

Socio-Politically Conscious Artists of Pakistan (1980's and 1990's)

“Art in Pakistan”

BFA-IV (Visual Arts)

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Introduction

- In the words of renowned art critic Quddus Mirza:
 - Politics has affected every area of life including the world of creative expressions, especially the fields that employ words like literature, theatre and film etc. Politics also impacts visual arts. Historically, painting, sculpture and other representational forms were used to convey messages to the masses: about divine kingdom, ruler's power or to invoke revolutionary sentiments. It was presumed that folks unable to access the written language could understand narrative told through images better. Till the recent past, art served as a tool to motivate people towards a higher cause. However artists as sensitive people do reflect on the currents of their times. They may be least interested in politics, but if they are investigating reality they are bound to be political. They may stay away from political matters all their lives, still one discovers social and political content in their work, much relevant and daring than those who actively pursue a cause.
 - In Pakistan, too, political content can be found in artworks by artists that belong to a political group or support a cause. Artist Ijaz ul Hassan, who has worked with trade unions and contested elections as a PPP candidate, engages with local and international political situations in his art. His detention in the Lahore fort during Zia ul Haq's times led him to formulate a pictorial language endowed with metaphors of windows and overpowering/surviving plants.

Introduction

- A number of other Pakistani artists have struggled against the suppression of women, ethnic groups and class through their art. Salima Hashmi drew nude female figures in the era of Zia. Another work addressed the massacre at Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila by Israeli military in 1982. Likewise, A.R. Nagori challenged religious and military bigotry in his paintings. A legacy that is visible in the works of Jamal Shah and Akram Dost Baloch, though a bit muted. Some contemporary artists engage with politics as the subject matter but due to the blurred ideologies of our times prefer indirect idioms.
- *The 11 years of General Zia's theocratic-authoritarian regime (1977–1988) was one of the darkest periods of Pakistan's artistic history. The whole society was reconstructed and modified into General Zia's own Islamic interpretation. It was the time of complete censorship and Pakistan went through rigid and extreme religious and political change. The censorship of the government was based mainly on moral issues and curbing of female rights. General Zia ul Haq followed strict policies of censorship in the visual and performing arts. Every kind of art that referred to any kind of political or social issue was censored. Works of artists that had political undertones with themes such as female oppression, religious fundamentalism or dictatorship were banned from state sponsored exhibitions. General Zia's regime rooted in "religious extremism" had inherent distaste for any kind of figurative and sculptural art and it was strongly discouraged by the state (said Saima Hashmi).*

Salima Hashmi (b. 1942)



Salima Hashmi (b. 1942)

- Salima Hashmi is a multi-faceted personality. A painter by vocation, she has achieved recognition for being progressive in terms of techniques and materials. In more ways than one, she succeeded in establishing herself as one of the leaders of Pakistan's modern art in the period, which could be described as Post-Shakir Ali.
- In 1977, Martial Law was imposed by Zia-ul-Haq and as a result, struggle for the revival of democracy ensued. The art scene at that time on one hand reflected the beauty of landscape, man and his socio-religious beliefs and on the other resisted the dictatorial laws which were the very anti-thesis of beauty and creativity. Being the daughter of Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Alys, Salima was one of those who fought against laws, which impinged on women's rights and democratic rights of people. She and likeminded artists of the time created a socio-politically conscious art, which may have on occasions been abstract in form but was expressionistic and communicative at the same time.
- Salima Hashmi, Former Principal of the prestigious National College of Arts, was born in 1942 in a house where literature, music and art were part of everyday life. Paintings were always there, and so was music. Writers, poets and intellectuals used to visit us frequently, due to which a constant feeling of creative activity was there. Also there were other things as well, which she saw as a young child and which left a deep impression, such as her father going to prison. She said: "*I think it had such an impact on my personality that I became a shy introvert*".

Salima Hashmi (b. 1942)

- In those early years of her life, she remembers art was taken for granted. Her mother used to provide her art materials, she remembers her mother always provided her with art materials whenever she needed. Paint-box, crayons and books were her favorite things. The environment of her home encouraged creativity. Her mother led her towards painting and designing, rather than pursuing a subject of political science. Her father's friendship with Professor Sponenberg also encouraged her to join National College of Arts.
- In the words of Salima Hashmi: “Art has been my only source of expression; I have been involved in performing arts. I was an extremely shy person and perhaps acting provided me with a vehicle for pretending to be some body else, and still expressing myself through it. Even as a small child I played with puppets, which my English grandmother sent us. Puppets continued to be a passion in later years, when I went to television and used them to put across ideas for children as well as adults. So performing arts whether it was theatre, television or puppetry , have all been forms of expression for me. I think, teaching too, if done creatively, is a form of expression”
- Salima Hashmi was nurtured in a creative atmosphere, where her father Faiz Ahmed Faiz along with his close friends left strong influence on her, these includes Patra Bukhari, Maulana Chirag Hasan Hasrat etc. Her mother too influenced her, who was straight forward and pragmatic and passed these traits of her personality to her daughters as well.

