

ENCOUNTER

Paintings and Installations by Veer Munshi

by Geeti Sen

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home; its essential sadness can never be surmounted.

-- Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 2001, p. 173.

Exile can become a state of mind: a divide between person and place. For some such as Veer Munshi, exile has been caused by political compulsions, when no options were left for him but to flee the territory. Recreating that place left behind becomes obsessive, to regain a sense of lost territory and an identity lost. Relocated elsewhere, he revisits again and again that paradise lost until it becomes a habitual refuge ... But then that 'rift' between the self and home becomes the means to recreate anew, a world that breaks all boundaries of place and time.

Gradually, and it is an evolution over years – that sense of loss expands beyond the personal — to understand that alienation is a universal condition of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is not just Kashmir but it is Afghanistan, Palestine, Bosnia, Bangladesh, Iraq that equally have suffered displacement, dislocation, migration. As Edward Said comments in his seminal essay, this is the age of the refugee, of mass migrations on a scale that bears no comparison in human history.

Veer Munshi's recent paintings live today in this "extra territorial space". They have moved on from his earlier compositions which revived

vivid memories of figures gaunt and anguished, assassinations, intrigues, corpses, cities burning. His present body of work tends to be less close in both time and space to Kashmir than his paintings from the early 1990s – they are now ‘abstracted’ from a deeper conviction. Yet that divide between self and identity and place is manifestly evident in his works: in the very manner in which he actually divides his canvases into diptychs, where he introduces an arbitrary partition of space; in his self portraits of a solitary, somber figure, brooding at times, branded with different, conflicting identities; in his double figures who are identical and yet branded with defined roles, in different countries which are separated by boundaries...

II

He suggests that three key words form his essential vocabulary in the present exhibition: division/ partition/ migration. The first is ideological, the second territorial, the third is the impact on millions who suffer the consequences. These are integrated so that one image leads into the next. Division is that of ideology, belief and identity, which divides communities. Partition is the consequence of this division – and it can happen in the Indian subcontinent as also in other parts of the world – depicted through a strip of land or water which separates people on two sides of the border. Migration is the fallout of partition, when refugees move across borders – not only from India and India and Bangladesh but from Palestine, from Iran and Iraq.

If we were to examine how these words transpose into images, we may begin with the diptych titled *Encounter*. Two male figures stand stiffly side by side, their backs to the viewer. The stark contrast between them states the obvious: the ‘common man’ on the left side stands naked, defenceless and vulnerable, shielding himself by holding behind him a small drawing with the lakes and hills of Kashmir. To his right is a militia man in camouflaged uniform, armed with his rifle on his shoulder.

The naked man – with a physiognomy bearing an unmistakable resemblance to the artist himself – belongs to the valley; while the militia man to the right is the outsider brought in to control the valley. They are rendered together, sharing the ‘ground’ and territory that is Kashmir. Standing side by side, they represent the violation of denying a people their freedom. This territory is made explicit by the lake and mountains of Srinagar appearing in the background – which simulates precisely the

landscape in the drawing – except that the mountains and lake are now stained blood red while in the picture they are painted an ethereal blue.. For the common man, this landscape has become a poignant memory of that paradise that once existed...

The affinities here with an earlier painting by the artist – among his earliest political statements -- brings emphasis to the terrain. Early in the 1990s he had painted the haunting image, eight feet in height, titled *Terrorist on Floating Land*. A naked man made anonymous with his face masked in white, stands with a rifle on a small piece of turf – against the lake and mountains which are stained red as also in this canvas. He stands alone in/against the world which is red with blood, on a small piece of floating land which holds out its own meaning of nebulous territory – the land that is being fought over, the land over which men stake their lives. As Munshi explained,

In the valley we live on floating land... There are lakes everywhere, with the land moving slowly.. At night you can steal a little bit of this floating soil, and attach it to your own property... It happens all the time. I use this reference as a metaphor for terrorists.

What is different with the *Encounter* is equally significant. While the terrorist stands naked and unashamed to confront us, these men face the reverse direction and not the viewer. When asked about their disturbing reversal in direction, Veer Munshi replies:

This is because they are facing that place. They are not here – they are there .. Once they face the viewer, then they would be here in the present. Looking the other way they take you to that land, that space.”

