in parts of the world as far apart as Africa, Europe and Asia.

Another outlook to culture would be to consider it from social and economic perspective, for in spite of common faith, race, language or nation, all societies are segmented into classes. The poor and weak, regardless of their faith, have a different culture that binds them together. For instance, a rich man will seek out the rich and not let his son marry the daughter of his poor brother. The rich and the poor of same faith and *baradari* uphold different cultural values. The transcendental definition of culture is idealistic and factually incorrect. An integrated culture cannot exist in societies divided into social groups with antagonistic interests.

Pakistan is going through a phase where we need to pause and ask ourselves, where we are going. People have the right to go wherever they like but it is best not to proceed backwards. No one should violently contend over events that happened far back in history. If some issues should have been settled differently then there is little that we can do about them now. Haven't we enough problems of our own today? Muslims are exploding bombs in mosques; fathers are killing their daughters for honour; brothers in order to appropriate their sister's inheritance still marrying off their sisters to the Koran, poverty, illiteracy and disease prowl our streets, but some of us aspire for an exclusively fabricated Pure Culture to be forced on to the people.

(6 October, 2004)

Sweep It Under the Prayer Mat

Sometimes I feel that a writer should reflect only on the events and not get entangled with unassimilated facts of daily occurrence. The evening discussions over tea or *sherbet* can be quite tiresome. It is amazing how some people have all the answers up their sleeves. Summarising the daily press is not everyone's forte. Exchanging notes on published articles that have been read or escaped attention, can be informative but brings little satisfaction. Printed material can be properly absorbed only when it is read in person.

Since the parameters of law and constitution are not fixed and are subject to the vagaries of legal minds prone to please the Provider, it is futile to attempt a speculative analysis. For instance, could anyone have guessed that the new local body elections were to be on party basis? I remember when local body elections were held during Zia's regime, a host of winning candidates were disqualified because in their campaign posters they had declared themselves *awam dost* (people friendly), which according to the Election Commission was a deceitful manner of indicating their affiliation with the Peoples Party. With changing times political needs have also changed. All candidates who wish to participate in the local body elections will now be required to declare affiliation with a political party, preferably with the ruling party if they plan on winning.

It is almost impossible to speculate today about what is going to happen tomorrow let alone the day after. It is easier to predict the uncertain direction. Those who have 'privileged' information as some claim, which often is not true, have the last word. The pretence gives them privileged space for an evening; anything and everything can be made to seem possible for the day. It is easier to predict the future in a long-term perspective. What is happening in Baluchistan today is as predictable as what was inevitable to happen in the former eastern wing of Pakistan. Unfortunately, riders who cannot sit well in the saddle are less anxious about where the horse is leading them and more worried about being thrown off the saddle. This is also true of profiteers who are focused on immediate gains than long term benefits. Who cares about what will happen the day after tomorrow? Even tomorrow is another day. If at the end of the day Baluchistan wished to stay away from the Federation it can always be argued that it was a profitable bargain; good riddance. As for the gas, we have enough of it at our both ends, up in the head as well as down inside us.

Somewhat similar sentiments were expressed when East Pakistan declared independence. The Bengalis were such a drain on the economy. They were not even proper Muslims. Most of them were brainwashed by their Hindu teachers; their women were easy hunting. I was once told that a young civil servant proceeding for a posting to East Pakistan was figuratively advised by his father to beware of Bengali women who tied their *azarbund* (draw-string) rather loosely. I have always wondered which *azarbunds* the father had been pulling because women in Bengal wear a *sari*. It is tragic that as individuals we have yet

to pause to consider accepting responsibility for the ugly events in Sonar Desh.

I know most people like to patronise suffering of other people from a safe distance. It makes them feel good. It is for the same reason that the richie-rich and wielders of state power, instead of shunning the day that Faiz envisages in his poem, *Hum bhe dekhayn gay*, 'when the wretched and the exploited will have their day to take account of them', nostalgically clap along with the singer when the verses are recited at music concerts. They insist that the poem be sung over and over again. Why should they long to see that day, the day of their undoing, remains an enigma? The Victorian bourgeoisie loved to pander to the wretched poor as long as they were spared their odours. They romanticised them beyond description. There were hundreds of paintings depicting children with delicate demeanours in rags, some with tears rolling down their blue eyes tracing their pink cheeks; innocent fallen women on London streets; wives bidding farewell to their men being transported on ships to the distant colonies; portraits of wrinkled men and women with pathetic faces. It was not till Kathy Kollwitz picked up her charcoal and Millet, Daumier, Manet and Van Gogh their brushes that the artist started identifying with the working people - politically, emotionally and aesthetically.

But is it enough to extend sympathy, a sentiment like charity that just helps to make a person feel good? It is actually by denouncing the exploiters and perpetrators of evil against fellow humans that evil in the soul can be fathomed and extricated? Do we as individuals and a nation have the courage to acknowledge this; it is important that we do, to ensure that what happened in East Pakistan should never

ever happen to us again. But would that not hurt our national pride? Should we rather not sweep the knowledge of dark ugly events under the *mussalla* (prayer mat)?

People who take a longer view of life are regarded as creeps who make life difficult for practical men who believe in *kal kis nay dhekha hai?* (Who has seen tomorrow?) Anyone who talks of things that cannot benefit us today is eyed with mistrust. Social and political activism is dead. Fighting for poverty alleviation has become a profitable undertaking. Simultaneously, we are becoming insensitive. The other day a journalist was quoted as having said that when he saw a man proceeding to publicly burn himself, he curbed the urge to save him because that would have amounted to tampering with the news. A dispassionate reporter, reporting events honestly, can slowly add up to save far more lives than one. His work requires great courage and vision. But should the argument be used to discourage us to be human?

A few months back when I switched on the television, I caught in midstream Tim Wilcox of the BBC facing a photographer, who was saying that he used his camera like a gun to battle perpetrators of crimes against his people. With the camera in hand, he recorded his land and tragedies of his people. Often, he extracted, as I learnt, gunpowder from bullets to use it as flashlight to capture the tragic predicament of individuals. The artist confessed that there were a number of works that focused on individual suffering, which he thought he wouldn't share with others. They were too intimately tragic. But in the end, he broke his resolve and shared them with others in order to stop it from happening again. Choices are not easy to make. Making honest choices is important even if they are wrong. It

is better than sitting on a fence and then falling and breaking into pieces that cannot be put together ever again.

(11 August 2004)

Other Side of Nationalism

"The awesome might of our two respective countries is demonstrated at the closing ceremony at the Wagah border, when the two national flags are brought down at dusk. It is much ado about nothing."

I cannot recollect who taught us English poetry; obviously needed to be taught by someone more able. As far as the novel is concerned, a student does not need guidance on how to read *Emma* or *Tom Jones*, which were part of our prescribed MA reading course. As an aside ***Tom Jones* and *Godfather* are probably the best film ever so faithfully made to an original text.** The Hollywood version of the *Brothers Karamazov* was quite terrible and so was Tolstoy's, *War and Peace*. English literature in our days was confined to the English. Aristotle and Longinus were the only foreigners included in the Paper on Literary Criticism.

✿ I believe now a number of writers from Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas, including some of our own writings in English, are included in our syllabus. The students besides Shakespeare and Dickens can also read Sophocles, Dostoyevsky, Ahmed Ali, Taufique Rafat, Edward Said and others. The scope of our literary engagement can be further enlarged if a student could benefit from our poets and writers who

have not written in English but like the Russians and the Greeks written in their own tongue. It would be rewarding if students could read Khwaja Fareed, Shah Hussain, Shah Abdul Lateef and Waris Shah. There is of course the need to have our poets adequately translated in English but some work has already been done.

Taufiq Rafat has translated Bulleh Shah and Qadir Yar's *Puran Bhagat*. There is a learned critical introduction to Qadir Yar by Athar Tahir and a splendid book *The Recurrent Patterns in Punjabi Poetry* by Najam Hussain Syed. There is then Christopher Schakell's *Sassi* by Hasham and his translation of Khwaja Fareed, Charlotte Vaudeville's translation and transliteration of Kabir, and Denny Matringe's translation of Waris Shah in prose. Similarly, there are translations of the works of eminent poets of our other national languages.

I am aware that some of us can read them in the original but there is no harm if they can be made accessible to students and scholars who work in English. I for instance, read my first text of the *Tuzk-e Babari* in an English translation of a French translation from the Turkic original. I am more than certain that the Urdu translation of the biography had been from the English and not the Turkic original. If someone had not undertaken the burden of translation, most of us would be unacquainted with *Tuzk-e-Babari*, regarded by E.M. Forester as the greatest autobiography of all times.

It is a positive step that the teaching of literature in English is no longer confined to the English but includes the best of poetry, prose and drama from all over the world. This should be made possible even for

the arts. In most art schools for instance, history of art means teaching European History of Art, thereby denying a student awareness of his own heritage and knowledge of the great achievements of other cultures and civilisations. To know about the Renaissance is splendid, but not to know about Ajanta and Mughal painting would be tragic. A student raised on the foundation of self-realisation is better equipped to perceive and gain from the achievements of others.

Unfortunately, it was part of colonial strategy to denigrate local art and culture and encourage natives to worship whatever was English or foreign. Painters for instance were patronised for their skill in copying western things. Instead of stimulating the mind to be creative and inventive, artists were encouraged to ape and plagiarise. The initiation of European aesthetics and artistic standards were the vanguard of physical aggression to capture markets, material resources and strategically located territories. Conquest could not have been accomplished and sustained without establishing cultural dominance. If people are raised on reading the best of English verse and encouraged to stay away from their own poets, naturally they would not only defend English poets but also the culture and people which they represent. It does indeed greatly soften a person's heart when he looks West towards England and thinks of Shakespeare, Wordsworth or Keats, doesn't it? Who cares about these Bullas and Tullas writing in their coarse mother tongue?

It is true that cultures, which neglect to benefit from others, gradually dry out. But obviously, there is a difference between being a passive recipient and a creative recipient. A passive recipient is a Wog trying to be English. An example of an active recipient is a

Mughal miniature, which absorbs Chinese, Central Asian, Persian, South Asian and later European influences to enrich itself.

A passive recipient receives, as a slave does from his master. There is undeniably an imperative need for the people of the world to share their achievements, perceptions and concerns. The world has indeed, due to improvement in information technology and modern means of travel become a global village. It is a village, which should be ideally governed not through fear and arrogant assertion of the one over the other, but based on mutual recognition and appreciation of talent and virtue. The winner should not take all. There should be no losers.

The history of the West since the Renaissance can be looked at from two angles. For the Europeans it has been truly a period of great scientific and technological advancement. It is a period of immense development of the arts and literature. It is a period of great inventions and new challenges. But to others this glorious era of the Europeans is remembered as a period of plunder, when vast populations were brutally wiped out. When their treasures and resources were looted and their economies ravaged and destroyed.

It is an era, which represents their subjugation and humiliation at the hands of a new breed of conquerors, which did not even consider their subjects human. By adopting different forms and strategies these forces have survived to this day, and continue to deceive, plunder and monopolise the world. It is irrelevant that the world has become a global village. What matters is who runs it?

To resist and restrain the common enemy of all inhabitants of the global village, it is necessary that nationalist aspirations are curtailed and a vision of a larger human community is evolved. It is true that nationalism was very important in the struggle against colonialism and imperialism. But it is also true that nationalism is essentially exclusive and divisive. It encourages people to claim superiority over others. Nationalism asserts itself by denigrating other nations and people who are religiously, culturally or ethnically different.

In Europe it led to the emergence of Nazi Germany based on the belief that Aryan Germans were racially pure and a better race. In the Middle East the Zionist State of Israel has been founded on the same principle. If Gandhi had not pandered to Indian nationalism, Hindu chauvinist sentiment may not have raised its head and the entire post-war history of the subcontinent may have been very different.

In our own country, Pakistani nationalism has been a tool in the hands of the rulers for depriving and exploiting the federating units. It has provided succour and strength to an intellectually barren, dogmatic minority who have helped the establishment to nurse and nourish an ideology of its own fabrication, which is an anathema to what Iqbal envisioned and the ideals Jinnah fought for. The two mighty countries Pakistan and India, both suffer from over-inflated nationalism. I am sure that if there were a drinking bout, each would drink the other to death. Why not sit back and enjoy the drink? Instead of working together and letting our people relish life the two mighty nations, to quote a friend, are 'intoxicated with the exuberance of

their own verbosity' in a bid to run the other down at any expense.

The awesome might of our two respective countries is demonstrated at the closing ceremony at the Wagah border, when the two national flags are brought down at dusk. It is much ado about nothing. In fact, it is positively pathetic and embarrassing. Our soldiers strut and stamp their heels, kick in the air, rattle gates, stare and glare across at their counterparts. They stride up and down, again and again, strut back and forth, kick, strut and snort.

All this is done to overawe the Indians, performing exactly the same routine to overawe the Pakistanis, a breath away across the border. Can you imagine that this has been going on for fifty-five years? I wonder what purpose it served, except to make us both look silly!

I fear repeated stamping on the tarmac can only weaken the patriotic spine and the martial brain. I confess it is better than going to war. At least no one gets hurt and the farce keeps the silly spectators on both sides entertained for free.

(16 June 2003)

Delete B's and P's

There is nothing like the law if it is on your side. Justice (retd) Nasim Hassan Shah's interview to GEO television was revealing. I admire his courage to recount the conduct of a panel of Supreme Court Judges, that adversely reflects on the conduct of Shah Sahib himself. Justice Shah was asked three questions by the interviewer. Shah Sahib had the courage – others might say temerity – to give three honest answers. I cannot exactly formulate the three questions and Shah Sahib's replies, but in their essence, they were somewhat as follows.

Question One: Why is the Judiciary so favourably inclined towards army regimes and indifferent to civil governments? Justice Shah's answer was simple and honest: "They have rifles and we have our jobs to protect." Question Two: Was there any 'advice' from above in the Bhutto case? Answer: "I am not aware that any 'advice' was given, but I suppose the Chief Justice must have been 'advised' and if he was 'advised' then he must have passed on the 'advice' to the other judges on the bench. Question Three: Do you think that Bhutto was justly hanged? Answer: "I think Bhutto's council Yahya Bukhtiar handled the case badly. When the panel of judges asked him what he thought should be Bhutto's punishment, he retorted that Bhutto

should not be punished at all and should be allowed to go free. This annoyed the judges and they hanged him."

Like Shakespearean tragic heroes who finally come to realise their tragic error, Shah Sahib confessed that whenever he thought of it, he felt sorry for what had happened. A citizen of our country, who was also the prime minister, was hanged and the law feels sorry for it three decades later. Justice Shah has taken an honest step towards his personal redemption. May God give him the courage to pursue the matter to its logical end! Will the judiciary have the courage to take on Justice Shah for his revelations or have the will to review the heinous judgement in light of the mala fide intent as revealed by Justice Shah, only time will tell? Certainly, these are matters which a self-respecting nation and our honourable courts cannot ignore indefinitely. I am afraid that with a few exceptions, the silence of the PPP on the subject has baffled not only their supporters but also all those who believe in justice and the supremacy of law.

There is a saying that in order to speak one lie, one has to fabricate a hundred more. It is always best to acknowledge mistakes instead of reinforcing them. It is never too late, as they say, to start with a clean slate. Many such common sayings have become platitudes and we use them thoughtlessly, just to garnish our thoughts. They have been around since I don't know when. There must be some wisdom in them if they have survived for so long. I wonder what our esteemed judiciary would have to say on the archaic subject of telling lies and accepting mistakes.

Pakistan started with a dream – faith in its honest hardworking people, trust in democracy and justice and firm hope in a bright future. What a mess

we have made of that dream. Out of the 56 years of its existence, dictators have usurped half the time. Jinnah had very clearly stated – allow me to repeat it for those who suffer from amnesia – that Pakistan would be a federation and have a secular, parliamentary democracy. His views on theocracy, the role of the army, the judiciary, the executive, are as clearly stated as a television commercial. Distortions that have been incessantly made to the Quaid's vision of Pakistan, to serve changing political interests of the ruling generals and religious fanatics, are common knowledge and need no comment. Jesus Christ on the cross apparently appealed to God and said, "Lord forgive them for they know not what they are doing." Can a nation and its people forgive those who know only too well what they have been doing? Quick fixes never work. There are no short cuts to the right solutions. Honest men don't make deals. Pragmatism has become an innuendo for opportunism and betrayal. The Constitution can be torn up like a piece of toilet paper, but Ordinances in whatever legality they are framed, can neither help you look good nor keep the backside clean. "*Bharian gallan dey bharay nateejay*" or in other words, bad deeds lead to a bad end. And yet one never learns.

To use a few platitudes, the only real lesson of history has been that no one learns from it. It is also said that the difference between a wise man and a fool is that while the wise man makes new mistakes, a fool continues to repeat the old ones. What category do we belong to? To avoid a misunderstanding, let me quickly add, nations are never made of fools; it is the individuals who are foolish.

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One of the great failings of our country has been rhetorical patriotism. Patriotism, in our case, has become an anachronism, insisting on preserving things as they are. It seems to have become the reserve of those who are in uniform – the greatest beneficiaries of patriotism. Most gentlemen in uniform consider citizens in civvies wanting in patriotism. How sad? Indeed, how tragic that they should think so?

Quite frequently, civilian governments, which are 'helped' by the generals into government, also regard the opposition as unpatriotic and enemy agents. Patriotism is a convenient weapon in the hands of those who wield power to harass individuals and political parties. In the 1990s when elected governments were trying to normalise relations with India, it was regarded as unpatriotic. Ten years later – a decade wasted – it is now being accepted as something in our best national interest.

The generals genuinely feel that in order to protect national integrity and the sacred borders of the country, the unpatriotic people of the country must be made to surrender their constitutional rights. They are actually convinced that the people of our country are incapable of governing themselves. What is worse, most of them cannot get the PPP (Pakistan People's Party) out of their mind and BB (Benazir Bhutto) out of the PPP.

The people are illiterate and cannot distinguish right from wrong. Others, who are literate or educated, are persons of dubious loyalties. It would be an interesting life for a trapeze artist. He could swing from pillar to post and then go and reside on a tree. He could then lead the peaceful life of a monkey. Alternatively, he could learn to dance to martial notes

and not anger the judges. Delete B's and P's from the political vocabulary and justice might then be done.

Almonds and the Bloom

Mian Muhammod Bakhsh writes *Dushman maran te khushee na kareay; sajanana we mar jana* (Be not merry at the death of an adversary; loved ones will also die). There is great wisdom in this small couplet often engulfed by malice.

"What are we doing here covering the proceeding of the funeral of a man who was a committed terrorist and murderer of innocent children?" asked the woman commentator of the Fox News that I infrequently switch on to amaze myself. Was it not obvious that Fox News needed to be there to cover the funeral of Yasser Arfat perceived by the world as an international event? Fox News, as is its custom, used the opportunity to badmouth a hero who had resisted US-Zionist efforts to dehumanise, marginalise and obliterate the Palestinian nation. The world does not expect anything better from Fox News but could they not have waited for the funeral ceremony to end before resuming the business of abusing, denigrating and attacking anyone and everyone perceived to be hostile to US interests - be it God himself.

I cannot recall precisely where or in what context Longinus states in his famous dissertation on literary criticism, *Longinus on the Sublime*, that even

enemies deserve an honourable burial. But I suppose in order to subscribe to the ancient Greek worldview a person needs to be honourable himself. The modern American hero regards honour an obscurantist virtue. Honour restricts; imposes restraints, demands courtesy, loyalty and humanity. The American hero - bearing an automatic weapon the size of Madagascar or wielding a bow the size of a wooden plough, with arrows tipped with deadly explosives - is believed to need a passion for vengeance, not a sense of honour. Asif Zardari is out on bail after the largest innings in incarceration history of South Asia. Ghinwa Bhutto is shocked and surprised that he has been released so soon. I wonder if she can count up to eight. I trust she must be painfully reflecting, "It was only the other day that he was apprehended. How come eight years have drifted by in a day?"

This reminds me of a Persian monarch, who on a sharp winter morning asked a famous Persian sage for a gift that should be source of everlasting comfort and guidance to him. The following spring when the almonds were in full bloom, the sage returned. Wishing a happy new year to his majesty, the king of kings, he presented an ordinary-looking ring and pleaded that he should never take it off. On the ring were inscribed the words: "This moment, too, will pass away". The *Shahenshah* lived a long life and ruled well. The ring would warn him in his moments of happiness that good fortune was not forever, and at the times of unforeseen misfortune cheer him that the dark clouds would finally lift.

Asif Zardari may not be a Mandela as someone insisted the other evening at a Thanksgiving dinner cooked by my friend Irfan Hussain. In the past I have

had jibes at Irfan for serving me barbequed squids that were as hard and rubbery as tennis shoe soles. But that was long ago. The turkey roasted for the occasion and served with cranberry sauce was exceptionally delicious. Asif Zardari may not be Mandela but he was no tender meat for his enemies either, or they would have pot-roasted him years ago. It was not that they did not use all the recipes to tenderise him. They sliced his tongue and exercised various pressures but he just wouldn't yield. Any cook could have told them that Zardari was no goose.

After eight years he has emerged unscathed. If at all there is a change, the years of incarceration seem to have made him even tougher and more determined. The time, I am sure, has tempered him and like us all made him wiser to what we are dealing with. But surely, only time will tell. Asif Zardari may not be a Mandela, but with his courage and fortitude, he has doubtlessly earned the respect of his harshest critics. Refusing deals and bargains he relied on the judicial process that makes snails look fast. Someone remarked at the Sindh Club at Sunday brunch that he should help the government save face by at least agreeing to a traffic offence. He may not be a Mandela but he has emerged as the most popular leader in Pakistan after Benazir Bhutto.

Zardari's release marks a change in the political climate. The system General Musharaf put together will not last for long. The erosion will be fast. Zardari is a consensus man, which is what is needed today. Consensus is something General Musharaf has spurned for the sake of holding on to everything. General Musharaf has tried to play off one political force against the other. He has marginalised the two

mainstream parties, the PPP and PML(N) and made false promises to the religious parties - succeeding temporarily in his purpose of dividing a democratic national alliance that seemed to be taking shape on at least three important issues: full and unfettered restoration of the 1973 Constitution, integrity of the state institutions *i.e.* the judiciary, the election commission etc, and the review of the civil-military relations so that civil society can assert its control over all organs of the state.

I called on Mr. Asif Ali Zardari at Bilawal House in Karachi. He was courteous, relaxed and full of beans. Everyone praised his courage in facing his unrelenting adversaries for eight long years. He graciously accepted the compliments with broad smiles accentuated by his moustache that now have streaks of silver. After a while he looked up at a group of visitors who were warmly eulogising his steadfastness, and remarked, "Remember one thing. I could not have done it for even one year without your prayers and support." He proceeded then to tell the tale of a man who at an annual town festival dared everybody to pull down his uplifted arm. No one took him on. His brother, however, shouted from across the arena that he would do it. The man exclaimed, "You can't do that! It is on the strength of your arm that I have undertaken to throw the challenge."

The weather is changing and fair days should return soon. In the meantime, let's tend the almonds and hope that they will one day burst into bloom.

(1 December, 2004)

Two Chairs for Democracy!

In the good old days people on horses, elephants or palanquins used to be arrayed on one side and the commoners on foot huddled together on the opposite side. Everyone knew who was who, what was his station and where he stood. There was martial law, or just the law. The generals were either in or out.

A visitor to Delhi can buy miniature paintings for a paltry sum. They are skillfully executed but a jumble of images lifted from various regional schools. It is a bit like the dish that in the Indian cuisine is called *Thali*. The *Thali* consists of several small metal bowls on a circular platter. The bowls contain vegetables and lentils. *Thali* can be had with plain *phulkas* but is generally preferred with deep fried *puri*. It includes a bit of everything but nothing substantial that can be relished on its own. It is a bit like the Mixed Grill for the carnivorous breed.

The miniatures up for sale in the craft shops are cooked up in a similar vein. You may find on a single sheet of paper a Rajput prince with a royal Mughal turban, dallying with a Pahari lady from the Punjab hills while Deccani maidens from Golconda and Ahmednagar prance about. The motley cast of human characters is surrounded by palms and fruiting trees, flowering vines, exotic birds and animals, also taken

from different regional schools. These miniatures may appear pleasing at an indifferent glance, like the most well-crafted object sold at airports, but are devoid of any real substance to chew upon. Every human, bird, bush and beast must hate living in it.