Salima Hashmi (b. 1942)

- She said: “*What I have learnt from my mother is to work hard to survive. My father was also very hard working, and remained so all his life. Work was something essential. Never in my life have I identified being artistic or creative with being relaxed; it always had to do with inner discipline. Inspirations and influences were political as well as artistic. Major events in the sub-continent, such as the Partition, my father going to prison, the Martial Laws, separation of East Pakistan, all influenced my work but most of all the eleven tragic-years of Zia-ul-Haq’s regime did a huge influence*”.
- For Salima Hashmi, there was never a question of art for art’s sake in her work. There’s always been a purpose, whether it was performing arts or visual arts. For her communication is the name of the game.
- She went to England for higher studies, and that span of creative enhancement provided her a chance to learn other techniques, mediums and materials to incorporate in her visual practice. She learnt photography as well as painting and filmmaking. Study in abroad was a luxury for her. Being there she remained in touch with what ever was going on at home. After returning home, she got married. She took part in some group shows and in 1983, she had her first solo show. She recalled in an interview: “*I was banned from Television in Zia-ul-Haq’s time, I went back to painting. Those were eleven very hard years, the darkest era of my life and it changed me in more ways than I can comprehend. It altered my collective way of thinking, feeling, seeing and did so very deeply. Whatever happened in the country has always reflected in my work. I did a series of works called ‘Sohni Dharti’. The title was supposed to be ironic. It was about tearing apart, tearing ourselves apart*”.

Salima Hashmi (b. 1942)

- Influence of her father's work was deep on her personality as well as in her work. Like Faiz Ahmed Faiz, she recorded her time, and like him she never did with anger. Even when anger is there, it's camouflaged. In her words: *"My work is lyrical and I like to think that I got that strain from my father. I am attached to beauty and I am attached to all the elements that make a work of art beautiful, whether its line or color, tone or texture. Other than that, I suppose, the basic influence is allusion to humanism, and that too comes from my father. In one series of paintings my father directly influenced me; it was the work which I did in the 80's and in which I used the symbolism of prison bars. My husband had been jailed during Zia-ul-Haq's period, and then my father's 'prison's poetry' became all the more alive. Also I was very close to the Palestinian revolution, and visiting my father in Beirut, witnessing the massacre at Shatila and Sabra refugee camps had a profound effect. This experience reinforced me to do a sordid series of paintings called Shatila Mornings. Many years later, I did another series called Dastey Tahey Sung which again is one of my father's titles from one of his anthologies which he in turn, of course, has borrowed from Ghalib. It had to do with one's commitment: the fact that one's hand is under the stone and you cannot remove it because that is your commitment. Later in the 90's, I did a series called Dairy of a Terrorist, which had a lot to do with my childhood, using photographs, including those of my father. It also was partly based on the tragic events happening in Karachi. The series looks at the cycle of life and at how today's terrorist can be tomorrow's hero. So definitely my father's poetry has had a very strong influence over my work"*.

Salima Hashmi (b. 1942)

- Analyzing her works, it has been observed that in her early years in the 60's, she was interested in the formal aspects of painting. She enjoyed working on still life, techniques, employed glassing, under-painting, textures, the contrast between thin paint and thin paint line, allowing it to drip down so that one can feel its flow. Whereas, later on, content became primary and the technical aspects were subject to the extent that she felt was more important for the painting to be real in the context of what was happening around her rather than just enjoying its colors or its lines.
- She shared her perception about painting, by saying: "*I think painting issues of today have to do with seriousness of purpose and a commitment to the meaning of what one is doing. It involved the realization of the kind of society that we're living in, the requirements of material and medium, a commitment to exploring medium and material in every aspect. It needs a commitment to really understand the world around oneself; both in terms of its physical structure and also with an attempt to understand its inner order and its inner meaning. Because, after all, if art has to be true, it has to be a reflection of what our life is about*".
- Its very important for an artist to construct a vocabulary, which takes note of our history which requires an immense amount of search, of thoughtfulness and tremendous hard work. In the works of Salima Hashmi, certain symbols played important role in expressing the underlying meaning of the vocabulary used. Representation of **hands** played important role, which were used in different ways. They have a physical feeling, a symbol of searching, a symbol of pain and also a symbol of protest. **Clouds** were also used a lot, both as moving images of promise and of turbulence. They are windows in her work, both as ways of looking inside herself and as means of looking outside.

Salima Hashmi (b. 1942)

- She used clouds as symbols of escape and of hope too, in search of finding a way out when there's none. She has used the symbol of **doors** in exactly the same way, however, they are also used as a symbol of a passage in times of struggle.
- Some of the works Salima Hashmi did in the 80's were about female form. There she used nude female form as a symbol of protest. This work was very much with reference to the laws against women during Zia's time. In her words: "the women's demonstration, police action against the MRD and so on, my work has always shown the nameless, faceless female form, which is protesting and showing up the hypocrisy in society. In Sisters of the Third World this form is used for protest and also to demonstrate strength."