Here in the first instance we experience the *crossover*, both in time and in place. It is not the 'here' but the 'there', not the present but the past which engages Munshi in this work; and so he takes us to that 'extra territorial' space within the canvas.

Fathers of the Nation repeats this schema of a diptych, with two men standing to face the reverse direction of green valleys and mountains. Remarkably, they are identical in physique; they could be the same man repeated, and they stand on common ground – but they are divided by ideology. One holds the large poster stamp of Gandhi, the other of Jinnah. They may share the same histories, the same rivers and landscape, they are shaped by the same environment and cultural sensibilities; but their identities have been defined, or rather 'stamped' with the nation. That is the divide -- created not by them but by the founding fathers of two countries.

III

That divide in ideology, in Munshi's worldview, leads to Partition: to the creation of countries and boundaries all over the world. No time has witnessed the repercussions of this more acutely than with the resurgence of militant nationalism in the twentieth century. The idea/image lends itself to powerful representation in three canvases which Munshi titles *Eye to Eye*, *Dialogue* and *Gandhi versus Gandhi*. The artist comments, "only the division (with Partition) makes you different. It also gifts you a different ideology". He experimented with several images until he arrived at the familiar sign of the river: the river that traverses across countries, the river that evokes nostalgia of past memories, the river which witnessed the movement of millions moving over from Pakistan into India and vice versa, from Bangladesh, from Palestine.. For him "the river is a metaphor for territorial division".

Partition, the geo-politics of national identity, is depicted through a strip of water which separates people on two sides of the border. Two rugged men who are identical in physique but in reversed positions crouch on either side of this divide, facing each other in *Eye to Eye*; while aggressive hunting dogs confront each other in *Dialogue*. Impending conflict is made explicit when animals and bestial humans confront each other, across the somber colors of muddy brown and blue-green rivers – in the case of *Gandhi versus Gandhi* the river is red with blood.

The familiar iconic image of Gandhi is like a blue-print photo reversed, to suggest his presence on both sides of the border, his pain accentuated by the red river of ensuing bloodshed. In Munshi's opinion Gandhi "was the one person who did not want Partition". History endorses this view, as do also visual archives from the time. Homai Vyarawalla, the veteran photo journalist who witnessed (and photographed) the nation in making and in transition from the 1940s and '50s, has commented that after the Partition Gandhi ceased to appear in public ceremonial functions.

Titles convey the irony of political rhetoric of the *Dialogue* across countries and borders. Munshi inscribes words across the large canvas of *Dialogue* with the familiar refrain of *karavan-e-aman*: the historic publicized event to mark fifty years after Partition when the bus traveled across the borders from Srinagar to Muzaffarabad, taking families to meet their families whom they had not seen for decades. Across two sides of this divide by the river, he adds a warning to this new-found resolution by the politicians: *Karavan-e-aman, counter insurgency on the soil of south east asia prevails.*

IV

Now he focuses attention on a phenomenon which has become an every day experience, occurring every month and year and in every part of the world.. This is a malaise threatening the ordinary citizen, from Bali, Baghdad, Colombo, Mumbai, Delhi, Jammu, Srinagar, Lebanon, and affecting equally the cities of Madrid, London, New York city, Washington D.C. None of these cities have been spared the terrifying ordeal of bomb blasts on trains and buses, cars and jeeps blown apart, of human limbs shredded into fragments.

Among the largest canvases in his present exhibition, six titled *Shrapnels* present the fallout of bomb blasts. Once more as in his series on partition suggested by the metaphor of the river, Munshi deploys a single motif to create that sense of despair and dehumanization which prevails when these blasts take place. Nothing conveys this more aptly than the fragments of iron and steel blown out from cars and trains, lying around dismembered.. What we see are not cars and jeeps but their naked armatures like skeletons, clawing the air - black, strange monstrous forms that can no longer be recognized...

The genesis for these raw images may be his own experience, sitting quietly in a teashop when a bomb blast had sent vehicles and people flying in different directions. Newspaper images provide the image of a jeep or a train twisted out of shape. More obscurely, several books on the mechanical inventions by Leonardo da Vinci have fascinated the artist – now they provide source material for his ‘reinventions’ of machinery. “Every image has to be a new image, though the thought process may continue to be the same”.

