

## USKI PANCHVATI

SOMEWHAT NEGLECTED, THIS room at the end of the corridor behind my bedroom is my personal space. Out of sync with the rest of the house, this room served to store junk and superfluous objects before my marriage but I cleared and decorated it for my own use. Nobody in the family is hassled by my appropriation of a useless space. Like me, this isolated room is kind of cut off and alienated from the rest of the house. I have decorated it as the studio where I pour out my feelings in colour on canvas. Brushes fill up my drawings with the colours of intimate emotions. This is where I live my life with a longing for, and an effort to achieve self realization. As long as I am here, I feel alive, vibrant, breathing, full of cheer and aglow with a golden light—all of which are expressed in the numerous paintings in this room.

My whole sensibility and my creativity is contained in the paintings on its walls. Subsumed in the very air of this space, my own feelings gaze at me from my paintings. Every time I enter this room, I let them take hold of me as I give in to them. As I leave, they retreat spontaneously and remain in the room as mute, inanimate spaces and forms painted on canvas.

This studio compensates for my loneliness. This is where Sadhvi breathes free, smiles and hums as she transfers her tensions in the forms and colours gliding smoothly over the canvas mounted on an easel. Time, even moments of anxiety, flies swiftly here. Perhaps the effort to give shape to your feelings is life. At least for me it is. Often, I don't come here for days but even the

thought of this space fills my being with joy. When I actually visit it, all the paintings descend from the walls and come to surround me. They caress me, converse with me, ask questions and smile at me as if they are my kinsfolk. My loved ones, my soulmates.

My paintings are diverse in style. Through them I project the experiences through which I have been in the process of my identification with life. To me, they represent harmony between external forms and the inner soul. I endeavour to raise my paintings from individual exclusivity to the level of my individual spirituality. I accompany Yatin to his factory sometimes. Even from a distance I notice clouds of smoke swirling through the chimneys and filling the atmosphere with toxic pollution. Minute particles of flyash settling over trees and bushes give them a murky appearance. In the course of time it will end up giving the landscape an eerie ambience with dark soil and twisted, wilting vegetation raising skeletal branches to show its plight. Recollection of such scenes provides me with an inner vision which gets subsumed, and is expressed in diverse symbolic forms in my paintings.

In some paintings all I depict is a single flower, a long blade of grass or a tiny little bird. On one hand my brush strokes make me confront my pent up feelings but on the other they express the grandeur, sanctity and the sublime beauty of nature in intense, velvety colours. Some paintings are finished fast, some take days to bring about a harmony between my feelings and external nature blended in colours and shapes. Sometimes, I make collages by glueing small chips of rocks and pebbles on canvas. A cold shiver goes down my being with a feel of the timeless frozen anguish of the

stones at such times. At other times, flowers, foliage, birds and other forms of nature do not attract me and I search for beauty in the ugly or unattractive objects.

On the pretext of going for an evening walk, I take the route to a shanty colony. Once there, I lean against a wall and try to absorb the poverty and the cocky obstinacy of the place. Piles of rubbish littered with torn clothes and dirty rags invade my consciousness. The forlorn face of a half-clad beggar girl with extremely dirty teeth sends out a silent challenge to me and hence forms the subject of my next painting.

Some of my paintings are nothing but lines assuming shapes. I learnt this style by watching my aunt, (Buaji), who used to draw certain figures on a wall of the kitchen on occasions like *Hoi Mata* or *Karva Chauth*. She would draw the figures of a man, a woman and their children. The Sun, moon and stars would complement them. Nature was represented in the form of a Tulsi plant. The picture was completed after she signed off with auspicious symbols like Om and all the names of the male members of the family. As a child, I would copy those drawings in my exercise book so that I could draw them if Buaji was not present on those occasions. Now the line drawings have formed a style distinct from Madhubani paintings. Bright colours of such paintings seem to reflect memories of my childhood on one hand and the radiance of the spiritual philosophy I imbibed from Buaji's influence on the other.