Year of the Drought by Salima Hashmi (1980)



Freedom by Salima Hashmi (1994)



Inner Landscape by Salima Hashmi



Absent Gods by Salima Hashmi



Untitled by Salima Hashmi



Untitled by Salima Hashmi



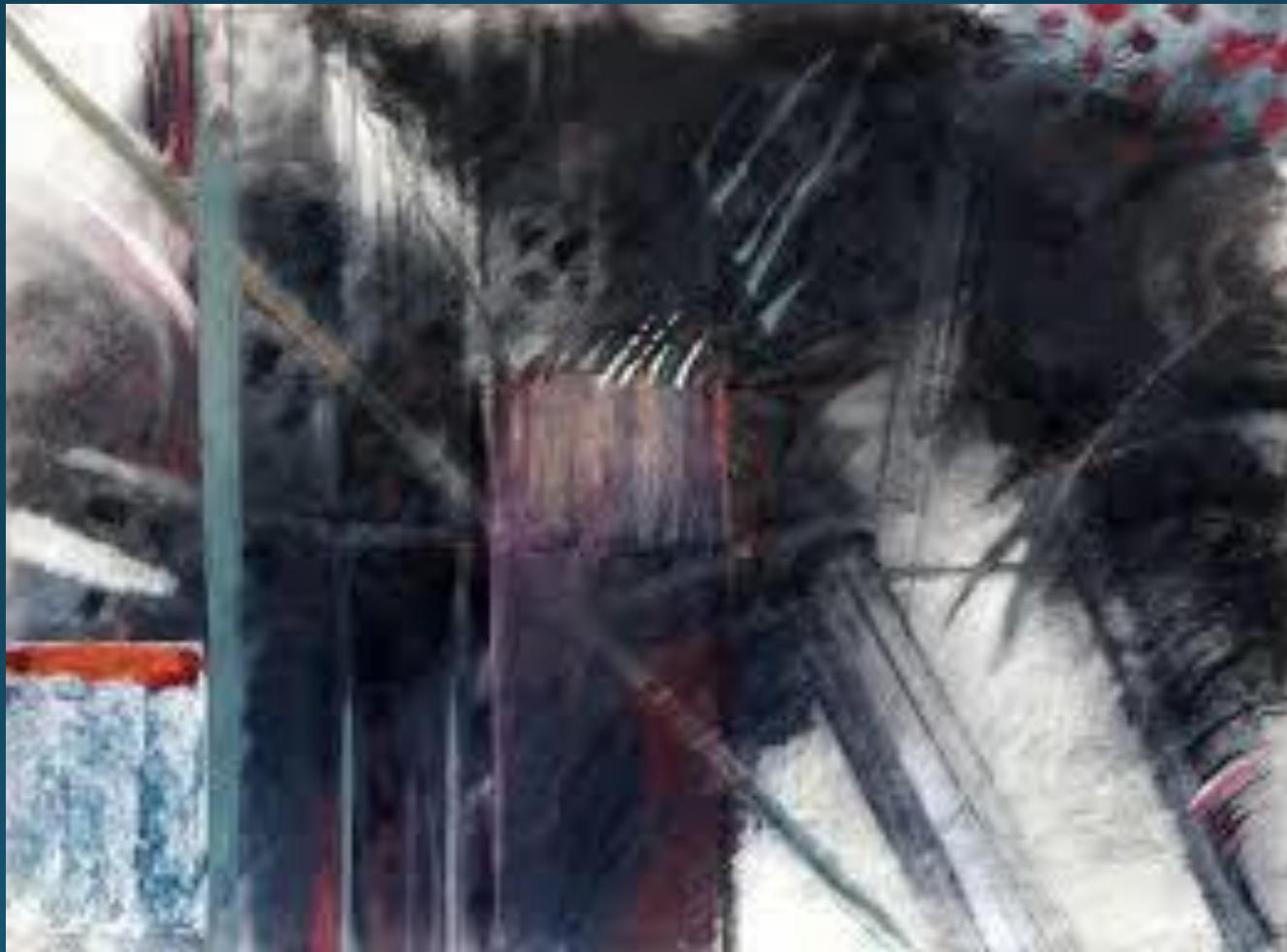
Untitled by Salima Hashmi



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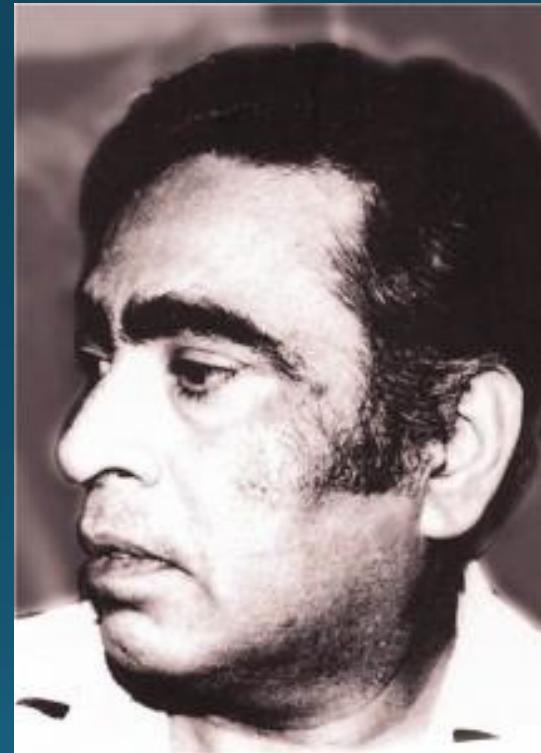
Title Unknown by Salima Hashmi



