

The Dream of Waking Consciousness

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In feeling and sensibility, Tara Sabharwal's works are intensely feminine, not in terms of a strident, militant ideology, but suggestive of an inward grace, a becoming reticence and modesty. Tara's approach is by no means placid or vegetative. It does not ruminate over the pains of womanhood; it unfolds layer upon layer of their mute suffering before our eyes. It has its tremors and its moments of nervous unease. It is moody and changeable, but it is true, to the slightest flicker of a fleeting thought. And because it is true, it rivets one's attention despite its occasional awkwardness, its stumbling forays. In fact, it is these very features that give the works their unignorable appeal. Firm, stolid architectural stability in pictorial structure belies the fluidity of human emotions. In art, as in the deepest human relationships, what one seeks is that moment of truth that expresses itself in subdued tones, in a tremulous movement of the lips, the delicate touch of a hand – far more eloquent than visual or verbal rhetoric.

The whispered confidence creates that intimacy, offers that quiet exchange where heart speaks to heart, shapes that inner space where joy and pain are shared, as and how they come, and where dissimulation has no place. Such a baring of the soul earns a profound respect. It is this quality of emotional intimacy and dignified restraint that gives Tara Sabharwal's works their charm; stark nakedness generates their evocative power.

How does one give substance to the intangible; form to the fleeting; visual meaning to ambivalence and doubt? The short answer is: through a pictorial language of one's own making, where form and colour are so true to the experience portrayed as to be inseparable from it. To be in the presence of some of these works can be as harrowing as witnessing child birth (all of one's defences are down in such a situation), but, ultimately as uplifting. For one has been present at a process of generation, with all its agony and exhaustion, its troughs of despondency and despair, in works woven so fine as to suggest an almost uncanny insect skill.

Intimist painters in the West, such as Vuillard and Bonnard, dealt with domestic life behind curtained windows. Tara Sabharwal's intimism is of a different kind: it is that of a woman's mind beset with anxiety and unease. Her work is a way of revealing her mind, unburdening herself of her innermost thoughts. It is an intimate diary of the emotional life. It is small in format, it is secret and it is hushed. It is a woman talking to herself in whispers.

The experience for the viewer is fascinating, and, at the same time, unsettling. It makes the blood tingle with the thrill of secrets shared; and it is unsettling because, in the process of the artist dredging up the accumulated silt of drowned memories, betrayed hopes, unfulfilled expectations, and anxious motherhood, she has awakened in us a distributing awareness of our own divided selves.

Childhood fears rise to the surface in later years to haunt the adult mind. Tara's world is a universe of unappeased spirits.

Inchoate feelings find their true expression in an appropriate awkwardness of style. The artist strives to capture the unfinished statement, words left hanging in the air,

as the mind hurtles on, in its fumbling, panic-stricken way, leaving in its wake the floating wreckage of scattered thoughts and battered emotions.

Art is the crystallization of feeling into coherent form. Though every experience seeks a form unique to itself, there is an overall individuality of style into which disparate experiences tend to cohere. In Tara's hands, collage and assemblage are devices to capture thoughts on the wing, and mesh them into a disquieting relationship. They are a way of piecing together fragmented experiences, putting together the shattered pieces of a mirror, which once provided the complete reflection of an image. That image is now thrown back askew in a score of dismembered splinters. Each sliver offers a partial, dislocated picture. But the broken fragments, even when glued together, can never again provide a coherent whole.

We are past, present and future, all at once. Every moment as we speak is already the past, and, even as the instant ticks its way into the future, that future is the sum total of all that has gone before, but from an altered perspective. The human psyche is like the everchanging pattern in a kaleidoscope, forming new designs with the slightest turn of the wrist, the least twist of the mind.

We live in a multiplicity of cultures, traditions and time-frames. That is part of the excitement and challenge of contemporary experience. This does not suggest that the artist has cut his moorings from his native historical tradition of art, whether Asian or European, but that he can be, in fact has been forced by historical factors to be, engaged with both, in a meaningful way. From the beginning of this century with Picasso, Matisse and Klee, down to our own times, with Henry Moore, Anish Kapoor or Stephen Cox, we have witnessed the artists' need to reach out from depleted and exhausted cultures and seek replenishment from others still firmly rooted and vital. This has been one of the more significant phenomena of the last hundred years.

Tara Sabharwal's small, miniature format establishes a link with Rajput pictorial practice, not through affinities of colour, form or setting, but through the manner in which experiences are shared with the viewer at a much deeper level than appears on the surface. Such a work is not meant to be hung on a wall, as part of a large decorative scheme, loudly asserting its uniqueness and drawing attention to itself. The miniature is a way in which the artist takes one intimately by the hand, and asks one to slowly absorb and ponder over the work. The narrative of tales unravels itself, strand by strand, offering fresh insights with each re-telling. And since the myths and legends are well-known, the viewer's delectation is through the subtler nuances of the artist's interpretation. Tara's myths are deeply personal and individualist, but not so obscure as to make it impossible for one to follow the trail of the artist's journey.

