
Jogen Chowdhury

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Jogen Chowdhury, who is well known for his increasingly withering depiction of the human condition, has always had a penchant for the human form. There was a time when this form was whimsical and romanticized. When his work had a dreamy, poetic, surreal edge to it. When he drew beautiful women, tender fantasies and wistful dreams, and when his motifs included flowers and butterflies. But even then there were glimmers of his developing acerbity and biting satire.

These glimmers have become a palpable presence in his more recent work where convoluted outlines, drawn as if with a wandering pen that is a trifle out of control, enclose gross, corpulent, misshapen bodies that sag and bloat as if some genetic code within them had gone askew. Divesting his work of narrative content, he concentrates today on the posturing human figure caught on his paper and canvas in intimate revealing flashes. The result is an all round experience that is at once disconcerting, brilliant, weird, embarrassing, perspicacious, ludicrous and strangely empathic.

Preferring ink and pastel for his medium (though he uses oils sometimes as well), he uses a technique of fine cross-hatched lines that weave a net like texture into the mottled, moldering skin of his subjects, and into their cellulitic undulating flab. His colours are restricted to black and white, but he infuses his figure and there with a slow spreading stain of colour and with a waxen luminosity that is strangely appropriate to their incongruity.

Building up a *dramatis personae*—businessmen, lovers, bureaucrats, priests, politicians— Chowdhury places them against neutral, often flat black backgrounds with the occasional minimal prop of a pillow, a bed, or a desk. One suspects that his figures spring from his memory and his everyday experience. This reliance upon autobiographical elements renders him into something of a satirical diarist—of his age and his culture. An age overtaken by avarice, corruption and degradation, where money in the absence of other values reigns supreme. And a culture which harkens back nostalgically and yearningly to the slow motion, refined and sentimental ambience of yesterday's Bengal. This Bengalee culture, has of course to be read between the lines so to speak — there are no blatant signs of it. But its subtle presence, which is particularly Calcutta, is undeniable.

The prevailing grotesquerie that marks Chowdhury's work, seems to spring from

some deep dark recess within his own psyche. It could also be an attempt to bridge the schism between his earlier mentioned 'age' and inherent 'culture'; to reconcile the vulgar horrors of the overt former with the nuanced sensibilities of the covert latter. Perhaps the trauma of partition that he experienced first hand as a very young boy and the insecurity of being a refugee from East Bengal, accounts for this scathing and exaggerated vision. It could also arise from an iconoclastic rage that reaches fever pitch in the bizarre and almost blasphemous series he has done on Ganesh, the Hindu god of wellbeing and prosperity.

Whatever its root causes, this grotesquerie is right on target, and with it Chowdhury topples myths and icons, laying bare the affectations, pomposities and hypocrisies of today's social milieu as well as the frailties and foibles of the human race. The artist catches the world in *flagarante delicto*. That he does it with a telling insight, tinged with irony and empathy, diffuses the ensuing discomfort. But not quite.

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