Untitled by Salima Hashmi



A R Nagori (1938-2011)



A. R. Nagori (1938-2011)

- Born in 1938, Abdur Rehman Nagori was an artist, art educationist, a writer and an activist. He was honored with President's Pride of Performance Award announced on 14th August, 2010.
- Known as A R Nagori, his life seems to be full of adventures. In his childhood, Nagori attended an array of cultural, religious and social events in his neighborhood. While learning Quran at a madrassah, and English by a retired Hindu magistrate his mind from an early age was engaged in an intellectual and philosophical discourse questioning the norms. Through his works and words, he would have had the audacity to challenge artists and politicians about failing social and economic conditions of his country.
- His fate, to cross paths with an array of high ranked artists and intellectuals of all times, brings him to Lahore in early 60's where he would study under eminent art educationists and artists like Anna Molka, Khalid Iqbal and would spent time in the company of Nasim Hafeez Qazi, Colin David, Shakir Ali, Shemza, Murtaza Bashir, Safdar Mir, Sufi Tabbassum, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Dr Niaz Ahmed, Moeen Najmi and many more.
- After completing master's in fine arts from University of the Punjab in 1965 Nagori joined his alma mater as a Lecturer where he served for a year leaving for Kohat as a head of Fine Arts Department of Cadet College. But his energy would not let him stay on one place as he was a man of great vision. Working for Air Force as an education officer till 1970 he became the founder head of University of Sindh, Jamshoro.

A. R. Nagori (1938-2011)

- In the words of Amina Cheema, an artist, art critic and art educationist: “*A R Nagori belongs to that generation who has witnessed not only the golden period of art in Pakistan but had also lived through the tumultuous times of 70's and 80's. During that period all sorts of artistic activity and freedom of expression was curbed to which Nagori always rebelled. He had also been associated with journalists and lawyers for their move for justice*”.
- With an enthusiasm of a child he would paint his canvases to protest the social injustice. His colorful palette was criticized for not being in-synced with his themes to which he responded in a manner of utmost decency that the work without aesthetics is pointless. With a mind of conscientious nature, he warned the society about the social injustice, economic disparity and political failings as said by Marjorie Hussain (an art critic). His courage to speak the truth is evident throughout his artistic oeuvre.
- By his friends, colleagues, students and followers he is repeatedly mentioned as an activist and a free-spirited person. Protest was in his blood. Expressing most pressed upon issues on politics, society and economy with the help of common vocabulary, Nagori talked not only about the plight of men but also spoke about the unjust treatment faced by the women of his society. Whether it is an early commission work of 1965 on war paintings or his later reflections upon the crisis of urban and rural Sindh, he favored deep content keeping views that art must serve a purpose.

A. R. Nagori (1938-2011)

- The first anti-militarism and violence exhibition Pakistan had ever seen was of Nagori's works in 1982. This was censored and then banned by the martial law regime. In 1983 then, Nagori held an anti-martial law exhibition which was sponsored by the Pakistan Union of Journalists. Every subsequent exhibition too was anti-establishment. His life-long fight against what he saw as injustice was due to his acute sensitivity to the suffering and misery of others.
- His most poignant exhibition took place in 1986 where he exposed 62 different national events which shook the conscience of the nation, and in 1988, in a series of 40 paintings he created new symbols of an alphabet based on bomb blasts, crime, dacoities, guns, heroin, Ojhri, the kalashinkov, rape – the horrors of preceding years.
- His palette has also been ascribed to his early exposure to nature; the colors speaking of the Gul Mohar, Amaltas, Keshudi and Flame of the Forest, all of which grew in his house.
- Even at times when direct socio-political imagery in art was neither appreciated nor acceptable, AR Nagori can be rightly termed as the pioneer socio-political artist in Pakistan. His paintings depicted the atrocities of the dictatorial government of General Zia and its religious bias against minorities and women. He was not intimidated by censorship or worldly prestige and his art exhibitions were usually raided and sealed.

