

## **The Muse of Moving Image in South Asian Art**

Almost ten years ago, when I was visiting Cleveland in USA, I made a plan to see a painter, who was famous in the area for his unusual 'folk' paintings. Being polite and acting politically correct, I asked my travelling companion that when are we going to see this Afro American artist? But instead of informing the date or time, she told me not to use the term 'Afro American' in front of the painter. She added that the old painter preferred to be called Black. Because he insisted that he is black, and it is an injustice as well as ironic, that he has been called by various names, such as Nigger, Negro, Colored, Black and Afro-American – all subject to change according to the whims of others!

The situation of South Asian states is not much different from the fate of that black artist, since the countries in this region have been named differently due to altered political fashions. Countries, such as Pakistan, India and Bangladesh were once described 'Al- Hind', then named India or/and Hindustan; which later became 'Indian Subcontinent'. Now with the inclusion of Sri Lanka, this area is baptised as South Asia, and you can even define it SAARC region (with the addition of Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives), if you have a diplomatic turn of mind.

Just as, whatever name you give, a rose will remain a rose; similarly, no matter what you term it; the area comprising three large countries of South Asia remains a unity in terms of many cultural practices and artistic expressions. The history of these countries can be traced from a shared past of five thousand years and a not long ago period of colonial rule. There are several institutions, like the structure of civil service, system of education, classical music and fervour for religion are common in these nations, but another, a recent cultural product – cinema – is becoming equally important in all of these countries.

Although, each nation prides on its vernacular film industry, but Hindi cinema from the studios of Mumbai has evolved into a common currency among the countries of South Asia (to a smaller scale, echoing the spread of Coca Cola!). These movies, if on the one hand are instrumental towards understanding the Hindi/Urdu language across the borders; at the same instance these reflect the conflicts of social classes through various stories. In addition to that, the movies offer idealized romantic endeavours carried out by idolized human beings – and enhanced through a number of lyrical and visually rich songs. (Probably the blend of reality and fantasy is the key for immense popularity of these movies).

However the power of cinema in South Asia can only be understood by observing the pattern of behaviour of ordinary people. Cinema, which initially and academically is supposed to be a reflection of life, now influences the way people behave. That, instead of films being based upon the lines from real situations, it is the public, which utter extravagant dialogues (learnt from movies) during some of the most crucial moments/matters of their lives. Along with its psychological impact,

Bollywood cinema plays an important part towards changing fashions in the clothes and altering notions about life.

Since it is everywhere, the presence of cinema can also be felt in the art emerging in the last ten years from the countries of South Asia. Cinema has contributed in more than one ways to develop an original, regional style – interestingly without much active involvement of the artists living and working separately in these countries. Mainly because, after the independence of these countries (from British rule, and from each other too – in the case of Bangladesh, which was liberated from Pakistan in 1971), the visual artists from these countries have little or superficial knowledge about whatever is happening in the area. Artists, either trained at the Western art institutions or being inspired from the mainstream European and American art, were more interested in what was taking place beyond the region.

In this scenario, Bollywood, with its complete package of phantasmagoria, forged – without any plans or awareness – some common features in the art from the Subcontinent. In fact films were already being produced in Bombay (since 1913) and art was also practiced in the ateliers and schools, but it was only in the Nineties, that two phenomena, the visual art and cinema – seem to be linked in certain manner. Here one must make a clarification: That the visual art did not have any considerable influence on cinema, certainly not as much as the celluloid has affected the painters' canvases. Understandably, because the movies has moulded every section of our social life, including rituals, wedding ceremonies, language, etc.

