

Contemporary Art Practice in Kashmir with Special References to the Works of Shafi Chamman, Veer Munshi and Inder Saleem

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Abstract

In the post 1989 the changing political climate of Kashmir had a drastic impact on the every social and cultural sphere of life including its provincial modern art scene. The most visible impact of the political crisis came by way of a sudden disappearance of some of the important artists of the Valley. Kashmiri Pundits, which included some of the important artists of the Valley, were forced into exile, which infected their aesthetic preoccupations with the nostalgic memory anticipating a disconcertingly existential stance. The only Muslim artists left behind, out of a certain aporia or apprehension; generally choose not to be politically direct in their artistic statements. During the profoundly dangerous first decade of militancy the local artists either hibernated or maintained a somewhat clandestine or solitary engagement with their works. The art college, called as Institute of Music & Fine Arts, served as the only available pretext for meeting and exchange was rarely seen busy with students. Due to the frequent calls for strike, unpredictable calamities and the ever-growing intimidating presence of new laws, new structures like bunkers, barbed wires and make shift army camps the normal routine life became a thing of the past. The present article highlights the artistic engagement of the three artists, who represent the third generation of modern artists of Kashmir, whose work is a living testimony of the most disturbed times in the recorded history of Kashmir.

Keywords: Modern art, Kashmir, insurgency in Kashmir, art and politics.

SHAFI CHAMAN (1964)

Shafi Chaman is the youngest of the third generation of Kashmiri artists who never left valley. At a first glance Chaman's paintings recall Ganesh Pyne's delicate silhouetted forms, the mild careful tonalities in handling the shafts of light and dark, well-defined sharp thin strokes to delineate foliage, the incongruous movement of color and lines once together recede into a kind of fairy dream world. But more intimately he shares Chagall's nostalgia of a dream-like rural life, where his miniature world of interpersonal togetherness dwells in a carefree dreamscape. The trees, waters-bodies, foliage and flowers assume a Wordsworthian like earthly delights. Child-like figures, distorted in scale and often floating in the space in elastic elongation free from the

conventional gravitation of earth dominated his early paintings, such as the work called **Beyond All Telling**, 1989.



Beyond All Telling, 1989, 102 x 89 cm Oil and acrylic on canvas. Collection: Iftikhar Jaffar.

Chaman in his somewhat elliptical poetic wit is often heard saying that it is not the most but the best that counts. He would be content to have produced a canvas in a year, with the pride glittering in his eyes. To his mind painting is not a work but an exclusive profound realization, which may take a year of observation and research. Chaman's scholarly-like pursuits in search of allusions to enrich his pictorial vocabulary are often evident from his sketchbooks as a repertoire of various chance encounters, light bulb moments and artistic inspirations. Like diary Chaman's sketchbooks reveal an artistic rigor, which proves a very significant exercise guiding his artistic development.

Among the most palpable sources that Chaman draws refers to the mythological past of Kashmir. The popular legend holds that the Kashmir Valley was once the great lake *Satisar* (the place where Sati, also known as Durga, took the shape of a lake). The lake was inhabited by the abominable and ferocious demons. Responding to the penance of the great sage Kashyap, Brahma's grandson, the gods killed the demon with a pebble divinely caste, which today stands as the hill upon which towers the fortress built by the Mughal Emperor Akbar known as Hari Parbat. The water of *Satisar* was drained through a breach in the mountains at what is now the mouth of the Valley beyond the northern town of Baramula. However, Chaman's aesthetic or conceptual associations are not strictly guided by historical or mythological doctrines or traditions. Unlike the scholastic rigor of G R Santosh, one of the most celebrated modern artist of Kashmir, Chaman

shares a playful or intuitive alliance to the sources he draws from. In the past decade or so Chaman has been using the triangle as primal form to negotiate his aesthetic link with the cultural ethos of his nativity. In a certain poetic delimitation he explains his conceptual framework:

Beyond all Telling I have been told that everything which has been experienced is firstly seen secondly touched and finally half understood. Beyond all telling the telling and understanding of the experience which I directly knead, observe slipping through my right hand fingers, triangle my aesthetical and cultural rapport to communicate it to one self and to The Society (relative term) at the arrow root level, when the situation was watery, demonic, damp and dreadful. The mother had to offer their sons at the Demons order.