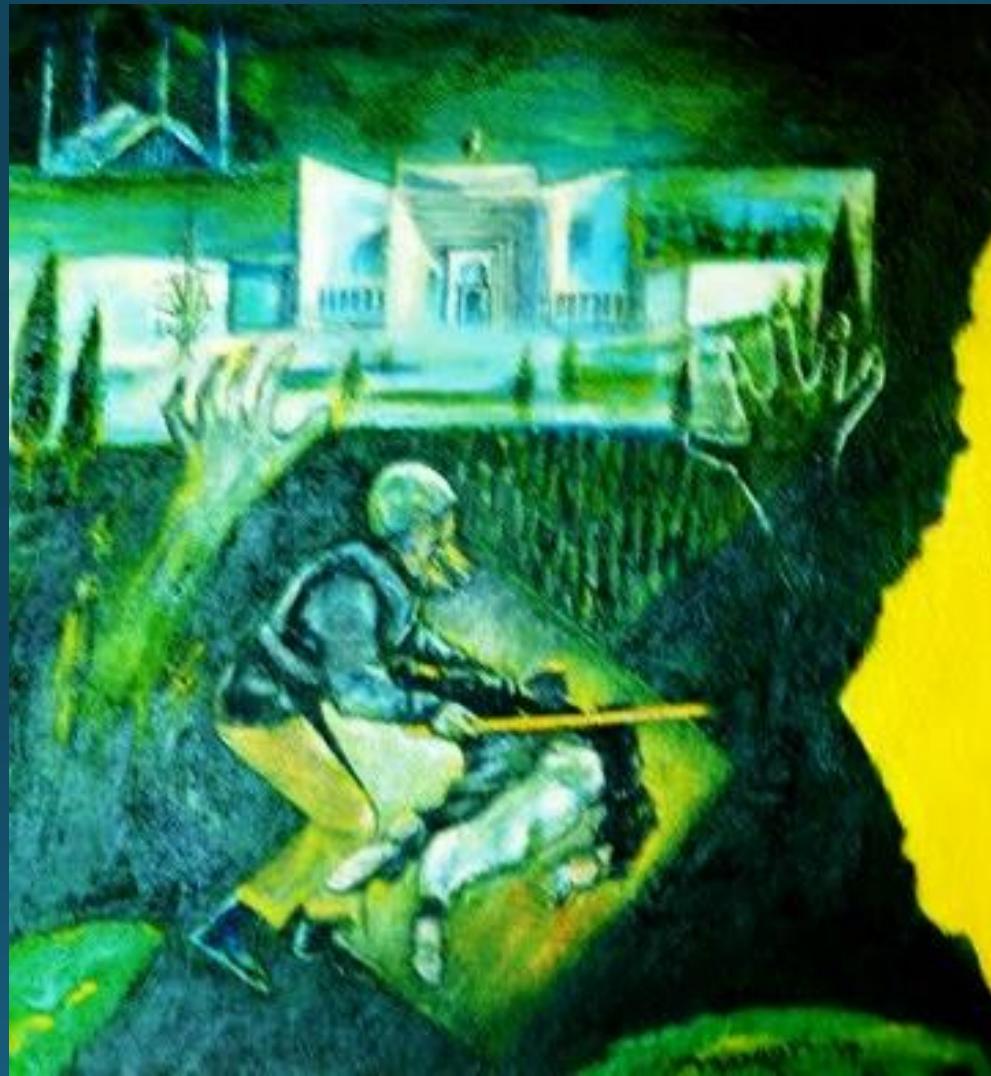
A. R. Nagori (1938-2011)

- His most powerful painting Tower of Power (1985) reflects the political drama of the 1980's. Painted against rich red background, signifying violence, the painting is treated in flat colors in which he describes the distribution of power in the society in his usual witty visual style. It is a satirical statement on Pakistan's hierarchical control. In it, the military is positioned wearing a cap of American influence. At the bottom, the common people are ridden over rough shod by bureaucrats, who profit from the clergy and collusion with the forces at the top (said Marcella Nesom Sirhandi)

King of Clubs by A.R. Nagori (1984)



Supreme Sacrifice by A.R. Nagori (1980's)



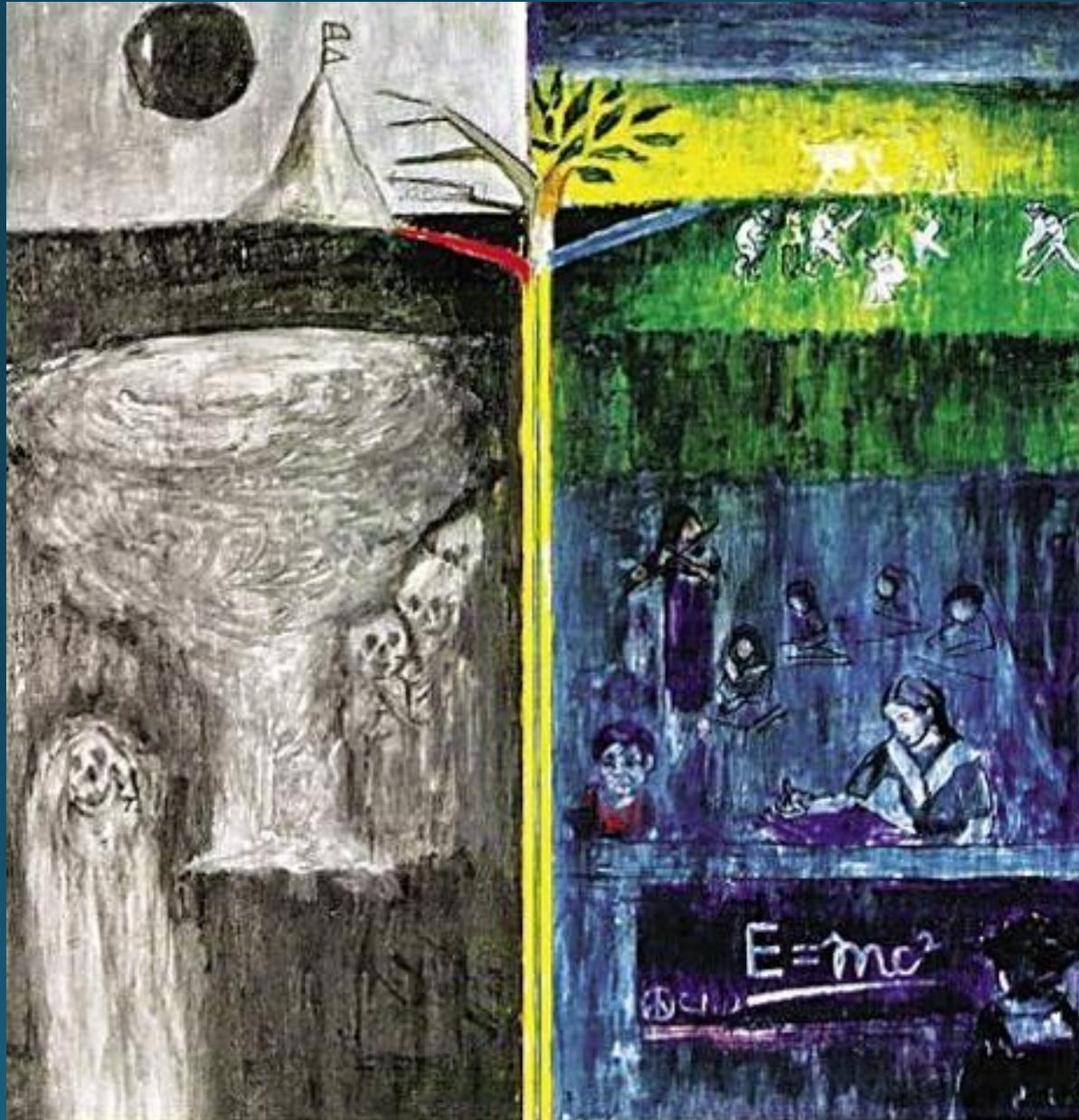
Tower of Power by A.R. Nagori (1980's)