The comparison may not be funny but I am afraid our country is beginning to resemble a miniature executed in the same spirit. Let us study its forms and colours. Our picture shows whimsical conceits arranged in an unbalanced composition. The assembly of characters picked by the artist makes little sense to a dispassionate observer - politically or aesthetically. They are a motley crowd of *rakshasas*. There is a long train of pilgrims on their way not to Chaucer's Canterbury but the GHQ. There is confusion all round. The terrorists are being chased, rockets launched, neighbourhoods bombed, criminals deified, law defiled and the opposition exiled. In the good old days people on horses, elephants or palanquins used to be arrayed on one side and the commoners on foot huddled together on the opposite side. Everyone knew who was who, what was his station and where he stood. There was martial law or just the law. The generals were either in or out. Now everything has been hybridised. You have generals in the cabinet, generals in the Senate, generals as governors, generals as ambassadors, generals as vice chancellors and many more generals. There are generals refusing to retire.

At the same time the politicians throng the space as never before. Generals adore them; politicians suck up as never before. Jointly, they have civilised, stabilised and democratised the system. We have the best of who and what we want. Making laws is like

ordering drinks in a pub. To dispense with the annoying political parties, democracy has been established at the grassroots level. The politicians who can agree on a common symbol can now be entrusted with the real tasks of running democracy. Democracy and the country are no longer at risk.

Everything is doing so well now. The Official Jester, reeking of bad breath, can of course dilate on these achievements better than I. If some natives are restless and beating war-drums in remote places it does not matter. The fact is the whole world is ours. So, what if we are hungry or without a job or don't have a footpath to sleep on? But to continue with what I was saying, we have a splendid system going. Take it or leave it. The Great Thumb is on people's pulse, ninety-six percent of them. Those who usurped Q from the Quaid have already told us that the Quaid should have learnt to dress better. A well-pressed khaki shirt and trouser looks so much better than a shabby *shalwar* and *achkan*. Actually, the Quaid had a fundamental drawback in that he was frail and a mere politician. The way the system has been put in place is amazing. The political parties are all out and Q has a majority in the Assembly.

Hazard a guess how would all this look in a painting? Hell of a jumble. Everything is so unpredictable. You can mouth a promise and because of the shifting shadows retract it the next hour. The only unambiguous element in the miniature is as to who should be seated in the centre chair. Seated, not in one but in two chairs; wearing not one but two robes; accompanied by three brides, one short and portly, the second slim and tall, the third prettiest of them all. What I fail to understand is why anyone

should want to sit in two armed chairs? Sitting in two armless ones may have been at least less painful.

Talking of chairs reminds me of Prof. Sirajuddin. He was principal of Government College, Lahore, when a visitor was ushered into his office and introduced himself as a former student. Prof. Siraj was bending over a file at the moment, writing a note. Without lifting his head, he courteously asked the visitor to take a chair and continued writing. After a short pause the visitor, wondering why the principal had not taken better notice of him, added: "Sir, when I left college I took the CSS examination. I have now become a deputy commissioner". At which, Professor Siraj, once again without looking up, rejoined: "In that case, please have another seat." Those were the good days. Try saying that to a DCO today. He will ask for the third chair. Presuming, that the viewer is not a 'pseudo-intellectual' and willing to surrender his sense of disbelief, there is a lot that a contemporary political picture can offer - like the Delhi miniatures - in terms of humour, tears and a sense of the ridiculous, as well as a gross sense of the romantic. There is this tall Sohni from Gujrat, who in spite of passing the screen test, couldn't be cast in the movie because she mumbled and no one understood what she said. Now she is saying bad things about the fair Heer from Jhang. Wasn't it Kaidu who was designated by the poet to spread rumours against her? In any case, what is Heer - who belongs to a different tale - doing with Sohni? Was it nice for Heer to so blatantly abandon her Ranjhan and succumb to her dark 'interior' longings? The silly Sohni, still carrying a *kacha* khaki pot on her head, will never learn.

There are many other characters worthy of mention. A. Rao who looked so elegant riding a camel is lost from the view in the belly of a tank. There are men of notes and goats with bags of dollar notes, and magicians who forge politicians. Pirates who play with loaded dice and toss coins in the air with rules like Heads they win, Tails you lose. Play if you like, otherwise out you go. Before I sign off this painting let me talk of Sassi pining abroad, with her Punnu incarcerated by Islamabad. In the past Sassi was buried in sand; today, she may be reborn again.

Considering that Two Chairs may hurt and Two Shirts be too tight, why not make up with everybody and ask for a cushion and sit upright in a single chair? Failing that one can only say: "Two Chairs for Democracy!"

(29 Sept. 2004)

ZAB Spoilt the Servants

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto stepped out of the shadow of Ayub Khan like the sun after a long dark night, sending out rays that brightened the sombre brows of people across the country. He ushered in an era of rousing self-awareness and feelings that had not been experienced by the poor ever before. The anti-Ayub campaign was a spontaneous, multifaceted mass movement.

It is ironic that some leaders of the National Awami Party in West Pakistan then regarded the mass movement a CIA-inspired movement. They believed Ayub Khan to be a progressive leader because his government had established a strong bond with the People's Republic of China. Maulana Bhashani, the NAP president - the Red Mullah who had once led the peasant revolt in Sylhet, now in Bangladesh - seldom visited West Pakistan now because of the ideological split that led to formation of the pro-soviet NAP (Wali Khan) and bickering between the Lahore and Karachi-based leaders of his party in here. I am certain that Bhashani did not endorse the views of the party leaders in Lahore. On his last visit to West Pakistan he did meet Zulfikar Ali Bhutto at the late Mian Iftikhar ud Din's house at 21 Aikman Road. There was some talk about a possible agreement between the two parties but that did not happen. Even subsequently, NAP

leaders in West Pakistan considered remaining aloof and politically correct.

Soon Zulfikar Ali Bhutto captured the so far leaderless anti-Ayub mass movement and totally isolated the NAP. The vast majority of NAP workers and supporters then abandoned the party. History is a witness that political leaders who cannot keep pace with the times and fail to lead are overtaken by events and by-passed by the people. As a result of adopting a political thesis contrary to popular aspirations of the NAP, that had been a major national party, was not merely left behind, it was simply shoved off the political stage. The party later split into splinters that have remained sterile on account of the arrogant 'self-esteem' and political opportunism of their bosses. A striking feature of the 'radical' factions that have survived to this day has been their bitter hostility to the PPP.

Maulana Bhashani never visited West Pakistan ever again. He had better things to do in East Pakistan. Unfortunately, because of the political upsurge in East Pakistan against the martial law enforced by the generals, Bhashani and his party were marginalised even there by the nationalist Awami League.

Bhashani's public meeting on the spacious front lawn of the Nedo's Hotel - where the Avari Hotel is situated now - was the highlight of his last visit to Lahore. The main theme of his address was that it was right time and opportune for the people to *gherao* the wicked feudal and industrialists, and capture their wealth they had appropriated from the hard labour of workers, peasants and honest citizens. Bhashani assured the assembly that the exploiters would not change. He narrated an anecdote about a person who

had asked him how many buckets of water should be taken out to purify a well if a dog falls into it. He said he had replied, "The well cannot and will not be purified even if a million buckets are pulled out unless the dead dog is removed first." The *jagirdars* and *sarmayadars* couldn't be purified because their hearts were putrid with passion for wealth and profit.

Bhashani never had a moment to himself. Throughout his stay at late Mian Iftikhar ud Din's residence, visitors - ranging from CR Aslam, then president of West Pakistan NAP, to Shehzada Alam Mannoo the industrialist - deluged him. I cannot resist recounting . Shehzada Alam's first meeting with him - I wonder if a second ever took place. I was already seated in the room with my dear friend late Sohail Iftikhar when Shehzada Alam was quietly ushered in. Maulana Bhashani was seated on a sofa chair with his back to the door from where Mr. Mannoo had made the entry. After usual greetings Shehzada was introduced to the Maulana as one of the leading textile mill owners. Bhashani turned aside and welcomed Shehzada with a beaming face and without the faintest note of sarcasm enquired of him, "*Koi gherao kia?*" Let me not describe the expression on Shehzada's face but I noticed that after shifting his weight on his feet a few times he attempted the broadest grin. Sohail Iftikhar who always demonstrated an unusual sense of humour repaired to the corridor with great alacrity muffling his chuckles.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto held his meeting with Maulana Bhashani in the same room. He emerged less humoured, determined to change the course of national history. The landed and industrial aristocracy and the state functionaries have never forgiven him

for that. Bhutto's political agenda polarised Pakistani society. A judgement on whether that was good or bad depends on where one stands. I meet people who should have nothing to complain about in life. They live in elite sections of the city. Their houses have glistening marble floors, casually covered with Persian rugs, spotless teak dining tables, silk and leather upholstery, mirrored walls, bathrooms with gold fittings and gardens professionally designed by landscape architects. They drive around in 4x4s and have several slick vehicles in their spacious garages. Their children go to expensive schools and holiday abroad. When the name 'Bhutto' is ever mentioned, a terrible burning sensation surges up their liver. The rich and beautiful demeanour instantly pales as if a black cloud had darkened a sunny prospect. Once when I insisted that a *begum sahiba* inform me what it actually was that Bhutto had done wrong, she thought I was being stupid but deigned to comply with a clouded brow: "Don't you know? He spoiled the servants." Indeed, he did, I thought to myself. She was a simple lady who had given me an honest answer. We have people - intellectuals and members of our civil and military bureaucracies - who are artfully armed with more sophisticated answers touching subjects ranging from matters of national security, economy, law and order, political patronage and what not. I will not enter into an argument with them here. They have well-rehearsed positions and will not forget or change their lines. The charming lady's lament said it all.

In short, what Zulfikar Ali Bhutto did was not to be achieved in half a century. He inspired the people to change their destiny. He pleaded to his people that their *kismet* was not engraved on the palm of their hands but lay in their fist. The unity of the masses

symbolised by their curled fingers, would give them strength and power to carve out their future. I find no need to list Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's services to the country and the nation. Almost everyone knows of them. There are others who will not ever acknowledge them. But even his enemies cannot deny that he unshackled the minds of our people, freed them from the bondage of culture and beliefs that held them enslaved to their masters. His enemies will not deny this claim because this was the actual grievance; he spoilt the servants – forget the charge listed in the FIR for which he was assassinated.

(5 January, 2005)

The Small Matter of Patriotism

The other day I was visiting a friend when quite inappropriately over a cup of cream-infested coffee he surprised me by declaring, "The trouble with Bhutto was that he was a super patriot". "What do you mean?", I enquired. "I mean, he was super patriotic", he repeated. As an aside: some may wonder whether a Sindhi can be patriotic. Are not the Sindhis, the Baloch and the Pathans a crowd of troublemakers like the Bengalis – who, in the end, got away? We should have kept our fist tighter. According to one survey, the Americans have suffered a collateral damage of one hundred thousand Iraqi civilians dead. The price poor US are paying for trying to democratise the country! Sometimes that is what one has to bear in order to help others. Would you say the Generals erred in their martial responsibility?

Bhutto had many failings. The most prominent, as my friend opined, was that he was a super nationalist. He paid a heavy price for it. Bhutto had a bright vision of a strong and prosperous Pakistan. He also cherished a vision of unity in the Middle East and the Third World. He wanted to have the finest army; a strong nationalist army that would work closely with the people to build and defend Pakistan - a model for other developing nations. The Islamic summit held at Lahore was symbolic of the unity among Muslims that

he dreamed about. He declared then that the armies of Pakistan were the armies of Islam.

Bhutto had built a splendid fighting force. He had totally overhauled the army. He armed, refurbished and modernised it as no general before him had ever thought of doing. In collaboration with the Chinese, he established the Heavy Mechanical Complex at Taxila and the Aircraft Rebuild Factory at Kamra. He upgraded the Ordinance Factory at Wah, the Precision Instruments Factory, the Special Steel Factory and built the Pakistan Steel Mills at Karachi. The industrial growth touched 30 per annum. But look at what the generals did to him in return.

Bhutto was obviously wrong in assuming that the state machinery steeped in colonial tradition and linked to neo-colonial interests would respond eagerly to his nationalist vision. How could his dreams materialise with the imperialist monster watching each move, sniffing over his shoulder? Remember what happened to Soekarno, one of the greatest nationalist leaders of the time. Aided and abetted by the CIA and a very efficient propaganda machine, General Suharto had millions slaughtered before taking over Indonesia to preserve the Free World from the threat of communism. They say all streams in that country ran red with the blood of his countrymen. Imperialism had no patience with popular nationalist leaders like Nearer, Nkrumah or Sekou Toure, who had struggled for freedom, independence and African unity. Most of them were overthrown by the CIA and replaced by thugs. One of these despots savoured democrat flesh and literally ate the entire opposition. When he was finally removed, the leader of the opposition - who had been mysteriously missing - was

found carefully stored in one of his deep freezers. Most of the body was intact but some of the limbs had been served to his foreign friends.

Bhutto's acquired the nuclear fuel re-processing plant from France. The process, I am told, permits you to leapfrog the nuclear fuel cycle. The nuclear deterrent would forever make the race with India for parity in conventional weapons less consequential. The deterrent would also help the Muslim countries feel safer that were under perpetual threat from Israel. That is why the 'bomb' instantly got branded as 'Islamic Bomb'. But look what the generals did to him. Would you call Bhutto's errors a result of his super patriotism or his inability to understand the nature of the war machine he had carefully assembled? Some people wonder what course democracy and civil society would have taken had Bhutto chosen a different course. I am curious how, Mira Nair the renowned filmmaker who was recently in Lahore to screen and comment on her 11-minute documentary titled 9/11 - would have tackled the other options.

Ms Nair, I trust, would have zoomed in first on the Fall of Dacca. She would have hurriedly, but steadily, captured some graphic images of death and slaughter that littered the streets, before moving on to the Paltan Maidan where our defeated army was assembled. Most, if not all, soldiers present there had been sent there without their eager consent for the purpose of killing their countrymen and to conquer the other half of their own country. Accompanied by the top brass, Tiger Niazi was on the podium in his well-pressed uniform. The Tiger didn't even meow at the surrender. Later, he would claim that he had been totally abandoned by Rawalpindi and that in spite of

his incessant efforts the Command Headquarters observed a total silence to his communiqué. What could the Tiger do in the circumstances? The Tiger after losing his stripes asked. He concluded that surrender was the better part of valour. A question here: "Wouldn't it have been more patriotic to surrender to the will of the people of Bengal rather than to an Indian General?"

What should Bhutto have done after being projected into power by popular will of the people? Should he have gone to Simla to negotiate the release of prisoners of war or taken some other measures first? Let us try to recount the measures he could have undertaken. He could have asked Mujib ur Rehman, the president of Bangladesh, to provide a list of individuals suspected of genocide, rape and loot. After a comprehensive list had been jointly prepared the alleged criminals could have been tried for violating the law and constitution, and for conduct unbecoming of officers and soldiers of the Pakistan Army. Then the matters concerning the causes of popular nationalist uprising, the military defeat and surrender could have been taken up. The Hamood ur Rehman Commission report could have been expedited and made public. Simultaneously, he could have negotiated the release of prisoners of war and the return of occupied West Pakistan territories lost to India.

But being a super nationalist Bhutto would not have the army humiliated and the generals cut to size. As we all know he negotiated and secured the release of his soldiers. The 'bloody civilians' pressed the prisoners to their hearts; tears rolling down their sallow cheeks, when they walked across the Wagah-Atari border. My friend, the late Musleh ud Din,

reporting the event live for the television, choked with emotion. The documentary report on the Fall of Dacca was stopped with an admonition to the ministry of information and broadcasting that had released it without his knowledge. Bhutto, the super patriot, would not have his army and the Generals humiliated. But look what they did to him!

(12 January, 2005)

You Can Have Your Medals Later

It is not easy to explain the meaning of *karroo* culture, but very briefly it means "*karna kurna kuch na, aks pana*" (creating an impression without doing anything). The Lahoris are particularly good at promising things in thousands. They were once regarded as the masters of exaggeration but have now been outdone by others more adept at the trade.

Our prayer leaders verbosely brag about their righteousness. They never stop talking. The only thing the listener can do is nod in consent. They make glib claims and threaten citizens failing to obey them with dire consequences in this and the next world. Since their profession requires them to blabber, they need to grease their throats as often as possible.

Their disputations make no sense and their lives rarely have any substance. Most mullahs have made mosques their personal fiefdoms. In old days a mosque was regarded as the house of God and didn't need to be named. Today they are boldly labelled with inscriptions declaring the management's creed in order to shun off stragglers who differ from them.

It is perplexing that an obese, indolent fellow - howsoever profusely perfumed and loquacious - has the audacity to spurn believers from God's Mosque. I believe the mullahs who politicise religion are even

worse because they divide the believers as well as the nation. Many of them have converted mosques into their private citadels. The *karroo* state looks the other way.

Mosques built to pray to God astonish aesthetic faculties. The mosques that charm me are the small unassuming village mosques, with the sharp edges of their plain decorative motifs subdued, and subdued with time by successive coats of lime brushed on with *koochi* (straw brush). Not many people notice how they shine like pearls in the morning haze and glow in the rays of the setting sun.

Since everyone recognises a village mosque as an abode of God, no one needs to inscribe any name on it. The *mohalla* mosques in Lahore used to be equally sedate and simple. The architecture of most mosques – meant to impress the mortals rather than serve their Creator – is usually garnished with bad *karroo* taste.

The mosque was once regarded as God's sanctuary. No one dared hurt, even touch, anyone in its confines. This is no longer true. The other day I read that three people were killed in a mosque following an exchange of hot words during a *jirga* held to resolve a dispute. That is how things are now. Believers joining the Jum'a (Friday) prayers are less concerned about the direction they are facing and more about protecting their backs. Armed policemen have to forego their prayers and stand guard to protect the congregation. There was a time believers would not throw a *kankar* (pebble) at a *mandir* (temple). Today they show little hesitation in lobbing

A grenade into a mosque.

What sickens our heart?

We fear not God

Worship the *Thaneda*.

But let's not be carried away. So, let's return to the *karroo* culture that has permeated all spheres of our national life. Besides the *karroo* Mullahs, there are *karroo* Generals and *karroo* Politicians. These are people, as a friend cynically noted, who have grasped the *ramooz-e-zindagi* or the secrets of life. Is it not a shame that while thousands have perished, some wretches are exploiting their misery to enhance their profits? Most citizens had believed that nobody would dare politicise the earthquake tragedy. The opposition resolved that it would not use the tragedy to advance its agenda. The earthquake was not General Pervez Musharraf's doing. People tried to retrieve and salvage whatever was possible from the devastation. The spontaneous surge of sympathy was overwhelming. Even the poor, sapped by hunger, injustice and perpetual deprivation, were desperate to share the burden and sorrows of those who lost their home and kith and kin, and shivered with their children in the deadly winter without any food and cover.

But some better-placed individuals in society, collaborating with officials as is the practice, capitalised on the tragedy. They should not. The General should not politicise the earthquake. He should not use the sacrifices of our brave *jawans*, who are always willing to lay down their lives for their country, to argue that the army is a legitimate, effective and reliable alternative to civilian rule. He should understand that an army can subdue a nation but not replace it. Yet, attempts continue to establish that generals are better than elected politicians and the army better than the civilians.

Brig (retd) M. Farooq has written in a letter, (Learning From History, *Daily Times*, October 20) that after the 1992 flood, "...a large area of AJK was cut off from the rest of the country. Thousands of houses were washed away and hundreds of thousands of people rendered homeless. Many of them never received any relief because Sardar Abdul Qayum Khan, the then prime minister of AJK and his cronies had no time to spare for the relief of the homeless." In words of Brig Farooq, "they were busy lining their pockets in Islamabad. The Pakistan Army alone shared its rations with them [the victims]".

Assuming what the Brigadier has stated is correct, I say, "Well done Army. That is what the nation expects of you." At the same time let me ask whether it is fair to wait for 13 years before slandering the AJK prime minister. If an admiral or a general receives kickbacks from the purchase of submarines or tanks, or a colonel is caught selling a tent donated for earthquake relief, it gives the military a bad name but it does not prove that the entire force is corrupt. Similarly, if a politician or his cronies are accused of corruption, they certainly tarnish the image of civil society but this does not prove that the entire nation is corrupt.

In the same issue, a letter by Captain F.Z. Khan extolled the martyrdom of five army officers in a helicopter crash on October 16. Captain Khan saluted "the courage and dedication exhibited by our officers". He ignored a university professor who died in the same crash. Hundreds of WAPDA linesmen are killed on duty whose death is never recorded as martyrdom, even though they die trying to keep our homes and towns lighted and warm.

We should all salute individual sacrifices but first let us bury our dead and focus on helping others who may die of hunger, cold and disease. According to UNICEF 10,000 more children could die in the coming weeks unless relief reaches them quickly. Dwelling on the death of five soldiers, and insisting on presenting them as the sole role models to inspire the nation in its relief effort, trivialises not only their individual courage, but also the pain and suffering of the earthquake victims, and the humanity and generosity of the people of our country.

Ye number bananay ka waqt nahin hai. Anyone trying to score points now will end up belittling himself. It is in everyone's best interest to suppress the *karroourge*. Let us instead be generous in acknowledging the material relief and human support extended by our people, other nations and the good citizens of the world. You can have your medals later.

(26 Oct. 2005)

Part II

Faces of a Generation Public Lives & Private Worlds

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Remembering Azad Kausri

As soon as the phone rang, I knew from the manner it rang that it was my friend Azad Kausri. His soft and slow tenor of speaking would instantly soothe riled up muscles and feelings.

I wondered why Azad Kausri had not called for the last three weeks to comment on my article. To be rudely woken early morning by the relentless buzz of the telephone; flog a disobedient body out of bed; pressure a groggy head and guide unsteady feet across a blank space towards the source of affliction is a trying experience. But on Wednesdays it was different.

As soon as the phone rang, I knew from the manner it rang that it was my friend Azad Kausri. His soft and slow tenor of speaking would instantly soothed riled muscles and feelings. He would begin by announcing, 'I have read your article,' and then take his time to casually unfold his mind. More often he was supportive, but whenever he took exception to playful passage he would simply say, 'It is nice, but outside my social experience.' I have not known Azad Kausri to ever flatter anyone. It is perhaps one of the reasons that while everyone respected him, only a few engaged him intellectually and socially.

I met Azad Kausri for the first time at 4 Mozang Road at the Punjab Office of the Pakistan People's

Party. Later when Mustafa Khar became the Punjab governor, a parallel office was opened at Olympic House on Temple Road. Sheikh Rashid and Mustafa Khar were not the best of friends. The Sheikh wished to strike feudalism down but he found Lord Khar standing in his way. The Sheikh-Khar tussle led to the war of offices. Mr. Khar systematically countered the old party offices established by Sheikh Sahib, with those of his own. Since Ghulam Mustafa Khar enjoyed more clout with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, he finally prevailed. Sheikh Sahib, at the close of his marathon political career was a bitter man. He was galled at his party for abandoning the land reforms. 'Land reforms or nothing'; he refused to budge till the bitter end of his life, even when the Party had begun to flirt with the forces of market economy.

Sheikh Rashid represented progressive thought in the Party and held sway in the early period. The slogan of *Roti, Kapra aur Makan* helped mobilise the masses. Later, when the party was in power, its policies veered to the right. Sheikh Rashid, Meraj Mohammad Khan and other socialists had done their task. Thereon, greater space was created for people who may have been politically weak, but hailed from established feudal families. This was supposed to lend respectability to the PPP and make it more acceptable to the Establishment. If people were with the Party, I wonder why that was deemed necessary or desirable.

Such was the transformation that it lost sight of an innocuous monument – I believe it still exists – outside the entrance to the bungalow of a notable Multan feudal, where a student part of a procession agitating against him was gunned down by his armed retainers. Later this eminent feudal joined the Party

and was soon appointed the chief minister of the Punjab.

Maulana Kauser Niazi was appointed the information minister. His first directive was to censor class issues on TV and Radio because they were likely to create social tension. It was quite amazing that a party, which had come to power on class slogans, should find it politically incorrect to address them. There were others who were put in key positions and so on. It is a long, sad tale of compromises, lost opportunities and betrayals.

During the early period of the mass anti-Ayub movement, when the iron was hot, a progressive group of motivated students and teachers felt an urgent need to work closely with the people. The purpose was to learn about their problems, and in turn educate and organise them into a social and politically cohesive force. One of the projects undertaken was to produce pamphlets on basic topics like, 'The Meaning of Socialism,' 'People's Democracy,' 'Colonialism and Neo-colonialism,' 'Social Imperialism,' 'Feudalism in Pakistan,' etc, considered pertinent for enhancing political awareness, a sense of history, culture, and knowledge of social and economic issues. Later some of the intellectuals pooled in their resources to publish a journal named '*Dehqan*'. Sheikh Rashid agreed to lend his name to the publication. This was to be edited by Azad Kausri.

