CHAPTER -3
ELEMENTS AND STYLES OF HER PAINTINGS

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ELEMENTS AND STYLES OF HER PAINTINGS

Image grow out of the imagination, being transformed through part associations and personal experience. The subliminal, the nature of human existence is metamorphosed through this wondrous gift of the artist’s creative impulse.

Arpana Caur concerns as an artist peak at two ends of a spectrum. On the one hand, there is the philosophic yearning of the individual to locate the self within a larger. Karmic logic, and on the other, a passionately felt response to the rapidly changing exigencies of a violent political reality. Punjabi literature was a natural influence, writers like Shiv Batalvi, Amrita Pritam and Krishna Sobti were visitors to their home. In her readings. Sufi mysticism and Nanak’s teaching of a “grihasta Udaasi” located within the Sikh philosophy of Udaari or melancholy, are especially relevant: of committed action even as the self or soul is uninvolved, even disillusioned. Notably, writings in Punjab flourished during the ravage-inflicting raids of Ahmad Shah Abdali from 1757 to 1767. Waris Shah’s Kissa Heer was written during those war-ravaged years, and it was such times that nourished composers like Bulle Shah and Ali Haider. Through her mother, Arpana was exposed to the Punjabi writing tradition with its
dominant strains of passion philosophical mysticism and *udaasi* which go back to one of the roots of early writing in Punjab. In the spirit of early Sikhism, her art is informed by both a reaction to violent repression, as well as the **Bhakti Bhawa**, the feeling of religious devotion.

Arpana Caur’s art is that of the threshold, an art that straddles the inner world and outer, the figurative and the abstract, swathes of colour and graffiti, the ploys of the pre-colonial miniatures of the hill states around Jammu and post-cubist expressionism with calm of a little girl with big eyes who often meets our gaze in so many of her canvases. It is an art that is electric only superficially, while in actual fact reflecting the visual tensions unleashed in the process of trying to harmonize what infact can not be harmonized. That is why it is thought provoking.

Here is the art of our time, and art that fits in with our modern life style in which boundaries and contexts are being changed to meet new realities constantly. Nothing, excepts perhaps the human being is sacrosanct in her art, for the whole of her imagery revolves around the crumbling layers of protection we wear around us. If her exteriors come floating through the walls of her "**Women in Interiors**," dead bodies float non-chalantly across other canvases as undisturbed figures in the background of flying kites in her "**So What?**" series, or tower over a
crouched nude figure in the Custodians of the Law,” now hanging in M. F. Hussain Museum in Bangalore. We are constantly assailed with images that have broken their boundaries, like the daughter as large as the mother, perches on the letter’s shoulders, a work of her is recently included in Geeta Kapur’s Hundred years of Indian Contemporary Art as reflected in the years of National Gallery of Modern Art Collection.

TECHNIQUE OF HER PAINTINGS

Arpana draws consistently on both literary and painterly sources of seventeenth and eighteenth century art forms.

In constructing her own forms, Arpana used Pahari miniature architectural forms in a prominent way with the series “Women In interiors” (1975). The painting “The change of Babes” Guler (1960) (Bharat Kala Bhawan, Varanasi) on the birth of Krishna was especially influential in her construction of an expressionistic architectural space. The high architectural walls that define the social space of the well-born ‘nayika’ in miniature convention are redrawn by Arpana to bespeak the contemporary woman’s stifling physical space. The series gains greater poignancy in contrast to Arpana’s own later work of a women’s monumental presence in an unlimited landscape.

Moreover, unlike many successful artists, she has refused to stagnate
and reproduce old motifs that sell Gone is the nostalgia of the musician playing to empty chairs, the young girl watching houses and books, the mother and daughter, the bald headed musician, the bearded tailor; they have all given way to newer images, newer ploys. In her latest work on Mumbai, she has made another break from the flat colouring of miniature painting by using elements of the chiaroscuro effect in framework that is based on colour and not on tone, reflecting on originality of approach to colour that we find in Indian mural painting. Recently she has worked with welded metal, magnifying glass, wood, steel roads and plastic toys, incorporating the most mundane thinks into the ongoing stream we call culture. And the more such elements an artist can bring into the mainstream, the more successful her or she is at innovating and being originality, despite being in the mainstream that ensure that are lovers will construct spaces to live in around such work rather than blending them into already existing environments. This is the essence of the success of Arpana Caur as an artist.