Earlier on (before 1990s), one finds a common motif in the art produced in South Asia. It is marked with a dominant 'naïve art'. For a majority of painters, the imagery remained figurative but the vocabulary was derived from the sources such as the folk art, Indian miniature painting, primitive artefacts – and Art Brute. This idiom was suitable to depict local themes, in a mode that resembled the 'meta-historical' art forms, prevalent in the Subcontinent. Several important artists, including K. G. Subramanyan, Jogen Chowdhary, Manjit Bawa, Arpita Singh, Tyeb Mehta and Bhupen Khakhar (India), Qamarul Hasan from Bangladesh, and Tassadaq Sohail, Afshar Malik, Anwar Saeed and many more from Pakistan worked in this manner. Their painterly canvases suggested political themes, social issues as well as personal concerns, yet their visual language, astonishingly was more or less identical.

It was only in the Nineties – and particularly after its second half, that Indian film industry witnessed a domestic boom. Filled till the brim in its native land, it began pouring into homes, shops and offices of its neighbouring countries. Inhabitants of these places, due to similarity in their culture, were able to identify with plots and could grasp the language used in the Indian movies. In that period, Indian movies were widely watched, because of the recently arrived video cassette recorder, which turned out to be a potent means to substitute/replace the state run programmes on TV (for instance in Pakistan). Since public (the silent majority according to Baudrillard) did not have

any say in deciding the content, time, or schedule of the programmes on their national channels, so they switched over to their video players in order to watch whatever they like. Indian movies proved to be a good entertainment for them. Scenes of love, sequences of sex, acts of violence and religious deeds were enough to satisfy the audience. In addition to that, songs – in the middle of narratives – while showing the pair of hero and heroin, running, dancing and cajoling at attractive foreign locations – functioned as a vehicle to transpose the spectators (psychologically – but only for five minutes – duration of the song) to those far way lands, where they can not reach, because they cannot run away from their 'miserable' routine.

After the introduction of video, the movies are now watched on computer, CD and DVD players, across the Subcontinent. These are also shown on cable networks. Now these movies have become such a domestic item, that a new release in Mumbai is simultaneously watched all over the region with its innumerable counterfeit copies. Besides the movies, numerous other (music and film) channels are also seen in the region.

All of these have altered the vision of a generation, which is now active as the new artists – in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The young artists are now engaged in the issues of politics, gender and identity – ideas, which are also explored in the popular cinema – although in a bizarre fashion. If one compares the contemporary art produced in different parts of South Asia, a number of these subjects reoccur in the works of many artists.

The most important among these concerns is the subject of politics. Increase in violence, of all kinds – state, sectarian and racial is tackled in the works of several artists from the region. However in contrast to film, which dealing upon similar topics, presents singularly emotional and sentimental substance/approach, the visual artists tried to express their ideas by using many strategies, such as poetic, metaphoric and formal. Yet their works revolved around the institution of power – and the violence attached to it. These artists (especially belonging to countries, which have withstood years of military dictatorships) like Shishir Bhattacharjee (from Bangladesh), and Jamal Shah, Akram Dost and A. R. Nagori (of Pakistan) addressed the issue of power, but formulated allegorical idioms to depict its presence in our lives and societies.

Despite the socio-political substance, the cinema – if it is watched on a big screen or on TV set – may have caused a major formal characteristic in the contemporary art from the South Asia. It is related to the popularity of representational imagery in paintings and drawings. A number of young artists from South Asia now prefer a realistic imagery. Their canvases are painted like photographs – but not in an academic 'photorealistic' manner. On the contrary, the visual material is treated like the sections of a film sequence. One of its examples was Rashid Rana's work exhibited in 2003 at Lahore. He painted large scale works, looking like the film negatives. The chosen scenes from the popular movies were juxtaposed with other objects to complete a narrative that indicated the secret politics of our desires. Similarly, other artists are also engaged with popular culture, but they are

not overtly concentrating on film imagery. Instead, mere the fact of realistic imagery chosen to express their ideas, link their art to the cinema aesthetics.