This is how I met Kausri for the first time. He was escorted there by Professor Aziz ud Din, political mentor to a host of students and teachers of the time. Azad Kausri was a frail, short person of dark complexion. I have never ceased to wonder how a modest unassuming person like him managed to

undertake the journey from remote Dadhial to Chakwal and then to Lahore.

Kausri always stated gently what he thought or felt. He believed firmly but never got agitated with others who differed. He critically examined and reflected on what he regarded was precious. Above all he continued to strive, even during the closing years when his health failed him, to organise conferences and meetings. He liked to encourage intellectual interaction; have current issues dispassionately argued and established beliefs challenged. He also found time to write and translate several books on history, poetry and literature, cultural issues and criticism. In other words, he didn't merely expound or declaim, which has become an irritating habit of ours, but made the effort to put his thoughts to the pen.

I must say working with Sheikh Rashid was without any irritations. No one ever saw him at the office except when he came to claim his copy of the journal. He never even contributed for his copy, but must confess he also never took away an additional one. He was a proper person. His only weekly worry used to be the editorial. He worried that Zulfikar Ali Bhutto might find it deviating too far to the left. It must be admitted that after an arduous discussion and persistent pestering he always submitted to the editorial committee, inaudibly mumbling, '*Yar meinoon marwa na denan.*' Sheikh Rashid was such a gentleman.

The weekly *Dehqan* was published for over six months. After the PPP government had come to power and Sheikh Sahib moved from Mozang Road in Lahore to his office at the Health Ministry in Islamabad, the project was disbanded. The Party supposedly now had

at its disposal, the entire state media, full-time salaried officials headed by a federal minister in the form of Maulana Kauser Niazi that could serve it better than a rag of a journal produced by volunteers. The *Dehqan* had served its purpose. It prized its independence and right to criticise, but refused to become a mere spokesman of the government, which it voted and cheered into power. That was the Azad Kausri I knew.

(1 July, 2003)

Rendering Verse

Faiz was essentially a romantic. Can anyone make a revolution without being a romantic? At the same time, can anyone make revolution without anger?

A far as reciting his own verse is concerned Taufiq Raffat was the worst poet in the world. Once on walking into the Lahore Television studios, I was met with a visibly irritated program producer Shahid Mahmood Nadeem. Apparently when Shahid was recording Taufiq reciting his own poems, Aslam Azhar, the managing director unexpectedly walked in on them. He was aghast to hear what Taufiq was doing to the English verse.

Aslam Azhar scowled at Shahid in disbelief demanding that Taufiq be instantly removed from the studio. Shahid was embarrassed beyond description. He had with immense effort succeeded in persuading Taufiq to appear in the literary programme he was producing. Taufiq was a friendly person, but preferred being left out of such hassles. He liked writing verse while commuting between Sialkot and Lahore or in the company of carpenters who worked in the woodwork factory established by his father at the turn of the last century.

Taufiq's father was a resourceful man. When he was a young boy of eleven, he suffered from Tuberculosis. In those days TB was considered a terminal disease because there was no cure for it. Doctors gave him ten years at the most, but Taufiq's father lived to be 91. I met Taufiq for the first time at the Punjab University, Fine Arts Department. He was a close friend of Professor Khalid Iqbal since they were in school at Dera Dun. I remember he bought a painting of mine for twenty-three rupees. I think he should have at least paid me twenty-five. The amount was not bad for the late fifties, and I was content to convert it into Winston Newton tubes of paint the very same afternoon.

Poets are always eager to recite their verses. There are some, who are even prepared to pay for a cup of tea if anyone is willing to lend an ear. Taufiq spared you the ordeal and instead amused his friends with country humour, which he would pick off his carpenter friends. Every time he came to Lahore, he would visit Khalid Iqbal at the department and much to Khalid's embarrassment and our pleasure enriched our repertoire of humour with new inventions. I have never ceased to wonder at the imagination and modesty of the anonymous wits that have never ever claimed their authorship to a joke.

Shahid Mahmood Nadeem demonstrated great courage and tact to manoeuvre Mr. Aslam Azhar into the adjacent room and in low voice tried to inform him that the man was the poet himself. Aslam Azhar was not impressed and shouted as loud he could in his chaste English accent, "Even if that is so, I will still not have it. Find someone who can read him properly." I

cannot think of anyone who could read Taufiq better than Kaleem Omar.

Kaleem is a poet of substance himself, but greatly devoted to Taufiq. I remember he never lost an opportunity to recite Taufiq to an audience. What a vast difference it made to the poems when the poet sat silently in a corner drinking Coca-Cola. Taufiq is no more, but his vibrant images and descriptions of common sights and things live on. It warms my heart to no end that a small painting of mine of the Commercial Building, which I rendered sitting across the Mall from the window of the Coffee House, is in his family possession.

Faiz Ahmad Faiz had marginally a better voice for rendering verse. But he managed it much better, stressing words with his husky round voice and stopping without warning in the middle of a line, to draw a puff or take a sip. I never heard Faiz tell a joke, but without doubt he was infectiously adorable. His admirers and protégés never got tired of pandering to him and claiming his friendship. Even Murtaza Bashir, the Bengali painter who could only manage broken sentences in Urdu, would always insist on asking Faiz at parties, "*Faij sahib aik ghajal ho jai.*"

Faiz spawned an insufferable crowd of mediocrity, whose claim to fame depends on their skill to show off their familiarity with Faiz. I wish they were also able to put a few lines together, which could penetrate feelings as Faiz could so easily accomplish. Some of the most boring and tiresome people I have come across are ones who have puffed at his cigarette butts (Faiz was a chain smoker) or asked him over for an evening to show him off to their acquaintances.

Faiz never acted precious and usually obliged. I have never come across a person who would so agreeably accept an invitation and so graciously indulge others and also amiably allow him to be indulged. He would make himself at home, which would put the host and hostess at ease. It is a precious gift that Faiz had, which most celebrities offensively lack.

There are scores of young and old poets, who try to emulate Faiz, which is the cause of their undoing. Analogies can be often misleading, but this brings to mind some of the former students of Khalid Iqbal, who are enraptured by the painter's work, with disastrous consequences. Khalid is a modern person with a modern sensibility. He is an objective, rational and enlightened person. He neither believes in ghosts or metaphysics. He is a man of reason who spurns ideologies. He is a Shavian cynic who believes in doubting all certainties. The man's paintings are not a product of his conscious self, but a bi-product of his existential being.

There is an Urdu saying which can be translated thus, "A crow that ventured to walk like a peacock forgot the way he walked himself." Similarly, poets who adore Faiz forget that he was a product of his own particular circumstances and concerns. He was obviously a great romantic, which is evident from his earlier poems.

Even later when he had steadied his heart, he remained a romantic. In addition, Faiz was a scholar of Urdu, Arabic, Persian and English literature. In the creative endeavours he helped himself to anything which served his purpose. The one error Faiz made was that he lent an extra life to the Ghazal, which could

have been allowed to die its natural death. By employing the literary ambiguities and conceits of Elliot and Ezra Pound, he enriched the language of poetry. He spurned conventional platitudes and while creating new images, he recharged some of the old ones. He replaced the mystique of the cruel beloved with the romance of the proletarian revolution. He not only changed the idiom of poetic language, but also broadened its intellectual substance, bringing it nearer to our time.

Faiz was fortunate to have great artists like Fareeda Khanum and Iqbal Bano and many others of talent to sing his poems. Taufiq Rafat had only Kaleem Omar. Compared with Faiz and Taufiq, Habib Jalib was endowed with a great voice and sang for himself.

I still remember the first time I heard him recite one of his poems at the Cheney's Lunch Home adjacent to the Coffee House. He had a rising resonant voice, which held every one captive. I have often heard admirers of Faiz criticising Jalib for his explicit topicality, his overt concern for the events of the day. If poetry does not distance itself from everyday actual events, they argue, it can regress to propaganda. Faiz's poetry on the other hand by transcending transient concerns is able to focus on larger issues, which address all "wretched" humans. The supporters of the other camp assert that Jalib is outspoken and forthright in his poetic utterances and addresses an audience whose sufferings and concerns are closely linked with his own. Jalib's exasperation with the class system and repressive political culture and values built up great resentment in him. The substance of his poetic experience could not be confined within tidy formal patterns. Jalib expresses his anguish and anger

and has little time to ponder over personal suffering or romantically dilate over events of the time. People have seen how he could overwhelm hearts and shake mountains. We all remember how his poetry shook the foundations of the Ayub government, which all king's men could never put together again.

Jalib should be judged for what he was and not what others expect he should have been. The same is true of Faiz. Faiz who was seldom angry. Instead of inciting the reader to action he tried to alter his feelings. Faiz was essentially a romantic. Can anyone make a revolution without being a romantic? At the same time, can anyone make revolution without anger? But I must add that while Jalib used his own musical voice to recite his poetry, Faiz was lucky to have Fareeda and Iqbal Bano sing for him. When Fareeda sings Faiz, she can with her evasive glances and gorgeous presence transport the audience out of themselves. Ironically even those who should regard themselves as the victims of Faiz's verse are enthralled to ecstasy to demand more and more of him. They are obviously quite dumb. That the first choice of the rich and the privileged should be to have Faiz sung to them at musical evenings boggles the mind.

(13 May 2003)

Of Pehlwan and Miniatures

Musarrat Hasan informs us in her book, *Painting in the Punjab Plains*, "One of the customs prevailing among the rich in Lahore was very quaint. They patronised a wrestler and paid for his maintenance, so that the wrestler could carry the name and colours of the patron during his fights." She proceeds to narrate a rather amusing episode about an artist Khalifa Imam Din. Khalifa Imam Din was called Khalifa because of the high standard of his artwork in the field of painting. He lived in Koocha Mitti Puttan – you will agree we had far more interesting names of the streets then - in the Walled City. His descendants have continued to paint to this day.

Mustafa, a well-known painter of cinema posters and hoardings, is his grandson who learnt to paint from Ustad Allah Buksh. In an interview with Dr Musarrat Hasan, he narrates that when his grandfather, "Imam Din became a successful and recognised artist, he felt like emulating the rich people around him". He particularly vied with another artist, the well-known Master Miran Bakhsh Moortanwaley. Miran Bakhsh lived in Koocha Musawwaran of Gumti Bazaar and was famous for having painted sections of the Assembly Hall and the Vice Regal Lodge at Delhi. He had also rendered a portrait of the viceroy himself. In recognition of his artistic accomplishments, he was

offered a trip to England that he declined and asked Master Feroze, his colleague at Mayo School, to go instead. Mr. Feroze after his return from abroad came to be known as Feroze Walaiti, for he took to wearing *angrez* apparel and strutted around with *walaiti* airs. Miran Bakhsh was, "too well settled to leave" perhaps he could not leave his *pehlwan* alone at the mercy of his family. Dr. Hasan sadly informs that Khalifa Imam Din's efforts to emulate the illustrious artist ended in disaster. The cost of maintaining a wrestler was so high that the Khalifa had to sell his *haveli* to Bulaki Shah, the notorious moneylender. It went for a paltry sum of a hundred and fifty rupees.

As mentioned in an earlier article, Maharaja Bhupinder Singh of Patiala was not only a great patron of *pehlwans* but of the artists as well. Bhupinder Singh was a colourful *maharaja* who besides the sports and the arts liked his drink and pleasurable pursuits. One of his grandsons reportedly observed that while he meticulously measured two fingers of whisky for a peg, his father poured three, whereas his illustrious grandfather took a peg of only one finger - but the finger stood in vertical position. It is not surprising that his peg came to be known as the Patiala peg. It would be wise for novices to avoid using the measure.

The late Haji Sharif, Pakistan's well-known miniature painter migrated from Patiala, where he worked for Maharaja Bhupinder Singh. Dr. Hasan, once again informs us in her introduction of the brochure for a joint exhibition of Haji Sahib and his son Muhammad Hanif, held some years back at the Lahore British Council that at the Patiala court he received a monthly salary of sixty rupees, with which he not only supported his own family but also despatched his

brother to Lahore to study art at the Mayo School. We are told that he paid for his brother's education by sending to the principal, Mr Gupta, one of his miniature paintings every few months. I wonder what happened to those paintings? Where are they?

Haji Sahib's father and grandfather were also court artists at Patiala. Ustad Allah Ditta, his grandfather, worked in the Mughal tradition, while his father, Basharatullah, trained by Parkhu, an artist from the Hill States, worked in the Pahari style. Haji Sahib settled at Lahore in 1945. After Partition he established the miniature section at the Mayo School of Arts. I remember him once saying that miniature painting was a product of inner tranquillity and then reminiscing that at Patiala the Maharaja never allowed any person or event to disturb his peace. There was not an iota of complaint in his voice but somehow, I felt admonished.

I wonder how many rich and 'Raees' members of our society, except perhaps for Syed Babar Ali, ever commissioned Haji Sahib for a miniature. Some of Haji Sahib's finest works were inherited for free by the National College of Arts, where he worked as an 'instructor'. Pakistan National Council of Arts acquired most of his other miniatures after his death through efforts of Khalid Saeed Butt, who was then the director general of the organisation.

In passing, let me mention that one of the things that delight a person on visiting the Packages Industries, situated at Kot Lakhpat, Lahore - besides the variety of roses in its manicured lawns - is the paintings hanging there. I recall as far back as the late sixties they had in their collection Shakir Ali, Jameel Naqsh and Moyene Najmi as well as many others

artists. I must also compliment Syed Babar Ali for undertaking to manufacture excellent opaque and transparent water-based pigments for artists.

On Haji Sharif's retirement Sheikh Shujaullah replaced him as the miniature instructor. Sheikh Shuja was also trained in the Mughal miniature style and continued to impart the specific technique and skills to an odd student who out of curiosity, more than anything else, took up miniature painting. For many years after the creation of Pakistan miniature painting remained an anachronism, patronised for being reminiscent of a great cultural and art tradition. It was, however, only grudgingly respected. No one would have shed a tear if with the passage of time it had demised. Haji Sharif and Sheikh Shuja had kept the techniques alive – teaching people how to prepare the right paper surface, drawing the contours and building shadows – but they made little effort at employing their skills to portray their surroundings. I recall Sheikh Shuja once rendered an exquisite likeness of one of his students. This was an exception mostly they relied on traditional subjects, forms and figures.

When Bashir Ahmed, a student of Sheikh Shuja, became the head of the miniature department, the unexpected happened. Miniature painting, instead of proceeding to die returned to life. The way their young student Bashir realised in a matter of a few years what the great peers could not .

Company of Fair Women

It is not as easy as it was in the sixties to flit across to Karachi without much thought. Karachi seemed closer and within reach. Things were better; our lives were less busy and not cluttered with inanities that have acquired preponderance over the more laudable and enriching activity of spending time, as a poet said, in the company of learned men and fair women. If they were not accessible, it was considered eminently desirable to seek them.

Fortunately, after a person has crossed fifty, he begins to take courage, looking up old friends who can often be obnoxious and merrily pull you down to the substance you are really made of. Meeting them among strangers can be particularly embarrassing. All one can do in retaliation is to accept the compliments with gratitude. A buddy will ignore an odious stranger but not spare harmless eccentricities of a dear old friend. An old friend once fondly remarked about another, "He is not our friend but a common ailment!" But all said and done friends are friends, and at this time of one's life *dushman bhi apne apne lagne lagte hain* (even enemies seem ones own).

Recently, I was in Karachi and overstayed by a few extra days. Visitors from Karachi are always in a rush to get back. I wonder why. There should always

be time spared for friends, a time to pause and to reflect on immaterial things – a cheerful reflection in a pond, a pensive face, a bright prospect, and memories of bygone days, unrealised dreams and longings cleverly concealed under the scabs of wounded ego.

Karachi, at this time of the year, is flooded with bougainvillea. They are dangling from trees, riding balconies, and cascading over walls in the brightest of colours. There are other species, like the dwarf *champa*, and palms of many varieties doing splendidly well. I thought I also saw a couple of tulip trees bearing flowers. Karachi has certainly become a verdant town since the old days when the number of trees could be counted on fingertips. The weather was friendly, breezy without the humidity and whiffs of rancid fish.

I met a lot of old friends but can one ever sate the urge for the companionship of the fair gender? The intellectuals I shirk, being so full of themselves and always in the right. But let me acknowledge the ladies from whose presence I benefited. Zohra Yusuf I have known since she was the editor of the Star, the weekly magazine of Dawn. Like Asma Jehangir and Arundhati Roy, she is frail but stands taller than most warring males. She is a sensitive caring person, an aesthete and a human rights activist. Above all, she seems to always have time for friends and all those put on trial by the adversities of life.

Marjorie Hussain has quietly and patiently devoted herself to furthering the cause of education and promotion of art. She has introduced dozens of young Karachi painters to the national art scene. As an author and a painter, she has a sizeable advantage over other art critics. Her views are mildly stated but widely respected and she can be kinder than what

some artists deserve. These days she carries the burden of addressing and summarising the Karachi art scene.

The three other ladies who I met are all our premier artists and painters of substance: Naheed Ali, Mehr Afroze and Qudsia Nisar. Naheed is a gutsy painter, never afraid of exploring new direction. Proceeding from her early non-figurative works to figuration, and then on to infusing the images with temporal concerns encompasses a wide territory. Most artists stick to the established path and attempt to cash the image they have coined of themselves. Unfortunately, Naheed left for Lahore while I was in Karachi for the launch of her exhibition at the Croweater's Gallery, which I was informed went off extremely well.

Mehr Afroze teaches at the Indus Valley School. From what I saw of her work displayed at the Croweater's Gallery in Lahore last year, she has evolved into quite a painter. She, in her own way, has come a long way from her early smudges and scratching to forging corporeal forms. The images of her recent canvases are striking and meticulously crafted. I cannot imagine that a sensitive viewer could ever tire of savouring them. Presently, she is off to Islamabad for a show at the Nomad's Gallery.

I have seldom come across a more spontaneous painter than Qudsia Nisar. She indulged me by displaying a wide selection of her latest works. Qudsia paints with exuberant abandon, without care or conscious thought. Her brush moves, and moves on from dots to dabs, from blobs to dashes to visibly vagrantly brushstrokes. In the end, vibrant colours and feelings coalesce into a simple statement

aesthetically at rest. The elements are momentarily arrested for our benefit, but seem impatient to scurry off to an unforeseen destination.

The sixth young lady closest to my heart is Mina Hassan Zaidi, my daughter, and of course my granddaughter, Tania. She put up with me and I with her without any altercation, though often I do detect her raise an eyebrow. Mina has an incredible sense of detail, disapproving of anything not being at its appointed place. She has many of my paintings to help cheer her. There are others on her walls that also help, like the inimitable Gulgee and Ghulam Mustafa, Iqbal Hussain, Naheed Ali, Shahid Jalal, Kaleem Khan and some others.

Tania, a seven-year-old, also likes to paint. During visits to Lahore, she and her brother Mustafa can go through reams of paper in a day. Once, while her *nano* Mussarrat was working on a canvas, she pleaded to be allowed to work on an 'easier' part of the painting. Mussarrat naturally let her brush in a colour. Tania was pleased, but before leaving the studio thought it appropriate to remind her grandmother, "Now don't you go about saying that you did it all by yourself!"

I cannot possibly end without mentioning another lady who was a couple of years junior to us at Government College Lahore. Pervez Masood and all other observant in our class agreed that she walked rather elegantly. Naushaba was an exotic name for Lahore in the sixties. She now teaches at Karachi and I believe teaches better Urdu than English in which she received her post graduate degree. Naushaba is the daughter of celebrated Sibte Hassan, author of several books that everyone should read. *'Pakistan mein*

tehzeeb ka Irtiqā' should be compulsory reading for anyone wanting to go to college or anywhere else, assuming of course that we would like to truthfully reconstruct our past and update whatever has been deliberately excluded of our civilisation, by fabricators of the state ideology. But it would be easier done in the companionship of wise old friends and fair women the likes of those that have been in passing recorded above.

(27 April, 2004)

Chughtai in the Woods

Abdur Rehman Chughtai's son Arif recalls Bano as a "very beautiful woman with big black eyes, wearing a green sari". He was obviously crushed by her charms. This happened when he accompanied his illustrious father to East Pakistan, now Sonar Bangladesh. Saleh Bano Panni, better known as Bano, was a usual visitor to Bengal's greatest living folk poet, Kibria Jasimuddin. Bano told me that while she used to sing, Kibria would recite poems.

That was where Bano met the Chughtais. Since then, four decades have elapsed in the batting of an eyelid. She still retains her features, a spotless fair complexion and of course the deep dark eyes and a deep voice, which even now arrest one's attention. She was not wearing green when I met her a few days back.

Bano recalls that it was past lunch when Abdur Rehman Chughtai arrived at Kibria's house. Chughtai who, as we all know, had a keen eye for feminine beauty, immediately asked for a large sheet of paper to make Bano's portrait. Kibria wandered about the house but could not find one, at which Chughtai tauntingly remarked, "You are a poet and you don't have a sheet of paper". As Bano reports, Chughtai then disappeared and returned after a while with a sketch, which she till recently believed was hers. The 'sketch'

was in fact an etching – an exquisite one. A likeness of youthful Krishna rendered with impeccable deftness.

The features have a faint resemblance with Bano. Varying pressure on the line delineates it. Krishna's flowing hairs are soft and individually rendered, each flowing down from the head, along the soft full cheeks down over and withdrawing behind the round shoulders. It boggles the mind how they were done. The answer to that is "Chughtai did it". Before I forget, the etching is titled 'Sunder'. How appropriate for a gift for Bano. Krishna is holding a flute in his hand, with the *gopis* huddled together in the background. Unfortunately, Chughtai deceived our lady in green, for she either believed or was given the impression that it was a portrait of hers.

Bano kept the etching for years believing that it was her likeness imaginatively sketched in pencil by Chughtai. The plate had been etched, according to Chughtai's son Arif, in 1952, and printed along with a few other etchings by Chughtai for his trip to Dacca in 1963.

Bano recalls that after Chughtai had gifted her the etching, he requested her to sing. The enchantress that Bano must have been, first sang two Tagore songs, and then followed them up with, as Bano put it, with a popular ghazal of Faiz, *Mujh se pehli si mohabbat mere mehboob na mang* (My love, don't ask me for my earswhile love for you). Who was seducing whom; one can never know, but Chughtai seems to have come out of the woods without a fatal injury. The second occasion Chughtai nearly got lost in the woods was three decades later.

Mitchell's Fruit Farms cheerfully stretches along the Lower Bari Doab Canal for miles along the GT road

and the railway track. Mitchell's has been famous for its squashes since British times. Today Mitchell's also serves pickles and preserves beside the squashes. Syed Mohsin Ali Shah who owned Mitchell's had challenged the Mandarins to a cricket match. Little did we know then that Shah Sahib had recruited a few Yazids from a nearby town Okara to bowl beamers and bouncers to us on the day of the match? Everything at Mitchell's is extremely proper. They have a proper oval cricket field, a proper pavilion, and even a pair of proper tennis courts. We didn't even mind a bit of cheating at the cricket match because it was so English.

Moeen Afzal is the undisputed captain of the Mandarins for life on the strength of being affectionate and officious, and for his talent for bringing together a motley crowd of disorderly characters. Moeen had proposed that instead of undertaking a long tiring journey early in the morning from Lahore, we should spend the night at Changa Manga forest reshuse, from where we could casually proceed after breakfast to Renala where Mitchell's was located. It seemed like a splendid idea so we agreed.

Even if it had not been such a good idea, we would have agreed. Moeen doesn't like any one disagreeing with him. Actually, I had never stayed overnight in the woods before. I remember the occasion very clearly as we were ushered into our respective bedrooms.

It was when our luggage was being brought in and Musarrat, my wife was directing the bearer where it should be placed, that I noticed something very familiar resting on top of the fireplace. It was a damp, cold evening but the firewood had not yet been lighted. I couldn't believe my eyes. They couldn't be real. Must

be reproductions, I thought. I walked up for a closer scrutiny and discovered that they were actually quite real. Not one, but two Chughtai's.

There was an aquatint with a pair of two frightened nightingales holding on to the delicate branches of a bush with white blossoms lashing in the wind. The etching expressed a pensive romantic mood; an unusual sense of movement and a feeling of chill lightly touched your face. The second etching was less spontaneous and a trifle studied. There were deer awkwardly stranded in the foreground and a caravan proceeding westwards in the background. The lady riding a camel ensconced in a canopy was obviously Sassi, the popular romantic heroin who had fallen for Punnu.