Like a thinker or a musician at work, I get totally engrossed in the turns and twists of the lines as I work at a painting. All these pictures

turn to a musical rhythm around me. My creativity thus comes out in the form of my diverse interests expressed through my paintings in this gallery. I have imprisoned them within the walls of this room after capturing them in the form of paintings. Someone asked me once, "How would you describe your style? Which school do you subscribe to?" To that I answered that my style represents my self. Nature and life are my school. My nature and my sensibility are represented in my paintings. External nature challenges me to say something on its behalf, to give it my own emotional expression. And that is what I endeavour to do. Through my efforts, nature gets born again and again in diverse manifestations. As for me, I am born of nature and it is nature that sets my inner being all aglow. The trees and the vegetation in my paintings are not inanimate. They have life in them, a sensitivity to feel emotions exactly like those of the human heart. Mists suspended on soft grass fill my mind with tranquility. Like a strain of nostalgia, nature has become an integral part of my existence.

Right from childhood, I have been enthusiastic about learning new things. There was no creative activity that did not interest me. Painting was a passion but I was equally keen on needlework. Similarly, I was enthusiastic about sports like cycling and swimming. After the college swimming pool became operational, I made full use of it. Swimming to me was an act of identifying with and surrendering to nature. The feel of cool water intoxicated me. That must be the reason why I walked away with the top awards in various swimming competitions.

My family was a consistent source of encouragement and inspiration. Ammiji offered prayers for my success. The medals I won were placed near the idols of gods and Papuji took great pride in my achievements.

However, I don't know why the skills, hobbies and talents that enhanced my self-esteem were proving to be an impediment to happiness in my marriage. They stood like a wall between me and Yatin. I had never imagined that one day I'd be punished for my talents and interests; that they would create an ever widening distance between me and my husband. It was strange that the things that made me happy and proud one day should be used as a weapon to humiliate me the next. I don't know what Yatin expects from me. What kind of a life he envisaged with me is beyond me to comprehend.

I spend long, lonely evenings of my marriage trying to raise such questions in my paintings. The history of this room of mine has spanned the time between my wedding and the rocky days I have faced since then. I had come here with such hopes and aspirations but my life is a continuous struggle for survival in a cold, antagonistic world where I am trying to find some ground compatible with my inner feelings. What do I find staring back at me all the time? A turbulent ocean, a sky thunderous as a demon with my entity fragile as a tiny boat overladen with thoughts and ideas, which neither takes me ashore nor lets me drown and perish.

Yatin has not been able to trust me and accept me as I am. May be I too have not been able to understand him completely. I don't know whether his work is so demanding that he comes home late every evening or that he is kept so busy that he has no time for me. Also, why he has to go on frequent and often extended outstation trips. I

wonder if these are the reasons behind his indifference to and distaste for me. I am fully aware that I am no part of his work-a-day life. I often try to remind him that he is the link between me and his family. I often ask him if he is satisfied with his hide and seek existence where all I do is breathe along waiting in silence. He remains passive and neutral to my queries. He does not react to the arguments I raise. Life between us is like a question mark. Very often, however, before he leaves for office he promises to be back early to spend the evening with me. But he seldom keeps his promise. Only I know how upset I get on such occasions. Later, in the darkness of night, our bodies may lie together but my mind flies away into remote distances. The impact of such distances bogs me down and leaves me hot and bothered through the day. I wonder why I cannot wrench myself away from the memories of those suffocating moments at night.

The air of my bedroom is still heavy with the echoes of an argument that took place the other night.

“Please Yatin, just think for once, how our life in this house is set to revolve around other’s wishes. How long can you live on what the others hold out to you? Restrictions and compulsions under which you function give me a complex. Come, let us move out of here and go someplace we can make a home for just the two of us, where we could be free from so many people, regulations and commitments.” I pleaded with him. He responded by a cold stare that sent me freezing down to my soul.

I do make an effort to be close to him and to follow whatever he says but there are things that I cannot bring myself to do, such as

playing cards with Neera bhabhi, Maaji and Yatin in the evenings. I try to join their conversation when they are not playing cards but their talk neither interests nor inspires me. On such occasions, Yatin's stinging glances at my quiet face and the magazines in my hands are enough to freeze me completely.

