

Remembrance of Things Present

by Quddus Mirza

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A child of seven or eight enters Mussarat Mirza's studio in Sukkur. He spends the entire afternoon in it, while his family is visiting their relatives. He is fascinated by colours, brushes, pictures, as well as the painter. I remember, it is the late 1960s. During those cruel summer days of Sukkur the child takes refuge in her studio—a small quadrangle [or was it a hexagonal space?—to find Mirza busy at her easel, oblivious to an unknown intruder, with finished and incomplete canvases laying around her.

I have often pondered over how her work for that child, as for the grown-up, was not an unfamiliar experience. Looking at her painting was not different from seeing actual fields, lanes, houses. Not that she produces representational landscapes, but [it is as though] Mirza captures the essence of things. She transforms physical into visual, but more so, into metaphysical and personal. A chair, a wall, some pigeons, houses, people perched on *charpais*, all become inhabitants of a new community. Of paint. Poetry. Pleasure.

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The choice, of not indulging in conventionally political concerns, is also a political position. Perhaps it is a sane stance, affirming author Nadine Gordimer, who announces that one must write posthumously, shedding immediate and short-lived for eternal and essential. Gordimer also clarifies the connection between creativity and politics: "If destiny is political, politics and literature cannot be kept hierarchically apart." The great Urdu writer Intizar Husain preferred a personal—for some nostalgic—approach in his novels and short stories. And today when we read them, there is no other text that denotes the socio-political condition of his times as effectively as his.

To a similar scheme, the paintings of Mussarat Mirza, which more than the rendering of transitory observations, are investigations into the interaction of a human being with the elements of nature—in the realm of memory, recollection, resurrection. These indicate another option for an artist living in a society with prevalent problems about ethnicity, gender, beliefs, class, freedom, equality. Not to respond to immediate issues, but to opt for another position. The courage to acquire something else. Not fashionable, favoured, or popular and permissible.

Her decision to paint what she finds in "front" of her physical and other surroundings, and to translate all that visible, sensed and felt, into strokes, marks of paint, for many (including myself) is a heroic stance. It is unmatched. In the great verses of Ghalib and Faiz, one recognises that every emotion, feeling (read concept) actually is the word chosen by the bard. So a spectator realises that the marks, shades, layers and textures of Mirza's imagery are perfect possibilities to describe her observations and responses—and her ideas.

Ideas, that is, which constitute *remembrance*. Memory plays a vital role in the art of Mussarat Mirza. She picks up her brush and denotes the residue of an extended encounter, or a glance at some external and yet "eternal" reality. She adjusts that reality according to her formal demands. Through such a process she readjusts the past, the legacy and politics of identity, through a particular land.

[In this regard] the practice of depicting land cannot be disengaged from the politics of identity. But here again, Mirza's canvases transcend such a theoretical demarcation. Her paintings concern the structure and the architecture of paint, the sophistication of surfaces. Hence, it has never been necessary to remind of origin, atmosphere, environment, hour or location of these images. They liberate from every earthly bound. Into the realm made of pictorial pleasure.

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One has to be very literal to calculate the number of sunrises witnessed on earth, but I am sure that for every person by the sea, in a desert, on a green field, each sunrise is different, amazing, heart rending. We know about this celestial body in our solar system, but with each new day there is renewed contact. There is a new conversation with this blazing entity—freely, closely, passionately.

The diary of that intimate conversation, with nature, and with the nature of oneself, is the work of Mussarat Mirza. Searching, soothing, silent soliloquys—and superb.

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