The story goes that Sassi on the eve of their betrothal fell asleep. The heartless Baloch tribesman lurking in the darkness had no patience for platonic trivialities and took advantage of the opportunity and kidnapped Punnu, who I believe must have got himself stupidly doped earlier in the evening. The thankless Punnu did not appreciate the help extended to retrieve him from Sassi. Betraying the confidence of his benefactors Punnu slipped away. In the meantime, when Sassi woke up from her sleep, she found Punnu gone. She raved and ranted but to no avail. The deed had been done. A poet has recently castigated Sassi for her lack of vigilance. Poor thing! She goes looking for Punnu. Both in the end recover their love in death.

Fortunately, Moeen Afzal, who has always managed to be in enviable jobs, was there, along with a mutual friend Kamal, who besides being a banker likes to paint. Incidentally, Kamal was the villain of the defeat the following day. He squandered away over

after over, playing elegantly with a dead straight bat – showing off to his wife. The late Rab sahib, our cricket coach at Aitchison insisted that a batsman should always use the bat as a mirror for the bowler to see his face in. I'm sure it is the right thing to do in Test cricket, but not when quick runs are needed in a match with fixed number of overs. You must have seen tale-enders score more runs with snicks than showing the mirror to the bowler. In any case being a martial race, it is not proper for us to address the ball by keeping our head down. We should never keep our eyes on the ball, but always look straight into the eyes of the bowler.

Moeen Afzal after he had worked out the strategy for stealing victory over Syed Mohsin – not knowing that we had an Achilles heel in the form of Kamal Hayat – imperiously summoned whoever was in charge of the forest rest house. The functionary presented himself and seemed amazed that we were anxious about mere pictures. On finding that nothing serious was amiss, he explained that the two black and whites were put there because the new building was being refurbished. In the meantime, I turned the Chughtai's around and discovered that they had been acquired in 1952 for a paltry sum of two hundred rupees each. The etchings are now in the relative safety of Quaid-e-Azam Library at Lahore. Actually they were better off where they were. That is where they belonged. But how could one risk having Chughtai lost in the woods. (11 Nov. 2003)

Jack and Queen of Hearts

Some believe that in the good old day's girls fell for the heroes; now they fall for the rich. At an exhibition at Karachi in 1968, I saw a painting of Sadeqain on the subject that struck me as a trifle commonplace. But looking back over almost thirty-five years, I find that Sadeqain's sentiments cannot be lightly ignored. If memory serves me, it was a single, long panel comprising four equal sections. On the three sections, painted against a black background, were the King of Hearts, the Queen of Hearts and the Jack of Diamonds. The fourth section, painted plain black, was stuck between the three images. Logically the King and Queen should have been placed next to his queen, and the knave wedged away by the black section. But no, in Sadeqain's panel, it is the king who is set apart from his queen while the Queen stands beside the knave. The Queen has betrayed the King of hearts for the knave of Diamonds.

Sadeqain was often evasive in identifying the good and evil in a concrete context. On the contrary he was rarely subtle when intent on speaking out. In the painting under review, he adds to the cap of the Jack of Diamonds the silver mascot of Mercedes Benz, which the automobile proudly mounted on its bonnet. Today, he would have perhaps replaced it with the insignia of BMW. The Queen of Hearts has abandoned the King of

Hearts and eloped with the rich Joker. In some games of cards, as you may know, the Jacks are used as the all-powerful jokers. I wonder if Sadeqain was depicting a bitter personal experience or reflecting upon material values that were confronting foolish hearts. Sadeqain never had a woman in his life; why should he concern himself with frailty of a woman. Sadeqain here is making a larger statement about the power of money to erode the old-fashioned values based on love and loyalty. I imagine if Sadeqain were alive today, he may have painted a few more panels. Let me try delineating a few with words, which is of course not the same thing if Sadequain had brushed this himself. Let's now see, in all fairness to women, a panel could be painted where the King betrays his Queen of Hearts for the Queen of Diamonds, which is often the case. There could be another panel where eighty years old Knave is in wedlock with a Queen of six depicted in the central two sections; pair of flanking sections would be painted the colour of blood, or should they be jet black the colour of doom? The third panel could also be about marriage, but in this painting the bridal knot of a Queen has been tied to the Holy Book. It would be appropriate that one, two, three or even more knaves, who have bargained off their two sisters, should flank the central two panels. They should all be portrayed as *kanas* because they only need one eye, to focus on property to the exclusion of everything else of value, dear to the human heart. Another panel could be based on an ageing woman against a black background, flanked by their greedy one-eyed brothers who have coerced their sister to live in celibacy so that they could gobble her inheritance. Another panel could be devoted to a knave who has no hesitation in molesting another's

sister, but is ready to kill for honour if his own pleads to marry for love.

And if you bear with me, I can attempt a few more in a political vein; a Jack in khaki trumping a Queen of Hearts, a Knave presiding in a house of cards, a Joker lording over *dukkys* (twos), *tikkyys* (threes) and *sattys* (sevens). There can be many more depending how Jack or Mack deals the deck, but for the moment these should suffice.

In the sixties, during the period preceding the panel on King and Queen of Hearts, Sadeqain sketched, drew and painted innumerable works portraying human cowardice and apathy. Individuals have become so morally and intellectually slothful that cobwebs have grown over them. In some works, crows have taken courage to nest on their heads and gone about laying eggs. In other works, humans are worshiping scarecrows by prostrating before them, while the crows take courage to peck out their eyes. Ironically, the vicious crows seem to punish the humans for their inability to discern the real gods. If humans are unable to put to use nature's gift of sight, then it is best that they be deprived of it and discarded to live in darkness and ignorance.

Without doubt Sadeqain produced most of his angry and more inspired works in the sixties. His later work rests on motifs and symbols he had established earlier. His symbols are simple and commonplace, useful tools to identify and explain his forms and images, which most frequently stand for good and evil, the antagonistic elements of darkness and light, the contending forces of ignorance and enlightenment. In his paintings, beauty stands for knowledge and enlightenment, whereas ugliness is synonymous with

superstition, prejudice and ignorance, and symbolises human avarice for violence and lust for power. For Sadeqain, man can often be a measure for all things. It is through courage and the passion for truth that man discovers the secrets of nature and life, and dreams of reaching beyond the stars.

(10 Feb, 2004)

Art and Nationalism

"Artists and writers in countries like Pakistan have a better perspective of the Globe today than many of their contemporaries residing in the First World. However, in spite of their closer proximity to contemporary events that are profoundly affecting the world, artists of the Third World have barely taken cognisance of this advantage."

I would rather paint than talk about art. It is unfortunate that much of art today needs to be supported by words. In most economically developed and urbanised countries an artist abides not in a community but an anonymous crowd. Isolated from social discourse he has been either unwilling or unable to communicate. In such circumstances the artist is inclined to address himself. Estranged and baffled he withdraws from the real, mean world. With the passage of time things have gone even worse. The choices are limited. It is not easy for an artist to be free in a fragmented, immoral world. The artists of the metropolitan world have invented their aloof tongues to express their private concerns. The purpose and effort I believe is to affirm their human identity in a language they know. More frequently than not their expression is obscure. Fortunately, there are able critics like you around who can make their sense common to plain intelligence.

It is undesirable that the principle function of an art critic should be not to explain art but to market it. There is a danger, of course, even in explaining art. In explaining, art is often explained away. The best critics I find are those who do not explain but merely bring the viewer and an artwork together. Even worse, the crass commercialism that requires a critic to act as a salesman deters serious and spirited art critics in their endeavours. It is poor a state of affairs that art today cannot have value unless it is made a commodity. But if a work of art cannot have 'value', can it still have merit? This is where the artists come and must speak up for themselves, not to show off – a pimp can do that better – but to articulate their thoughts and concerns.

I recall that Sadeqain was an unstoppable talker. But most artists in Pakistan like not to talk. Many of them have probably nothing to say. Better be mute and look creatively lost than open the mouth and appear commonplace and stupid. This, of course, cannot be said about A.R. Nagori. I feel it is imperative for artists to reflect and verbalise their thoughts for their own benefit and that of others. Most major English literary critics, from Spenser to Elliot, have been poets. Similarly, the most incisive observations about art have come from artists in their personal correspondence, journals, recorded conversation, witty observations and light-hearted comments. You don't have to visit an economist to know the rate of onions, anyone who cooks will tell you that. However, I must add that where artists have been silent in our country some critics have made a sizeable contribution.

The world is getting increasingly inexplicable today for the highbrow and yet anyone on the street

can make the distinction between sunshine and shoeshine, between the cool colours of dawn and the raging colours of damnation, the world as it is and how it must be. Obviously, there is greater satisfaction in caressing and scratching your body or descending into the dark inner recesses of the mind than in being molested by the bitter taste and odour of common concerns.

The artists and writers in countries like Pakistan have a better perspective of the Globe today than many of their contemporaries residing in the First World. However, in spite of their closer proximity to contemporary events that are profoundly affecting the world, artists of the Third World have barely taken cognisance of this advantage. While it seems that most Western artists have surrendered to the system – they are convinced that they cannot beat the system and hence must work within it - many artists residing in countries still suffering the pains of being born have yet to taste the fruit of freedom. They are beleaguered by both, the offensive and oppressive post-colonial state and the neo-colonial system.

In the past national upheavals people tried to excavate their past, revive ancient myths and resuscitate dead and lost traditions in art and literature. This was an integral part of the struggle to reaffirm national identity trivialised and smothered by colonial occupation. "At the turn of the 20th century as contradiction between the Indian bourgeoisie and British colonialism sharpened, sentiments against Western cultural domination expressed themselves in the form of New Bengal Movement" (*Painting in Pakistan*, Ijaz ul Hassan, Ferozsons Ltd). During this

period there were essentially three options for an artist:

First, the artist could proceed to revive and enlarge upon the traditional styles of painting as practised by the Buddhist artists at Ajanta and the miniature painters of the Mughal, Pahari and Rajput schools. Abanindranath Tagore spearheaded the New Bengal Movement in words of EM Havell, "...in order to rediscover the obliterated tracks that his forefather had trod".

Referring to his works A.R. Chughtai writes, "These humble creations are redolent of those old days when we were making efforts to live and dream with brethren of this land ... this background of my art should not be lost sight of."

Second, the artist could establish links with untarnished rural life and the village crafts, and gain from their simple humanity and spontaneous manner of visualising images and motifs secured in their memory by traditional practice (Jamini Roy, Amrita Sher Gill, Zain ul Abedin and Qamar ul Hassan).

Jamini Roy recoiled from the academic style of the Calcutta and Bombay schools of art as well as the wistful style of Chughtai and A. Tagore. He was inspired by the more vivacious and spontaneous folk expressions. The work of Amrita Sher Gill can be divided in three distinct phases - the European phase and the early and later Indian Phases. In her early Indian phase her work was motivated, in her own words, by the desire to "...interpret India and principally the life of the Indian poor". Zain ul Abedin found much grandeur in common man. He, in words of Jalal ud din Ahmed, became famous overnight by capturing the suffering of three million people, whose

emaciated corpses lay scattered all over Bengal. Qamar ul Hassan recounts how in his youth he was thrilled to see, "featureless lump of clay come to life" with a few strokes by a traditional doll-maker. Later, he joined the *Bharatchari* movement that brought him in closer contact with the village artist and the craftspeople. The primary aim of his work was to bring art within the aesthetic and intellectual range of common people.

Third option available to the artist was to acquire the manner and techniques of Western naturalist painting (Raja Ravi Varma, Fayzee Rehamin, Ustad Allah Buksh).

Archer has shackled Raja Ravi Varma with his history painting. He probably never saw the numerous other paintings on display at his house in Travendrum, now a museum devoted to his works. Most of these are still life paintings – I still have a vivid memory of a long cluster of bananas – sensitively painted with great skill and objectivity. Here a word about Fayzee Rehamin. Fayzee had incredible skill in delineating demeanours and effortlessly expressing surface textures. He worked in J.S. Sargent's studio but just when he became famous he decided to banish chiaroscuro and consciously adopted a flat linear style of rendering people and faces. The nationalist bug had stung him so he came back from London and settled in Karachi. He writes, "Indian art has been crushed out by European influence ... there is hardly a spark of vitality left ... twenty years ago, a few native men began to revive old arts ... I joined them in their protest ... I felt that by painting Indian native scenery and by visualising native Indian traditions I could do a real service to my people." The last time I was in this town they were still

trying to unpack his works stored after his death. I consider myself fortunate to have been able to see them in 1968 while they were hanging in dingy rooms in some crowded district of Karachi.

Ustad Allah Buksh acquired the skill to paint in the European manner by painting hoardings and theatre backdrops in Bombay. On returning to Lahore, he established himself as premier painter of the Punjab landscape and various facets of rural life and folklore.

By the middle of the twentieth century many progressive artists' groups were in existence. Except for a few artists like Zain ul Abedin who were committed to radical causes, the majority of the artists were progressive in intention but motivated by liberal aspirations. Instead of purposefully focusing upon a revolutionary agenda they idealised man and pursued abstract human issues. This group includes artist, for instance, like M.F. Hussain, Shakir Ali and Sadeqain. A few sentences may be added here to underline their endeavours.

M.F. Hussain, according to Geeta Kapur, has been engaged in portrayal of India and brings the villager in the form of an animated puppet right into the present presumably to be carried forward by the 'liberal vanguard', marching in the Nehru tradition. Since then, he has become the darling of the Indian bourgeoisie. Shakir Ali rather deftly delineates common people in an aesthetic mould. He believed that man was born free but later fettered by society. Bird in a cage or birds soaring above in flight are his favourite images expressing human predicament and individual longings. Shakir's world is a private world where helpless Leda is raped by Zeus as a swan, and who

carried off another on his horns as a Bull across a sea. Shakir's work is pensive, pervaded with a sense of loss that reminds a person of Adam's descent from the Heavens. Sadeqain in his works has several attitudes and concerns - the artist as a hero fearlessly facing the gallows, treading on the thorns of life; painting with a brush dipped in his own blood. Man as discoverer and inventor, and the measure of all things. In his ceiling at the Lahore Museum, he depicts workers and peasants as the revolutionary vanguard leading the wretched of the earth. On other occasions he is visibly moved by Iqbal and Faiz's verse, and panders to feminine beauty in his paintings and couplets. In the last decade of his life, he devoted much of his energies to calligraphy in an innovative manner.

(This is the first part of one of the papers presented at the International Seminar hosted by the National Section of International Art Critics Association (AICA) on November 25-26, at Karachi)

(15 Dec. 2004)

Writers and Sweating Painters

Anarkali fell for a handsome Mughal prince and was enclosed alive in a brick wall. How awful! But I have often wondered why the father couldn't keep his headstrong son in place instead of picking on a harmless dancing girl.

Writing is so much easier, say at least much more comfortable than painting. Michaelangelo would lie on a wooden plank for hours, high up under the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, painting images with pigment dripping on his face, sometimes getting into his eyes. He was back up there again the following day. Besides the talent and effort of painting, just climbing up there required his old muscles to be in good shape.

Sitting in a chair, leisurely letting thoughts run wild is one thing; standing in the hot sun for hours interpreting life's diverse forms is something else. Sniffing a flower and finding words to match the experience is one thing, striving to find the right passion of colours and forms, drowned in smell of turpentine and sweat is another condition of existence.

Then there is the small matter of carrying the load around, an easel, a canvas, a sketchbook, and tubes of paint, pastels, and rags if you may. What does a poet need? Literally nothing! A piece of paper and

something to write should do. The best poems, I am told, are the one's scrawled on scraps of paper. The very best are dashed off on discarded cigarette packets picked up from café floors, while sipping tea at someone else's expense. Who would offer a cup of tea to an untidy painter labouring in a field, or innocuously surveying a balcony, a façade in a street? The ordeal of an artist who stands for hours riveted in one place like a statue is quite another thing. Painting is not just a matter of poetic imagination; it is tangible, a product of physical pursuit that is both creative and corporal. The fancy things come later. Van Gogh ate a lot of bread to keep himself strong. He wrote to Theo, his younger brother, that he should do the same. I wonder why our people don't eat enough bread. And if there is not enough bread to go around, as the French Queen had once with great concern enquired, "Why can't they eat cake". But jokes aside, she lost her kind head for it.

Sadequain and Moyene Najmi were the only painters among who looked starved, but were tough, for both lived on nourishing fluids. However, this is the only similarity they shared. Moyene talked little and painted even less after much application of thought. I can remember almost each one of the few paintings he did, from his impressionistic *Nila Gumbad* and *Qilla Gujjar Sing* painting water colours, to his stylised later works in oils like his *Mughal Gardens* and *Anarkali* – not Lahore's famous shopping bazaar but the naïve court dancing girl who fell for a handson Mughal prince, and as a consequence his wilful father enclosed her alive in a brick wall. How awful! It was perhaps a common occurrence in those days. But I have often wondered why the father couldn't keep his

headstrong son in place instead of picking on a harmless little girl.

Sadquain on the contrary painted so profusely that I recall only the ones I liked best. His works range from drawings where crows are nesting and laying eggs on human heads, to huge murals spanning walls and ceilings. Sadequain loved to talk almost as much as painting. He never ceased weaving yarns about himself and his work. It was best to just listen while he talked.

I was once asked to interview him for the television and at another time for the radio. It was the simplest thing I have ever done in my life. He hardly let me finish introducing him when he just took off and went on at his own leisurely pace, talking of this and that, narrating episodes and incidents which distinguished him from lesser others and his own sharp mind and sense of wit. He was smooth with words and substantiated everything he said with a couplet – an irritating habit I regard with most other people. Frankly a couplet can often confound an average person about what is fairly plain to him in simple prose. Sadequain was a smooth talker and could talk endlessly without pause. He feigned to be a little tipsy by the manner he spoke; slowly meandering from one point to another, pensively weaving words and phrases in a manner they would induce stupor. In one such engagement, I was brought to myself when the programme producer not so politely nudged me.

Sadequain, unlike Moyene, painted feverishly, spasmodically with both hands and often in a hurry without thought. He was so good with his line and could render his familiar male and female types without blinking. Once in order to show off his skill, he

delineated his usual woman type in a matter of seconds. What made the demonstration impressive was that he started at the top on a large sheet of paper with the feet and then proceeded down from the ankles to the knees, to the hips on to the navel, the breasts, and then finally down to the neck, the head and the hair.

After he was finished, he turned the sheet upside down for the audience to see what he had almost disdainfully accomplished. Everyone applauded. It was a brilliant performance of his great skill. Having this easy facility, he would often do things without reflection. He was so fluent both with his words and line that I wonder if he ever stopped to think things over, or ever inclined to speculate or impelled to conceptualise what he espoused. I knew Sadequain fairly well, and considered him a friend but there many little things that have remained unsaid.

Sadequain was one of the best things, which could have happened to Pakistani painting. He reasserted the importance of the human image and insisted on declaiming the real issues of the time. Sadequain's primary and key works express hope and brotherhood of man. They are not based on a personal sense of loss, which is characteristic of much of modern painting and literature. Most Pakistani abstract painters, under the impetus of western modernism were taking a path, which would have led to a *cul de sac*. They eschewed living issues and adopted instead, expression of private concerns, escaping into esoteric figments of their individual fantasies, or seeking satisfaction in sterilised aesthetics, cleansed of thought and ideas that define the ethos of their and our times.

But coming back to our present concern about the writers in white shirts and painters in blue jeans, it should suffice to observe that in painting for using every ounce of turpentine the painter has to shed at least a litre of sweat. One is of course not being dismissive of the writers for their clean white shirts. Let's hope for future writers to push their pens less and painters to sweat less.

(12 August 2003)

The Melting Ice Cube

Coming to Karachi in the sixties was always fun. It was a city of lights. Some of the Lahore roads in the fifties did not even have street lighting. Zubeida Agha painted one of her well-known canvases, 'Clifton Lights' in those days that was reproduced on the cover of the *Illustrated Weekly* published from Karachi.

Karachi, then, was a clean city, even a quiet city, not the mega-city it has become with the noise, the crowds and, of course, the violence. Its sedate and pensive demeanour has been slowly engulfed by hunger and bad taste.

It is true that old Karachi was built for some unknown reason away from the coastline. But in the past at least the sewers did not brazenly flow into the sea as they do now. Most Karachi-wallas are not even aware that they live on the shore of Arabian Sea. Even painters who are supposed to possess a keener sense of observation have demonstrated unusual indifference to the presence of the sea. There is hardly a canvas that can be produced as evidence to prove that Karachi has a in its neighbourhood. A few artists have indeed brushed off some animated watercolors of fishing boats and harbour life, but they merely touch the subject's surface, which has inexhaustible possibilities. This is understandable because we are

not a seafaring nation. Most of us would rather not wet our toes. We like to have our feet firmly planted on the ground.

I painted a canvas once, from a friend's hut at the French Beach, looking down and across the sea through an open window. When I started, I found myself at a complete loss. The moment I tried to fix its image on the canvas she would quietly back away, and the moment I would foolishly stride after her, she would quickly start racing back towards me. Backwards and forward, it moved with a will of its own. Spasmodically, the waves would ride onto the beach surprising people who cautiously stood on dry sand, suspiciously surveying her from what they considered a safe distance.

During the monsoons, the Arabian Sea gets awfully rough, gray and angry. In the winter it becomes calm again. Blue and green colours are restored. The waves cease dashing their head into boulders in a bid to smash them, quietly caress the seashore and slip onto the sandy beaches. Sea has many faces and can lure you in unexpected ways. By the time I was through painting for the day, I was actually feeling dizzy. Spending the whole morning bending forward and straying backwards without applying a brush stroke would make any one's head spin. I felt more like a sailor lost at sea haplessly pulling at the oars rather than a person skilled at working with brushes. But I looked and looked, and in the end, I caught her in an instance she paused.

Some of us may not be aware that there are moments when everything comes to a brief rest. The Greek artists were aware of this, which is evident from their sculpture. The Roman sculptors broke away from

the tradition for their preference for expressing action. The Greeks liked to present their deities and heroes in a state of rest, repose and equilibrium. They liked to catch the pendulum not in motion but at the moment when it comes to rest – the moment its journey in one direction has ended and the one in the opposite direction has not yet begun.

Each time I come to Karachi it is a nostalgic experience for me. Returning anywhere after a long period of absence does induce nostalgia. Its strength depends of course on the person's individual memories associated with the place. Nostalgia rests on fantasy, on a person's longings; desire to repossess shared moments, his romantic insistence on permanence and his refusal at accepting change. Unfortunately, mutability is the very essence of life, change is as certain as death. But awareness of change also creates a sense of loss. If we could ever arrest change!

It would break my heart if I were to start counting the number of old buildings that have been pulled down in Karachi. And with time, many dear friends have vanished with them. On such occasions, I sometimes wish the inevitable could be made less inevitable. The wheel of time could be jammed. It is true that with the passing away of one good thing – bad things seem neither to change nor pass on – others take its place. Nature often abundantly compensates. It takes with one hand and generously gives away with the other. It all depends on the meaning a person attributes to life. A severed branch usually engenders many more. The force of life and human courage are irrepressible.

If some familiar structures have been pulled down, there are also many new ones that have come up. To name a few, near and beyond Clifton alone, there is the Mohatta Palace that has been salvaged and impeccably restored. It is currently exhibiting a Jamil Naqash retrospective. There is then the Gulgee museum that has been built by the artist to house some of his choicest works. A little further down there is the Indus Valley School. Mehr Afroze who heads the Fine Arts Department, gave me a brief tour of the place. In one of the art rooms, it was unusual to see that students were addressing a still life comprising of crumpled rough brown paper and crushed cardboard boxes, instead of the usual empty wine bottle, a fruit, an ashtray or a pot set against a drab fabric.

In a basement studio across the courtyard, some students were busy establishing cubicles for their respective thesis projects. One of the students, who drew rather well, had pinned up a few studies for her thesis subject titled, Melting Ice Cube. It was rather inventive and unusual challenge, which required her to study, sympathise and perhaps empathise with various stages of a melting ice cube. She also had on display some conceptual sketches and illustrations from magazines depicting decay. One of the functions of art and literature is to draw peoples' attention to what they have not perceived and enable them to experience what they have. When inanimate objects are creatively perceived and identified by an artist, it is strange how they come alive and begin to interact and talk. I asked the young student if she ever had such an experience. Surprised by the question she effusively smiled back and said no, she had not. These were her preliminary drawings, but if she keeps up engaging the ice cubes with the same compassion and

persistence she is in for a surprise because one of these days an ice cube is bound to whisper aloud and reveal to her the warm heart which makes it melt.