The atmosphere is somewhat different when Vikramji is at home. All the chatter then ceases and the conversations are geared towards their business and they talk shop in an official manner. The talk never descends to the level of the family. Very often, after that, Yatin goes off to South India for two weeks or a month. Alternately, he goes abroad in connection with work relating to their factory in Calcutta. He stays away for long stretches of time but never brings me a gift. Nor does he respond with any special ardour to my eager body which awaits his return impatiently.

At any rate, the intensity of my desire has slowly been dulled over time. I often wonder if my existence has become totally meaningless. Why am I living here? Have I been brought here for the sole purpose of being surrounded by the four walls of the house? Have I divided myself into two parts—one my questioning self and the other Yatin who answers me? Was I the point and counter point at the same time—the enemy and the friend? Endeavouring to unravel these contradictions, I'm left in a perpetual state of conflict which refuses to resolve itself or leave me alone. Any expression of my angst provokes a hostile reaction in Yatin who chastises me in words that leave me squirming and I remain desolately searching for truth within myself.

Yatin has adopted a peculiar, callous attitude towards me. Most of the time the expression on his face and his eyes is that of a cold, stony anger. Each time I notice it, I spend my days petrified and surrounded by questions. I wonder whether my involvement with art prevents me from thinking of other things and leaves me inadequately equipped for life. I also wonder why I cannot become “worldly, practical and perfect” in every sense.

Well, practicality may not be a major part of my personality but physically I try to be practical in many ways. I do get petrified by Yatin’s cold anger and yet I cannot deny myself the subtle intoxicating desire for life in my body. Words do not satisfy your longing. The body often forgets its pain and gets possessed by desire. The mind dismisses all arguments and begins to dissolve into the body at such moments. Early one morning when the daylight had begun to filter through the windows, Yatin, lying next to me on the bed, turned on his side. His arm stretched out up to my pillow and a familiar touch filled me with intense warmth. His arm slid down and enfolded me. The intoxicating scent of his body was about to overpower me when I was reminded of the big argument we had the night before. The memory left a bitter taste in my mouth and I wanted to brush my teeth. As I made to get off the bed, his strong arms clutched me with great force. “Let go of me,” I said.

“No, I won’t,” he said. His fingers were entangled in my hair.

“Please.”

“I said I won’t. Are you angry with me?” he asked.

“What is the use?”

“Oh come on! Come, forgive me. I’ll never give you reason to complain again. You’ll see that I won’t.”

I knew that at that moment he was all body, only a body and the body has just one logic. Dismiss it at a crucial moment and it turns killer. The violence Yatin’s mentality had wreaked on me was so devastating that I had no wish to relate to him physically. I had endeavoured to ignore antagonism through silence and valued whatever sensitivity he could show me in order to find a way to survive. It was a tough course to follow but I had begun to traverse it when all of a sudden the argument of the previous evening raised its head before me. Yatin had telephoned me in the afternoon.

“Sadhvi, we have to go to a party tonight. Be dressed and ready to leave by seven pm.”

“What kind of a party is it? At whose place?” I had asked.

“You don’t know them. It is an official party.”

“All right.”

The occasions when Yatin and I would go out alone were very rare. More often, the whole family went out together under the supervision of the eldest brother Vikram. Seemingly he was the one who held the reins of the family.

I had no idea what colour he liked best—yellow, green or pink. The last three to four years haven’t brought us even that close. So I dressed in a yellow silk saree, put on along necklace of gold beads and arranged a few miniature yellow chrysanthemums in my hair which was coiled in a chignon. I thought I looked nice in the

mirror. Yatin was late. I wondered if the plans had changed because he came home at nine, ignored me and rushed into the bathroom. He washed and changed in a hurry. I said gently, "Isn't it late now? We were to leave around seven."

"Don't worry about that. Nobody is that punctual in big cities. Go, sit in the car, I'll be there in a minute."

