

MF Husain's Hindi Autobiography *Em. Ef. Husen kī kahānī apnī zubānī* Sketches of a Performative Self, Surfing the World in Space and Time

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Abstract Drawing from Elizabeth Grosz's notion of the body as a socio-cultural artefact and the exterior of the subject bodies as psychically constructed, and Rosi Braidotti's concept of nomadic identities, in this article I introduce world-renowned Indian painter MF Husain's verbal and visual autobiography *Em. Ef. Husen kī kahānī apnī zubānī* as a series of sketches of a performative self, surfing the world in space and time. Bodies and spaces are envisioned as "assemblages or collections of parts" in constant movement, crossing borders and creating relationships with other selves and other spaces. People and places become a catalyst for manifestations of the self in art – MF Husain being foremost a painter – and eventually also in literature. I look for strategies that MF Husain uses in order to construct or deconstruct the self through crossings and linkages. I try to investigate how the self is performed inside and outside private and public spaces, how the complex (sometimes even contradictory) relationship between self and community is portrayed, and how this autobiography does articulate notions of (imagined) community/ies, nationalism, transnational subjectivity, nostalgia.

Keywords MF Husain. Autobiography. Hindi literature. Modernism. Performative self.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Writers, Scribes, Painters, and an Earthen Pot. – 3 (Dis-) Embodying the Self. – 4 A Branded Self in Performance. – 5 Memories Becoming Visible.



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1 Introduction

This article focuses on MF Husain's Hindi autobiography *Em. Ef. Husen kī kahānī apnī zubānī* (MF Husain's autobiography).¹ Maqbool Fida (MF) Husain (1915-2011) is one of the few painters of his generation to have garnered international recognition and he is acclaimed as a unique figure in the Indian art scene. His pictorial production has been widely investigated, but to date no effort has been made to analyze his literary production. In this paper, I will suggest some possible trends of analysis of MF Husain's autobiographical production, focusing on the notion of a performative self, surfing in space and time.

MF Husain was born in 1915 into a large, working-class Suleimani Muslim family in the Hindu Vaishnava temple town of Pandharpur, Maharashtra. His mother Zainab died when he was only one and half years old. His father Fida remarried, and the family moved to Indore. The young Maqbool's early education was perfunctory, but his association with painting began at this early age, as he learned the art of calligraphy and practiced *al-ḥatt al-kūfī*, the kufic calligraphy with geometric forms. At the age of twenty, he moved to Bombay with the determination to become an artist; he worked as an assistant to a painter of billboards, painting cinema banners until he was invited by Francis Newton Souza to become one of the components of the Progressive Artists Group (PAG) of Bombay, an association created in 1947 with the aim to encourage an Indian avant-garde. They wanted to break with the revivalist nationalism established by the Bengal school of art as well as come out of the influence of the British academic painting, and they aimed to promote a modern art movement engaged at an international level. Public recognition came together with the independence of the country, when he won his first award at the annual exhibition of the Bombay Art Society. Subsequently, state recognition came in 1955, when he was awarded the Padma Shri; later he was conferred the Padma Bhushan in 1973 and the Padma Vibhushan in 1989, and he was nominated to the Rajya Sabha in 1986. In 1968, MF Husain won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival for his film *Through the Eyes of a Painter*. He received a large number of international honors and today he is one of the most celebrated artist of India, thanks to his pioneering experimentations with new forms of art. MF Husain is also one of India's priciest painters: in 2011, his work *Sprinkling Horses* was sold in an auction for 1.14 Million US\$, at that time the highest price so far achieved for an Indian work. He died at the age of 96 in 2011.

MF Husain indulged in autobiography at many levels. He produced a series of self-portraits and paintings titled *Autobiography*. Besides

¹ Literally, *apnī kahānī apnī zubānī*, that is to say "his own account of his own story", an expression that is the equivalent of "autobiography" in Hindi/Urdu.

