

The Painter of the Subdued: Shamshad Hussain

Anjali Duhan Gulia*

It was not easy to catch Shamshad Hussain and his works as he socialized less and hardly displayed his works. However, once I luckily caught him in his creative den,¹ and he came to me as a charming and warm person who prefers his work to speak more than himself. Born in Bombay in 1946, in the house of arguably India's most celebrated artist (Late) Maqbool Fida Hussain, Shamshad Hussain's childhood was surrounded by art; where he used to quietly observe his father working in the balcony or under a street lamp on large canvases. Without carrying the weight of the traditional Indian art and also his father's bequest, he created a personal style, marrying the use of western media and thematically focusing on Indian life. In the 70s, he became at peace with himself and his creative sensibilities. However, he frankly acknowledged his debt to his father later in his life.

Shamshad was a naughty child, more interested in sports and bossing around than studies. He studied only till the eleventh, later following his heart, entered the evening classes at J.J. School of Art, Mumbai. As he was not keen on studies, in 1963, he went on to do a diploma in painting from the College of Fine Arts, Baroda. In his own words, "*This was my way out to move away from my family.*" Though he believed that nobody teaches art as such, one had to find one's own way. Here, he had to struggle against his father's immediate and powerful influence to create his own distinct style. He described his days at Baroda as "*wonderful*". He was a meticulous student doing over a hundred sketches a day and used to get a scholarship of fifteen rupees a month. There was immense freedom of experimentation and no walls between students and teachers. Shamshad had Gujarati

schooling, so it was initially difficult for him to grasp the knowledge put across by the Professors in English. However, he was particularly influenced by the works of Prof. K.G. Subramanyan and learnt a lot by viewing them. The years he spent in Baroda acted as a platform for his later artistic career. Human figures were the prime concern for him as he was deeply interested in them as a painter and his beliefs were rooted in humanism. The contemporary ideas and ideals in Baroda were also partly responsible for shaping his choices during his nascent years.² His early student works were under the influence of his father. The prominent figures of men and women rendered in bright colours still paid homage to the style of Hussain. However, he was continuously struggling to find his own idiom, to develop his own style. This led him to experiment with various media such as oil, pastel, pen and ink. He was trying his hand in every style and theme, but thematically he was more inclined to the female form.

In 1965, Shamshad started his professional life as a freelance and free-spirited painter in Delhi. He could have returned to the comforts of his family, but he chose to be on his own. "*With only thirty-five rupees in my pocket, some kitchen utensils and a chulla, I came to Delhi*", he revealed. It had to be awfully tough. He lived in *abarsatiin* Jangpura, living on meagre resources, but working really hard to carve a niche for himself. Around this time, in 1968, he had his first solo exhibition and sold his first painting for just rupee fifty.

Shamshad's visual studies in drawing in the next decade reflected this personal struggle that echoed the struggles of an ordinary Indian. In 1972, he went to Sikkim, where he initiated his famous headless series. From his hilltop hotel room in Gangtok, he had a bird's-eye view of the entire area. He could observe people going about their mundane life. But he could only see their limbs and flat

* Asstt Professor, Department of Visual Arts, Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak. A former Fellow, IAS, Shimla.

heads, with no faces. Therefore, all the paintings created during this phase have energetic figures with muscular limbs shaped with powerful lines. However, they are headless – pulsating with life yet no focus.

Finally, his patience paid off when he got a British Council scholarship to do his Post Graduation at the Royal College of Art, London, during the years 1979-80. *"I was initially not very keen on this and wanted to stay in India and pursue my creative work"*, was the response of the then young spirited painter.

London became the door for Shamshad, and it opened for him the exposure to the European countries, the whole of Western art and the Renaissance. The works of Michelangelo and Rembrandt particularly influenced him. When asked about his academic experiences in London, he thoughtfully remembered that *"I had very kind Professors and I had formed deep bonds with them. I also interacted with most of the contemporary British painters, including David Hockney."* He later added, *"I was exposed to the best of the Western art both historical and contemporary and it certainly benefited me immensely by expanding the range of my imagery."* Still, the human figure, especially females, remained a major theme.

Women sitting and chatting and observed in other mundane activities became the vital subject of his works. When I curiously enquired about this focus, he assertively answered *"Because I like women"* and *"women's forms, their gestures, the movements of their limbs that speak for themselves"*. The missing heads from his earlier series paved the way for more bold, sensuous and relaxed imagery. They were depicted sitting and gossiping in open spaces as if imbued with the feelings of experienced reality. There he also absorbed that the British talk a lot and this observation made him paint his figures with parted lips – conversing and communicating. Therefore, he painted his figures with open mouths; supporting their verbal articulations with a range of hand gestures. Shamshad also adopted the flatness of colours and graphic clarity as key elements of his stylistic idiom. This series continued for several years.