I fell silent and moved towards the stairs. Downstairs, Neera bhabhi was playing cards with the others in the lounge. She cast a long venomous glance at me but made no comment. Yatin followed me swiftly in the driveway, and getting into the car drove furiously to our destination. One of the buttons on his coat was askew and I was desperate to set it right but it was beyond my daring to cross the barrier created by his cold eyes and stony silence. I felt completely alienated and quite remote from him. That frigid attitude of his was like a dark cloud whose shadow encircled him. The more you tried to penetrate it, the more formidable it grew. I had absolutely no desire to cross it then. We were like two strangers in a car.

The car took a turn and stopped in front of a house in Vasant Vihar. The nameplate bore the name "Goyal". The drawing room was quite crowded. Soon after we entered, Yatin went looking for our host Goyal but there was nothing to look forward to as far as I was concerned. After a while, I noticed a middle-aged man holding a glass of whisky in his hand stepping towards Yatin. He put an arm around Yatin and bellowed, "Oh, welcome, welcome Yatin Ji! How nice to see you!"

Yatin introduced me, “This is my wife, Sadhvi.” Goyal started looking for his wife after greeting me. When his back was turned towards us Yatin whispered to me, “Do talk to him and his wife—humour them, will you? He is a top official in the government. He is extremely useful for our business.”

Goyal had returned with his wife who was short, flabby and quite non-descript. Leaving us together, Yatin and Goyal were lost in the crowd where other introductions were to be made. I could hear Goyal’s voice over the party din, “Meet Yatindra Nath Khanna, MD of Khanna Private Limited. He is the younger brother of Vikram Khanna.”

That Yatin bore no special identity even outside the family and was recognized by his brother’s name, was something that had often rankled me but that evening it stung me rather viciously. Why couldn’t Yatin establish an identity of his own? I was deep in thought when the flabby Mrs Goyal started asking some purely homely, routine type of questions. With each of my answers her expression grew more and more incredulous. Four years since I was married and still no children? Mrs Vikram plays cards. Shobha bhabhi is a great one for kitty parties. How come I had no interests? The bearer drew near and offered us drinks. I took a glass and tried to sip a cold drink when I noticed Yatin and Goyal standing in the far corner of the room surrounded by some ultramodern women. I could see Yatin’s hand sliding down the bare shoulder of one of the ladies dressed in a diaphanous saree. Goyal came up to me and tried to strike a conversation. Sandwiched between him and his wife, I had begun to feel quite disgusted by it all when Ramesh emerged from the crowd

and hurried towards me saying, “Arrey, Sadhvi! How nice to see you! How are you?”

Meeting him was like being resurrected into a new life. Ramesh used to attend evening classes for painting during my college days and that is where I had met him. He was an engineer working with a firm in Delhi. It took me no time to place him as I had seen him from a distance just two days back at a fabulous stage performance of Zubin Mehta’s orchestra.

“I am fine, Rameshji. And how are you doing? Do you still paint?”

“Not much,” he answered. “How about you? You were the most talented amongst us all.”

“I paint something or the other all the time. Painting is my obsession. I can’t live without it.”

“That is great. At least you are continuing with your art. Art creates beauty in life. It fills your sensibility with a special fragrance. Don’t you think Sadhvi, that art leads you towards the true meaning of life?”

“But you need words before you get to the truth— words that belong to others—to scriptures and prophets. We determine their meanings according to our interpretation. Can we trust those meanings, Rameshji?”

“You are right. But what do we have in the name of religion except a few books—the webs of words, discourses and bhajans.”

“The aim of religion is the practical realization of the highest truth. Life is a fruitless quest unless it is guided by that truth.”

“So have you found an insight into truth, Sadhvi? Have you achieved something?”

“It is very difficult, Rameshji. As far as I go, there is loneliness and an inner vacuum and they have given me nothing so far. A resolution is awaited. Once it comes about, it may lead to some realization I’m waiting for.”

Yatin breezed in suddenly and led me by the arm to that part of the room where a few couples were dancing to soft music. He insisted that we dance together. Locked in his arms I tried to match my steps with his but how could I do well what I did not know?