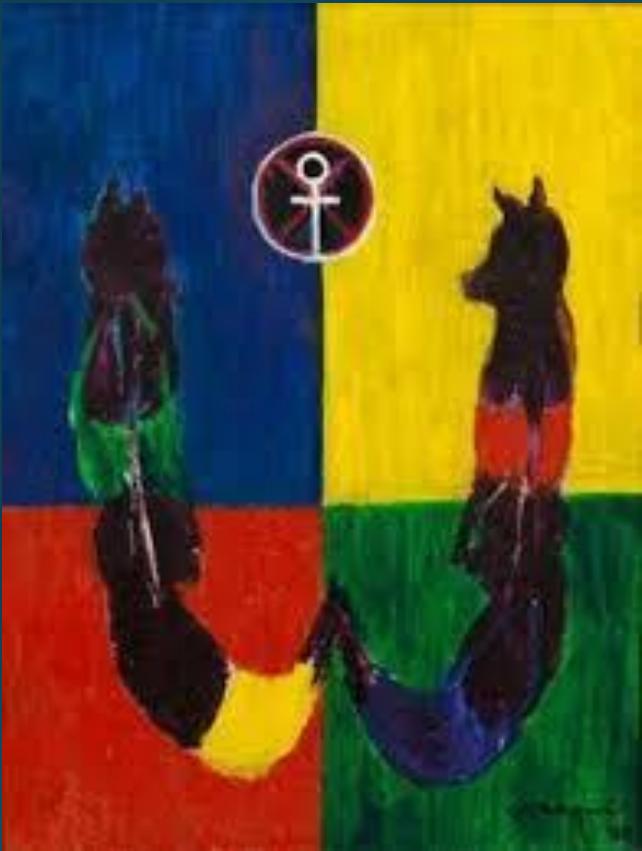
Untitled by A.R. Nagori (1983)