Em. Ef. Husen kī kahānī apnī zubānī, MF Husain wrote a personal diary, *Harf va nakś* (Words and paintings), that unfortunately I could not see. This is described as an unbound book, entirely in beautiful calligraphy, existing in seven or eight copies. It contains poetry, unsent letters, some abstract sketches and other notes, written in three different languages - Urdu, Hindi, and English (Tripathi 2012). Last but not least, a dramatised version of the artist's life written by Varun Gautam and directed by Nadira Zaheer Babbar was brought on stage in 2006 by Ekjute, the renowned theatre group based in Mumbai (www.ekjute.com). In his long association with the group, MF Husain designed Ekjute's 15th, 20th, 25th, and 30th year celebration logos. He also entrusted them with his memoirs and diaries on his life, which resulted in the much-acclaimed play *Pensil se braś tak* (From pencil to brush). MF Husain personally designed the sets for the play and was closely associated with the production. The play traces Husain's evolution over several decades, from his humble background to his years struggling as a painter of movie posters in Mumbai, to being globally acclaimed as an international artist. The stress is on the figure of a painter from a small village rising above all prejudices and used his art to reflect the cultural diversity of India, trying to bring harmony in this diversity. In the play, the current avatar of MF Husain meets his young self and his child self and they have an engaging conversation of how Husain has changed over the years, and how he has become almost a victim of his own brand. The younger versions claim he has forgotten them, but the older Husain states that his greatest achievement was keeping his inner child and his passionate youth alive inside him. This structure is repeated in the Hindi autobiography as well, as MF Husain himself stated:

This book is not about my achievements. It only talks about things which I would like to share with my children, friends, and other people. The book has short stories, with three characters, a small boy, Maqbool, and M.F. Husain, which is a brand name. I call this a brand name because nobody bought my paintings when I was plain Maqbool but did so when the paintings were sold under the name M.F. Husain. (Sundar 2003)

Combining Elizabeth Grosz's (1995) notion of the body as a socio-cultural artefact and the exterior of the subject bodies as psychically constructed with Rosi Braidotti's (1994, 2002) concept of nomadic identities - insofar they don't belong anywhere and belong everywhere - I will introduce the representation of the self that appears in this autobiography as sketches of a performative self, surfing the world in space and time. Bodies and spaces are envisioned as 'assemblages or collections of parts' in constant movement, crossing borders and creating relationships with other selves and other spac-

es. People and places become a catalyst for manifestations of the self in art - MF Husain being foremost a painter - and eventually also in literature.

According to Grosz, art is generated by a dynamic corporeality that vibrates to the rhythm of the universe. Rather than being a cultural accomplishment, art explodes when the “forces of the earth (cosmological forces that we can understand as chaos, material and organic indeterminacy)” interact with the “forces of living bodies, by no means exclusively human” (Grosz 2008, 2-3), in the tumultuous, excessive, not so much useful as intensifying forms of sexual selection. Art, according to Grosz, is not about taste, cultural accomplishment, or a reflection of society, but it is experimentation with materiality, sensation, and life - an extraction from the universe and an elaboration on it. Life does not produce fixed products; in its constant creativity, life produces processes of becoming (Braidotti 1994, 2002). According to a nomadic notion of identity, one could say that the stuff of life, its materiality is constant change that destabilizes the present (Grosz 2004, 96, 111). I will refer to this analytical frame in order to analyze MF Husain's autobiography, keeping in mind Husain's words, “Creativity is when you go into something and in the process you discover something” (Sundar 2003).

2 Writers, Scribes, Painters, and an Earthen Pot

MF Husain's Hindi autobiography, which was originally written in Urdu, was published in September 2002, soon followed by an English version, freely interpreted by journalist/editor/film critic/screenwriter/film director Khalid Mohammed. *Em. Ef. Husen kī kahānī apnī zubānī* is introduced as an assemblage or collection of parts. It is a book that is in constant movement, as it crosses linguistic borders (English, Hindi, Urdu). It has a strong visual impact too. First of all, it is a printed book, but it has the form of a manuscript. Moreover, the text has to be appreciated both visually and orally, because it is accompanied by drawings. This literally makes MF Husain's autobiography a *citralkh*, or ‘picture-writing’ (also ‘picto-gram’, ‘picto-graph’). The Hindi volume has a fascinating history, that is told by the ‘scribe’ Rashda Siddiqui in the introduction:

When Husain started writing his autobiography, he would just keep on writing wherever he was, whether he was in the *dhabā* sipping his morning chai from a clay cup or in a five-star hotel coffee shop, or else he was travelling on a plane (something he did a lot, and really liked doing!). He used to get up very early; sometimes he would even get up at three o'clock at night, and start writing. This is actually his disposition: once he starts something he

would not let go until it is finished, he would not leave it incomplete. Husain's autobiography was written on paper napkins, on table mats, on the empty surface on the back of letters, on notes made of torn envelopes, and even what was written on nice paper sheets came out of his pockets as a crumpled bundle. He would often read out his writings to friends: he liked to steal the scene at any *mahfil* (meeting). Then one day we collected all the papers, we paired chapter to chapter, note to note. It was wonderfully written. Its beauty is found in the writing and the language is poetic, the exposition is unique. I wrote down the manuscript as a book, and embellished it with drawings made by Husain. (Husen 2002, 6-7)²