Exasperated, Yatin let go of me and grabbed Miss Lillian in his arms and began to waltz with her. Ramesh, who had just been released by another partner, was looking at me but I avoided him. Goyal drew up to me and asked me to dance with him. I said, “I am sorry. I can’t dance with anybody except my husband.” Goyal withdrew without an answer. Yatin watched from a distance but remained quiet.

On our way back Yatin was obviously high. He was exhilarated and full of good cheer. “I had to get a huge loan sanctioned for the factory. Goyal has finally given his approval today. I’ve been chasing him for so long. It was a great party! Do you know our company has borne the expense for it? Miss Lillian is our hospitality officer—the PRO. She had organized everything so well. She is brilliant!”

I waited for him to finish his effusions. After he stopped raving about the party, I said quietly, “Listen, please do not ask me to come to such parties. And why did you need me when Lillian was around?”

Yatin's demeanour hardened at once. He burst out angrily, "Who do you think you are? Weren't you talking intimately to that tupenny engineer? You neither talked to Goyal nor danced with him. You have no manners. Stupid girl from a lowly family—how would you know how to make use of your contacts in the interest of big business? As a matter of fact, your coming to the party made no difference. It was lucky that Lillian was around to take care of everything otherwise Goyal would have slipped off my hands again this time. I'll take care not to bring you to parties in future. It is sheer boredom—a kind of embarrassment when you accompany me to a party. God knows what heights you exist at that you never come down to earth. You think you are very smart-do you?"

Yatin had scythed away me, my *sanskara*, and my behaviour in a single blow. Stung to the core, I was writhing within but all I could say quietly was, "Why do we live together if you don't like my company? Do you really find me so boring?"

"Yes, I do find you boring. Your company is suffocating. All my efforts to talk to you, to relate to you, to reach out to you end in failure. Sadhvi, you strain to pull your self in a direction exactly opposite to mine. Maybe it is because of your middle class upbringing."

His words froze me. I sat in total silence by his side. So what was left of our relationship when he was so fed up of me? How could I hold him if he had no interest in me? I was trying my best to make him happy but how could he expect me to have an intimate conversation with Mrs Goyal?

I knew nothing about latest sarees and new fashions in jewellery. I was familiar with the art scene and cultural programmes held in Delhi. I seldom went to attend them but had information about all the new plays. I had watched Zubin Mehta's latest performance. A casual discussion about Mahler, Mozart and Beethoven's symphonies was followed by Vikramji sending albums of western classical music to me. I was thrilled with them. Watching an Indian conductor leading an orchestra of a western classical musical had filled me with great pride.

In western music, the musicians create harmony according to the notes prepared by the conductor. He is the master who decides how to blend different strains together to achieve perfection. He waves a slender wand in the air, his head and eyes moving to the rhythm of his own creation. Music, instruments, players and the conductor are synchronized in harmonious creativity. The American actor, Danny Kay once said that the conductors of orchestras are not ordinary people. They possess extraordinary energy bordering on maniacal. I am convinced that only that kind of energy can control and synchronize diverse instruments like violins, pianos, trumpets, double bass etc. in the hands of a hundred and ten musicians to create harmony.

I would have been happy if Mrs Goyal had discussed Zubin Mehta's orchestra or something else relating to art and culture but what could I do if I had nothing to discuss at her level? Yatin has not been able to see me beyond what is skin deep. I understand him perfectly so I have been constantly trying to externalize my life in order to harmonize with him. In my opinion, your beloved should give you a sense of direction. He should fill your life with joy and eagerness and curiosity about the world and himself. There should be an element

of wonder each time you look at him. But Yatin is nothing beyond the definition of a frigid relationship which I remind myself of each time the going gets tough. Ammiji used to say that I should get myself involved in domesticity to the extent that I should be missed if for some reason I am not at home. I had tried my best to follow that advice in the interest of my marriage but it was obvious that I was exhausted. My courage had gone.

There was a crack on the glass of the window on my side. The touch of my finger resting on it reminded me of my state of mind—cracking up and full of shards! Like an abstract painting.

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