

When Images Look Back

Recent Works of Sharmi Chowdhury

Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin,' thought Alice, 'but a grin without a cat!
It's the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life!'

Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

When facts meet fiction, animals converse with humans, the outside and the inside exchange places, and a strange universe is conjured into existence.

Playful, daring and witty, the recent works of Sharmi bring to the fore a new facet in her dealings with the world.

There are times when young artists, through sheer tenacity and a deep sense of commitment, arrive at a style that would make all their previous works seem experimental. Sharmi Chaudhury has effortlessly and precisely accomplished the leap from the exploratory to a mastery over her medium with this body of works comprising water colours on silk and paper, and painted ceramic platters. Her penchant for storytelling continues unabated, but the mode has metamorphosed dramatically. What earlier used to be an elaborate tableau of puppet-like figures set against a theatrical backdrop seems to have acquired a life of their own. Releasing themselves from being characters in a play with prescribed roles, the figures now appear to assert their new found identity which is as much based on masquerade as on empirical observation. They move in a fictitious world where mirrors don't speak the truth, and where animals and humans live in strange but happy camaraderie.

Experimentation with old media such as tempera, water colours and oils is the forte of most students trained in Kalabhavana, Santiniketan. Of all the old masters of Santiniketan, it was Benode Behari Mukherji, with his absorption with the medium and his close

attention to detail, which left a deep impression on Sharmi. Following the usual trajectory, Sharmi's move to Baroda for her Masters only intensified her love for the materiality of the media. In Bhupen Khakar and Nilima Sheikh, Sharmi found further sources of inspiration, who suggested to her the intimate connection between the medium and image-making.

With the world as a stage, the stories narrated by Sharmi almost invariably have a theatrical setting, with curtains appearing from unexpected corners, where scenes from reality and fiction intermingle. With flicks of garish pinks interspersing her palette, she invites a reading of her images via popular culture – reminiscent of the repertory of kitschy landscapes of sunsets and floral flourishes often seen on the exterior of highways trucks or the pan shops. However, what really sets her images apart from popular visual culture is the fact that her very real and quotidian characters hold conversations with imaginary beings, drawing on larger civilizational discourse extending from the Panchatantra tales, the Buddhist jatakas, *Pather Panchali* to the Japanese *Ukiyo-e* woodcuts, to name a few.

What binds all these disparate frames of reference together is the element of the performative in a double sense: the painted characters as much perform their roles through gestures and physiognomy as they are brought into existence through the performativity of the artist's gestures of calligraphic strokes.

It was the large scale of a canvas that suggested to her that she could knit stories within a story. Like a craftsman, she wove the waft and weft of her narratives between the axis of reality and fiction. As one reads them, one felt swept into them in a dizzying encounter and is dazzled by her skill in suturing different stories on the same surface.

Her recent works have however moved a long way from these earlier narrative efforts. It is as if Sharmi questioned the large sweep of her imagination, which was producing macro-narratives that matched the verve of a traditional historian. Sitting on a high ground, the world had once been laid open to her gaze as she chronicled the events unfolding before her. However, in her current works, Sharmi snaps out of the grand mode of story-telling and untangles the complex web. Paying intimate attention to a singular strand, she animates her old characters, who very often appear either singly or as two images, with new life. In their reincarnations, they become bold and self-assertive. This is as true of human figures as they are of animals.

The tradition of story telling, where humans and animals meet as equals and where divinity passes to humans, moral and ethical discourses go back to the Buddhist *Jatakas*

and the *Panchatantra* tales. Sharmi too invokes a pre-rational bonding between the human and animals worlds, but addresses a contemporary audience, who also seems to be passing through a time of ethical and moral uncertainty.

That is why Sharmi's staging of a dialogue between humans and animals is devoid of either the grotesque or the caricature, unlike the work of her medieval western counterparts. Drawing from a different starting point, which never espoused anthropocentrism, she uniquely creates an egalitarian world, where animals playfully assist humans without being their instruments and humans seek their counsel in times of distress. Far from the Judo-Christian world view that places human beings at the pinnacle of divine providence, in the pictorial universe created by Sharmi, animals occupy a place of privilege: as judges, jesters or just indulging in pure frolic and exuberant *joie de vivre*.

Introverting our standard notions of the inside and the outside, we confront extraordinary scenes, where wooden furniture is set in the woods while shirts flutter as they swing from the branches of trees acting like hangers. A bewildered girl finds herself ensconced within a cupboard while crocodiles sportily give a joy ride to a bunch of frolicking men. Like Alice in wonderland, the girl seems to stagger through a world where even the most improbable appears natural, such as a man gaping at mating animals, precariously hoisted on a stool behind a painting like a wall. As for the copulating animals, they make love like humans, half dressed on a mattress.