But the cinema aesthetics is not limited to the making of a movie in the film studios. It includes the ways in which those movies are viewed by a large public. If the three countries of Subcontinent admire Bollywood movies, yet there is a difference in the scheme of watching these. If shown in theatre halls, the movies are seen as these are prepared by the directors and producers, but if telecasted on cable TV or through the CD and DVD copies, a number of other visuals are superimposed upon the screen. Ads for shampoo, soap, cooking oil and other household items, mutilate the actual frame of movies, yet the public has to see these, since there are not any other options (especially in Pakistan, where Indian movies are banned in cinema theatres). All of these separate schemes of showing the movies have altered the pictorial habits of the painters living in the region. In comparison to earlier canvases, which reflected one picture frame/happening – the new paintings are constructed as a combination of two frames or as an assemblage of (not the materials) visuals/ideas. Thus most of these canvases comprise two or three separate images, painted and composed side by side. In some instances, the smaller forms are painted over large compositions; hence a sense of layered space is achieved.

It was a surprising experience for me to witness in the exhibitions of young artists, whether held in Karachi and Lahore or in New Delhi and Mumbai or in Dhaka, that all of them are shaping an identical visual vocabulary, without being aware of each other's existence or art. The common modus operandi to construct a painting appears to be a combination of contrasting images – sometimes painted on separate surfaces, but displayed as one canvas. This method of fabricating a narrative – with its representational imagery – is not much different to the moving frames on a TV screen, where one image is not blended in the other, but it is seen one after another – and forms a sort of collage in the memory. Likewise, small visuals are superimposed on larger images (a visual feature that is often experienced during the movies played on videos and cable).

Some of the artists, who have been using the sensibility of this kind in present day India, include Atul Dodiya and Jitish Kallat. Atul Dodiya draws his inspiration from the narrative technique of cinema, with an emphasis on its magic-realistic quality. For example in some of his canvases, occasional figure (of the artist) is portrayed as a hero from the movies. Besides the paintings in this way, a number of artists are exploring media and video art, like Nalini Malini, Rummana Hussain, Tejal Shah, Ranbir Kaleka and Sonia Khurrana. Though these 'art video' may not have much connection with the film, but increase in the video (art) can not be disassociated from the popularity of the genre in the masses.

Perhaps, with the inherent links to the cinema in the works of many individuals, two other artists are consciously appropriating the cinema imagery. Indian artist, Pushpamala, was trained as a sculptor in Baroda, but later chose to work in the photography. She photographs herself posing as

different characters in the movies. Her work is a comment on cinema being a mirror to society as well as a continuation of the habit of identifying with the desirable roles from the silver screen. Yet her photographs suggest quirkiness, due to their peculiar 'sentimental' postures, low tech appearance – black and white prints, which are tinted by local shopkeepers/photographers. The other artist, Rashid Rana, from Pakistan has selected a wide variety of Indian film clips to construct his large scale digital prints. Tiny pictures from famous movies, once joined communicate another – often paradoxical, yet logically connected – image. For example in one work, the scene from cult movies, are connected to create the view of Pakistanis celebrating their national day around a huge national flag. Similarly, in other works, pictures of local boys serve to formulate large portraits of three Bollywood heroes. These works, on the surface may appear to be made of contradictory material, but in reality, these subscribe to the deeply embedded relationship of a public, which is in love with the movies manufactured in its neighbouring (rival) country. Thus Rana's work probes the ideas of national pride, patriotism and the cultural boundaries. But more than that, his art, like Pushpamala's, signifies the strong influence of Indian cinema in the lives of people across the borders in South Asia.

If the films have become a common source for the creative individuals of our countries, these are modifying the verbal expressions in our societies. Lately, the colloquial tongue of Mumbai's lower classes, the language of most of these movies, is now spoken like a fashion in several parts of South Asia. This language, termed as 'tapuri'(paupers') can be heard on TV advertisements, in the educational institutes and in theatre plays – a recent phenomenon, which may be a symbolic representation of the similarity already evident in the visual arts from the South Asia, Indian Subcontinent, Al-Hind – etc!

(printed in the catalogue for an exhibition in Berlin, 2005)

Quddus Mirza