For decades, Arpana Caur has been a leading name in contemporary Indian art. Her paintings, with bright colours and multiple themes, have been hailed by critics in India and abroad. Writing in the catalogue for her upcoming show in Germany, Ernst W. Koelsperger explains: “Arpana’s
visual narration for several decades formed a block: the concrete versus the abstract. She has always insisted in telling about thoughts and actions in her paintings... only few artist of the present Indian art scene have such an eminent influence and are present in all important art-centres of the world... her positive, always active and social oriented oeuvre obtains energy from an immense pleasure in pictures and narrations bonded to time and space. Secular and spiritual aspects blend.”

SYMBOLIC CREATIVITY IN HER PAINTINGS

She thrives on metaphors that find an apt use on striking, vibrant canvases, be it a pair of scissors, a metaphor that she has been using for 13 years now, the electric plug, shoes versus bare feet, the extended hand or the pot, self-taught artist Arpana Caur has a way with metaphorical images. In an interview with a national daily, she had once explained the use of scissors in several of her works. “I needed a metaphor for time” she has said continuing, “The Greek believes that scissors have the power to cut man’s fate (his thread of life) which is in a state of perpetual suspension. So, I thought to myself: ‘let me use the scissors’ and began using it. Now if anyone sees a pair of scissors, they refer to it as Arpana’s scissors, it has become such a hallmark and, each time, I try to use it differently.”
Well-known painter Satish Gujral nicknamed her ‘scissors’. That’s because I use scissors and plugs in my paintings. I believe scissors have the power to cut Man’s fate.” As she wakes up early morning, she paints to the sound of gurbani and Abida Praveen’s music. “I don’t make art. It makes me. Everyday.”

In her earliest work, it is a protective device starting out as a distinguishing feature in images of women, who are protected and those who are not. In “The Sheltered Women” series, it takes the form of a human being, in her mother and daughter images of a banana leaf in her Time Image series and in some of the images in her “Resilient Green” series, or even a Guru Granth Sahiba protecting her grandfather carrying his belongings in sack from Pakistan in her Partition series. There is a universality of discourse in the images she uses but the context is personal.

It is drawn from many different sources. There are images from ritual, like the umbrella from legends, like the woman with scissors, reminiscent of the classical Greek myth of the Fates, the upturned Kalpavriksha of Hindi mythology, or from the poetry of Nanak and Kabir, as in “The Body is just a Garment” series. Then there are physical images of the tirthankaras, the Buddha, Ghalib, Bhagat Singh, Udham Singh and even the popular images of Rajkapoor and Nargis under an
umbrella from the film Shri 420. There is also the global images of a bombed out public building of Hiroshima that the nuclear threat passed by imperialism has given world wide significance to, in a work commissioned by the Hiroshima Museum from 50th anniversary of the holocaust, Lately, she has added images from the folk art of the Warlis and of tattoo artists of the Godna tradition to her repertoire. But then she shifts the focus of there to her personal contemporary view of things. There is nothing reverential about it, as we can see from the figures of saints plugging into the "Tree of Enlightenment." or of Khushwant Singh’s Train to Pakistan cutting across the dialogue of Bhagat Singh and Gnadhi on violence and non-violence. These are personal statements, like her "Letter to Ghalib," that we fine tune into, after the initial contact with existing and known images is made, giving them universal relevance beyond mere authenticity.