From this account, one can get an idea of the scarce relevance given to the written word by M.F. Husain. On the contrary, the cathexis is on the sonic force of the actual act of recitation, oral-gestural compositions, speech and gesture. In this case, the (autobiographical) account is directly linked to the body of the reciting individual. The need to make possible the retention of memories outside the body is satisfied by the written text, as well as by "surrogate or prosthetic apparatuses" (Rao 2016, 73) such as archives and museums. Indifference to writing has been a century-long feature of the Indian subcontinent (Rao 2016), that got modified in premodern and colonial time, bringing about a whole set of scribal specialist communities (Raman 2012; O'Hanlon 2013). Scribal documentation was confined to revenue and administrative domain. Even today, the creative force of the poet or writer is conceived as orality and mnemoculture. In India, the poet is basically one who does not write, but recites. The poet must have a companion who is polyglot, who can communicate readily, who has a beautiful hand, learned in many scripts, herself capable of poetic composition, a rhetorician: such a companion must be the poet's scribe.

The book under analysis has a very active and dynamic scribe. Rashda Siddiqui's obsession with painter MF Husain began in 1977. Their liaison developed from being a teacher-student relationship into one in which Rashda played muse to Husain, remaining his close friend for decades. The way she describes the process of assembling the fragments of autobiography that MF Husain had produced is not only a passive recording of something he had told or written, but rather a complex puzzle construction, involving not only the shaping of a text, but also the manufacture and selection of drawings to accompany and complete the written body. It is a co-creation, such that the common notion of 'autobiography' is shaken: the final book is indeed MF Husain's account, but it involves the agency of Rashda Siddiqui as well.

² Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the Author.

Rashda is also a character in the narrative. She is the protagonist of a chapter where she is introduced as the author of the first book written as a tribute to MF Husain, *In conversation with Husain's paintings* (Husen 2002, 187-90). Interesting enough, the chapter is divided into two parts, showing two different calligraphic styles. The first part tells poetically of their first meeting and emphasises Rashda's ability to appreciate MF Husain's paintings outside the logic of art business:

This is a time when everything is bought and sold. Some people buy, some sell. It's very rare to find people like you, who are so devoted and crazy for love as to go around with a painting by Maqbool in their hand! (Husen 2002, 188)

The second section does not show the horizontal headline called *śirorekhā* on top of each word. This is a typical trait of the Devanagari script, that is sometimes shun in handwriting to make writing fast. Therefore, it suggests that the text is a sort of annotation or a gloss. The main text retells the event of the first meeting with more realistic details, ending with an overt advertisement of the book by Rashda Siddiqui: "This is the first book of this kind in the language of art. The artistic book design is by Rashda's talented second daughter Anjum" (Husen 2002, 190).

Nomadism, meant both as movement in space and as a constant process of becoming, is another important feature of *Em. Ef. Husen kī kahānī apnī zubānī*. The book, as MF Husain often stressed, traces a journey in time, from the little Maqbool playing in his grandfather's lap to the artist whose works are on display at major exhibitions worldwide. MF Husain's public persona has been analyzed with reference to the Indian nation (Ramaswamy 2011; Bagchee 1998), because one of the features of his most famous and controversial paintings is the representation of India's diverse cultures, and a strong sense of Indianness. After the 1996 controversy on the supposedly obscene paintings hurting the sensibilities of the Hindu community, he became one of the favorite targets of the right-wing Hindutva groups, to the point that some nine hundred cases were filed against him in various courts of India; he was personally harassed by fanatical mobs, and exhibitions of his work were repeatedly vandalised. In 2005, he left India in a self-imposed exile, and 'settled' among Dubai, Qatar and London. In 2010, he was conferred Qatar nationality at the instance of the modernizing emirate's ruling family - a very rare occurrence - and he renounced his Indian passport. This caused a controversy in India, given MF Husain's "self-elected role as a modern-day *śubradhār* for the nation-state" (Kapur 2009, 7 fn. 4).