Dreadful demons who used to reside on the triangle peaks desired to digest an experience as regular as old as humanity itself. The demonic three-dimensional aspect of conceiving the necessity of the triangle of necessity. It is just from here where from my pursuits begin. The origin of the triangle, the silence, silence which speaks the primordial truth about the human matters, the culmination of all sorts into silence, which germinates, sprouts, and flourishes within three sided geometrical figure called the 'triangle'.

The triangle of punishment, trimorphous punishment which exists in the distinct forms; Body-Spirit. My hermaphrodite subjective process may not be universally comprehensible or explicable but the assignment of the punishment needs to be dealt by the objective punishment of the conceptual trigonometry; 1 - the conscious, 2- the intellect, 3- the vision (the inner vision). The modeling of silence in three dimensions, the Perfect Triangle (the relative term) of human knowledge. The punishment of being a painter - the base for my fabric is the direct result from the conflict of attractions, the influence of an essential triangle, no, not the two men and a women, neither the two women and a man but only one man and the all women, the all men of earth, water and fire.¹



Anantnag, 2002 Oil on canvas. Collection: Artist

Chaman's allegorical triangle is conspicuously identifiable in some recent paintings, such as the *Verinag Pool*, vertical pyramidal triangle weaved in a net of straight lines amid a lyrical tree and huge flames of fire behind and whirling lines inside a hexagonal flat in the foreground. Verinag is a famous resort in Kashmir, but it is the legendary significance that attracted Chaman. As traditionally believed that it was Verinag through which gods drained the water-ridden Valley. The work called **Anantnag**, 2002, the place where Chaman lives, the triangle formed after joining the diptych shows the linear perspective, the point vanishing behind the man treated in abstract expressionist mode, occupying the nightmarish space in the right part of the canvas, with hands hanging in sheer helplessness. The act of supplementing punishment with being is an ontological question foregrounded in the existential philosophy of Sartre and Camus, which surfaces as a haunting presence in the work, especially, for its compositional alliance with the iconic work such as Munch's *Cry*.

In the recent years his paintings have adopted a relatively lesser contrast than his previous works. The painterly outlook has also considerably shifted from a morose or robust expressionist mode to the more subtler grayish and pleasantly low key undertones. The paintings reveal a far greater tendency towards abstraction. However, the previous aesthetic engagement with the triangles still preoccupies a seminal formal/conceptual paradigm. The paintings such as **Untitled**, 2006, **Trimorphous Triangle**, 2006, **Untitled**, 2007, **Pissing on the Triangle of Morality**, 2008, **Iron in the Apple**, 2010, **The Rustic**, 2010, **Adams Apple**, 2010 while still dwelling in the old shrewd tactics of wit and satire they are also characteristically different for incorporating an assemblage of well-wrought visual transformations; abstracting the identifiable commonplace motifs of nature into a plethora of visual metaphors of disparate variables.



Bul Bul + 1, 2002, 93 x 104 cm. Oil on canvas. Collection: JK Academy, Srinagar.

The triangle assumes more palpable presence in **Bul Bul + 1**, 2002. Here the triangle is a concrete but empty road to infinity, the *Bul Bul*, Indian nightingale, is an archetypal symbol for a good omen, which however, is looking downwards in despair for the sheer emptiness of the bridge-like triangle. At the same time this bare triangle in a countermovement reciprocates with the fatality of communal triangle; Hindu, Muslim and Sikh stretching their hands out in an outcry to demystify the politically rendered religious divide and once again revive the peaceful traditions of the past.



Trimorphous Triangle, 2006, 112 x 119 cm. Collection: Artist



Pissing on the Triangle of Morality, 2008, 98 x 106 cm. Collection: Artist



Iron in the Apple, 2010, 152 x 121 cm. Collection: Artist



Adams Apple, 2010, 98 x 105 cm. Collection: Artist

Chaman does not seem to be ambitious enough in terms of sharing his work in the public spaces. However, he has received State Akademi Awards in 1983, 85, 87 and 2002. He has also participated

in All India Painters Camp in the Valley in 1987, 95, 99 and 2002. More recently he was selected as one of the local artists in the fifteen days Residency Workshop, Khoj Kasheer 2007, organized by Khoj, International Artists Association, New Delhi. He prefers to paint in a clam, solitary and somewhat self-complacent space. At present he is teaching in the Faculty of Music & Fine Arts Srinagar and working and living in Anantnag, Srinagar.