A child is running in panic against a background of vehicles distorted out of shape. This could have happened in Baghdad as Munshi comments, and the original image may be from a newspaper. A head in a corner reflects on the devastation which lies around, a single tennis shoe is left behind among more ruins of iron scraps, a piercing cry rents the air of a boy terrified by the wreckage around him... When steel and iron machinery are shattered into fragments and juxtaposed against human bodies, the point is brought home: human lives matter more than these man-made vehicles and instruments of destruction.

How has this paranoia come about, to invite such urgent attention ? Insurgency, alienation, terrorist activities that hold countries to ransom.. It was only last Monday that the front page of the newspapers carried another bomb threat in the capital of Delhi, with India Gate cordoned off and surrounded by police forces. Veer Munshi’s large canvas with India Gate with guards and planes circling over the monument is titled *Guarding the Nation*. It was conceived and painted three months earlier and is strangely identical – as a prophetic forecast to this episode.

Yet he returns us again and again to his point of departure for experiencing this state of mind. Three of his installations introduce the *shikara*: perhaps the most loaded metaphor for Kashmir, evoking both the idyllic paradise from the past as well as that of the boat crossing the river, transporting us into the present – or transporting us across the shores to death and beyond.

Most aptly then, he presents *Burial* with the shikara upturned to face down, to resemble a coffin crowned with yellow flowers. Below he depicts himself in two registers with the same image repeated like a passport photo – but with each image Munshi is branded with different identities. As the labels define him, he is *exiled, displaced, a migrant, a refugee, seeking shelter*. At the same time, the labels suggest that he could be considered a *secessionist, an extremist, a terrorist, a militant* and/or a *fundamentalist*. These multiple labels of different roles lead us to consider the dilemma of definitions as they implicate the person and affect his own self-esteem, his future.. We are compelled to consider the possibilities: is Munshi likely to be one or many, or any of these definitions ?

Gunboat and Missiles of Faith introduce the *shikara* again, but without the autobiographical footnote. The upturned *shikara* is now blackened instead of white, adorned with innumerable small accretions that resemble shrines – be it temples or mosques. If that were not sufficient, the belly of the boat rains down with vengeance instruments that are perpendicular and forked, reflected in the glass sheet below. They look strangely like iron implements of torture – but they are suddenly recognized to be ritual objects of worship! When these exquisite ritual forms are transformed into an army of ugly missiles, religion is implicated in the ensuing conflicts.

And when the boat is finally hung up and laid to rest, it is not a poetic evocation of the lakes and valleys. The body of the *shikara* is now adorned with the single steely profile of the AK 47 – its habitual presence is dominant and all-pervasive in the valley.

Memory is tenacious – it plays a fascinating role in intensifying experiences from the past. Even as he envisages the world beyond, the valley remains central to Veer Munshi's vision – it now becomes a mythical archetype of that paradise lost. *Mood of the Valley* conveys this nostalgia for the world to be made 'whole' again – ruled now by guns

and the military forces. To evoke this he creates a huge circular drum, eight feet in diameter and twenty-seven feet in its circumference. This entire circumference imparts a hallucinating vision of soft limpid colours, imprinted with sensuous lotus leaves floating on the lakes... Above on the surface of the drum he positions an army of black military helmets – ironically they are similar to these curving leaves but so different in intent.

By juxtaposing these forms That divide, that frontier between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is “the perilous territory of not-belonging.” This is the territory of mass migrations, displaced persons without shelter, refugee camps, and intense alienation. Munshi reflects that it is not people alone who migrate but birds and animals; but their migration is voluntary, not compelled by historical and political events. His second installation of

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Kashmir becomes, and represents a state of mind. He notes that while the experience isolates you on a personal level , “when another migration takes place, it connects you to earlier migrations..” In realizing this, in relating to other situations beyond Kashmir, he transcends his own dilemma of identity.

These canvases are six feet across and some times larger – vast in dimensions and in their implications. The geo-politics of the twentieth century have led Veer Munshi to transcend his own tragedy, to confront and share the predicament of people across the world. When Edward Said concludes his essay on exiles, it would seem to apply to Munshi’s present work:

Exiles cross boundaries

break barriers

of thought and experienc