(13 April, 2004)

New Dimensions

In a previous article I promised to share with you my appreciation of Sabir Nazar's paintings exhibited recently at the Nairang Gallery. They touched me like a cool, fresh breeze at a time when Lahore is deluged with the heat of scented inanities and perfumed bad breath. Sabir is something special. His art has a soul. A modest person, he draws on tradition and folk art to express his concerns. Unlike some 'modern' artists who believe in ghosts and demons his ideas are quite unambiguous.

Sabir Nazar has a political upbringing and a multi-cultural outlook. He is critical of art that does not draw on the indigenous narrative and familiar images and panders to foreign vocations. He regrets that most of Shakir Ali's work is inspired by Greek mythology rather than tales that are more familiar and closer to our heart's hearth and home. He has a point there. Indeed, not many of us are closely familiar with the story of Leda and Swan or of Europa and the Bull. Shakir could perhaps have reached a larger audience by referring to characters and episodes that reside in our common memory.

Sabir informs that during his formative years he was fascinated by child art. Later he absorbed the the 'folk' manner of forging images on and around trucks.

buses and informal renderings on surfaces of commonwalls. Khan Baba's Hotel in Gulberg's Main Market, he mentions, has many archetypal images (like Ranjha) painted on the walls. To serve our purpose, these images need to be reinvented and upgraded. All myths would die unless successive generations update them. One of the tasks for our artists and writers surely is to revive the myths that enable them to express themselves with least fuss to larger and diverse viewers. Considering that modern painting the world over – at least till the neat past – has advocated ambiguity if not obscurity and maintained a deafening silence about the burning issues of our time, it is been difficult task to encourage a narrative expression. It is even today upheld that only lesser minds point their fingers to the truth. It is stressed that truth is multifaceted and unfathomable; beyond human grasp. Afraid of being branded ideologues many talented artists preferred silence or ambiguity over silence.

At Kohat, where Sabir was born, there used to be a Valmiki temple. It was dedicated to a sage who is believed to have written the Ramayan. It was usual to put up annual open-air plays based on various episodes such as Rama and Sita's trials in the forest, their struggle with the demons, the assembling of the monkey army by Hanuman, and Rama's invasion of Lanka to retrieve Sita from the clutches of its demon king, Ravan. In his youth Sabir took part in the rehearsals. The Monkey god, demons exuding fire from their mouth, flying chariots (*uddan khatolay*) and acrobatic feats charged Sabir's imagination.

In his work Sabir does not employ esoteric symbols confined to his private concerns. His imagery

has a wide social relevance. He counters religious orthodoxy by resurrecting Sarmad, the sheikh whose head was cut off at Aurangzeb's order since the orthodox emperor would not allow anyone to deviate from the Shariat enforced by him and conservative mullahs that held sway at his court. In one of Sabir's paintings Sarmad is seen ascending the stairs of the Badshahi Masjid - the location has thus been shifted from Delhi to Lahore. In his hand, Sarmad holds his severed head (depicting the unity of the body and mind). The flooded Ravi symbolises popular rage.

Shah Husain one of the renowned Sufi poets, who not merely declined imperial favours but did not hesitate to give refuge to Dullah Bhatti. Dullah later became a symbol of peasant resistance to official repression. Dullah inspired and led a revolt of Punjab peasantry against Emperor Akbar for high taxation. After great trouble he was later captured and executed but Akbar spared Shah Hussain's life. Dullah is another symbol that finds its way into Sabir's works.

Several of Sabir's paintings are based on the story of Puran Bhagat, a popular tale that seems to be receding from our collective memory. There is a splendid translation of Puran Bhagat in verse comprising 26 cantos by the late Taufiq Rafat, one of Pakistan's eminent English poets. It has been published with a learned introduction by M. Athar Tahir. Still, compared to his half-brother Rasalu, who is a great hero of Punjab folk tales, Puran is relatively little known.

Puran's story has a striking resemblance with the tale of Prophet Joseph. Both were abandoned in a well. While Joseph's brothers threw him in the well out of jealousy, Puran was falsely charged for assaulting

his mother after he spurned the sexual advances of Luna, his stepmother. Later when he was retrieved and sold in Egypt, Joseph, was also falsely accused by his master's wife Zulaikha and imprisoned. However, while Joseph was eventually vindicated because the shirt torn from the back indicated that he was in fact trying to flee from Zulaikha, Puran's father believed the charge against his son and he was thrown in a dark well with broken hands and feet. The well Puran descended can be seen as a physical well but also as a metaphor for his inner self. Later Saint Gorukhnath - who makes an appearance on other tales as well - pulled Puran out of the well with a thread twisted by a virgin maiden. In another painting the thread appears as a snake. The snake symbolises Adam and Eve's quest for self-awareness and knowledge. Snake in Sabir's work can also be a sexual symbol. While charmers' snakes are tame, Najam Hosain Syed points out that "*jinoon laria naheen os sapnachen ditha*" (he who has not been bitten, has not [really] seen the snake). The symbol is thus capable of several layers of meaning. In Persian poetry, the day is the symbol of awareness. In our local tradition on the other hand night can be a positive symbol; at night lovers meet and heroes and saints reflect on life; the day is associated with commerce and everyday existence.

Sabir has painted at least five versions of Ranjha. In one picture Ranjha is riding a buffalo (with its udders full of milk, symbolising mother earth). Ranjha casually residing on the ample haunches of the buffalo plays a tune on the flute, symbolising human creativity. Ranjha is also a passionate and faithful lover. In one of his paintings Sabir gives a twist to the folk romance as Heer, Ranjha's beloved is shown reclining in the nude. Sabir doesn't gloss over the

natural urges and irrepressible forces of life and nature. Ranjha's passion for Heer, he believes, was as much physical as Platonic. Can one deny that for together the two make for an ideal union?

Sabir's imagery reflects our civilisation and our social concerns. Like a pilgrim he visits the past without any intention of plundering it for profit or aesthetic embellishment. His images can be traced to traditions that have had an impact on our country and region. A Sufi riding a tiger holding a serpent in his hand brings to mind goddess Durga riding a tiger. Then there is Prophet Younas shown inside the fish, a *Burrrak* (horse with wings and the face of a woman) that according to tradition carried Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to the heavens and the GandharaN human forms and compositions incorporating different episodes of Buddha's life.

All of Sabir's paintings are rendered in watercolour on paper. They have been handled most delicately. He has obviously enjoyed every bit of his work and viewers should be pleased if he continues to work in the same vein. In some of the works, however, his social insights are lost because the images are huddled together for lack of space. It would be interesting to see what Sabir can achieve if besides watercolours, he renders his subjects in oils and on a larger size. That may possibly offer more elbowroom to him and his images and enhance the impact of his symbols.

(21 Dec. 2005)

Wandering Thoughts

"Son, choose any one you like", said the master, pointing at the canvases stacked in the veranda. Tahir selected one he liked best and happily sauntered off, little realising that Ustad Allah Buksh had given him for five hundred a canvas that in those days could have fetched five thousand rupees.

Today is another day. It is a bright sunny morning. I wonder why a crow has been 'croaking itself hoarse' since the middle of the night. The sight of a dove cautiously approaching the water bowl outside the window is comforting. Rain stretching deep has encouraged the bougainvillea draping the boundary wall to bloom passionately. A friend informed me yesterday that only 300 of the saplings out of the 4,000 he had put in the nursery pond have survived. He intends to harvest the fish by the middle of January.

A second dove has alighted on the round rim of the water bowl. It cautiously immerses its beak; expeditiously takes a quick draught of water and swiftly takes off. It is unusual for doves not to move in pairs. I hope all is well with them.

My friend Irfan who is visiting Lahore, seems to be up. I can hear the rustle of the morning newspaper. He must be paging through the paper, ruining his appetite for a proper breakfast by counting the number of men, women and children sexually

transgressed, robbed and blown up the previous day. Why not start the day with accompaniment of music; a morning Raag perhaps.

The Oxford University Press has rather shabbily printed Tahir Jehangir's interesting account of his treks. It is informative and makes interesting reading for those who like outdoor life. Tahir, now approaching 60, is an insatiable trekker. Every time you meet him, he has either recently arrived from or is setting off for some exclusive nature reserve. He has unusual stamina for walking and some place in his heart for art.

He has appropriated a number of paintings from his friend Badar Moeen, who has passion for painting that has matured by studying the works of masters. The talent may have died out had it been surrendered to studio regimen of an art school. I am of the view that art schools kill more artists than they produce. In an art school a student can acquire a few handy skills and some smart shortcuts. But a lot of what he can learn in the studio of life cannot be learnt in a classroom. Mao Tse Tung said something, which I believe is also pertinent to art. He said that what can be learnt in a day in battle cannot be learnt in a year in a military academy.

Tahir Jehangir's interest in art is not recent. It goes back many years. Irfan and I were with him the other day for an evening. A baked fish was served for dinner with sliced lemons and some herbs. It had a fantastic aroma and tasted delicious. Irfan, an authority on food, thought that the baked chicken pie was a bit watery. Frankly, I rather liked it. But it is best not to argue with experts. To people like me, what looks good or tastes good is good enough.

I was about to reach for a third helping of baked fish with a spoonful of boiled rice that I thought I'll lightly soak in the juices floating in the fish plate, when I observed Irfan eying the Trifle pudding rather disdainfully. At that moment Tahir arrested our attention by informing that he had bought an Ustad Allah Buksh in the 1950s. How was that possible? He could not have been no more than fifteen years old, Irfan confided to me later.

Apparently, Ustad Allah Buksh lived next to Tahir and had cordial relations with Tahir's father. Tahir was acquainted with Ustad Allah Buksh and was rather intrigued by the man who often sat in the veranda doing nothing but painting. In the compound of his house Ustad Allah Buksh had kept a variety of animals, including cows and buffaloes that he frequently rendered in his paintings. These were his models unlike the Parisian painters of the time who preferred keeping women for the purpose.

Allah Buksh was too bashful to have painted a nude; not at all shy of rendering udders though. Only on rare occasions did he allow female flesh to reveal itself through a wet shirt sticking to a woman's torso. I wonder why Allah Buksh never painted horses. I must ask Tahir when I next meet him if he ever saw or heard one neighing from Allah Buksh's house.

When Tahir Jehangir passed his Senior Cambridge examination his father gave him 500 rupees - to his utter surprise, since the Sheikhs from Chiniot have a reputation for being extremely thrifty. Instead of spending the money on tangible needs, Tahir went across to Allah Buksh's house to satiate his aesthetic sense. Carefully avoiding the sizeable dung droppings softy resting all over the ground, he walked

towards the veranda, where Allah Buksh was working on a canvas.

"Sir, I would like to acquire a painting of yours," said Tahir, looking purposefully straight into the Ustad's eyes. Allah Buksh was visibly amused and affectionately sized Tahir, whose head stood barely a foot and a few inches above the terra cotta *chillam* of his *hookah*. Feeling that he was perhaps not being taken seriously, Tahir produced the five hundred rupees he was carrying in his pocket. The Ustad took a deep puff; the *hookah* instantly came to life. The Ustad then leisurely allowed the tobacco smoke to escape from under the strands of moustaches tinged with copper.

"Son, choose any one you like", said the master, pointing at the canvases stacked in the veranda. Tahir selected one he liked best and happily sauntered off, little realising that Ustad Allah Buksh had given him for five hundred a canvas that in those days could have fetched five thousand. The painting proudly hangs in his house. Thanks to Badar Moeen, I have to wonder if Tahir Jehangir since he has grown up ever bought a painting again.

(5 Oct. 2005)

Finding

Corresponding Link with Nature

A considerable part of English poetry it is argued is moved by the English countryside. This incidentally is also true of the best of its painting. It is asserted that it is essential for man to find a "corresponding link" with Nature that can rejuvenate him with its beauty and awesome majesty.

Pakistan has a wide range of natural scenes ranging from the rugged mountain ranges and thick-forested slopes to the fertile alluvial plains, the deserts and the sea. We have streams coursing down mountains eternally covered in snow, placidly meandering rivers flowing into the ocean. We have green fruity valleys, multiple crops, sights and sounds of almost every description. In the monsoon season the gleaming green paddy stretches beyond the horizon, in winter the golden wheat. We have orchards with fruits of almost every description ranging from dates to grapes. It is a country where the palm and the pine can grow in companionship. And yet we are poor. But that is another matter. Let us not ruin the joy of recounting pleasurable sights and tastes of heavenly bounties with bad taste of poverty. The two are separate things.

There was an official who flourished a beard. A precocious youth who had come to have a job done asked him: "You appear to be a pious man, then why are you asking for money?" The man whose long beard reached his fat belly, instantly answered: "Look my friend! As you can see, my beard ends where the belly begins." Pakistan is poor but surely not because it is fertile and naturally beautiful. Let's for the moment, for this reason alone, celebrate its natural endowments and the courage of its people.

It is ironic that urbanisation which had initially created the necessary material conditions for man to have the leisure to reflect upon nature, later living in the mega urban environment acquired a momentum of its own that estranged him from nature. Most school children in New York now believe that like all other consumer goods, milk is made in factories. Many of them have never seen a live cow. For good reason unlike our towns, where they roam the streets at leisure, there is not a single cow in evidence in New York or Chicago. Are we not fortunate then to be closer to nature, as urban life encroaches upon the countryside, establishing islands of rural landscape within towns, providing easy access to ovine and bovine pleasures?

I find it inexplicable that surrounded by natural prospects Pakistan has produced a very small number of painters who have a natural predilection for nature. Allah Buksh apparently never observed nature closely. I find his paintings of mountains engaging but they are entirely the product of his fancy. I wonder if he ever perceived nature, studied actual flora, rock formations or the individual demeanour of the hills, mounds and mountains he depicted. Even the hues and tones of his

landscapes are foreign to the indigenous colours and disposition of nature around him.

Khalid Iqbal is an astute painter who has spent a lifetime focusing on the fringe that divides Lahore city from the surrounding rural life. He paints with an immaculate sense of light and tone and has an unusual ability to portray the essential distinctiveness of a place. Khalid's world is a restrained and studied world where there is no room for scudding clouds, gushing streams or winds coursing through monumental trees. He has, however, captured an aspect of our familiar landscape that went unnoticed before. But this is all an artist can be expected to do - make people look and experience an aspect of their surroundings of which they have been oblivious before. There are some other painters who have addressed nature in different ways, but there is only a few of them. Shahid Jalal, Ghulam Mustafa, Kaleem Khan and Sardar Aseff have ventured beyond the city fringe. Intellectually and aesthetically, it is imperative for a Pakistani painter in close proximity with nature to establish a link with it. Art cannot renew itself merely by interaction and contention with what has preceded it, as has been the case with much of modern art. Painting and literature cannot be judged by their form and appearance alone. An artist has to draw sustenance and rejuvenate his art from what surrounds him.

It cannot be disputed that art is a product of its own time. At the same time art and literature often aspire beyond the immediate presence, towards an ideal or at least a more comprehensive future. This aspiration binds art of all times and ages - not necessarily in form and appearance but in spirit. The art of an era cannot be better than art of the preceding period. It can only be

different. Art and poetry neither inevitably evolve as argued by materialist ideologues nor can develop according to the dictates of market economy. In absence of enlightened patronage, both the State and the Market pervert and corrupt art. Pablo Picasso believed that the ancient Egyptian painting was modern because it survived to his day, whereas he saw artists who claimed to be modern, to have died in their own lifetime.

The mention of man's urgent need to find links with his environment reminds me of Gulgee. Professor Arshad of Zoology Department of the Peshawar University informed me the other morning that one fine day an exhausted man, accompanied by his wife, introducing himself as Gulgee, stopped at his house, situated high up the steep Mukhshpuri slope at Donga Gali. They asked if they could have some water to drink. After the couple had quenched their thirst and recovered their breath, the husband confided that they were considering buying a house and asked whether or not he knew of one around for sale. It so happened that there was a bungalow up for sale and the professor guided Gulgee to the place.

Subsequently Gulgee also bought some property four kilometres away at Nathia Gali. His son Amin has recently adorned the exterior of their house at Nathia Gali with rather strange images. Amin Gulgee has an irrepressible talent for innovative concepts. He has produced a large body of sculptural works in a matter of a decade. He also has decorative talent and a pleasant aesthetic sense, but I wonder why he has done the exterior with motifs that could easily scare away visitors at dusk.

In the early sixties Gulgee was a stranger in the Hills. However, after establishing residence there, he

started visiting the place every summer. Today every local seems to know of him. If a person were to study Gulgee's paintings he would never be able to tell that Gulgee had ever ventured close to the Himalayan vicinity. It is quite amazing how firmly he shut himself away from Nature all his life. His association with nature ended, like the aforementioned beard, where his painting began. It is incredible that in Gulgee's pictorial as well as non-pictorial paintings, there is not even a faint reference to nature. An artist who calligraphed the name of Allah in hundreds of ways, but was unable to perceive Nature, would always remain an enigma.

Sahir Ludhianvi has written at the beginning of his famous anthology of poetry, *Talkhian*: "I am returning to the world what the world gave me in the form of accidents and inflictions". It is apparent that nature had nothing to offer to our Gulgee.

(4 August, 2004)

Sexing up Paintings

In the late fifties when it became fashionable for artists to sex up their paintings with abstract elements, Sadeqain's vision was not affected by the trend. He selectively absorbed certain aspects of Cubism but favoured a descriptive rather than an analytical approach. Sadeqain demonstrates a great narrative skill in his canvases and murals. He is more concerned in readily expressing his concerns rather than setting about to solve aesthetic riddles.

In those days everything associated with the West was considered unquestionably smart, and anything that even remotely reminiscent of our self was perceived as old and rusty. Many of our painters and some even now, had no hesitation in adopting forms and mannerisms of modern art, hijacking them from foreign art journals and magazines.

Sadeqain was an incorrigible talker, a phrase that I borrow from Ali Imam, who often used it to describe one of his own gifts. When Sadeqain or Ali Imam spoke, everyone else listened. They both spoke rather well, but Sadeqain was in a league of his own. His commitment to himself and his work was absolute. He could weave words into an ornate narrative and embellish it with phrases, couplets from Mir, Ghalib,

and Iqbal, and of course from his own *rubayats*; four-line verses, some in Punjabi.

His studied manner, lazy intonations, dramatic pauses and unexpected asides, would leave the listener mystified. Those who were jealous of his articulate skills called it verbosity. I think he was eloquent and could occasionally be amusing. However, most people couldn't make head or tail of what he said when he thoughtfully declaimed his ideas. The leisurely pace and solemn tone in which he disdainfully held forth, was enough to convince the listener that what was being uttered was irrefutably of grandiose proportions.

During his discourse Sadeqain would often go silent abruptly, and stare through the thick lenses of his spectacles at the captive audience. His gaze seemed to search for a response, asking, 'have you understood anything?' The response was usually in the form of an ingratiating smile, followed by an evasive reply such as, "Sadeqain sahib, *kia baat hai aap ki*." (you are something else) I am sure Sadeqain did this purposely to make an impression on his devotees.

Generally, people held Sadeqain in high esteem and idealised him in their own ways. Sadeqain never hesitated to cultivate a unique image of him, projecting not one but many different personas. In private life for instance, he shunned women, but publicly he tried to establish his image as a romantic, with a keen eye for feminine beauty. On other occasions he would promote an inebriated bohemian image of himself, but rather soberly he cultivated the right people in the right places. That is why many of his contemporaries didn't particularly care for his social commitments. Yet the Pakistani painters owe so much to Sadeqain.

I vividly remember a commemorative meeting organised by the National Council of Arts for Sadeqain at the Islamabad Hotel, Islamabad after his death. Ahmed Faraz, our famous Urdu poet, praised Sadeqain but at the same time expressed his resentment that Sadeqain had not stood by those who struggled against Zia's terrible dictatorship.

Faraz is not known for mincing words. Recently at a dinner in Islamabad he confided in me that that during those days, there wasn't a military officer's wife Sadeqain had not sketched. Each evening was spent pandering to a general or a colonel. All said and done, Sadeqain was largely responsible for almost single-handedly enhancing popular appeal of art and introducing new subjects and social issues, which painters had hitherto not touched. Many painters and critics even today are not ready to accept his contribution; the facts of history through which they have lived. I will not name any – many of are still alive – who spurned the human image. They insisted that the purpose of painting was to address pure aesthetic realities not the verbal ones. A painting they argued must focus on colour and line and nothing external to the canvas. The human image and the problems pertaining to it were best addressed in literature and should therefore be expelled from painting.

Painting should not create illusionary images but original forms. Some artists insisted that painting should be even cleansed of texture, which being a tangible element belonged to the sphere of sculpture. Texture turned painting into a relief, destroying the two-dimensional 'sanctity' of the flat canvas surface. This is how the highbrow ideologues of Modernism in Paris and New York argued. Later even the rectangular

canvas was rejected and replaced with shaped canvases, followed by painting off the museum and gallery walls itself, and so on.

Let us try to stretch the argument a little further. Can it not be argued that if describing things by painting is not high art, then how can describing people, things or events through the medium of words be proper literature. Logically per force description should be left to illustrators, journalists and advertisers. People and events by this argument should be only presented live, on a stage.

However, if in the words of Shaw, a playwright can present to an audience a battle scene on 'bare boards' that the audience can assume to be real, why is it not proper for a painter to depict a lion hunt on a canvas, which surely is not possible in a theatre. A lion hunt on a screen in a cinema or television is surely visually more convincing but it nevertheless remains an illusion. Should cinema also be ousted from the domain of high art? If the cinema is to be forgiven should the theatre be closed down? Many artists who once believed in this incessant aesthetic rubbish, which successively achieved the status of an ideology, have since the invasion of pop art and post-modernism, re-espoused the human image and popular causes – the causes that are of course approved by the neo-liberal elite because everything else is still termed as gross propaganda. In the final analysis art is not a matter of technique, style or content, nor a question of what it is, or what it is not or should be. It is really a matter of what it does, and how it affects and where it takes you. (17 Feb, 2004)

Shuffling a Deck of News

One of the comic interludes in a variety programme used to be a short skit when a person would saunter across the stage pretending that he was ignorant of the chair set at the edge. He would stop, suspiciously study the empty chair, cautiously look around and then tentatively proceed towards it, pick it up and place it at the place of his preference. He would, without trying the patience of the audience any further, pull a newspaper from under his arm and sit down to survey the headlines. He would read aloud the important headlines of the day for the benefit of the audience.

I remember Mohammad Ali Wasti, then a student at the National College of Arts, who was extremely good at it. He was also good at mimicking Tariq Aziz and rendering a parody of the news he read for Pakistan television – reading them in Tariq's deep rhetorical voice. Those were the days when Tariq was a PPP frontline leader. He regarded himself a revolutionary and never fought elections for in those early years he regarded it a bourgeois deception. Later, he was part of the delegation that accompanied Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to Simla. In the 1970s, he read the news and also made the news. He was a great orator. I have rarely seen a person who without being glib or

voluble had such command over words and could move crowds the way he did.

In those days some people used to say that Meraj Mohammad Khan, Maulana Kauser Niazi and Tariq Aziz were employed to heat up the oven. ZAB would then arrive to bake whatever he liked to bake that day. This is not to deny that Bhutto, who may not be considered an orator in the conventional sense, was the real mover and shaker of the crowds at public gatherings. When Bhutto held the mic and started speaking in his high tenor voice that frequently broke on reaching a crescendo, he and the crowd became one. He joked, and poked fun, sometimes chastised the crowd. They liked him for whatever he did. Once they went into frenzy when he hurled at them a bouquet of flowers along with the vase from the stage; at another occasion his jacket.