The condition of exile is a paradox for MF Husain. He was the emblematic modernist painter, secular by default, his Muslimness be-

ing underplayed in the name of secularism that was the default condition of the modern artist. In fact, he was deeply committed to the composite, multi-religious, and secular values of Indian civilisation. But in the postcolonial and globalised world the secular agenda has been relativized, and he had to face the Muslimness entrusted upon him by the communal discourse. For decades he sang the nation, but he was partisan to the notion of a secular, 'bourgeois' Indian state. When the state turned to Hindutva, he got trapped in the Islamophobic construction of the Muslim as terrorist, that obscures the 'good Muslim', who must be detached from Islam (Mamdani 2004). Struggling to refuse the role of national martyr, he remained not national and not yet global, but living in a general condition where accelerate mobilities are linked also to voluntary migration, troubled citizenship, and human rights discourse. Another kind of exile is caused by the postmodern turn: as the modernist phase gets deconstructed the notion of the artist as author is questioned, and MF Husain – an author “in the hyperbolic mode” – is “periodized and sent into exile within (and without) the domain of art history” (Kapur 2009, 14), even if MF Husain's liaison with popular genres such as Bollywood puts him beyond the high art/popular art binary.

When MF Husain left the country for good, many claimed that, despite leading a full life abroad, he wanted to return to India, if for no other reason, just to drink tea at his favorite Irani teashop in Mumbai. Incapable of express loss, he became celebratory, the triumphal marker of individual and national survival. He had always been peripatetic and lived an eventful life, spent nomadically crisscrossing the globe and enjoying his moment in front of the canvas and behind the camera, spinning out paintings, films, books, anecdotes, etc. In the first interview released to NDTV after he became a citizen of Qatar, MF Husain humorously questioned the very notion of one's physical location, paraphrasing the popular song “Hindvī haiṃ ham, vatan hai hindostāṃ hamārā” (We are of Hind (India), our homeland is Hindustan) into “Hindī haiṃ ham vatan hai sārā jahām hamārā”, that is: “We are of Hind (India), our homeland is the whole world”. When the interviewer asked MF if he craved to be at home, he replied “What is this physical presence? In today's world with so much technology and communication you are everywhere and a creative person is not bound by any geography” (“Husain. The Art of the Matter” 2010).

3 (Dis-)Embodying the Self

If 'geography' is a relational process, it is important to investigate the relation between the self and space that comes through the body. In this section, I will address this issue as it appears in *Em. Ef. Husen kī kahānī apnī zubānī*, drawing on Elizabeth Grosz's notion of the

body as a socio-cultural artefact and the exterior of the subject bodies as psychically constructed (Grosz 1995).

The book opens with a family tree (Husen 2002, 3), which is not a graph but a drawing, visually presenting the self that is going to be set in space and time with more details in the subsequent written introduction to the family genealogy (Husen 2002, 25-9). Here characters are clearly set in space and time, through references to geographical locations, professions, kinship. Maqbool and MF Husain appear as two distinct characters. The first is a child at the bottom, identified with the label "Maqbool in Dada's lap". He and grandfather Abdul Husain are leaning on the trunk of the tree, that has on its backdrop the blessing hand of great grandfather Ibrahim. MF Husain is represented as painting in a central position, and his name appear again in connection with Fazila, identified as "Husain's wife".

The tree is rooted on a square piece of land, or carpet, marked as Pandharpur. Another toponym, which is also graphically drawn as a factory, marks the icon of Maqbool's father: Fida Husain was employed at Indore Malwa Mill as a timekeeper of manual labour workers. Some characters are more detailed and they are identified by objects referring to their jobs: Fida, a clerk who monitored workers' daily attendance, their absence, and maintained account of their labor hours and work rates, holds a book; Dada Abdul, who had a shop of oil lamps, is shown with a lantern; Owais, a cinema director, is connected to a camera; Mulla Nisar Ali is praying on a sliced moon backdrop; and MF Husain is painting a horse that jumps out of the frame, as if alive. Objects, thus, are crucial in constructing identities. Few characters have face features (a beard, a straight line marking a nose), and Mother Zainab is the only character facing backwards - symbolizing death.