What really makes them stand out, however, is her unselfconscious way of expressing there realities as she does in her goddesses of the part and present, contrasting the devi figure with that of a female building-albourer carrying bricks. Her art is remarkable in the simplicity with which she present a radical view of the realities of our lives, using images that we are used to, in a new context. She confronts us with image of policemen firing at angels in the sky, of trees as providing both shade and but for a
gun, of neatly-lined kitchen knives, of houses burning, of widows with shaved heads drowning in the Gangas’ of forms that remained us of Renaissance art with cherubs in the sky, of miniatures of satis, of popular ritual images of good and goddesses, so we are repelled, but not so much that we refuse to think of there things.

Structurally she achieves this by confronting us with dualities: figurative and abstract, monochromatic and polychromatic, the single image and its multiple reproductions, men and women, day and night, land and water. She is always alive to the fact that everything has two sides to it. She could have left it at that. But she does not want to sit on the fence safely. She takes sides, and with a very clear perspective of a future where humanity confronts oppression-peace confronts war, and the environment, pollution. Here is an art of hope and of a sense of liberation on a grand scale. And a world becoming smaller everyday takes to it naturally.

The lady, at present, has her plate full. She elaborates, “I am working on several things. I am using the warli motifs of spiral and harvesting for my series on time. I am also working on a Sohni series with pots, using it as a metaphor for the body and a third series using the plug image which denotes the connection between life and death, awareness and non-awareness.”
MEDIUMS OF HER PAINTINGS

Arpana used mostly oil based and water colours in her paintings. She also used pastel and showed interest in terracotta. Her simple looking but deep meaning paintings left such a deep impression in beholder’s mind.

Whether she works on binary positions or on singular images, there occurs metamorphosis of the sheer physicality of the human body which is rarely attired in grab other than the intrinsic colour. The colour she juxtaposed onto the collaborative works which she began in the 1970’s – with a folk artist Sat Narayan Pande. The act of co-singing became a major bridge that brought together the artist and the crafts person. Here too, in the few works you can immediately pickout her elements that stand out against the mute palette of the Godna. Interestingly, Godna was a tattoo art that was practiced on the bodies of tribal women to enhance their beauty. It was only a decade ago that this art was transferred on to paper. The skin colouration was brought in by dipping the sheets in cow-dung wash. While there are a number of such works here there is also the canvas in which Caur paints the Godna motif herself. The rippled tenor and the heady feel of multiple illusions is a resonating imagery that she creates.

The idea for this collaborative work on paper came from the incongruity of everyday visuals-a bullock-cart on a Delhi street carrying
the upper body of a truck, the thermal plant near her house on whose walls women dry hundreds of dung cakes, two sources of energy co-existing. She set upon the idea of juxtaposing two kinds of images, folk and urban by actually working with a folk artist about 10 years ago, when paper went to this region, both men-and women took to coating paper with diluted cowdung, to approximate skin colour Godna motif-birds animals, trees-are usually black and white, repetitive and subtle compared to the more flamboyant Madhubani tree forms came out of the folk artist that he said he hard never done earlier, against it, ‘I juxtaposed Delhi’s streets in fluorescent yellow, its traffic lights. Suspended between the two changing worlds in the Budha or Tirthankara.’

For nearly six years, Arpana worked with Sat Narayan Pande and some other tribal artists. She says, “That was the first time ever that a folk and contemporary painter co-signed side by side .The idea was to show how, we in present day India co-exist in two times and two cultures simultaneously.” Needless to say, it imparted a mew dimension to the world of brushstrokes.

**HER VIEWS ABOUT DELHI**

This is not the Delhi I grow up in. That Delhi was quiet and innocent, with very few ears, no television, many trees and a routine
rhythm of school or work, and leisurely walks on wide car-less streets.

When I began to exhibit in 1974, there were two galleries, two collectors and two lines for the happenings in the art world in a couple of newspapers. One was considered lucky if even one person walked into a gallery. Friends would tease me; so, when are you having one-person show; which meant one evidence a day. So in 1981 I did my sad and funny “Missing Audience” series with empty chairs but the singer singing alone in ecstasy, eyes closed. You somehow had to keep the flame burning.