Remembering Wasti and old days allow me to read some of the headlines that I encountered during the week in *Daily Times*. I will list them down, I promise in the sequence they came. I wish to take the necessary precaution to point out that if the reader were inclined to read their own thoughts into the news headlines it would be at their own risk. Here we go:

Media completely free in Pakistan- Sheikh Rashid

(May 5)

Police attack journalists (May 5)

Government elevating women in society (May 10)

LHC validates 12-year-old's marriage (May 10)

Pakistan army drone crashes (May 5)

PPP can give Musharraf safe passage – Zardari

(May 5)

Joan says sex is the cheapest beauty treatment

(May 7)

Enlightened moderation has become a joke – Minister of State for Religious Affairs (May 7)

Angelina Jolie calls on Shaukat Aziz (May 7)

Aziz seeks clerics' help on birth control (May 6)

Angelina says she and Brad just good friends (May 5)

Michael Howard says he will resign (May 7)

Musharraf for tolerance in society (May 4)

Angelina Jolie calls on Musharraf (May 7)

"I'm here for the job I do, not for the person I'm dating"

(May 7)

3rd plot to kill Musharraf foiled (May 6)

Showing Indian films the only way to revive cinema (May 10)

Lack of quorum in National Assembly embarrasses government (May 7)

Zoo keeping people away from Chimpanzees (May 7)

Institute to conduct study on sex behaviour (May 8)

Four shot dead in Gujranwala (May 5)

Public display of weapons banned in Waziristan

(May 6)

Top US official says war on terror moving in the right direction (May 6)

Christian Scientist puts Darwin on trial (May 8)

Tagore's stolen Nobel Prize replaced (May 8)

Angelina Jolie climbs truck carrying Afghan refugees (May 8)

Afghan arrested for spying (May 7)

Sanitary store catches fire (May 8)

US says it upholds UN torture rules (May 6)

Haphazardly reading aloud newspaper headlines can be immense fun. It is much better than wasting time on solving crossword puzzles or even going through the news in small letters. The grandfather of a friend of mine wisely advised his grandson who liked reading, "Son don't unnecessarily stress your brain otherwise you will age early."

A cousin took the advice so seriously that he would not let any printed material enter the house. The only newsprint that was ever allowed to visit them was the one in which butcher wrapped *Qeema* for them. *Masha Allah*, he is over 70 now. To this day he has neither had the need to dye his hair nor to wear spectacles. Uninvaded by the ideas and conflicts of the time, he is at peace with himself and his neighbours, and does whatever his wife asks of him. If I were to 'compare and contrast' as we were often asked to do in our examinations, I have no hesitation in penning down that the those who every morning brace themselves to read what transpired the previous day have been worse off. They are unpleasantly opinionated, long winded, irritably argumentative and determined to demolish those who disagree with them. Company of good hearted ignorant is far more desirable than those who, with impaired intelligence preach right virtues but support the wrong side.

Frankly I would rather be proved wrong and be loved, than I wrong someone to prove that I was right.

Munnoo Bhai is a dear fellow, but since his wife and I share the same name – Ijaz – instead of calling him Bhai I sometime call him Behen. What could be more innocent and sweeter than love between a brother and sister? Munnoo Bhai, nay Behen, as everyone knows is an eminent short story writer, playwright, poet and above all a great wit. Admittedly he is far less fertile in effusively visualising the ridiculous than Amjad Islam Amjad. Whereas Amjad tickles your ribs, Munnoo Bhai penetrates the skin. Evidently, both, in their own ways, act as laxatives for those who are mentally and physically constipated. I haven't seen Amjad Islam in recent months but did spend an evening with Munnoo Bhai the other day. As the evening cheered, his wit visibly sharpened to everyone's amusement. Munnoo Bhai is too polite to take a dig at an individual. He is the only person I know who can create humour at the expense of the meek. He gets away with it because he draws our sympathy for their innocence and tragic inabilities.

In one of the narratives, he described – as only he can describe being a playwright – the responses of a poor husband who hides himself under the bed when robbers barge into his room in the middle of the night. When the robbers break open his trunk, he is first worried and then angry, but keeps his silence. Later, when one of the robbers holds his wife by the hand, he finds his honour challenged (*ghairat mardī zor*) and he is visited by *tapash* (rage), but God gives him *sabar* (forbearance). At one level it is funny but upon reflection, it clenches your heart. Common innocent men and women need to be encouraged and protected.

Centuries of economic and social repressions condemned them to live in fear and servitude. Individually, they have not as yet overcome the fear and memory of their past to combat brute force.

How long will the honour and dignity - not to speak of the civil, legal and economic rights - of our brother citizens remain vulnerable and compromised depends on our collective realisation and endeavour?

(11 May, 2005)

How Should I Know?

It was at the Agricultural University and the Ayub Research Institute; situated in common vicinity at Lyallpur (later Faisalabad) that Mr. Khuda Buksh Bucha was holding forth with eloquent flourish on farming, rarely excelled by anyone. General Musa, the governor, and Dr Norman Borlaug, the Nobel laureate and father of the Green Revolution, were also present. Mr. Bucha, then agriculture minister of West Pakistan, was venerated by the *dehatees* (rurals) on account of his amiable fatherly manner in which he spoke to the farmers every week on Radio Pakistan.

I remember how our God given Bucha Sahib would patiently explain to the listeners how they could improve their yield by improving farming techniques and methods. He would speak at a leisurely pace. With his fluent command of Punjabi and his graphic pauses and stresses he would make certain what he said was safely stored in the listeners' heads. He savoured each word like a delectable morsel of food before allowing it to roll off his tongue. He obviously enjoyed doing it. I never had the occasion to be in his company but he was universally regarded as a rare conversationalist.

Bucha Sahib, impeccably dressed in his usual *sherwani*, was on this occasion addressing in Urdu that he spoke with equal ease with a mofussil accent. He

praised General Musa, the chief guest, for his *buland sitara* on two counts: "*Aap kaa 1965 ki jang mein bhi sitara buland tha or aaj zaraat kay mahaz par bhi sitara buland hai.*" Dr. Borlaug sat through Mr. Bucha's ornate speech of welcome with some impatience. He did not know Urdu but was wise enough to gather the gist of it. It looked like a rendering of classical Chinese calligraphy that demonstrates skill and aesthetic flourish but expresses no urgency of intention.

When Dr Borlaug (a very tall man of Sufi disposition) was called to address the learned gathering he eschewed preliminary pleasantries, coming at once to the point he wished to make. "Look here! Don't be too happy! You have to lay down a programme to produce new hybrid seed variety every year, failing which this Green Revolution in wheat production will be over in two years", he said - or something to that effect.

It was as a result of the hybrid variety of seed introduced in those days that for three years Pakistan was self-sufficient in food - what some have termed food autarchy. The Food Department officials have claimed 22 million tonnes of wheat harvest in the current year. The department is seeking credit for what it does not deserve. The high yield is primarily due to good weather. In the irrigated and semi-irrigated areas like Mianwali or Shahpur the yields have remained almost the same. It is the wheat in the *barani* (rain-fed) regions that has made the difference.

The crux of the issue in wheat production - besides ensuring better prices for the farmer and a sound infrastructure - is the availability of quality seed. Improved seed is the single most important factor in higher yields. Hybrid seeds cannot be

designed for perpetuity, because they start regressing within no time and in a few years revert to their original low-yield stock. The urban gardeners know how the imported hybrid gladiola and amaryllis bulbs that flower so gloriously the first-year, refuse to produce half the number of blossoms the following season. The size of the flowers is also inexplicably down to half the original.

I believe in India no farmer uses hybrid seed that is more than three to four years old. That is the single most important factor in their self-sufficiency in grain. The infrastructures like electricity and metalled village roads etcetera, is important for overall social development and, farm and agro-based industrial growth but good seed is the key factor in production.

Talking of infrastructure let me mention in passing that our village, which cannot be more than 25 miles from Lahore as the crow flies and a mile off the Sheikhpura-Gujranwala road, got electricity 52 years after independence. Since last year we are also the beneficiaries of a *pucca* road; another matter it is by now breaking up. To get an electric connection for a tube well a farmer is required to pay for the poles leading to his field at rate of about Rs 30,000 per pole excluding the cost of the transformer, the meter, and other accessories including 'tips'.

Across our eastern border, I believe, all villages have had metalled roads and electricity for decades. It seems unbelievable but it is true that farmers in the Indian Punjab were provided free electricity till recently. It is only now that a small surcharge has been imposed.

Coming back to the seed, it is tragic that our departments and institutions have paid no heed to Dr

Norman Borlaug's timely warning, loudly and clearly disclaimed at Lyallpur almost four decades ago. Presently things are so bad that a state of emergency needs to be declared. There are no young hybrid seeds available. The youngest seed, I believe, is four years old. That, too, is in short supply.

Most farmers are now using seed that is more than eight years old. Using seed that has regressed to impotence and then praying for God's mercy is like having the proverbial ostrich that hides its head in the sand at the sight of danger. Let us at least face up to the facts. What are the facts? It is a fact that most of our scientists and seed breeders have left the country and are now working for multinational seed companies. The officials of the Agriculture Department and the professors at the Faisalabad Agriculture University behave as though they were rival *saukans*. No one seems to be coordinating. Individually on the lookout for promotions and medals, they hate sharing information. If the state of affairs is not immediately rectified, we will soon be entirely dependent for seed on multinational companies. We must not let that happen at any cost.

We must, as Dr. Borlaug recommended 25 years ago, have an ongoing programme for indigenous improved seed. We should try to emulate what the Indians have done at Ludhiana. Leave alone major crops like wheat and maize, they have produced at least two dozen varieties of *bair* while we have not even bothered to look at the backside of one. The immense development in our fruit sector is the result entirely of the efforts of private nurseries and growers and not the outcome of any state-run horticulture establishment. I wonder even if there is one.

Pakistan has a larger agricultural land and water base than India. Then how is it that India is self-sufficient and we are always running short of it? It is an irony that we should be importing wheat from countries like Saudi Arabia.

But let me not end this on a morose note. There was a Sardar who in a drunken state fell off a six-story building. People rushed to help him and luckily, he survived. The Sardar on regaining his senses was asked, "Sardar jee what happened?" In great pain, he retorted, "How should I know, I have just arrived." I wonder when we will arrive.

(4 May 2005)

Thanks be to Allah'

Mirza Ghalib loved mangoes. On being asked which mangoes he liked best he replied, "The sweet and we had plenty". He was sucking on a mango one day when one of his poetic adversaries called on him. Ghalib invited him to have a mango. The visitor declined the invitation taunting "Even donkeys don't eat mangoes." After a brief pause Ghalib in agreement retorted, "Yes, donkeys don't eat mangoes".

A teacher at our school, who excelled in Maths, encouraged his pupils to spend their leisure time solving sums. He held playing cricket in very low esteem. He would describe a Test Match as, "Eleven fools of one country playing against eleven fools from another, and thousands of fools watching them for five days." He preferred to visit the cinema. So did we but many of us also liked to play cricket.

Cricket has now transformed into a popular spectator sport. Times have changed and only disadvantaged are said to be indifferent to the game. The young in Pakistan have taken to cricket. While soccer or football, as it is called in South Asia, once regarded a poor man's sport, requires a wide open space, all for cricket children need is a cheap bat, a rubber taped ball and a street; even a 22 yards long alley will do. I am told at Zaman Park - that has

produced many distinguished cricketers—Imran Khan used a wet tennis ball that was frequently dipped in a pail of water. Pakistani cricket has come a long way. Memories of Kardar, Imtiaz, and Khan Muhammad and of course Fazal Mahmud, the Oval hero, are fresh in the mind. Fazal took 12 wickets, six in each innings. Many of the players were declared out by catches taken behind the wicket by Imtiaz — I have not seen another wicketkeeper stand right up to the stumps for a fast bowler. An English kid who was listening to the cricket commentary, heard the English commentator say so often, that so and so is out “bowled by Fazal, caught Imtiaz”, that he asked his mother, “Mummy! Why were so many of our players bowled by Fazal, caught in tears?”

In those days Imtiaz seldom missed a catch, while our other fielders, with the exception of Kardar, rarely caught one. Whenever anyone missed a catch, the others laughed. Zulfiqar, the off-spin bowler and a comic, recounts that someone, intrigued by this unusual conduct, enquired of him “Why do you all laugh on missing a catch.” Zulfiqar smiled and confided, “They laugh because they know that next it will be their turn to drop the catch.”

Abbas Zaidi, the PCB coordinator, told me in confidence that Inzimam, who appears quiet, cool and withdrawn, is often very witty. He recounts that someone asked Rameez Raja how he found playing Murlidharan. Rameez replied that one should ask Inzi how he finds playing Murlidharan now. Inzi let a moment pass before answering, “*Behtar ay na khedo*” (Better not play him).

I have learnt that while Inzimam has been toiling over his English, Woolmer, cricket coach, has been

labouring with his Urdu. They have both reached a level of verbal interaction that is profitable for Pakistan cricket. There are still occasions when communication between the captain and the coach collapses. At such moments Salman Butt, the only other English-speaking player in the team, is asked to act as a translator between the two. "Thanks Be to Allah" all is well. Pakistani cricketers have not been very proficient in the *gora* language. I remember reading a remark about Aleem ud Din, our opening batsmen in the early 1960s. After interviewing him, an English journalist wrote, "Aleem ud Din's age is as mysterious as his English. Mahmood Hussain, who thought he bowled faster than Lindwall, spoke English rather candidly." On being asked what he thought of Mushtaq he opined, "He bats well. His fielding is good. And his balls are not bad too."

Mahmood Hussain was a tall handsome person but crown of his head resembled our grassless pitches. On one occasion, Zulfiqar missed a catch off Mahmood Hussain's bowling. Mahmood was furious, flew into a rage and hurled a few foul words at him.

Amiable and gentle Zulfiqar kept cool but as soon as Mahmood Hussain started striding back to his bowling mark, he called after him, "*Oi Ganjay!*" (O' Baldy) Mahmood Hussain stopped in his tracks, turned round shouted, "Now don't you dare get personal!" Our Lindwall was rather sensitive about the pitch of his head.

MU Haq is a wit and has endless amusing incidents up his sleeve. It was a pleasure watching the third Test at Lahore, sandwiched between him and Chaudhry Moin Afzal. This Chaudhry knows more facts about cricket than General Pervez Musharraf. MU Haq,

who likes to be addressed as MU and not as Mr. Haq, was a distinguished batsman of his time.

He informed us that on one occasion he was 70 not out but missed being caught almost a dozen times, trying to hit a six. When he reached home his father who had been watching television welcomed him with a beaming smile. In those days there was only one fixed TV camera that covered cricket and the cameramen erratically followed a ball to the boundary. Attempting to follow the trajectory of a ball that was hit high into the sky was out of question. "How did you do son?" asked his father, hoping the son would recount the salient features of his splendid innings. MU, who was annoyed with his performance, evasively replied, "It was alright."

"Don't be modest," said the father who had not seen the missed catches. The father asked the question again and again. MU politely but rather impatiently begged his mother, "Mama, please restrain papa from asking the same question over and over again!"

You may recall that in spite of the two bad decisions against us on the third day of the Lahore Test we had piled up close to 400 runs by tea for the loss of three wickets. At lunch someone observed that in future we should not risk sending in Shoaib Akhtar as a night watchman. How we pump ourselves up in victory; but why not?

We had noticed that MU did not join us on the balcony after lunch. He returned close to the tea break. Before seating himself, he informed us that he had been talking to some Englishmen in PCB chairman Shehryar Khan's chamber but was glad to be back with us. They were all sulking. He then added with a sly chuckle, "They all have such long faces that I wouldn't

risk taking them to the races, for fear they might be saddled and made to run the last race."

We all know by now how the Test ended. Pakistan reduced the English XI to ashes. After the English captain's gracious comment that Pakistan outplayed them in every department, nothing more needs to be said. But trust the English. With the exception of Tony Blair, they must have the last word on everything. At the end of the play a technical expert teasingly observed on television, "Don't forget the coach was an Englishman".

(7 December, 2005)

Of the Sun, Birds and a Friendly Spy

He was incarcerated, ruthlessly tortured and finally put to death by the Gestapo. Julius Fuchik - secretary general of the communist party of Czechoslovakia - during his incarceration wrote down his observations and reflections on scraps of paper. The pencilled notes were smuggled out by a sympathetic prison guard and later published as *Notes from the Gallows*. His wife was also arrested but confined at another facility. Both were unaware of what the other was going through.

It has been said that in his book Fuchik comes out not merely as a victim but also an accuser, judge and moral conqueror of fascism. He never wavered in his belief in the better future of humanity and did not for a moment surrender to the Nazis. "Oh, what a crop will rise one day from that frightful seeding", he exclaims.

Shakir Ali, one of the pioneers of modern painting in Pakistan, was greatly inspired by Fuchik and his writing. He writes, "Its author even in his most difficult moments - when threatened with sentence of death - was able to write about the sun, flowers and birds". Depicting the pain and trials of a people is not easy but cheering them when they are shackled in darkness and strengthening their resolve by singing

about the sun and birds flying in azure skies is even more difficult.

In the early fifties when Shakir Ali was at the Slade School in London he volunteered to be part of an international brigade of students that travelled to Czechoslovakia to help clear the rubble of the town of Lidice destroyed by the Germans during the War. His large painting, *The Flight*, that symbolically presents a flight of birds rising from darkness towards the sun, was donated to Czechoslovakia government in the late sixties and hangs in the Lidice Museum built to honour those who perished. The terrible rain of German bombs on this city that did not harbour any military installations, industry or troops was meant to teach the Czech and their allies a lesson.

Ever since the dawn of civilisation teaching lessons has been a prized pursuit of tyrants and bigots. Alexander burnt Persepolis in order to teach the Persians a lesson. The atom bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to teach the Japanese a lesson. Sharon is constantly teaching Palestinians a lesson. Bush wants to teach the 'bad' Muslims a lesson. Our Mush wants to teach the nation and people a lesson. The reader can surely add many more names to the short list of teachers determined to teach men and humanity a lesson. Some explain that US has invaded Iraq to introduce democracy and thus make the world a safer place to live. May God bless Iraq!

On completion of his studies in London and later at Prague, Shakir Ali returned to Pakistan and settled in Lahore. As a teacher at the Mayo School of Arts and Crafts (now the National College of Arts) he was constantly hounded by intelligence personnel on suspicion of being a communist. The local spies in

those days took their job rather seriously. They were usually dressed in white *salwar-qamees* and a shabby black Jinnah Cap pressed hard onto their head lest it should fly off by a dusty gust generated by a passing vehicle. I suppose they were dressed in this manner to make it a trifle easier for their superiors to monitor them in performance of their duties.

Mian Iftikhar ud Din, a greatly respected politician rich landowner and a *raees* of Bagwanpura was also considered a threat to the state - as were his two sons. Arif and Sohail spoke impeccable English and never wore anything not but cut at Saville Row. They were both tireless readers which made them naturalsuspect. Sohail was additionally a lover of music and South Asian painting. He preferred Rajput paintings to the Mughal. That must have angered the 'patriotic' agencies and further aggravated the situation for him. He liked the unabashed Rajput use of colour and carefree delineation of form. He did not much care for the objectivity of the Mughal brush and found the paintings cluttered with detail. He admired the feminine type conceived by the Basholi and Guler painters of the Punjab Hill States and had a few copied by Sheikh Shujaullah who succeeding Ustad Haji M. Shareef taught miniature painting at the National College of Arts. I also recall a splendid portrait of a courtly lady with huge elongated eyes and other features from the Rajasthan state of Kishangarh in his possession - also copied by the same artist.

Sohail, who had his early schooling at Cheltenham in England, greatly admired South Asian culture and believed in promoting religious and ethnic unity. He idealised the romance of Rupmati and Bazbahadur in that it symbolised and expressed what

he himself believed in. Had Sohail come across a Rupmati in his life he would perhaps not have so early and so casually moved on to unknown pastures at the prime of his life.

The state of Pakistan was convinced that Sohail Iftikhar was a threat to our national security and had him followed wherever he went. I remember one particular occasion when at behest of Habib Ullah we proceeded to Sargodha on occasion of its annual *mela* that was in those days considered second only to the National Horse and Cattle Show. Friend Habib had studied English at Government college and then proceeded to study English linguistics at Leeds and never recovered from it. At Leeds, he was greatly inspired by G Wilson Knight in first person. The Wheel of Fire - not the famous film *Chariots of Fire* - had impressed us all reading English at G.C. Afzal Kahut and other luminaries like Pervez Masood. The rhetorical tenor of Mr. Knight enabled them almost all to ascend to high positions in government. Those who went to Cambridge to study English got into trouble for having known Mr. Knight.

Cambridge stood no nonsense and insisted that a student must stay close to the text; no farfetched poetic interpretations - even analogies were frowned upon. The price Cambridge paid for I.A. Richards and F.R. Leavis's presence at the University. Here we have in Pakistan, not to speak of literary critics, art critics who quote off their cuff verse from Rumi and Tennyson to pontificate about painting. Cambridge Dons conspired to get Leavis out of the Downing College because he was too big for their boots. The only link we Pakistanis have with the Downing College now after FR Leavis is our own Aitzaz Ahsan who

apparently studied law instead of literature and is undoubtedly making a splendid job of it. It is a natural law that when excellence is tempered with, like a river it changes its course. Was it nice to have the Noble Laureate Dr. Abdus Salam out of the way on the plea that he was not a Kosher Muslim? By promoting science and rational thought in our country would he not have diminished believers in prejudice and ignorance? Believe me, I have seen some of my countrymen refusing to eat with indigenous Christians and not hesitating to accept biscuits spurned by pedigreed dogs owned by the rich *goras* visiting from abroad.

Sohail, in spite of his sensitive appreciation for music, painting and literature as recorded earlier, was considered a danger to National Security as though it was a fragile porcelain pot. He was followed, wherever he went, by intelligence men disguised in their 'uniform' riding old bicycles mostly without mudguards. The one who was deputed to keep an eye on Sohail on our visit to Sargodha conveniently posted himself in the heat of summer under a shade-less acacia growing at the entrance to the bungalow where we were staying. We were guests of Chaudhry Bashir Tarar, a retired deputy commissioner. Chaudhry Sahib supported an incredible table strewn at mealtimes with sumptuous dishes, cooked with traditional recipes supported with an array of homemade pickles.

Our host Bashir Tarar had noticed the presence of an alien at the gate the moment he had arrived and like a good country gentleman took care to send him customary food and refreshments. Frankly we had no knowledge of his presence. We soon came to know of him and discovered that the poor fellow had to file a

report on us each day. Shortly afterwards we befriended him and sympathised with him for the dirty work he had to do. The day we were leaving we informed him after tucking in an ample breakfast of our intentions and persuaded him to take the day off and go back to spend it with his family.

They say man proposes and God disposes. We left for Lahore in late afternoon and were short distance out of Sargodha when, while attempting to overtake an unruly truck, a stone shot off its tire in our direction smashing our windscreen to smithereens. In heat and dust, it was virtually impossible to proceed on, but we tried; soon better sense prevailed and we repaired back to Sargodha. On reaching our destination in late evening our major concern was to contact our friend the spy and inform him that we were back; not gone. Secret service being secretive, in spite of our best efforts we failed to ascertain his whereabouts. We were pained but consoled ourselves that he must have filed his report to the authorities by now. What a terrible let down; wonder what became of him. He was such a nice guy.

(2 Feb. 2005)

Roll up Your Sleeves

There was a time every citizen stood up to make his self useful to the community. There was never dearth of volunteers for a cause. Today people just mind their own business. I am reminded of a blind man in a village who was approached by a caring person who informed him, "Hafiz jee, they are cooking *halwa* at the mosque." The blind man whined, "*Sahnoon key* (What's it to me?)" The person shouted in his ear, "Hafiz jee, it is for you." The blind man dismissively retorted "*Fer tuhanoon key* (Then what is it you?)"

Fortunately, there are still around people with warm hearts who believe in social activism and are willing to give part of their valuable time without thought of a reward. After Independence the enthusiasm for building the new country slowly waned. By the time we were grown-ups the spirit was already tainted with a degree of cynicism.

In the late sixties a new spirit infused our hearts. It was a burgeoning feeling that impelled people to unite to change established society, its values and norms. Artists and writers strove to create what expressed a closer identification and understanding of the society and the world they lived in.

It was during these times that the artists in Lahore got together and established an organisation

that arranged its first independent Show at the Lahore Museum in 1971. Subsequently, the Fine Arts Equity united with the writers, actors and musicians to form the Pakistan Artists Equity that represented their professional and artistic concerns in television, radio and state cultural organisations throughout the country. To escape state interference - to which the artists were subjected during the Lahore Museum exhibition - the fine arts wing of the Equity established an independent gallery at Moeen Najmi's residence. Mr Najmi was a prominent artist who accepted the responsibility to curate exhibitions and direct its everyday affairs. Since the Equity was a strong representative organisation of visual and performing artists, it was represented on the governing boards of the Lahore Arts Council, the Punjab Council of Arts as well as the Pakistan National Council of the Arts, Islamabad.

The Equity worked for the establishment of the provincial arts councils in all other provinces. In Punjab, art councils were also established in several major cities including Multan, Bahawalpur, Dera Ghazi Khan, Faisalabad, Gujranwala, Rawalpindi and Murree. It also encouraged formation of a national theatre, people's roaming theatre, a national folk and traditional heritage institution and a national art gallery. In the field of radio and television, the Equity negotiated an agreement with the authorities as a result of which the performance fee of the TV and Radio artists was substantially raised. All this happened in the course of a few years.