Turning to the written text, I now focus on the way MF Husain introduces the 'self'. The double narrating self presents two different characters, who sometimes engage in conversation, or else appear to observe each other. One is a child, Maqbool. He is a boy born in Pandharpur and raised in a totally masculine environment by his paternal grandfather. The other voice is MF Husain, the adult, branded painter. Interesting enough, the actors introduced in the first chapter of the text - titled "Suddenly, an Earthen Pot Burst Out Speaking" (Husen 2002, 9-11) - are not human. Of course, the conventional metaphor of body as a clay pot cannot be lost to any reader having a minimal acquaintance to Indian literatures (Kabir 2002, 67), but the fact remains that the only overt human feature is found in the drawing before the text, where Maqbool as a young man sits on a *cārpāī* (jute bed), with his hand on an earthen pot. The written text, on the contrary, shows a room devoid of animated beings. Unanimated objects tell the story of a departure through an external narrator, who describes the room: there is an earthen pot, placed on a *cārpāī*, a lan-

tern, a book open at page fourteen; some clothes, that are listed in detail – a man shirt, boy knickers, a dupatta; a broken bicycle chain, a flute, kite paper, a sweet box. The wish to eliminate any animated being is corroborated by the casual notation about the sweets: “surprisingly no ants” (Husen 2002, 9). As I pointed out, the earthen pot is a very recognizable literary *topos*, the metaphor of the human body that was popularised through Kabir’s *bījak*-s (Kabir 2002, 67; 114; 116). Therefore, it is clear that the narrating voice is Husain’s. Somebody has just left, somebody has just come in, with a torch in his hand: they cannot meet, as they are the same person in different time. But the pot has an open mouth, the story cannot be contained, it has to come out. We can understand this as an example of the exterior of the subject body as psychically constructed (Grosz 1995).

MF Husain applies a process of dis/embodiment to his characters. A clear example of this is found in his construction of ‘the Mother’. In order to understand it, I draw on the butlerian notions of performance – as a bodily practice that produces meaning, that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be – and performativity (Butler 2007). Drawing on Foucault’s “model of inscription” and rejecting the commonly accepted distinction between surface and depth or the Cartesian dualism between body and soul, Butler refers also to the notion of “linguistic performativity,” an account of a discursively constructed body which cannot be separated from the linguistic acts that name and constitute it, with the consequence that bodies are never merely described, they are always constituted in the act of description (Butler 2007, 134-5).

Maqbool is motherless. He has no memory of her face as she died when he was too young to have memories of her devoid of the memory of her face, leaving no photograph or picture that might be used to construct such memories. In his quest for Mother, MF Husain reiterates signs in a way that remind of the (Derridean and/or Butlerian) notion of “citation” (Derrida 1982, 315; Butler 1997, 49; 155-6). Discourse precedes and constitutes the ‘I,’ i.e. the subject. Signs are vulnerable to appropriation, norms are far from monolithic or stable, but they may be reiterated and cited in ways that undermine hegemony or conventional use. MF Husain uses the sign of a nun, a *sādhvī*’s cloth – that is conventionally disconnected from the notion of motherhood – to construct a body that is devoid of any flesh and facial feature. M.F. Husain’s numerous paintings of Mother Theresa are a proof that places, objects, signs, they all contribute to the construction of the body.

[The child’s] undying ember of love went into the caves of human civilization. It met the elegant *apsaras* of Ajanta. It scabbled the broken pots of Mohenjo Daro. It inscribed “Ibnzainab” with its fingers on the scalding sands of the Karbala. He asked about her

to Nimrod's Nefertiti, Milo's Venus, Michelangelo's *Pietà*, Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, he did not hesitate to meet even Picasso's *Mademoiselles d'Avignon*. In art, many painters have represented their mothers on canvas and paper, beyond immortal life, conferring to them a body of the shadow of the soul that is the essence of the whole creation. The tiny secret of God's creation. For sure Van Gogh would have painted countless portraits of his mother seated in the sun-blazing sunflower fields, but, alas, people declared him a lunatic and locked him in an asylum. Whistler painted a portrait of his mother sitting silently in a corner of a room, dressed in the color of the night. Rembrandt painted a woman carrying a lamp, who became the mother of his son.