It has become the past so soon like black and white films. Today’s Delhi is multicoloured, it’s the cultural capital of country—a tag once attached to Bombay—with over a hundred galleries and an opening everyday. As I write, for instance, there are openings of two senior non-Delhi artists, a discussion on woman artists in a gallery in Defense Colony I have never been to, and a sculptor’s performance at our own academy of Fine Arts and Literature—all in one evening!

After a long day of painting, it needs courage to attend all these. One is usually selective but on a day like this, it is impossible to remain in one’s shell much as one many love to.

This is Delhi. It will never allow you yours cosy shell anymore!

Once upon a time contemporary artists from Delhi, Calcutta and
south India simply had to go to Bombay to earn their bread, not butter, where the Sabavalas, Godrej, Dubashs, Pundoles and Gendhys would welcome them with open arms. Long grueling journey, carting large painting and their frames under train berth, staying at hard-to-get YWCAs, stretching canvases overnight at the never – available Jahangir gallery! Mumbai was the open cosmopolitan culture, welcoming new forms of art. And Delhi, the staid babu city that went to sleep at seven, earning the label of dull, boring and most of all uncultured, an extension of the agricultured' North.

Today, the butter is all in Deli. Galleries are always calling and cajoling artists, rather then the other way around. Not a day goes by without an ‘interested visitor’ and the phone has to be on the recording machine in order to paint.

This is new face of Delhi, where people come flocking each winter, not only from the US but also from Singapore, Hongkong, Japan and Karnataka. Even artists from neighboring Sri Lanka now considered Delhi India’s new cultural capital.

What’s new in this cultural capital? The page three phenomenon, where some long to be seen and others are too shy, is here to stay. One fearfully watches for a familiar face behind the camera every time one
steps into an artist's opening, or even a Reshma or Wadali ‘brothers’ recital. Diplomatic cards pour into artists studios, committees beckon you, school and colleges hope you will ‘chief guest’ their functions.

You do need a 48-hours day if you are to do your primary thing—painting, you are lucky if you can.

This ride on the magic carpet that is Delhi can be heady but exhausting, but the city itself brings you reprieve. Every unbearable summer, it pushes you to mountains, or back into your shell where you can paint to your heart’s content. Come to think of it, one lifetime. So much does this city offer.

There is the National Museum with its fabulous miniature and sculpture collection, and every visit can trigger off fresh images in the mind. There is the craft Museum where folk art flourishes. These folk artists, who carry on generations of community traditions have few takers for their work in their own states. Delhi is their Mecca, but they have to pay several visits before they get a chance to exhibit their work in their two dream places—Delhi Haat and the Craft Museum. While both have done a lot to popularize folk art, it is obviously not enough for the innumerable folk artists in India’s villages.

Then Delhi has to country’s oldest, and perhaps, the only
contemporary museum in the country, the National Gallery of Modern Art. Confined to Jaipur House, which refuses to expand, nearly 97% of the collection is in storage, but one still makes repeated visits to see the remaining 3%, so lovingly displayed by its new director. Though plans for a new building were approved a decade ago, funds, we have been told, are lacking. The sprawling Indira Gandhi National centre for Arts seems to be lying vacant these days, but at the India Habitat centre, there is a buzz of activity under its new art director, who has come from Chandigarh. Nearby, Stein’s spirit still presides quietly over the old charm of the India International Centre.

And of course, there are my favourite monuments, which I have visited thousands of times, and never tire of The Bangla Sahib Gurdwara, the quiet uninhabited air of the Damdama Sahib Gurdwara, the Dargah of Nizamuddin Auliya where Amir Khusro also lies, Jamali-Kamali beyond the magnificent Qutub Minar, the feeling of space at the Old Fort and Humayun’s Tomb. I could go on I especially like the little known Khirki Masjid, with its myriad arches, and nine clusters of nine domes on the roof, almost intact after five centuries. Tucked away behind cluster of tenements and choked streets in Chirag Dilli, where peacocks strut around tombs camouflaged with plastic waste. History struggle to breath and be
Blemments and styles of her paintings

acknowledged in the fashionable and chin Hauz Khas Village, while hoardings scream garish messages from the defenceless walls of Masjid Moth.