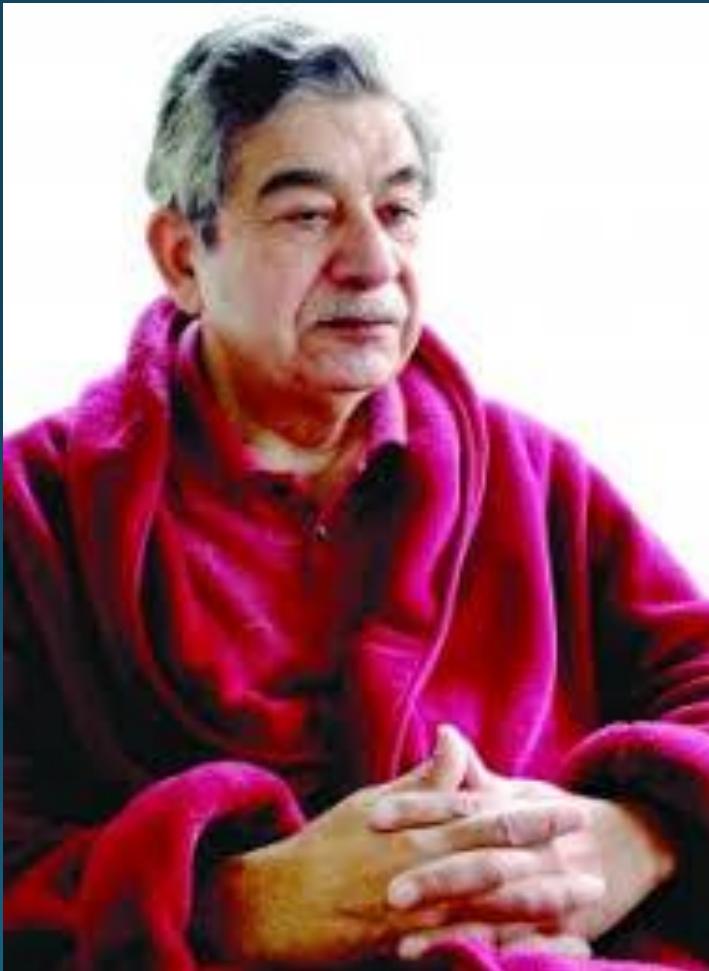
War and Peace by A.R. Nagori



W for War (on left) and Z for Zindabad (on right) by A.R. Nagori



Mian Ijaz ul Hassan (b. 1940)



Mian Ijaz ul Hassan (b. 1940)

- Mian Ijaz ul Hassan is a reputed Pakistani painter, art critic, political activist and a writer.
- Being a painter he always worked against the grain, generating massive controversies in the process. As a critic pointed out, “Ijaz-ul-Hassan has dared to go where no one with his sophistication has gone before.” His outstanding talent as an artist has, however, secured him a place at the forefront of Pakistani painting for nearly half a century.
- Ijaz-ul-Hassan was born in 1940. His early education culminated in a period of tenure at Aitchison College followed by a stint at Saint Martin’s School of Art, London. As a mature student, he enrolled at Government College, Lahore, reading English Literature, before transferring in 1964 to St John’s College, Cambridge.
- He studied painting at Fine Arts Department, Punjab University and St. Martins School of Art, London. He is a recipient of the Presidents Award for Pride of Performance, the highest national award in the field of art.
- Ijaz ul Hassan is one of the leaders of a group of painters who identify themselves with their surroundings. His work of the seventies established a new trend in Pakistan Paintings. In the early period, he employed popular images clipped from print media, posters and cinema hoardings. Later, these were used to express larger social concerns. Ijaz not merely painted, but lived the times for which he was on several occasions apprehended and incarcerated. Many of the works of the period were censored and removed from exhibitions.

Mian Ijaz ul Hassan (b. 1940)

- He said: “*Never for a moment did I think that I could not paint*”.
- In 1977 during Gen. Zia ul Haq’s Martial Law, Ijaz ul Hassan was one of the first activists to be arrested and put in solitary confinement at the infamous Lahore Fort. During this period, when every form of dissent was crushed, Ijaz tried to have his thoughts and feelings known to the viewers with images and symbols; many derived from nature.
- One of the images established was that of a window through which you look from lonely confinement to sunny prospects. This image he evolved peering through the bars of his cell in which he was incarcerated at *Naukhar*. He also launched a series of paintings based on a vine girdling a tree. The entwining vine conveyed the feeling of togetherness and fulfillment. In a different vein, his paintings flaunting lilies and other natural elements express manifold ideas and feelings ranging from pain to joy, according to his speculative frame of mind at the given time.
- In the words of Ijaz-ul-Hassan: “*I've only been able to paint what has moved me, what has, somehow, gripped my soul and my imagination. I don't paint the servitude and wretchedness of people; instead, I paint their inherent strength – the invincibility of common resolve and individual endeavor. Look at the agonized form of 'keekar' (acacia) tree that I paint! Nobody pampers the acacia; no one waters it. Look at its remarkable resilience. Where there's a branch today, there'd be a multitude tomorrow. To me, acacia is a symbol of the agony and the ecstasy of the common man*”.

Mian Ijaz ul Hassan (b. 1940)

- Ijaz ul Hassan said: “*I have never forced images upon any subject; instead, they evolve from it. One has the luxury of describing one's feelings in words in literature but in painting, one has to assemble them in such a manner that in one go, they are all transmitted. In other words, a painter's task is much more complicated than a writer's. I have made paintings like ‘Lilies in Rain’, ‘Lilies at Night’ where lily stood for a fragile being striving to survive in a hostile environment or for an endangered creature afraid of darkness, and so on. Then I began to see ‘rain’ as a blessing*”.
- In the Zia era when he could not express my thoughts and feeling freely he resorted to the use of symbols and metaphors to convey his intentions.
- Ijaz ul Hassan takes special care to seek out trees that have matured and acquired striking individual identities. Most of these images symbolize human struggle and growth. He also takes pain to record the phenomenon of life and death; things coming into being and others perishing into oblivion; somber prospects being suddenly invaded by sun shine, silhouetted leaves ignited and dark lilies set ablaze by stray rays of light; a Laburnum transforming from a specter of death in winter to miracle of life. Ijaz is thrilled to draw strength from the regenerating force of nature where an axe falls on a limb, several shoots must grow next season. His work does not aspire to explain the meaning of life but strengthens mans resolve to live it. Ijaz has had seven solo exhibitions, many group shows and in the course of almost five decades has produced extensive body of work including large murals for public spaces.