Kolkatta, December 1980. The lavish Tata Center in Chowringhee Road. The opening of MF Husain's saris exhibition. A whole crowd of Bengali women adorned in colorful saris, Bihari begums, Punjabi glitterati collected there. In all paintings a repeated white sari, appearing from an inky blue background. There were flashes of tiny orphan children hidden, concealed amidst the folds of those saris. There was no human body in the white sari, no mother's face. Two thin blue stripes comprised the sari's border. One could recognize the world-famous divine woman: Mother Theresa. Her identity is not her face, but her infinite love for those children who have been deprived of their mother's love. An old, torn sari fluttering in the wind entwined itself around Maqbool's feet. It was very old, maybe 60 or 70 years old. Many, countless women must have worn that sari on their bodies. Perhaps it had been bought in Pandarpur, perhaps it had danced once on the river bank, in Indore. It must have been washed by many *dhobis*, it must have ripped then it must have been stitched. Eventually it must have been given to the poor, in charity. A poor woman, whose breast was now dry, must have sold that worn out sari for a pittance at Chor Bazaar in Kolkatta, to get a couple drops of milk for her whining baby. (Husen 2002, 20-2)

In this passage, MF Husain constructs the Mother's body combining everyday clothing pieces and his artistic performance, tracing its cultural history both in the Indian and Islamic milieu and in the European and American one. Once again, the body is literally a socio-cultural artefact.

This is a strategy that comes repeatedly in the autobiography. For example, when the narrator tells about Dada's death in the chapter "Dādā kī ackan" (Husen 2002, 38-43), he shifts between times and places (Indore, the room where Dada died; Paris; the time when Dada died and 1970), sounds (voices, noises), objects (Dada's cloth, his fur *ṭopi*) and relations (the neighbours, Maqbool and MF Husain). It

is during a concert of John Cage in 1970s Paris³ that the boy/alter ego reminds MF Husain of Dada's room in Indore, because of the voices and noises that are being performed on stage. This scene is anticipated by a similitude made by the narrator when describing the noises of the house "the sound of the water, the utensils and the bucket blended into a symphony, as memorable as the compositions of John Cage, the master of avant-gard fusion" (Husen 2002, 38). There is a circular movement of memories of the boy and the branded artist, and the narrating voice tells to the younger himself his life.

4 A Branded Self in Performance

Maqbool left childhood, lost his familiar space and his beloved Dādā, and became an adult. After Dādā's demise he was sent to a boarding school in Baroda. During vacations, he would go to his father's house in Indore and work as an account keeper. But his real interest was in drawing and painting. In Indore, he came to know Narayan Shridhar Bendre (1910-92), whose journey of modernism took Indian modern art on its first revolutionary step.

The sentimental education of young Maqbool took place while he discovered women's bodies, getting a crush on Jamuna or Batool, girls that were anyway bound to get married to someone else. At the same time Maqbool was slowly developing into MF Husain, the artist. At the time of his death, Dādā Abdul had handed Maqbool a 10 rupee note, and this banknote was to play a significant part in his life. In 1932, Maqbool Fida Husain's career as a painter started off at a street corner in Indore, when a stranger paid him ten rupees for the painting he was working on. He would soon leave to Bombay, the city where he met his wife-to-be Fazilabibi and that conferred on him the title of international artist. He would travel extensively and get wealth and honors, his paintings and drawings being eagerly sought by India's new rich, often not for love of art but as good investment. Despite all his fame and wealth, MF Husain seemed to be untouched by both: he could be as comfortable in a dhaba eating desi food, as in a five-star hotel relishing an expensive meal.

MF Husain would become a branded artist, a painter whose identity was highly performative. He stopped wearing footwear as a tribute to the Hindi poet Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh (1917-64) in 1974, and he used to walk barefoot into the most exclusive gatherings and clubs

³ *Song Books (Solos for Voice 3-92)* is a collection of short works by John Cage, composed and compiled by the composer in 1970. It contains pieces of four kinds: songs, songs with electronics, directions for a theatrical performance, and directions for a theatrical performance with electronics. It was first performed on 26 October 1970 at the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris, by Cathy Berberian, Simone Rist and John Cage.

all over the world. In the next decades, as modern Indian art gained wider acceptance, he constantly used the media to create hype around his mild eccentric persona and his escapades, steadily scaling up his prices. His ascetic looks and gentle, softly-spoken, watchful manner commanded attention and respect, while several of his artworks garnered adulation and riches from festivals and auctions worldwide and earned him the label of “the Picasso of India”. With time, he progressively enriched his branded persona with other features: a free-flowing white beard and hair, impeccably-tailored Hermes suits, and his ‘baton’ – an oversized paintbrush modelled on a type devised by Matisse – made him an instantly recognizable figure in India’s art world.