Will the coming generations know our quiet childhood in Chandni Chowk and the tears that rise to our eyes in Ferozshah Kotla, Khooni Darwaza and the spirits of martyrs whisper in despair at an increasingly violent and divided nation? A nation torn by contradictions, a nation that is fast forgetting the sacrifices made by martyrs as they dreamt of a tree flag, fluttering on the ramparts of Red Ford. On every crowded street, there is one such relic from the past, struggling to breathe amid the tangle of ugly new constructions, T.V. antennae and cables.

Behind my house, the women of Shahpur Jat dry hundreds of dungs cakes everyday on the steel walls of a thermal power station skirting the oldest wall in Delhi, the remnants of Siri Fort. This strange, surreal mix of old and new triggered off a whole series of paintings for me, "Between Dualities," where I collaborated and cosigned with a fork artist (earstwhile tattoo artist) who appropriates skin colour by coating cowdung diluted with water on paper.

In this series, his trees (that Delhi once had in abundance) are strangulated and embraced by neon trees.
Siri Fort Wall, the oldest 13th century wall from where the Mongols were first defeated, never to come back, having conquered large parts of China, Europe and Asia, has been ruthlessly usurped by voracious builders and a banquet hall, in connivance with civic agents and government builders who treat Delhi’s monuments as their personal fiefdom.

Laws that prevent encroachment within 100 meters of any monument are routinely flouted. All pleas and letters to the authorities fall on deaf ears; perhaps in the mad race for money, money and more money, people have become too callous to care anymore.

What is history then? We have no reverence for it in Delhi. And we have no reverence for the innumerable court injunctions against noise pollution through loudspeakers, amplifiers, construction activity, vehicular horns and crackers after 10 pm. For baraats, jagraats and Punjabi Pop, midnight is the magic hour. The noise may shatter you nerves, but any mention is taboo. Wealth must be on garish display at weddings, to the accompaniment of loud Punjabi Pop, the same tunes which so easily adapt into praise of the almighty.

Delhi’s citizens pray for sleep while others pray on their nerves. And no number of midnight calls to the police help. But did these help in 1984, when thousands were burnt alive in or outside their homes?
Delhi has a bloody history. You can smell it in post’ 84 Trilokpuri as you can in Tughlaqbad. But Delhi forgets and forgives, and carries on. It’s the place of power, of all the manipulative class games of grabbing more power, with the empty canopy of India Gates as one of the many reminders of its capacity for forgiveness, its irony, its nostalgia.

“Sikhs legacy of the Punjab” Exhibition

Arpana Caur attended the first ever permanent, international Sikh exhibition called “Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab” at National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC on 24 July 2004. Other prominent international guests included Tarlochan Singh, Chairman of the Minorities Commission of India, veteran marathon runner Farja Singh; Singh artists, the Sikh sisters from UK; the Pakistani Ambassadard of USA and the Indian charge D’Affairs besides other prominent Sikhs and patrons of the exhibition from all over USA.

Paul Taylor, director of the museum’s Asian Cultural History program, explained that on doing an inventory after 9/11 not a single stem relating to Sikhs or Sikhism was found. This was the challenge prompting this exhibition. “Now materials are being acquired and borrowed to present the exhibit on one of the world’s largest religious groups”.

In the program, Arpana talked of the influences and inspiration of
her art work. She talked especially of Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith, Kabir, and Indian Sufi saint of the 14th century and legendary Sikh artist Sobha Singh, especially his masterpiece ‘Sohnu Mahiwal’ and the trauma and the genocide of the Sikhs of 1984.

The exhibition itself holds over 100 items including Sikh artwork, arms and other Sikh artwork, arms and other Sikh artifacts. This exhibition, at this point will last two years in its present location near the museum’s popular ‘Baseball as America’ display and then move to the second floor for a further three years.