

ZAINUL ABEDIN: A VICTIM OF CONFLICTING IDEAS

By Syed Waliullah

One cursory glance at the painting of Zainul Abedin, now being displayed at his exhibition in Karachi, immediately reminds one of the fact that the artist, is definitely in his elements when he is sketching whether in black and white or in color. For his latest works are again sketches.

One sketch takes much less time than an oil painting on the same size of canvas. But sketches have a tendency to flow rapidly. This is perhaps truer in the case of Zainul Abedin whose imagination and artistic talent seem to find the most adequate form of self-expression in this particular mode of art. Therefore, he abhors oil painting, shuns the idea of dilating on one solitary emotional experience, and whenever he takes up a painting of a grandiose size, he seeks escape from boredom of detail in wide spacing. He is unhappy, and perhaps somewhat lost when he is pinned down to a big canvas.

Then his imagination bound by a single conception, sags, resulting in somewhat uninspired use of colors and in the curbing of his usually remarkable sense of freedom which is perhaps his strongest point as an artist.

There is, however, nothing wrong in this. With modern times, we have grown to accept specialization as strength rather than weakness by discarding worshipping of all-rounders.

The days of the general practitioner are certainly over. It is, therefore, quite logical and rational to isolate for the sake of appreciation the particular field, line or style in which one shows proficiency

At his best

For the same reason I have come to believe and appreciate that Zainul Abedin is at his best when the mode of his painting is allowed to run freely with his imagination.

In return, this imagination is the liveliest when the form he adopts to express himself is the highest possible one. In no other mode than that of the swift, bald and bare lines, therefore would it have been possible for him to speak with such depths of feeling and poignancy as he did about the famine that overtook Bengal twelve years ago. Perhaps we have discussed much too often these famine sketches which won him fame so suddenly.

For years we have forced the artist to exhibit the same sketches over and over again.

Even in the exhibition being held in Karachi now some of them are displayed.

The years following the production of the famine sketches have, however, been comparatively barren. However, recently the artist gave us a slip and went to the Chittagong Hill Tracts where he quickly finished scores of water-color sketches. He lived among the simple, honest, but colorful hill people (perhaps aesthetically speaking, the only colorful people in the whole of Pakistan) who were presented with the free gift of a hill and also bitten by some poisonous insects, the prominent marks of which he still proudly wears as battle-scars.

Hill Tracts

Because the watercolor sketches done at the Chittagong Hill Tracts are his latest production and because they are done in the manner he excels most, one is likely to pay special attention to them. Undoubtedly, in these sketches he has physically introduced to art a sector of the country previously unknown. But somehow they seem to arouse geographical rather than artistic interest.

Perhaps a reference to Gauguin will explain the point I have in view. When Gauguin left France to paint the people of the South Sea Islands, he introduced to Europe a people who were entirely different from his own, who, in the eyes of the westerners, had about them an aroma of idyllic romanticism which the western world, confused by the first impact of materialistic industrial society, was beginning to hunger for as an escape. But the manner in which Gauguin depicted the islanders succeeded in arousing superb artistic feelings instead of an exotic interest. The genius of the artist showed no ordinary curiosity for uncommon things: he was not a mere traveler ready to swoop down upon anything that was bizarre, eager to tell what he saw, perhaps exaggerating his experiences in a feat of boastfulness. He went there with the mission to be an artist free from the trammels of a society which he felt did not give him enough freedom to express himself. He remained a creative artist, apparently thriving in the environment he believed was best suited for his artistic expression.

Zainul Abedin's Hill Tracts sketches however, seem to bring to one's mind the question: for what purpose did he go to the Chittagong Hill Tracts? Was it for the lure of new subject material which he considered to be novel enough to excite his imagination? Was he motivated by a zoo-graphical rather than artistic interest? Or did he find the material there emotionally and ideologically closer to him?

One thing seems to be certain. It is that the artist did not go there to seek such an environment as would be more congenial to the expression of his artistic genius. Then it is probable that what took him there was merely the desire to depict a little hill community which is different from the rest of Pakistan, from the religious, social and ethnological point of view. Obviously, he was in search of new painting material and not a new mode more adequate for expressing his ideas.

This realization may, I am afraid, prejudice some against these sketches though it cannot be denied that they possess most of the qualities that characterize his best sketches. The hill people in his sketches sit near homes built on bamboo stilts, placidly smoking; their pretty women wearing colorful dresses weave; they and their hills and swift flowing rivers and boats are no doubt faithfully depicted, revealing to us for the first time a little erstwhile hidden charming world. But one wonders whether this task of revelation should not have been left to an ethnologist equipped with a camera and color film.