MF Husain wanted his art to go beyond the boundaries between elite and popular practice, and he started performing as a painter in front of an audience. Painting is generally believed as a solitary activity, that the artist performs with no disturbance, concentrating. Therefore, it is not understood as an activity requiring an audience. But MF Husain challenged this convention, and in 1968 he started his first performance of “Six Days of Making” at Shridharani Gallery in New Delhi. Every day he would paint for forty minutes in total silence, sharing this experience with the people who had gathered in the gallery (“Painter M.F. Husain” 2010). MF Husain designed his performance as an act of creation and destruction, similar to the everlasting process of transformation that life itself is, producing his paintings in a performative way, through a dynamic corporeality that vibrates to the rhythm of the universe, which recalls the Groszian definition of art. He projected the figure of the artist as a practitioner rather than a master, one that creates through doing rather than expressing, adopting the persona of picture showman, an artistic figure common to India’s rural and urban cultures that informs the tradition of narrating a story with a visual aid from the folk storytelling with the help of a painted scroll (Coomaraswamy 1929; Jain 1998) to the bioscopewallah and commercial Hindi cinema (Mahadevan 2010). This meant taking a critical stance towards the mainstream projection of artist, artistic production and art in general: he wanted his art to reach everyone and “understood himself as a postcolonial master who would emulate the picture showman of India’s great and little traditions to invent a distinctive modernist language” (Khullar 2015, 129).

Artistic creation and craft production had in common the fact that they are non-mechanical, non-industrial, handmade and nationalist labor; MF Husain’s paintings emphasised the wonder of workday routine, the ability of the painter to generate art just seeing and hearing ordinary things: people cooking, washing clothes, singing. His 1968 film titled *Through the Eyes of a Painter* is an experiment in making, a discovery of the creative potential of improvised artefacts and everyday materials. In the passage of the autobiography I quoted at the end of the previous section, everyday sounds such as

vessels washing and water splashes become sophisticated experimental music: through the artistic sensorial perception the simplest thing can become extremely sophisticated, the ordinary can produce the extraordinary.

An account of the performative exhibition of the branded self can be found in *Em. Ef. Husen kī kahānī apnī zubānī*, in a chapter titled “Kolkattā” (Husen 2002, 202-9). The first paragraph locates chronologically the story in February 1992 and positions MF Husain, who is an old renowned artist now, sipping his morning tea from a mud cup at a teashop situated in an alley behind Tata Centre at the corner with Ho Chi Minh Sarani, as he has done for the past fifteen years whenever he happens to be in Kolkatta. He is writing his memories, and he is struggling to avoid the general tendency to boasting that famous people show in their autobiographies. He is shown chatting with an “engineer babu”, and giving him an autograph accompanied by a drawing of Ganesh. He stresses the fact that he considers common people more reliable than snobbish high-class people, and that what his art needs is the appreciation of the honest and receptive people of Kolkatta, not the snobbish faces of Bombay or the emotionless faces of Delhi’s bureaucrats. He wants to connect with common people, this is a paramount feature of his art. “People want to see both the paintings and the painter’s physiognomy and movements.” (Husen 2002, 204). The narrator reports an anecdote proving the strong bond between the artist and common people:

A passing taxi stopped; two Bengali women gave him three flowers with enthusiastic bliss, as if it were a votive offer. They said “We are looking forward to seeing you painting at the Tata Centre on the 21st!” And off they were! Husain was flabbergasted. He could no longer sip his tea, nor move his pen. Those women had not emerged from a Mercedes or a Contessa, they did not wear French chiffon saris. Perhaps they were returning from a temple after their morning puja. (Husen 2002, 203-4)

MF Husain had a six-day exhibition in Tata Centre, filmed by his son Mustafa in the short documentary *Six Days of Making*. He produced six paintings – representing six female deities in front of a live audience and on completion of his work, he whitewashed all of it. The narrator inserts his notion of art creation in a wider cosmological frame quoting the Urdu poet Jigar Murādābādī (1890-1960):

banā banā ke jo duniyā miṭāī jāī hai
zarūr koī kamī hai ki pāī jāī hai (Murādābādī 2015)

The world is destroyed and reconstructed time and again.
Surely, it’s because a flaw is found somewhere.

According to the narrator, everything in the universe is flawed, half-finished: for example, man is incomplete and woman is incomplete, and the notion of Ardhanāreśvara suggests a possible hope for perfection, so that the world stay alive, instead of giving up life in despair. It is impossible to reach the ultimate mystery of the universe, and even if the human intellect can reach the heights of the miracle of beauty, the body cannot. Therefore, every form of art contains a flaw. That's why the artist should always be aware of the flaw that is in himself.