Sneering at our everyday assumptions, resting on a distinction between the natural and the cultural, Sharmi pulls the carpet from beneath our feet as she stages these reversals. Being human is more about a sense of alienation, an obsessive narcissism, which drives men and women alike into gazing at their own reflections and their horror of confronting the face of the other in the mirror. If we for a moment pause to look closely at one of the platters, which depicts a woman shown from the back, holding a mirror, we can grasp the kinship that Sharmi creates between humans and animals. Emerging on the surface of the mirror is a jackal-like face that peers back at this woman, perhaps suggesting that it is an embodiment of her alter-image! Here, the term "reflection" takes on a much more profound sense of self-interrogation and becomes a frantic search for a stable centre. On the other hand, the animals are projected as less anxious about who their real selves are and are shown to inhabit the world with more ease and grace. More in tune with their environment, the elephants, crocodiles, monkeys, pigs, bears and crows make up the larger world and intervene in the human world at crucial moments of the narratives: they offer advice, take sides in conflicts, make claims on human destiny, and at times even meekly perform their prescribed roles as *vahana* or divine vehicles of the goddess.

While images freely actualize in the mind, every artist needs to translate them into the reality of a drawing, painting or sculpture. When one confronts the medium with the image

in the mind, the former tests the latter and poses enormous hurdles before the image can materialize. Only when one crosses them one by one, as in an obstacle race, does the medium relent and become hospitable to the image held in the mind. Sharmi has to wrestle with the medium of ceramic platter. Seeking advice from potters and sculptors about how to achieve the right mixture of ceramic paints and gum, to retain the vividness of the colours, even after the firing, Sharmi could only arrive at the magic formula through a long and arduous process of trial and error. The round format of the platter offered a challenge to her, who, like the old masters from China and Japan, surrendered to the constraints of the format and let it dictate the composition. When painting on a platter, she would place it on the floor; when it was displayed on a wall, the platter would traverse a 180 degree shift. This was for Sharmi the most challenging aspect of working on platters, since it transformed its meaning in its new orientation of display.

Very clear about how each of the platters should be placed, Sharmi views them as a part of a larger narrative set and is very definite (like a curator) about how they should be displayed on a wall. Sharmi has a clear idea of how the platters should be hung on the wall, since the stories form autonomous units at the formal level but spill outside their boundaries and speak to one another at the semantic level. This lends them an intertextuality that not only binds the disparate stories in a narrative web but extends its circle to include the viewer. The position of the viewer as a voyeur is in fact built into many of the narratives, but at times, this logic of the gaze is disrupted when images rebel against their containment and look back.

As the artist's statement reveals, the man-woman relationship underpins Sharmi's narratives as a leitmotif, but what disrupts the gendered binary is the subliminal world invoked by the animal world. The animals parody the human world by mimicking it or open up a new world ruled by different norms and morals. At times, markers of femininity from the human world are mapped on to the animals, as when one of the platters depicts a man carrying a crocodile with a red bangle adorning each limb! In a sense, the animal body displays no hierarchy between the hands and legs, which throws into high relief human-centered values, based on the homo erectus - a stage in prehistory when marks of social stratification began to reflect upon the human body in the form of crowns, masks or ornamentation.

If the artist stages a critique of the patriarchal system, it is primarily through a 'detour' to the animal world. This by no means implies that the human and the zoomorphic world are like two parallel lines **that** inevitably intersect to reveal the historical dimension of human morality and ethics.

It is striking to note Sharmi's disavowal of the narrative content of her paintings. Her distancing herself from storytelling stems from her apprehension that it will detract attention from the performative aspect of **her** labor or what she refers to as the modality of her expression. This compels her to reject both the metaphorical and the allegorical aspects, which she considers superfluous to her main intentions. The other reason for her discomfort with storytelling lies in her desire to prevent her images from turning into illustrations of well-coded stories, rather than stories that pre-exist her acts of articulation. It is her kinetic interaction with the materiality of the paint as it spreads across the surface of silk or ceramic platter that breathes life into characters that never existed prior to their creation. In that sense, the artist's denial of the narrative element in her works stresses the unpremeditated character of the procedure of her image making. While her statements constitute one way of reading her works, they offer themselves to many more modes of interpretations that are as varied as the viewpoints from which the viewers engage with them.

Poised between autobiography and fictional reportage, Sharmi brings to the foreground the notion of performance, as encapsulated by the dual images of a man holding a monkey by a rope; the stances of both the figures making it difficult for the viewer to decide as to whose tune the monkey dances to. In fact, we are not sure whether it is the monkey who holds the rope and orders the man to dance around or it is the other way around. In these role reversals lies the poignancy of reworked moral fables that resonate as much with the past as the present.

Despite the artist's rejection of her concerns pertaining to storytelling, it is difficult for the viewer to divest the cryptically drawn figures of the narrative content. One witnesses a decisive move towards the emblematic, which results from condensing the stories into a single frame as in a Tarot card. Take, for example, a scroll on silk with a three-headed goddess who faces the viewer upfront while regally standing before a docile tiger. It should be noted that in traditional Indian iconography, a goddess is shown having multiple arms but rarely triple heads. Of course, the mind behind the mixing of codes that cuts across cultural boundaries is the mischievous girl in the far ground indecorously swinging away in merriment. One wonders if this girl, who keeps reappearing in various guises across different frames, embodies the artist herself as some kind of a contemporary Alice in a multicultural and globalised world where signs travel across national boundaries as swiftly as people!

How can you keep on movin' unless you migrate, too?

They tell you to keep on movin, but migrate you mustn't do.

The only reason for movin' and the reason I roam

Is to move to a new location and find myself a home.

'Migration Blues'

References:

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