The conditions for arts and the artists might have continued to improve but for Gen. Zia ul Haq who banned all trade unions, student organisations as well

as writers' and artists' associations. Immediately, the cultural mafia stepped in and once again took command of the state institutions from where the artists had worked so hard to remove them. (I hope Dr. Enver Sajjad, who was very active in the formative years of the Equity, can spare some time from his wide creative pursuits and can pen down the facts in greater detail).

The "cultural vultures" captured the meagre resources reserved for arts during the Zia regime. It is unfortunate that the mafia was allowed to maintain its hegemony even after the restoration of democracy. The state handpicked artist and bureaucrats advanced their own interests and pandered to the changing political needs of ruling governments. The collective interests of the artists and nation were thus ignored. This caused the cultural institutions at the federal and provincial levels to lose support of the artists, and eventually, their clout with the government. The Punjab Arts Council, once a vibrant organisation, now lacks funds sometimes even to pay salaries of its staff - what to talk of holding an annual exhibition or a concert. The situation of the Lahore Arts Council (Alhamra) seems to be better, probably because it has two halls and galleries which can be booked to mount an exhibition or hold a Play.

They wait for things to happen rather than reach out and make them happen. The Pakistan National Council of the Arts has held only six national exhibitions in three decades, most of them in the '70s. Not that it is primarily the officials' fault. The main reason for this lack of activities is a lack of funds. But without the active support and participation by the artists these organisations can never get adequate

funds from a government that considers art and culture an anathema. The government today would readily spend millions to woo a person or a political group than spend a fraction of that on the arts. As for them there is no immediate political and commercial benefit in that

It is commendable that artists of Lahore and Punjab rolled up their sleeves in 1985 and took their affairs in their own hands by establishing the Punjab Artists' Association. The Association is presently holding its 19th annual exhibition and the 7th national show. In the two decades of its existence, it has remained focused on promoting art and artists. It claims to have introduced scores of artists who are today nationally recognised. Its members seem determined to keep the arts alive and free, in a society derailed by philistines, hijacked by 'culture vultures' and subverted by extremists. When the Association was formed in 1985 there was hardly an art gallery of consequence. Since then, several galleries have been established. Private galleries have created extra space and freedom for artists. Governments are often negative or cautious for an artists' calling. The galleries have established an everyday link between the artists and the buyers. There are many artists today who can live by their work. The art world has qualitatively changed.

But there have now emerged problems of another nature. Many of the gallery owners are now concerned only in making money and selling art as any other commodity. There are rumours that a few of them are even selling forgeries and flogging spurious copies of well-known artists' work. In these circumstances the artists can be easily persuaded by

private galleries to manufacture artworks for them to dupe their naïve customers. Artists perforce are tempted to increase their turnover. Fortunately, artists who manufacture works that have the stamp of their style but not the spirit of their soul cannot survive for long.

In the last half-century painting has achieved a high level of excellence in Pakistan. It has an unusual diversity of styles, expressions and concerns. The Pakistani artist has not worked with any national agenda but created works that are motivated by his individual rapport with nature, concern for people, and society. In the present exhibition there are on display abstract and non-representational paintings; modern and traditional miniature; portraits and calligraphic renderings; eternal images of the female form; women's rights and social issues; broad rural prospects, narrow city lanes; common sights and rare insights; individual visage of trees and delicate demeanour of flowers, tendril and leaves; myths and reality; humour, wit and plain anger; and many more observations, reflections, thoughts and asides, each distinct in temper, manner and mood. There is today a great need to evolve and strengthen indigenous tools of art criticism with which we can evaluate our own artistic achievements. The use of language and terminology employed in the European context is often not appropriate for describing the intent and nature of a Third World artist's work. The expression of our leading artists has their own unique, distinctive character. It can only be comprehended in the context of their aesthetic or social experience and engagements. The moment a critic tries to measure or compare achievements of our painters with western artists in terms and phrases employed by them, he

seats our artist in the back row. In any case, analogies are mostly misleading and are best avoided.

Sadeqain and Shakir Ali both employed in their respective manner certain devices of cubism, but were they emulating or pursuing the ideals of cubism? No, they were not; not any more than Picasso when he derived inspiration from African sculpture. It is hoped that soon critical talent would emerge with tools and terms that can faithfully describe the concerns and achievements of Pakistani artists. It is only when we can expound and define the achievements of Pakistani artists in their own context and sever our dependence on modern post-colonial parlance that our artists will be truly understood and appreciated. For the moment let's keep the sleeves rolled up.

(23 Feb. 2005)

Forging Through the Art World

There was a time when there was no fear of having a painting stolen. Now people are forging them by the dozens. Who says times are not good for art? Some artists are always cribbing. They cannot see the better side of things. Frankly if you are always losing the toss, you start believing that the coin does not have a second side. But imagine Michael Angelo while inhaling marble dust, actually observing that the times were not good for art. In a way he was right. Even when things look good for art there is hardly a thing to cheer the artist.

But constant cribbing can be irritating as Mustansar Hussain Tarrar once mildly reprimanded me: "Mian Sahib, *tusee kurhday bohat o.*" You know who is Mustansar? I wonder if the reader knows the joke about the traffic constable who let him go while riding a cycle with a warning for the constable could not spell his name, Mustansar Hussain Tarrar, to cite him for a violation. On the next occasion when Mustansar was apprehended again but the policeman was better prepared for him. He took a while but managed to scrawl his name. But when the constable enquired of his father's name which is a phonetic riddle he was dumbfounded and let him go exclaiming, "As a VERY SPECIAL Favour I am letting you go. But it's LAST Warning!" Frankly while I do recollect the sound

of his father's name, I am hesitant to spell it for you myself.

Mustansar is a cool person. He keeps his cool even when Kishwar Naheed scoffs at his travelogues. I assume he derives satisfaction from the fact that he is better travelled than she is. He also has a great collection of Gandhara sculpture and other artefacts as well as a splendid painting by Khalid Iqbal. In our country, people close to state power often believe that artists should be grateful for the opportunity they provide for free to hang their works on their prestigious walls. Sadeqain was a master in the skill of encroaching on their exclusive space; thus, you would say pandering to the powerful and the influential. I think he did well. It was Sadequain who legitimised them and not they who patronised him. He had no problem in dashing off drawings of lithe young women who weaved themselves into exotic patterns. He was also adept at flattering women by rendering their appearances with black ink markers.

Sadequain's great facility to delineate human form and objects enabled him to produce a very large body of work. It also helped him to invade, as I have said, every second bureaucrat's house. Like a workaholic, he had an irresistible urge to paint. Apparently when the inspiration to reflect upon life and the events around him dried up, he continued to render calligraphies some of which are notable by their unusual conception.

The exotic patterns and erotic dispositions depicted in some of Sadequain's drawings and paintings remind me of one of Jameel Naqsh's works that has been recently acquired by my friend Fareed ud Din Riaz. Anyone familiar with Pakistani painting knows

that Jameel Naqsh has for decades painted women with pigeons. Women in repose or alert, dreaming with eyes wide open or playfully addressing pigeons are rendered in an endless variety of moods and attitudes. Unlike his more recent works, where a woman zestfully seeks the companionship of a horse, his earlier woman-and-pigeon paintings were sedate and pensive. The pigeon represents the absent lover and is rarely a phallic symbol. The woman-and-horse paintings potently express a surging desire for physical union. These paintings are a tribute by him to Marino Marini; a major part of whose works is devoted to balancing the human form with the horse figure. But Marino's works spurn sensuality inherent in the woman-horse relationship. Naqsh's paintings, by contrast, are pregnant with sensuality. He also seems to be getting stronger by the day in his artistic endeavours. I believe he recently sold a painting in London for 1.5 million, but there are still people in Pakistan who want a painting for free. Fortunately, we also have now a host of genuine collectors in the country. I wonder if those who expect a painting for free also expect their rich business friends to provide them with their manufactured products without paying for them.

Taking a broader view of the art world, the present is pretty good and the future looks bright. Some enthusiasts, who have the money to spare, will, however, not buy the art of their time. They look for artists like Chughtai, Allah Buksh, Sadeqain and other eminent painters who are dead. To my embarrassment, I have encountered forgeries at the most unexpected places. The other day, a daughter of a friend of mine sent me for assessment a watercolour claimed to have been done by the great Zain ul Abedin,

famous for his Bengal Famine sketches. I have learnt about people in Karachi who assess paintings for a substantial consideration. Frankly, I wouldn't extend my opinion even for free. But as I have mentioned, this was a friend's daughter. I advised her not to touch it.

A few days later the same painting was sent to me for authentication by an acquaintance who had been trying to flog it to my friend's daughter. This person assured me that she had acquired the work from a family who had got it from the artist himself. Unfortunately, the painting dated 1959 was not even distantly related to Zain ul Abedin. I told the lady what I thought of the watercolour: the family trying to sell the painting as a Zain ul Abedin were a bunch of frauds. In hindsight I wish I had let my friend's daughter buy the fake, priced at Rs 1.5 million. That might have taught her a lesson. There are so many fakes and forgeries being bought and sold at preposterous prices these days that it boggles the mind. Nayyar Ali Dada, one of our eminent architects, once mentioned to me that when he pointed out to one of his rich clients that the Chughtai hanging on his wall was a fake, the owner dismissively replied, "Yaar, who cares it is a fake! Chughtai to Hay!" You may not believe this but my friend's daughter says she is sending over a Chughtai to be verified. Don't you think she deserved to be punished?

(17 June, 2005)

Cutty Patang

Moti Lakhi has sent by email some interesting observations on Sahir with a comment on my translation of *Graiban see liya mein nay*, the gist of which I wish to share with the readers.

"I am an old fan of Sahir Ludhianvi. *Talkhiyan* was my favourite too. In our college days, which was early and mid-1960s, love on the campuses in India was mostly unrequited and one-sided. This often led to breaking of hearts. Sahir's love poetry (his own love life was unsuccessful too), much of which was also rendered into film songs, was therefore immensely popular with students. His '*mohabbat tark ki mein nay*' became one such song and was my favourite too."

"I am afraid you have translated the phrase '*graiban see liya mein nay*' too literally. I think it is a metaphorical allusion to shutting up one's mouth. The poet renounces his love in the face of a hostile society, observing a forced and suffocating silence. That this probably is the intention, is also borne out by subsequent lines where he likens this renunciation to gulping down poison and challenges the society to be happy about it."

I admit that Moti Lakhi is closer to truth. I had taken a more literal, perhaps the pedestrian path to Majnu, the dishevelled lover, raving for his beloved

Laila in tattered clothes. Of course, never in my wildest dreams have I imagined Sahir in such a state. My interpretation may have sounded like making the lover secondary to his attire.

Meanwhile, Mary Katrina Shemza is back in Lahore. She recently mounted an exhibition of her late husband's and her own works at the National College of Arts. The show is now off to Islamabad. The last time she came to Lahore in 1985 she brought with her the Memorial Exhibition of Anwar 'Jalal Shemza. Peter Burnhill and Mary were the two curators of the exhibition. The exhibition later travelled to Karachi, Islamabad and Peshawar. I recall writing a commemorative article on the occasion that appeared in *The Sun*.

Shemza was undoubtedly one of Pakistan's outstanding artists. He was a proud man of impeccable good taste in everything. He dressed neatly and elegantly. Not a single hair on him was ever out of place till Mary bore him a daughter named Tasweer who I imagine could not have been restrained from playing with the beard while in her father's lap. He was imaginative, spontaneous and innovative. He resurrected images and created and invented motifs at will, then endowed them with aesthetic identities with flawless precision. Even before settling in England in the late 1950s, he had evolved a characteristic style in which a firm, sharp line had a distinctive role in the delineation and definition of individual forms. His works are aesthetically rational and emotionally refined but never cold. When he was young he was the angriest man among his friends with the exception of Safdar Mir, the playwright and scholar and of course the meek S. Safdar, the painter, when he was a bit tipsy.

Safdar's closest friend Moyene Najmi was a cool and laid-back person. Shemza, on the other hand, was hot and aggressive. He had a reputation for grabbing people by the collar to make a point.

Shemza also wrote. I have before me one of his novels *Qissa kahani*, published by Urdu Markaz and printed by Insha Press, Lahore, 1954. Shemza himself has designed the book's dust cover. Inside, there is a self-portrait of the artist in pen and ink on a yellow background. It is a revealing sketch of the painter and his concerns. He is wearing a traditional *kurta*, embroidered on the front, around the neck and on shoulders. Shemza was well-rooted; while he generally went about in trousers he would occasionally make an appearance in a *boski* shirt and a *lacha*. He was probably the first painter to assimilate folk art motifs and ordinary objects in his paintings. In this little sketch I particularly like the *kutty patang* drifting away over his right shoulder. Those were the days when no one got hurt on *Basant*. Those were also the days when painters who didn't write, at least read.

The other evening Mariam Habib invited Mussarrat and me, for tea in honour of Mary Shemza. Mariam is an art critic, a painter and Shemza's contemporary. A single look at her is enough for one to visualise how the face must have rattled the hearts of her contemporaries. Her late husband, obviously, proved the smartest of them all. After being treated to tea with delicious savouries, we settled down in the living room and Mary got talking about Shemza. She wondered how a person fastidious even about small things could marry a person like her who never cared how she looked. She described with laughter, but not without pathos, their first meeting at a fancy dress ball.

He had come smartly dressed in *achkan* and *shalwar* and she in an oversized shirt of her father's, which she used for painting. He with all his hair in place and she with her long blond hair tied on top of her head, some of them falling in front of her face. Before the party was over Shemza was in possession of her telephone number. A few days later he rang her and they decided to meet at King's Cross station. Mary was getting late for the appointment and in the huff thought that they were to meet at St Pancreas station. She waited and waited but Shemza wouldn't come. She chastised herself for having been late and thought that Shemza had come, waited and gone. As she was about to leave, she spotted Shemza striding towards her. In just one meeting he had sized her up and guessed that she must have bungled the appointment. Is it difficult to guess why Shemza married Mary? It was obviously for her disarming innocence and warmth; above all, for being so pleasantly forthright.

Shemza never gave up trying to dress her up. He liked her, for instance, to carry handbags to work and wear gloves. She liked to wear a duffle coat and was content to have her keys and other essentials tucked in various places in its large pockets. Why carry a bag if shopping can be tucked and carried in the head cover of the duffle coat? Mary told us that Shemza did all the hard work in their garden. According to Mariam he was always mowing the lawn when she visited them. After that he would then get down on his knees with a pair of scissors to manicure the garden till it was trimmed like his beard to the smallest detail.

This is also how Shemza worked on his paintings, engravings, lithographs and silk-screens. He worked

with the steady but warm hand of a Kashmiri craftsman and the strength of trapeze artist.

I have not said a word about Mary Katrina's work because she deserves space in her own right. We at Lahore are familiar with her work ever since she first exhibited in 1961. We regard her as one of us. Having lived a rich life together, some of her works are sympathetic to Shemza's aesthetic vision. It would be inappropriate here to speculate about her influence on Shemza's individual journey as a painter. It may suffice to observe that as early as 1961, when Shemza and Mary returned to Pakistan and put up a joint show there was evidence that part of Shemza's concern for geometric forms were encouraged by Mary's paintings.

Shemza was born at Simla on July 14, 1928, and died at Stafford, England on January 18, 1985. Mary Katrina Shemza and her husband are represented in the National Collection of Pakistan. Anwar Jalal Shemza most distinctively enriched Pakistani Painting. His works are thoughtfully poised and immaculately refinement.

(15 March 2006)

A Non-Veg *Thali* from Delhi

I am just back from Delhi after participating in an art exhibition of Pakistani Masters – an event described in the invitation card as Artfully Peaceful and brought to India by Jack Daniel Foundation for Arts and Culture. The other artists, besides me, in the Show were Gulgee, Jameel Nagsh, Iqbal Mehdi, Nahid Raza, Najmi Sura and Mashkoor Raza. The effort was supported by PIA, The Park Hotel and AMCHAM India. The exhibition went off quite well with the inauguration stretching into late evening. No one quarrelled with the description “Masters” except for myself. I felt that while there are band masters, ring masters, art masters and even house masters, it is inappropriate to declare anyone a ‘Master’ in his lifetime. I am certain that during every new endeavour a creatively functional artist finds himself on the threshold of a new beginning and would spurn the coarse adjunct.

While I was chatting with Gulgee at the hanging, he drew my attention to his exquisite portrait of the late Aga Khan, assembled together in small pieces of lapis lazuli, quietly stating, “Some people compare that to Rembrandt, but I had to work harder.” Surely, Gulgee must have worked hard; very hard one could see that, but I was trifled taken aback at the announcement. Why dig Rembrandt out of his grave.

Rembrandt is not only regarded as the first modern among painters, also a painter a few dared copies. Never before had any artist so intently perceived the fickleness of life by repeated observation of his own demeanour; with such casual detachment that it verges on abject indifference.

Rembrandt and Hamlet were both outsiders. They questioned themselves, searched for truth and inquired into the meaning and purpose of existence. While he lay dying Prince Hamlet of Denmark pleaded, "...report me and my cause aright to the unsatisfied" so that the motives that impelled him to act as he did could be understood. Rembrandt died a pauper, caring two hoots for what people thought of him or his work.

The exhibition and the social events hosted by the sponsors were over in three days. Shakir Ali once remarked that too much art could be boring. I tend to agree with him. Unfortunately, these days anything that is boring or obscure is regarded as highbrow. A good laugh is considered coarse and a step lower than being lowbrow. I think this reflects an "upper class" attitude. There is a saying in Punjabi, "*Wadday sir sardaran day, tey wadday payr gwaran day*" (the chiefs have big heads and peasant's big feet). Everyone knows that peasants have big feet because they put them to work but has anyone enquired why chiefs have big heads? Actually, their heads are quite small - President Bush's ears, for example, are bigger than his head. Of course, a head may appear big when wrapped in a bolt of cotton with a yard to spare to cock up the two ends of the puffed-up headwear.

My friend in Delhi, Karan Sawhny, hails from a big land-owning family of Shahpur district. The motorway intersects their holdings at the Salem

interchange. His great grandfather was a man of great wisdom and foresight who had his sons and nephews educated in England.

That is why Karan speaks English like an English lord, but with humour and a level nose. His grandfather, too, was witty. Karan tells me that after the Partition when the family migrated to India, the grandfather tried to cheer up his brother-in-law who had lost a fortune. "Whatever you had", he said, "you built yourself, so you can make it again. Since I inherited everything, I possessed, I have lost it all." Karan is always flexing his brain. Always choosing high moral ground, he is ill equipped to take practical decisions. He was an adviser to the Indian government but resigned because he did not agree with its policies. He never married because he always found the woman concerned wanting in some respect. These and other events could have cowed him down had he not taken to making cheese. These days, friends find it difficult to guess whether he is smiling at them or recommending his cheese to them.

Sumant Dhamija loves Karan dearly because he holds him responsible for his appreciation of pleasurable virtues - developed while they were together first at the Mayo College and then Cambridge. Sumant is an adorable person. He is handsome and suave with a laid-back lifestyle. It is impossible to imagine that he is a descendent of the lion-hearted warrior Jassa Singh Ahluwalia. (Jassa Singh was born in Ahlo village near Lahore in 1718. Besides many other martial feats, he conquered Lahore in 1761. Jassa Singh and the 11 Misl chiefs he commanded, laid the foundations on which Maharaja Ranjeet Singh built

a unified Punjab, eventually extending its frontiers to Afghanistan and Tibet.)

On my recent visit Sumant updated me with a flicker of detectable mirth, "Mian Sahib, be careful. Karan's pigs have doubled to over 200." Sumant takes great delight in making little digs at Karan's expense. He complained that he had tried to help Karan sell some of the pigs but when the contractor arrived to take away part of the herd for slaughter Karan backed off, agreeing to sell only two. Karan stands like a warrior but has a soft heart.

He loves his pigs. Sumant reported that Karan couldn't sleep for several nights after the two pigs were carried away. Sumant wisely took the precaution of staying away for some days, giving his friend the room for grief. But Karan, never short of ideas, has another project up his sleeve. That is what I most like about him besides his erudite knowledge and rich sense of humour. During our conversation he looked straight into my eyes and informed me in a ringing tenor, "Mian Sahib! Do you know that it has been established that pigs are cleverer and smarter than dogs?"

"Oh really" I asked not that the issue had the remotest bearing on my concerns. It is unlikely that I can persuade the Pakistani dog lovers to replace their dogs with pigs. Karan surprised me no end when he related that pigs could play soccer and that a Pig Olympics had recently been held at Moscow. Although Pakistan has a large number of swine roaming the country, some even invading Islamabad, it seems very unlikely that we will be training a contingent for the next games.

Karan is determined to train his pigs in athletics and other sports – including soccer and figure skating – for the next Olympics. This is the only way, he tells me, their lives can be saved. The champions can be kept to breed more champions and improve the general stock of pigs – ultimately to assist and if necessary, replace some of the terrible humans threatening our planet.

(26 April, 2006)

The Art of the Matter

In those early days Pakistan Television Corporation's head office was located on Harley Street in Rawalpindi. Aslam Azhar, who had started the transmissions from a hut at Lahore, was the managing director of the corporation. He was to television what Hafeez Kardar was to cricket – he assembled and motivated a splendid team of artists, producers and technicians. Through personal example he established a code of excellence and conduct. Since he had no favourites, he was able to patronise talent and forge discipline.

We had spent over half an hour discussing issues concerning artists and their fees, terms and conditions of their contracts and how the Pakistan Artist's Equity.

that was a representative organisation of television artist - and the Television Corporation could work in close cooperate to settle all contentious issues regarding programming and need for revising professional fee structure and need to upgrade some talented artists. Most people thought Aslam Azhar was arrogant; we found him to be cordial and down-to-earth person. When Tariq Aziz, Mehmud Butt and myself were ushered into his office he received us with warmth. Tariq was better acquainted with him for he read the Urdu News for The Pakistan Television.

Unlike stiff-necked officials he welcomed our visit. And if my memory doesn't falter, we were in addition to usual biscuits were also served sandwiches with tea as it was nearing lunchtime. He welcomed our endeavour to draw his attention to what we regarded were urgent issues and finally saw us off to the door with a pleasant smile.

As Tariq was backing out on his old red car to exit from the gate, I saw a fleeting glimpse of something familiar on the wall of the cabins built along the driveway. I asked Tariq to stop and reverse the car. He did so. I was right. It was indeed a painting of Shakir Ali that was stuck on a cabin for use as a notice board. It was painted in dark colours on a canvas and having soft surface was just the right size for pinning notices on it. I was astonished but not surprised.

It was an abstract painting that had been probably stored to be moved to the new premises but had been inadvertently picked up by a resourceful employee for use as a notice board. I rushed back to Mr. Azhar's office and barged into his deputy's office to report the outrage and ensure that the painting was removed and taken to him. I hope it has seen better days since then.

The incident came back to me a few months back at the Board meeting of the Pakistan National Council of the Arts (PNCA). I was bewildered to learn that the Twin-Cinema Complex owned by the NAFDEC had been privatised – everything sold to a private party with all the belongings including a mural that I had painted. I asked how they could sell off an artwork as part of other furnishings. Everyone expressed ignorance of the matter, expressing regret about the oversight. It was resolved that the Director General

would visit the site to ascertain if the mural was still there after the meeting.

Fortunately, when I accompanied D.G. Naeem Tahir and some members of his staff visited the site we were relieved to discover from a *chowkidar* that some painted film images were still stuck on a wall. What a relief. Now the next thing was to retrieve them from the owner.

In terms of its complexity, I regard the mural that I painted for The National Film Development Corporation (NAFDEC) as the crowning achievement of my work during the 1970s. It was a massive effort of approximately 12ft x 24ft in size, comprising several 12ft vertical panels painted with over 35 images, some life-size and others delineated on a heroic scale. The mural offers many options by presenting diverse visions of contemporary cinema in dramatic contrast with some urgent social concerns typified by men, women and children on a street in front. Khwaja Shahid Hossein, the NAFDEC chairman, had commissioned it in the mid-1970s. It took me over a year to collect, sketch, draw and assemble the various images on paper before proceeding to paint and refine each image and reflect and expand upon the meaning and aesthetic content of the statement.