From London, he travelled to America, Canada, Mexico, Paris, France, Netherlands, Switzerland, and Germany, and later to Russia and Japan. These trips gave him a vibrant and stimulating experience to observe life and, in particular, humans more closely while posing questions about his identity as an Indian versus the Western influence of his late-Modernist British training. During some of these voyages, he met two of the most prominent collectors of his works, whose support had also played a significant part in his career. These were an American collector late Chester Herwitz from Boston who has probably the most extensive collection of Indian art,³ and a Japanese businessman, Masanori Fukuoka who

is also the owner of the Glenbarra Art Museum.⁴ Both Herwitz and Fukuoka were initially collectors of M.F. Husain's works and eventually also bought Shamshad's paintings.

Although Shamshad had developed a mature visual language for himself, it was still tough for Shamshad after returning to India. He started breaking space, line, and colour in his works. The real break for him came in 1981 when he was commissioned to do a sculpture of the scientist Dr Hussain Zaheer. This again stimulated curiosity in him and he explored and learnt in detail the different techniques and styles of sculptures. The sculpture was unveiled in 1981 after six months of work. His works, in the form of paintings from this period, display the urban middle class. In 1983, he won the Lalit Kala Akademi's National Award. Subsequently, even the upper strata appeared in his paintings in the late 80s and the early 90s. The surroundings were still missing, but he now paid more attention to the drapery wrapped around the figures, which highlights the emotions of his painting represented through colours and folds. Even in the earlier paintings, his characters' postures and clothes define their class. In his later works, Shamshad carries this technique forward and delineates the social attire much more sharply.

Shamshad Hussain continued his fascination with female figures in these years too. His creative output reflects a continuous dialogue with women, their faces, their figures and their world. Ordinary people in mundane places comprise a large part of Shamshad's work, but occasionally he paints on different themes also, reacting to the contemporary political landscape in the country. Like once he painted on the misery of the common man during the emergency. He also chose to paint the destruction of the Babri Masjid, and along with SAHMAT designed posters for Peace. In 1991, he began working on Hindu religious imagery and painted Radha and Krishna and Hanuman. Later he did a mural in the School of Social Sciences, JNU, for which he delved into a variety of media, pooled in all his creative skills and completed it in 1995. In the following year, a new phase started for Shamshad, based on a work of fiction *"Love at the Time of Cholera"* authored by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. For the first time, on the flat backgrounds of his paintings, furnishings began to appear.

Human is the main protagonist of his works; the mob, women gossiping, and engaged in their unglamorous mundane chores are depicted in shuddering lines. The crucial element of his works is how he divides and breaks his creative space, using lines and colour, creating a comfortable ambience. At first glance, the figures appear naturalistic, with a strange sense of flatness in terms of shading in colours, but a closer scrutinizing suggests that

the figures have been built up by brush strokes. There is no precise flatness; the patterns developed by the vigorous movement of the brush on the canvas add life and animation to the works. These have a lively quality as if they are pulsating with life. Images with their open mouths, gestures and attitudes add to this life in his works. Subtle shades of contrasting colours are juxtaposed with each other, acting as an essential tool in composing the whole work.

When asked about his friends in the art field, Shamshad answered, *'There used to be a time when all my friends Swaminathan, Manjeet Bawa, Kishen Khanna, Bhushan, and G.R. Santosh, used to hang around at Garhi studios. G.R. Santosh used to cook often, something delicious! We used to carry one or two of our current works, and an interesting discussion happened between us on each other's works. This dialogue is missing nowadays, except for a few friends'*. Later he unhappily remarked that *'now it is more of commercial dialogues which happen between artists; that he is selling for this much, my price is so and so rupees per square foot, I have raised my price to this much.....!'*

Till his death, at 69, he painted like an ascetic in this commercially reeking environment but still managed to remain clear from it. He exhibited his creative spaces successfully around the world, including the significant biennales of Tokyo, Dhaka, Ankara and Bhopal; III and IV Triennales; Perth Festival, Australia; Asian Youth Festival, London; Travelling Print Exhibition, USA, amongst several others.

Notes

1. This article is based on a *tête-à-tête* with Late Shri Shamshad Husain in 2007.
2. Yashodhara Dalmia and *et al*, 'Shamshad Husain' in *Indian Contemporary Art Post Independence*, 164–165 (New Delhi: Vadehra Art Gallery, 1997), 164.
3. Late Chester Herwitz and his wife Davida Herwitz were active in the Modern Indian art landscape. They attended the inauguration of the Bharat Bhavan in 1982. Dnyaneshwar Nadkarni, *Husain: Riding The Lightning* (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan Pvt. Ltd., 1996), 2.
4. The Glenbarra Art Museum was set up in 1993 in Himeji in southern Japan.

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