Occasionally, when dealing with the theme of motherhood, for instance, the experience is so elemental and universal that, almost instinctively, Tara has recourse to terms which relate to both Hindu and Christian traditions. It is as though the individual experience reflects, or is reflected back in, tribal archetypes. The new-born as the Child Krishna or the Infant Jesus, and the passage through various stages of the mother's tribulations: the Annunciation; the Conception; the Nativity in the manger, among humble cattle and to the astonishment of awestruck peasant-folk; the Flight from tyrannical forces, Joseph and Mary on the one hand, Nanda and Yashoda on the other. The link with such age-old icons, relating to the miracle of childbirth, and its attendant rites and mysteries, is clearly established. But the symbols are no longer static, stratified

into pictorial conventions emerging out of a pastoral society, simple and unquestioning in its faith.

The bleak passage through life of the Madonna of today has to discover its unique formal expression – the woman of our times, from a broken home, displaced, riven with anxiety and a sense of guilt, falling back on her instincts of procreation and survival, in a cold, inhospitable, incomprehensible world, comforted by no order. In such an alien environment, the lonely mother can do no more than weave her personal patterns of meaning. Work after works tells of the contemporary woman's predicament. The ghosts of the past are never exorcised, laid to rest once and for all. They rise again and again, when least expected, to haunt one all through life.

In *Womb Watch, 1994*, the mother's face is frozen into a pallid mask of tragic intensity, as she broods over her babe in its sac of amniotic fluid, floating on a sea of blood.

In *Night Gaze, 1996*, the supine, half-naked mother, her arms folded protectively over her belly, watches the child rise like an apparition out of a tumultuous sea.

A seated Madonna-like woman suckles her new-born infant in *New Lives, 1995*, recollecting the stage of her pregnancy and parturition; she gazes gratefully at a saintly female form that surfaces from the water, her hand raised in benediction.

But soon the young mother is beset with fear and a sense of impending disasters, (*Afternoon Separation, 1995*). Bereft and insincere, she shrinks behind bars at the foot of a spiral staircase, clinging to her child, while callous figures turn towards, or away from her, in derision. The steps cavort in a frenzied dance, and potted plants writhe menacingly, struggling to escape.

The increasing tension pervades a whole series of works, some of them congealed around time-worn mythic images: mountain, island, storm-tossed sea, stricken city, predatory bird, until the final denouement in *Sick Bed 1995*. Here, an elderly woman, having gone through her cycle of life, now lies stretched out on her deathbed, surrounded by family members, her own many discarded selves, and vestiges of her earthly and imaginative existence. An elephant, both toy and meaningless deity (from the Buddhist belief in the dream of Maya?) raises its trunk in sad farewell. Significantly, both *New Lives* and *Sick Bed*, the beginning and the end of human existence, are in subdued grey tones, covered all over with a tracery of thin, nervous lines.

The concept of time is integral to the meaning of most of the works: the fluidity of time, its intangibility, its corrosive nature, the fact that it cannot be arrested or frozen, is charted out in a series of poignant visual images.

We sense the germination of an intense drama beneath the softly-brushed surfaces of these works. The paint caresses the forms, almost lovingly, with slow, sensual deliberation, but only to reveal the raw wound beneath. There are no great dramatic climaxes; the pain oozes out, almost imperceptibly: through an anguished look, a half-finished gesture, in the contorted spaces between human beings. The surroundings and the elements become participants in the human drama; nature is coloured by the emotions of the characters; it mirrors their moods and feelings, and is drawn into their suffering.

In Indian art, the universe is looked upon as *lila*, the sport of life, which reconciles body and soul, heaven and earth, participation and renunciation. In Tara's works, the *lila* assumes a bitter, ironic significance. Human beings are victims of emotions and

circumstances that they cannot come to grips with, cannot comprehend or control, except in terms of the pain they endure.

In these works, woman vis-a-vis society as a whole, in relation to her family as daughter, sister, bride, mother, is an individual unfulfilled at every level of these associations. The only being she can cling to, with frantic hope and desperate longing is the infant she has engendered, brought into the world through her loins. The first wail of the new-born is but an echo of the mother's anguished cry at that primal act of severance – the cutting of the umbilical cord. How swift is the division between mother and child; how quickly does the infant grow into the man-child, even before it has been weaned.

The absence of a sustaining faith; the breakdown of family ties; the collapse of moral values; the tearing apart of the social fabric, breed a sense of purposelessness, of the futility of human endeavor. They lead to the dismemberment of society, and the disfigurement of the individual psyche.

Tara Sabharwal's works compel attention because of the muted, but relentless, power with which they portray the plight of humankind today, particularly that of woman. Her art does not transcend the tragedy of the human condition. It does not liberate. But it is inexorable in its attachment to truth. In that, perhaps, lies the seed of a new beginning.