Main causes

Zainul Abedin is undoubtedly a powerful artist but his recent sketches unfortunately to repel someone to wonder whether he is not somewhat lost to what road he should take as an artist. As I have should take as an stressed elsewhere, I believe we are partly to blame for the artist's failures and lapses in the past years. In these years, we have forced him on his artistic experiments and on gathering experiments, being constantly conscious of us gazing him. He should have been allowed greater amount of privacy which is essential for his works. I feel he is like a tiger who has lost his prowess and strength in the fare of merciless, full-blast drum-beating.

In the case of our artist the problem is made more complicated by the fact that it is not the constant public gaze on its spotlighted personality more that is hindering his work. There is the problem of the strong force of traditionalism as expressed by the pronounced public appreciation and support to it, coming into clash with the desire on the part of talented artists to break new grounds which, if attempted, is bound to, be followed by a period of vexed uncertainty as to the public reaction. However strong an artist may be in his convictions, this conflict is bound to weaken him so much that he is finally left vacillating colorlessly and pointlessly, confused to the very core.

This confusion is made more critical by the nature of the public opinion favoring repetition of traditionalism which is unenlightened. I say unenlightened because an analysis of our attitude to art quickly shows that we do not know what we seek in art. We accept traditionalism in art which though newly imported into our country, is, from the international point of view, a much exploited mode of artistic expression. Our appreciation of this style is confined to the already accepted belief, changed since the discarding of the one-dimensional perspective-less oriental style of painting, that anything which is made to attractively resemble something is good art. We are, therefore not surprised to find in the drawing room of a Pakistani the colorful, nicely framed picture of the Britons in red jackets, fox-hunting.

There is no doubt that the watercolor sketches of Zainul Abedin would be

accepted by the public. But because of our unquestioning approach to them, they will fail to serve the purpose of art which is to create vital aesthetic spirits that are capable of changing the way of life of culturally dormant people. We cannot expect to create life with an imported carcass.

All that I have seen of Zainul Abedin's paintings of recent years do strongly suggest that he is a victim of this conflict of the public dictate, on the one hand and the desire to be what he wants to be, on the other. I feel more convinced about it when I see the few works he produced some months ago which may be broadly termed as unacademic. With faintly colored cubistic graphs forming the background, these few experimental works portray human figures in a style which definitely shows an originality that is worth pursuing. "The woman and the Cat", "The Snake Charmers" are prominent among these new efforts which were first exhibited at the exhibition held by the Pakistan Art council in Dacca last year.

While experimenting with these he also conceived the idea of painting, using exclusively locally produced colors unconventional designs on cane mats. (He has already given a design to the cane mat weavers for mass reproduction). To my mind here is something extremely original which combines a break from the academic traditionalism with something that had deep roots in the soil. Yet we find the artist, instead of directing all his energy and imagination towards a fuller discovery of the original style revealed in "The Women and the Cat" and the cane- mat design idea, run to the Chittagong Hill Tracts to emerge later with heaps of watercolor sketches. No wonder that these sketches raise questions as to the motive behind their production instead of normal critical questions pertaining to their art value.

We must realize that art and culture blossom not when tradition is repeated endlessly, unchanged and unaltered but when it is changed through a process of receptive synthesis into something that is dynamically progressive. The artist potentialities of our people will remain latent as long as they are fed with such specimens as for instance, the water-color sketches of a Spanish city lane or a French garden corner which Zainul Abedin produced during his visit to Europe. Nor the well-drawn watercolor sketches of the Chittagong Hill Tracts are going to catch the imagination of the people. Their failure lies in the fact that they are, on the one hand, a repetition of a much-used, much-stretched style, and, on the other, they are without any roots in the indigenous traditions of the country. In other words, they are incapable of producing new artistic spirits that would, so to speak, set the imagination of the people ablaze.

It is a really unfortunate that our country has no dissecting progressive cultural section of any size. Had there been one, the burden on the shoulders of the few lone talented artists like Zainul

Abedin would have been considerably lightened. At the moment such burdens are bound to weigh heavily on them in as much as their battle is a lonely one and they alone have the responsibility of making a decision as to the course to be chosen and followed. Perhaps they are like the captain of a ship in moments of crisis with no help and no equipment but entrusted with the task of taking a shiplot of people to a land better than the one they have left behind.

But perhaps we can justifiably hope that Zainul Abedin will ultimately be able to overcome the material obstacles and fulfill his task. He has talents. His knowledge of his own people, their emotions, dreams and aspirations is intimate. He also knows their shortcomings; knows where the void is the widest and where the lack of sensibilities about form and color and the way of life stands gaping unconscious and unaware of its ugliness. He has also vision and the strength to translate it into reality.

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