How could they sell off the mural along with the old furniture and dirty rugs? Shakir's painting was a small canvas and could be misplaced but how could anyone be blind to a mural? The good news is that the mural has been retrieved and saved from being dismembered thanks to Gen. Javed the Federal Minister of Education's personal interest and Mr Naeem Tahir's efforts. I believe when Mr. Tahir approached the new owner, he did not know what Mr.

Tahir was talking about but slowly he gathered that he possessed something valuable and refused to part with it. Mr. Tahir first tried to say that the "cartoons" were of no use to him. But when the man refused to budge, he took a harder line, informing him that the ministry had sold the premises but not the mural or rather the "cartoons". The man was not impressed and threatened to go to court. He was adamant that the mural belonged to him, period.

Mr Tahir then changed his approach and proceeded to pamper Khan Sahib. He proposed that instead of going to court, Khan Sahib could gift the mural to the National Gallery. Apparently, Khan Sahib found this a more agreeable solution. The mural, I am informed, is now in the protective custody of the curator of the National Gallery and later put on permanent display.

This reminds me of the two small works of Chughtai I salvaged on a weekend trip to Changa Manga. They were casually resting on an old fireplace. I couldn't believe my eyes. Anyone could have walked away with them. One was an aquatint with nightingales holding on to the delicate branches of a flowering bush being swept by a gusty wind. The second was an etching with deer and a pair resting in the foreground. Perhaps it was Leila proceeding on a camel towards an unwanted destination but I am not sure.

The first work was evidently rendered with spontaneous feeling. The second I must say seemed hard and a trifle studied. Fortunately, my friend Moeen Afzal, a government official, was also there with me. The person in charge of the forest rest house was sent for who casually explained to us that stuff had been

removed to the old rest house because the new one was being renovated.

I turned one around and discovered that it had been purchased by BA Qureshi in the 1950s for a paltry sum of Rs. 200. Three cheers for Mr. Qureshi. What a shame it would have been for the Punjab government to lose its two valuable possessions if I had not resisted my temptation. Incidentally the Chughtais are now in the Quaid-e-Azam Library. It is hoped that they are still there and have not been auctioned off with discarded books and old furniture.

(23 May, 2006)

PART I

Lahore: Whispers of a Shifting City

PART I

CHAPTER I

What is a good life?

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Forging a Myth

He stood out among his cabinet colleagues. Always impeccably dressed, 'suited- booted', as some would say, flaunting a silk handkerchief in his pocket. Others have faded from public memory, but not him. He lives on, in the hearts and minds of people, and as a lingering, bitter memory for his enemies. What would his enemies not do to have him erased from public mind? Had they known the memory would outlive his temporal existence, they would never have killed him. The murder elevated the hero to a martyr and martyrdom transformed him into a myth.

I saw him for the first time at the Lahore Arts Council in the fifties. He was addressing an audience at the opening of an exhibition. He wore a light-grey summer suit with trendy drainpipe trousers. Most of us at Aitchison College in those days wore trousers with our flaps twenty-one inches wide. By the time I joined Government College Lahore, the width had come down to seventeen inches. Salman Taseer was the only student who went about the college in drainpipes. I never once had a trouser tailored in that fashion and felt considerably relieved when bell-bottoms replaced drainpipes.

I have no hesitation in confessing that some people looked rather nice and elegant in drainpipes.

Getting into drainpipes in the fifties required courage, demonstrated by spirited individuals who liked to be different, liked to lead rather than be led.

He was popular with people not merely because of his flamboyant demeanour and manners, but because he also made it a point to mingle with them on festive occasions. He would casually walk into a crowd as though he was part of it. In the months when he was briefly released, to be imprisoned again, to everyone's surprise he sauntered into the Gaddafi Stadium where a cricket match was being played. It created a stir; he was cheered like mad by the crowd. The pack of policemen who followed him to protect our 'national security' – more sensitive than our hind – were loudly booed and attacked with orange peels and peanut shells.

Those were the days when politics was not so violent. If issues are not addressed politically the people inevitably respond through non-political means. If recourse to justice is blocked then people react in ways that are often not very pleasant. When the citizens' legal and constitutional rights were usurped through brute force by a tyrant, sporting a dangling moustache, all faith in state institutions was destroyed. That period has let loose the furies that have plagued us to this day.

These days, people don't heckle and boo; they quietly throw bombs. This is the political legacy of dictators who lost half the country, shook the very foundations of the Quaid's federation, and destroyed state institutions and people's faith in them.

A brief pause for a story I heard lately. This is how it goes:

It was getting cold. In the evening the north autumn wind was rapidly becoming sharper in its bite. The night was becoming so chilly that huddling together in thickly foliated leaves or even trusted cavities in trees no longer helped. One frosty morning the *Tota* (parrot) lovingly touching the beautiful vermilion beak of his *Totee* says, "Dear, winter is on us, it's time we returned to our garden in the plains." They had spent a good part of the summer on the green slopes, away from the scorching plains, cracking nuts and nibbling on berries, which were in natural abundance in the hills where they had sojourned for the summer. There was no other choice but to go. It may start snowing at any time. The next morning, they spent a leisurely extra hour foraging for a hearty morning breakfast. They checked if all their feathers were in good shape, had a pensive final look at their haunt and without a whistle took off for the plains. Parrots are fast flyers. But once they were at a lower altitude, the *Totee* thought that there was no need to hurry home to the plains. Without warning she would descend towards a ravine or take off for an orchard or a grove. The *Totee* liked to enter into ceaseless chatter with local birds of feather. The *Tota* loved his *Totee* dearly but sometimes he would really get angry with her for being so light-hearted. "Darling, don't be such a grouch," the *Totee* would say to cheer him up and then sidle up to endear him. The *Tota* would pretend to be indifferent but in his heart, he would be pacified.

At last, when the parrots reached their garden, they couldn't believe what they saw. The fragrant herbs, the flowering bushes, the trees all appeared to be dead. There were no birds, butterflies or bees to be seen. There wasn't even a blade of grass or a wild plant in sight. There was no water in the pond and even the

well was dry. How could all this have happened? They were still bewildered when they were startled by an ugly dark owl arrogantly perched on a denuded branch of the tallest tree in the withered garden. The *Tota* instantly took to his wings, followed by his *Totee*, towards the owl. He feared that the owl must have had something to do with it. "Have you done this to our beautiful garden?" the *Tota* asked. "Yes!" was the cocky reply. What could a pair of parrots do? The owl was armed with formidable talons. They reprimanded the owl for the heinous offence and then decided to retreat from his odious presence.

Just when they were about to take off, the dark ugly owl shouted at the parrot, "Stop! Where do you think you are taking my *Totee*?" The *Tota* was confounded at the owl's audacity and raising his voice in anger to full whistle asked, "Your *Totee*?" The owl coolly but resolutely replied, "Yes, my *Totee*!" "You *ulloo* (owl), can't you see that she is mine?" replied the Parrot again, but the owl insisted she was his. Finally, when the parrot utterly lost his cool and was about to pounce on the owl, the owl suggested that the dispute be referred to the wise and honourable owl that resided on an ornate tree in the centre of the garden. The innocent Parrot fearing no foul play agreed. The case was presented to the honourable owl with an inscrutable face framed in silver feathers. The honourable owl listened to the parrot's plea with visible sympathy. He also listened to the black owl's complaint with patience. After both the complainants had rested the case before him, he readily announced his judgment: "In spite of the fact that the *Tota* and *Totee* are birds of the same feather and claim to be joined in union, the *Totee* belongs to the owl."

The *Tota* couldn't believe his ears. There was nowhere else to go and he was left with no other option but to leave and come back to fight another day. The dark ugly owl looked the Parrot in the eye and smirked, "I might have destroyed the garden, but I couldn't have done it without help from him."

Tota kahani, like many other popular tales, is a narrative put together to explain in simple and engaging form events of weighty significance. Myths are different. The smart man with drainpipes I saw in school, and subsequently saw again and again at different times, cannot be delineated with words, nor the events of his life narrated. The memory of his life and events can only be seized in a myth that lives in popular imagination.

He died with courage and honour for what he believed, and for all those who believed in him. And the poor of his country forged a myth. Myths cannot be destroyed by brute power unless they rest on lies or are rejected by the people who believe in them. For those who abhor his legacy, the myth escapes comprehension. Myths are amorphous like the wind. They cannot be caught in a fist or confined in a cage. And yet they have the power to inspire men and women, move people and events, and at times shake mountains.

For Butter or Worse!

"I am sure the cows and buffaloes, even the goats that can nibble at anything, find their repast deliciously crunchy and varied in taste - a kind of mixed grill, though I wonder if cows really care to selectively savour the flavour of plants."

The sky is getting dusty again. No one remembers the untimely shower of rain. Most of the wheat has been finally sown. I am told that in order to get best yield the seed should be in by the middle of November. Fields of fodder speckled with mustard flowers and spiced with radish and turnips are spread like ornate carpets near mud-built habitations. I am sure the cows and buffaloes, even the goats that can nibble at anything, find their repast deliciously crunchy and varied in taste - a kind of Mix- Grill, though I wonder if cows really care to selectively savour the flavour of plants individually, like we do with kidneys, liver, lamb chops and pieces of beef steak. In some restaurants a pair of fried eggs is slipped on to the Mix- Grill, thus subduing the carnivorous appearance of the concoction, which unfortunately makes the whole thing look like a big mess.

One reason, while young and at school, we ordered Mix-Grill was that most other items on the 'Shezan Continental' menu card, such as Chicken

Stroganoff, Steak Poive, Spaghetti Bolognaise etc, could not be adequately fathomed. Our vanity forbade us to ask the Shezan waiter, towering above our table dressed in spotless white, crimson Qamarband and turban with golden embellishments, to explain the contents of each dish. We scanned through the menu and pretended to be familiar with listed items. So, we kept our right eyebrow up and simply asked for the usual Mixed Grill. Personal dignity was far more important than what one ate. I don't recall having the bloody Mixed Grill ever again.

In passing, you may perhaps find it interesting, if I were to draw your attention to the striking similarity between the manner the late Shemza signed his paintings, and the way the word Shezan is inscribed on the Restaurant hoarding. This is because the artist was commissioned to design the logo. You will agree that the task was easily and rather elegantly done.

I wonder why Mixed Grill should remind me of a story recounted by Abdul Butt, whom you have already met in one of my earlier renderings. We sat in the neighbourhood of a peepal tree, encouraging our bodies to be warmed by the sun struggling to emerge from the morning mist. It was a bit early for idle gossip. Apparently, Abdul Butt had nothing better to do that morning. He looked relaxed, dressed in a fresh shirt and a *dhoti* with a hand-woven shawl neatly wrapped about him. I had not quite yet assembled my thoughts. I was still feeling groggy and my mind was full of many stray concerns, which needed to be assembled. Impatiently, I sat with the amiable Abdul Butt, listening to his placid inanities, irritated that he should take so long in revealing the dire urgency of his indecently early call. But soon, quite contrary to my

humour, I found myself getting absorbed in what he proceeded to unfold.

There were these three brothers who travelled far from their pitiable village and arrived at a kingdom where everything was in abundance and equally priced for a kilo. Kidneys, liver, steak, eggs, vegetables, fruit, bread, rice and everything else including chocolate, milk and butter cost the same. It did not take long for the three brothers, who had good business acumen, to decide what would be to their best advantage. If the price for a kilo was to be the same for all edibles, then it would be best that instead of buying a pound of wheat or carrots for a meal, to eat instead a kilo of butter. It was therefore easily resolved between them that they would only eat butter for food. Let other foolish people buy carrots and turnips or whatever they liked. In a matter of weeks, the three skinny, famished characters inflated into balloons. They lived happily, content with their buttered lives. The hard times were over or so they believed. They often wondered why they didn't think of leaving their wretched village before.

There is no reason why they should not have continued to live their inflated lives, had an unfortunate incident not taken place. One dark eerie cold night, while the kingdom uneasily slept, someone for reason best known to him killed another in the neighbourhood of the sultan's palace. The three brothers, ignorant of the deed, happily snored on their squeaking beds. Next morning early before dawn the heinous crime was brought to the knowledge of the sultan – a man of justice, always anxious about the welfare of his subjects. The sultan instead of having the crime investigated, ordered that all those who had

thick necks should be rounded up. The sultan ruled his kingdom well and never let a crime go unpunished. He was known for employing simplest methods to unravel most complex problems that would baffle others. If he had uniform prices for edibles, he also had simple solutions for crime. When all subjects with thick necks had been assembled before him each neck was carefully measured. The three brothers to their misfortune had the thickest necks of them all. They were politely asked to step aside and then summarily executed.

What was the point or the moral of Abdul Butt's story? He was obviously alluding to something. It was a bit early for my antennas to receive subtly coded messages. You are welcome to draw your own conclusions. If I were to venture a guess, I should gather that excess of everything is bad. It is best not to be greedy and preferably have your neck the same size as others.

(2003)

Wretched Common Things

May is the season of Amaltas (laburnum) which remain in bloom till end of June. This year because of the stormy weather, the dangling clusters of their blooms have withered before their usual time. Amaltas were at their best when the temperatures were unexpectedly touching 43 degrees centigrade. They love hot weather – hotter the better. Like most of us they don't long for the cold Monsoon breeze. They are totally at peace with themselves and their habitat, like the poor farmers who need to cut wheat sitting on their haunches in the sizzling sun.

In the old days there were not very many Amaltas trees in the city. In recent years some good person in the horticultural department of Lahore City has gone about planting them all over town. The result is a steady annual invasion of deep yellow and lemon gold early summer. They have slowly strayed into almost every neighbourhood. Even in the dusty surroundings they make their presence known by leaning over a wall; surprise the commuters at a slippery turning peering from behind dark mulberries; flaunting their colours at unpredictable places for no particular purpose.

Amaltas is bit of a show off. It can afford to be. There is no other tree with such abundant inflorescent

flowers. Gull-e-Mohar are far too few in numbers to compete. The Gull-e-Nishtar are too restrained. Before the sixties, Gull-e-Nishtar, also called Kesu and Flame of the Forest, added considerable colour to Davis Road where they formed an elegant avenue leading from the Mall to the Simla Hill. Most of them have died of old age; most have been cut down to provide parking space for commercial buildings; few left to mourn their faded elegance. The other trees that bloom annually in Lahore are the Kachnal and the Sumbal. The Kachnal gives gorgeous blossoms that have a striking resemblance with orchids, which are so highly prized and are now grown at great cost in our country. If you know how to cook, Kachnal buds with mutton and a handful of peas it makes a delicious dish. Unfortunately, in a home with taste for its subtle flavours, the Kachnal tree is seldom allowed to blossom. It must be remembered that for cooking purpose the white Kachnal flowers taste better than the pink or the light mauve ones.

Sumbal flowers, on the other hand, are fleshy and can weigh up to a quarter of a pound. That is why one never sees people resting under a Sumbal tree. The flower is truly proportionate to the awesome size of the Sumbal but can easily knock out a person if he were hit on the head.

Culinary etiquette and good manners require that I must acknowledge another plant. It is an unobtrusive tree and bears rather sickly-looking clusters of small white flowers that make excellent Saag. It is a trifle bitter in taste, but so are the Karelas. My mother calls it Bata or Rawaan but when the flowering is over it bears bunches of thin long beans. Mostly these thin long beans are pickled but I hear at

some places they are also cooked and eaten. The Bata tree also provides a supplement for ginger, or "adrak". In the Saraiki belt of southern Punjab and northern Sindh its cuttings are planted in fields. Once the cuttings have sprouted and grown into young plants, they are ready for harvest. The plants are pulled out of the ground for the succulent roots that have a sharp pungent taste, similar to ginger. It is not amazing that a common tree should be able to provide us with clusters of white blossoms for "saag", "phalians" for "achaar" and roots to flavour our food and yet the Bata tree lives in relative obscurity while people rave about upper class imported plants that have to be raised like poodles. It seems that even plants have classes. Those that are local and common, and can grow easily without much fuss is kept out of the gardens designed by our landscape architects. The Dharaik and Bukain, that bear such lovely small blue flowers with an incredible sweet fragrance, are considered only good for providing shade in the summer to animals and peasants. The Shisham, the Kikar, the Beri or Shareen are too common to be allowed into a garden. If they trespass the gardeners know what is to be done to them – knife them. I can understand if some residents do not like to have a Beri in their compound since it invites urchins to throw stones at it to access its fruit. But the Shareen is a different matter. It bears sizeable flower with cream petals with long stamens with yellow pollens radiating from the centre. It disperses a delightful scent in the Monsoon season, especially on a damp evening.

Common trees cannot be found in posh localities but in villages and, like stray dogs and beggars on road sides or dry dusty strip between metalled roads and private property They are always at peace with

themselves, bearing their lifelong trials with mystic forbearance and fortitude. Cyclists and pedestrians cut off their greenest twigs for "muswaks" used for cleaning teeth and massaging gums. The "Sukh Chan" tree "muswaks" are in great demand but the thick "waan ke muswaks" are the bristles of the modern toothbrush. The Kikar, an ascetic among trees, never complains when it is stripped of its bark to provide "dandasa" for the village maidens to fresh up their breath and add a touch of reddish hue to their gums and lips. The more inventive and resourceful ones use its bark to blend their brew. They say if you are looking for "Thara"- local name for Rum or Mao-tai - proceed to the village that has Kikars freshly denuded of its bark.

Can one cease to admire Amaltas blooms.

Wonder how it bears with ease, the burning heat in such peace? Astonished.

Discovering uncommon virtue, in wretched, common things, Be it men or trees.

(2004)

For a Fruity, Sporting Pakistan

"We certainly have had more than our share of frost, however no one reported sighting the moon, which traditionally encourages lovers to break into sad songs, which it is believed soothes a broken heart. At least this is how it was in the black and white films. In those days, lovers rarely got together in private and sang their lines from respected distance. True Lovers were supposed to suffer. I must say that heroines today have a much better time raucously shaking their butts and berries to rousing tunes."

Winter is finally on its way out. We haven't had such a severe winter for decades. And the one with such dense fog that made our haughty sun seem like a giddy smudge on a solemn sky. But the sun is back in all its radiance, pricking nature to wake up from its brief slumber. Nature in hot regions is hardly ever let to rest. It is always active, replenishing what it sheds. Just compare an apple tree, which sleeps half the year with our mulberry. After it has yielded its sweet burden to the birds and urchins, its branches and limbs are severed to weave baskets and make axe handles. Poor thing! What a predicament to be in? Sometimes it is also disrobed of its verdant apparel to feed silk worms.

How can anyone specialise in anything around here? In the West pear bears pears and apricot, apricots. Here, all of us have to undertake numerous and often contrary tasks. Where there is little merit given to achieving excellence, individuals tend to become all-rounders, losing sight of their nascent talents. The one who excels in surgery seeks gratification for his expertise in golf. A physician holds stronger views on divinity rather than on medicine. Those who have a talent for creative writing spend a lifetime typing political columns and intellectuals instead of rummaging through knowledge speculate about commerce. Once upon a time intellectuals believed that politics was a powerful agent for social change. It is unfortunate that steadily, politics has become a means of acquiring and retaining power and wealth. Once it inspired people to action, today it makes voters sneer and arch their eyebrows. Moreover, people today are constrained to diversify and work overtime to keep their ovens burning. If they pay for gas they don't have enough to eat. If they can bear their hunger they still cannot send Pappoo or Billo to school. Only God knows how they treat their ailing elders, pay house rent or travel to their place of employment – if they have one. There is then, the small matter of paying the electricity bills, haggling for old shoes and used clothes sold on the footpaths, depositing the mandatory *salami* at the wedding of close relatives and marrying off daughters who grow up with the blinking of an eye. The list is long and goes on adding liabilities, pacing beyond the grave. But these are grave matters, which are best forgotten, or like autumn leaves, swept aside for better days. Iqbal says, "*paiwasta reh shajar se, umeed e bahaar rakh*", (Stay clasped to the tree and hope for spring). Iqbal

surely is not advocating that one should not seize the moment. What he is stressing is the necessity for firm commitment to a cause, an ideal, and the need not to lose hope. In the pragmatic contemporary world where everyone is bent upon castrating ideologies of ideals, one wonders what should one make of Iqbal?

The streets are invaded these days with abundance of delicious fruit, which makes the taste buds salivate in expectation. Just when we had bidden adieu to grapes, apricots and melons, the citrus fruits have made their appearance. I wonder if you have noticed that the early fruiting oranges this year are unusually large, juicy and sweet. They are ordinarily bland in taste, but I like having them because like the old *desi* oranges they are easy to peel and seldom sour. This year the *kinnoos* are also sweeter than usual. Apparently moonlight and frost encourage the citrus to acquire a sweeter temper. We certainly have had more than our share of frost, however no one reported sighting the moon, which traditionally also encourages lovers to break into sad songs, which it is believed soothes a broken heart. At least this is how it was in the BW films in the fifties. In those days, since lovers rarely managed to be alone, they sang to each other addressing a full moon from where ever they were. True Lovers were supposed to suffer. Love was a serious enterprise then. I must say that heroines today have a much better time raucously shaking their butts and berries to rousing tunes.

Only the other day, driving along the canal, I saw a basketful of fresh strawberries and crunchy *beirs*. I have known this for some time that while the *rehri wallahs* can appreciate people eating *beirs* they are quite baffled that why should anyone so eagerly buy

the red berries. Strawberries admittedly have a distinct fruity scent but they are often so sour. As berries go, a normal South Asian would prefer *jamans* to strawberries anytime. To have strawberries with icing sugar and clotted cream in London is another matter. I cannot recall without a degree of amusement the distortions on the face of a bus stand vendor occasioned by a strawberry, which he had innocently lodged into his mouth, while waiting for a buyer. Strawberries visibly sell well in Gulberg and Defence and on roads leading to other affluent parts of Lahore.

If all our fruits, ranging from peaches to leeches, plums to papayas, dates to grapes, guavas and greengages were assembled for a photograph, with of course the mangoes seated in the centre. *Shareefas*, melons, *shaftaloos*, prunes and *lauquats* overlooking their shoulders, with strawberries, gooseberries and mulberries cuddling in between, and many other fruits of our land, which I have failed to name – figs for instance – be requested to sit on the lawn in the foreground. What an attractive portrait it would make, expressing unity in the great diversity of our land. We have all so often seen a friendly pine leaning on an upright *Ghajoor*. I have often wondered if God's natural manifestations can cheerfully live in togetherness, why can't we humans do the same? If contrary natural forms, bushes, birds and beasts can live in an ecological harmony, why can't we, the chosen species, take time out to identify common points that can unite, rather than those that divide?

Without doubt, the next best thing to fruit or draining down a glass of *lassi* or *Anar* juice is cricket. The World Cup is on. I hope in the end we do well, because it is the only time we seem to unite as a nation.

We are without doubt talented people. We have constantly been making news playing bridge, hockey, squash, and cricket and even sailing. There was a time we used to come home bagging the most gold medals for the athletic events in the Asian Olympics – Iqbal for Hammer, Khaliq for 100 and 200 metres, Raziq for 400 metre hurdles and others for the javelin and steeple chase events. I wish Pakistan, instead of insisting on the membership of the Nuclear Club, would declare it a fruity, sporting nation and spend major part of its resources producing athletes, artists and men of talent and virtue. The nation would rather have good plumbers and athletes, than nuclear scientists and hawkish generals.

(25 Feb. 2003)



Ijaz ul Hassan is a recipient of two presidential awards. The Pride of Performance Award received in 1991 and the Sitara e Imtiaz award received in 2015. He is a painter, a teacher, a writer, a poet, an organiser of art exhibitions and many other things. He wrote one of the first books on Painting in Pakistan that is now printed in the eighth edition.

He has had a seven decades long career as a painter. He is regarded as one of the most well known and popular painters of Pakistan. The paintings that embellish the cover of the books in hand are a testament to his abilities as a painter. One of his paintings is now owned by the Fukouka Asian Art Museum of Japan.

The advent of a new century brought forth his talent as a writer. For three long years he produced popular weekly articles, printed in these two books for the 'Lahore Daily Times'. He Also wrote a number of articles for 'The Friday Times'.

During these years he also expressed himself in verse in English, Urdu and Punjabi.

Apart from his literary pursuits, he was also the founder member and later the President of the Artists Association of Pakistan, that is the only art organisation that has regularly held art exhibitions and seminars consecutively for thirty six years. Many of these exhibitions were national exhibitions and Ijaz wrote learned and well researched forewords for most of the brochures produced with the exhibitions. These brochures are a good resource for those seeking archival material on the art of the years between 1986 to 2024.

Ijaz ul Hassan has been on the governing bodies of major institutions and was part of the two policy framing bodies on Art, established by the Government of Pakistan.