The account of the six-day performance starts in a highly theatrical mode, showing MF Husain manically absorbed in the effort to express all the achievements he had got in four decades of artistic production. He would paint with the soundtrack of the famous habanera dance from Bizet's *Carmen* - which he defines as a "belly dance" - and Beethoven's seventh symphony. He would be at the same time Maqbool and MF Husain, that is the young artist and the branded artist. Sometimes Maqbool would grab the brush and paint restlessly before disappearing in the crowd; other times Husain would alternate moments of excitement and waves of exhaustion, when he would walk on the stage as if he had lost his way. The audience's mood follows the artist's, thrilled when he is inspired, disappointed when he isn't.

On the morning of the sixth day, the last day, Husain headed straight to the office of the Tata Centre Public Relation Officer, Barun Banerjee. He asked for a blank sheet and he jolted down a drawing. It showed Husain sitting, a brush in his hands. He was surrounded by six canvases, but they were completely blank, not even a line on them. There was only an empty can of white paint next to them. (Husen 2002, 209)

MF Husain has often been characterised by his love for excess, sexuality and sensuality. In this performance, the almost eighty-year-old artist engages in extracting the essence of a turbulent heap of sensations, feelings, experiences and memories seething inside him like the Ganga river, captive inside Śiva's hair. He surfs the waves of a vibratory universe with no precise direction or purpose, accompanied by the sound of music and by the collective gaze of the audience. He is surrounded by six deities, in a shower of colours that covers his whole body. He paints the feminine *śakti* as fertility, love and devotion (Parvatī), knowledge and learning (Sarasvatī), warrior energy (Durgā), destroyer of evil forces (Kālī), divine Mother (Mary), and wealth and prosperity (Lakṣmī). Then, as in the universal cycle of creation and destruction, he whitewashes all forms: when art is produced, it is the consequence of excess, of the "energy or force, that puts life at risk for the sake of intensification, for the sake of sensa-

tion itself - not simply for pleasure or for sexuality, as psychoanalysis suggests - but for what can be magnified, intensified, for what is more, through which creation, risk, innovation are undertaken for their own sake, for how and what they may intensify" (Grosz 2008, 63). But when the powerful impact of its presence is destroyed, it creates an even bigger impact, ceasing to exist physically yet remaining in memories.

5 Memories Becoming Visible

Em. Ef. Husen kī kahānī apnī zubānī is introduced by a short essay penned by renowned Hindi writer Nirmal Varmā, titled "Maqbool's 'Husaini' pen," with a pun about the meaning of the word "ḥusayn" in the original Arab form as "noble, good." Nirmal Varmā states that "the magic in Husain's images, words, details, can be summarised in a single word: metamorphoses. Any single thing changes its form as soon as it gets into his magician-like hands, it gets transmogrified, one after another, new forms of Lilliputian dolls pop up from within, like in a Russian matrioska" (Husen 2002, viii). In the stream of life, time and space flow; tiny details and particulars, insignificant fragment flowing in the stream of life, raw childhood memories ripen with time, they all become real objects that take form in some of Husain's films, paintings, or poems. At the beginning of the autobiography, after a long time, a lantern, an earthen water pot, a muslin dupatta, wandering in the labyrinth of Husain's inner world, become visible; forgotten words, innocent faces do not disappear in the darkness of oblivion, but return years after and take shelter in the artist's workshop and writing.

MF Husain was an iconic mixing of self, community and nation, whose life and work are "intimately entangled with the career of independent India as a democratic, secular and multi-ethnic nation" (Ramaswamy 2011, backcover). He would eulogise Indira Gandhi during the Emergency, when he painted her in the form of Durga riding a tiger; and yet he was totally apolitical, absolutely blank regarding talks about the right wing or leftism. MF Husain's art is an art of existence, an extraction from the universe and an elaboration on it. The body - particularly the female body - is translated into an image that reconfigures the vocabulary of Modernism. For an artist like him, art is not tied to the reproduction of the known, but to the possibility of the new, overcoming the containment of the present to elaborate on futures yet to come. This might be understood as the claim for a different political role for art, meant as a bio-aesthetics entrusted with the creation of new worlds and forms of life (Grosz 2008). In MF Husain's artistic production, as well as in his autobiographical writing, art goes much beyond a narrow understanding of art as a

practice about taste, cultural accomplishment, or a reflection of society. It emerges as territorializing and de-territorializing force, sexual selection, and nonhuman power.

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