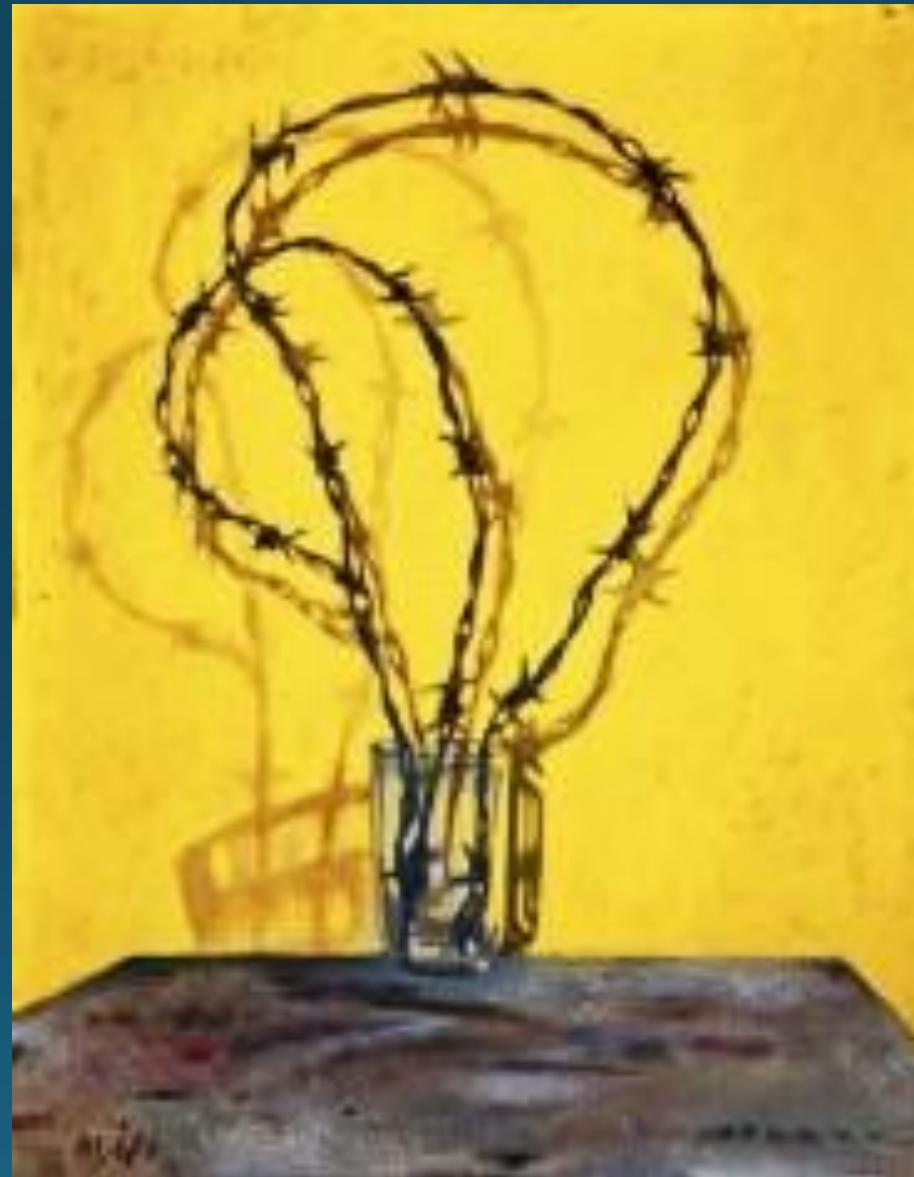
Mian Ijaz ul Hassan (b. 1940)

- He initiated to make students and artist realize the openness towards living issues and bitter truths. He was the sole challenger of the time and received much criticism on his works from the people who supported theories of formalist art. Ijaz gave an unavoidable twist to the ideals of Modernism in Pakistan. He added new dimensions to his works by taking a big step further to capture aesthetics by observing and absorbing the popular imagery of the time. He strongly employed familiar subjects from pop images for his purpose, as he was much inspired by the dramatic power of advertisement hoardings. From popular images to metamorphic narratives Ijaz ul Hassan experienced various styles and strongly expressed the political turmoil with which he as an activist artist was affected. His painting ‘New year bouquet’, 1981 came out at the beginning of New Year during the heyday of Zia ul Haq martial law. A barbed wire bouquet a gift to people of Pakistan represents metaphoric narrative for the restrictions and impositions put by government during martial law. Many of Hassan’s paintings are views from windows. ‘View through Window’ is general title of the paintings that are also identified as pewasta reh shajar se umeed e bahar rukh.

Glass cage by Ijaz ul Hassan (1979)



New Year Bouquet by Ijaz-ul-Hassan (1981)



Red Lillies by Ijaz-ul-Hassan (1981)



Pewasta Reh Shajar say umeed e bahar rakh by Ijaz-ul-Hassan (1998)



Girding Vine by Ijaz-ul-Hassan



Pewasta reh shajar say umeed e bahar rakh by Ijaz-ul-Hassan



Pewasta reh shajar say umeed e bahar rakh by Ijaz-ul-Hassan



Glass cages by Ijaz-ul-Hassan



Green Revolution by Ijaz-ul-Hassan (1974)



Thah (Bang) by Ijaz-ul-Hassan (1974)



Pewasta reh shajar say umeed e bahar rakh by Ijaz-ul-Hassan



Wilderness by Ijaz-ul-Hassan (1994)