VEER MUNSHI (1955) and **INDER SALIM** (1965) are among the immediate contemporaries of Chaman, who however never lived in Kashmir throughout their artistic career, are in fact more significant in terms of their aesthetic relevance to the radically redefined and new forms of art-making. Munshi, while continuing the traditional studio practice, foregrounds a new stance that aims at revitalized or redefined painting as a language to address the personal and the political contemporary concerns. In a certain artistic alliance to the conceptual/postmodern painters such as Atul Dodiya he has evolved a vocabulary loaded with politically charged appropriations, negotiating the personal identity, history and dislocation.



Fate of a Kashmiri Pandit, 1995

Among the contemporary Kashmiri artists settled outside Kashmir Munshi remains to be the most prolific and engaging artist to represent the aesthetics of diaspora and dislocation. The works such as **Fate of a Kashmiri Pandit**, 1995, **Untitled**, 1997, **G-&-J-father-of-nation**, 2005, **Dialogue**, 2005 dwell in the haunting stories of partition and at the historic tragedy that has engulfed Kashmir, Munshi's homeland that he was forced to vacate, like most of the Hindu Kashmiris, in the early nineties. As Ranjit Hoskote describes:

Veer Munshi's art approaches the political, not only through an intellectual cognition of oppressive structures and conditions, but also through the emotions of grief, loss and

bewilderment that attend the predicament of exile. To his credit, the volatility of such emotions is tuned to a fine pitch of poignancy, the restrained cadence of the elegiacⁱⁱ



Untitled, 1997, 92 x 112 cm. Oil on canvas. Courtesy: JK Academy, Catalogue, Exhibition from the collection of JK Academy at IGNCA New Delhi



Dialogue, 2005.

Inder Salim shares a more radical position for his art-practice emerges out of the dramatic change that has taken place in contemporary Indian art in the recent years. Informed by the shifts in paradigm in the western art-practice since 1960s, especially by means of the emergence of new mediums like installation, performance, site specific, video art and digital art, the post-90s Indian art-practice too witnessed a certain transformation of the traditional studio into a “hybrid, expanded and mutated space.” Inder Salim, often represented as multi-faceted activist-artist from Kashmir, is largely known for his provocative performances. Incorporating mediums such as documentation, photographs, of assemblages, painting, performance, video, text and so on he attempts to explore notions of self ‘otherness,’ the idea of ‘Kashmir’, and its demography and politics. Unlike Munshi, Inder Salim is a self-taught artist who grew up in the small town of Kashmir. It was only after coming to Delhi in early nineties that he showed a certain interest in painting. But, drawn by a natural instinct for activism, he later switched over to more interactive and radically new mediums like installation and performance art. Among some of his notable performances are **Evoking Nazir** held at Open Studio at THE LOFT, Mumbai in 2009 is a 45-minute slide talk supplemented with a performance and a presentation of documented work done over the past few years, which he describes in a blog:

Nazir, a friend, in Kashmir, who doubly disappeared, first when we grew up, and then by the political growth in Kashmir. May be Nazir is still alive, but how to by-pass memories and touch that past, again.....So, memoires, personal and historical, blended by a conflict, by a love, and hate even; by a politics and violence even, by an ethics and the absence of it even; and by a present which is in the making and which is a read-made even. Evoking the sound NAZIR has a childhood embedded inside it, a smell of opium and charas, and a multifaceted affair between the self and the other, which manifests the being, and a nothingness even, so an attempt to evoke...ⁱⁱⁱ



Evoking Nazir. Performance and Installation. Open Studio at THE LOFT, Mumbai in 2009.

Notes

ⁱCited from an unpublished statement of the artist (Shafi Chaman) 2008

ⁱⁱHoskote, Ranjit, *Dodging the Land Mines of History*, accessed March 29, 2011, at 13:00 hrs, <
<http://veermunshi.com/index.html>>

ⁱⁱⁱSalim, Inder, *Evoking Nazir*, Wednesday, September 23, 2009, accessed April 1, 2011, at 18:00 hrs,<
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