
Exchanging gazes

Shreyasi Chatterjee

Self being a product of it's culture, it's gender, it's tradition, it's race when thrown into the diverse shades of light of the outer world tries to negotiate with the newly perceived social and cultural elements that it encounters. And at this juncture, arises the tension between tradition and modernity. Jogen choudhury's exposure to the modern western art world during his stay in Paris had put him before this puzzle which he has been able to solve reassuringly and gracefully by negotiating with the modernism of the western art world over the years. A quick look into his pictures show primacy given to simplicity, clarity and immediacy of the expressive distortions of his figures. Stylistically they not only evoke the indigenous idioms (kalighat pata, Bengal patua tradition, folk dolls of Bengal) but also recall modern masters like Matisse, Gaguin in rendering flat colours and sinuous lines and many others in the process of his assimilation. In this age of globalization where the growth of homogeneity is much promoted, the axiomatic pronouncement of Jogen Chowdhury's paintings proclaim his immense faith in tradition from where he draws his strength and appropriates western modernism to set free the limitations of indigenous sources in order to unfold the heterogeneous network of a wider cultural space.

Jogen Chowdhury's paintings open up a social space determined by the patriarchal structure of his immediate surroundings. The presence of male figures in his paintings therefore implies the moral, physical and social power that he exercises on women. And the presence of woman in his works is felt in her gestures, clothes or chosen surroundings as she is considered to be the signifier of the weaker sex, the other, in the hierarchical social order of a phallogocentric society signaling the role of gender as a cultural determinant.

In this article I wish to focus upon the gaze of the images, both male and female of Jogen's paintings and the psychological message they contain which are actually culturally mediated.

The binary assumption of a male voyeur and female being the object of his vision recurring in western modernism since late 18th century projects the bodies of women being conscious of their charm become an object of desire under the male gaze explicitly does not always hold true in Jogen's works. Like the black and white drawing of Noti Binodini, a 19th century Popular icon with a far away look in her eyes is not at all aware of her feminine charms. Although the artist has exposed her bosoms through

her sari clad body deliberately but the onlooker fails to possess her even psychologically. Because to-be-looked-at-ness of Binodini's self-conscious charm here is ruled out by the subjects's indifference to the male spectators. This Kind of self-absorption of the subject in his or her own world is very much intrinsic to the traditional ethos of Indian paintings.

At this point, I want to make clear in this discussion that I am not only presenting the gaze of Jogen Chowdhuri's female figures viewed against the perspective of a patriarchal culture but also of the gaze of his male subjects towards the spectators expressing their psycho-cultural anxieties being a part of the phallogocentric society.

Curiously enough many of his male figures project their unselfconscious image as they turn back to the spectator or dozes off to sleep. Like, a scantily clothed fleshy man seated on a sofa with his eyes closed is caught unaware of being framed as a subject. But this televisionic frame of the composition does not fail to assert the male sexuality at an instant to the onlooker. Although Jogen has been careful enough to hide the male organ under the preponderous weight of his distorted bulging body (*Man on Sofa, Pastel on Paper, 1976*). Similarly a reclining figure, resting on his elbows, a reminiscent of Henry Moore's typical sculptural pose, draped in a narrow band of dhoti, indicates the sign of regional costume, dominates the canvas and therefore the entire field of vision of the spectator. It recalls the earthly colours of Amrita Shergil and therefore of Ajanta murals but with a mundane overtone. The hairless smooth body with a slightly bulging stomach epitomizes the typical Indian male type. Thus we cannot 'turn a blind eye' to the dealings of Jogen's masculine sexuality, at least obliquely (*Reclining Figure, oil on canvas, 1995*).

Jogen participates in the age-old cultural construction of female body as an object of desire as he paints seductive females absorbed in their own world, as for example *'Midsummer Night'*, oil, 1994 or *'Moonstruck'*, drawing, 1995. They display their exuberance against the sky strewn with moons and stars. In both the pictures, the doll-like gaze of the female figures cut diagonally across the picture which positions the male viewer and the artist in the role of a voyeur. Jogen is also adept at disconnecting the gazes of his subject from the viewer more vividly even when he places a frontal image of a man dressed in kurta pajama projecting a distant look sufficient enough to deny the presence of the spectators. On the contrary, a man holding a square mask is pushed to the side of the picture-frame with a sidelong glance demands a compulsive attention from spectators as he stretches out a square shaped mask before them.

Jogen's plausible representations of eyeball connection in the work 'spring', oil, 1995 showing a couple exchanging affectionate looks or in the drawing 'Night of the Owl', 1996, where a female character exchange look with squinted nocturnal creature, dish out the syntax of Jogen's vocabulary of mutual gaze. 'The Tiger in the Moon light', his famous work, shows the predator's prowess as it springs into action quiet convincingly. The gaze of the ferocious beast never fails to communicate valor although the eyes are drawn in the manner of a folk idiom. And the sprightly action of tiger instantly reminds us also the tigers of Bundi and Kotah hunting scenes.

The traditional gendered patterns of power and authority become transparent in his Couple series. A drawing 'Couple' done in dry pastel and colour on paper, 1996, showing the husband while escorting his wife suddenly turns back and returns his gaze to the spectators in a dramatic way. As he plays the role of a protector one can therefore read it as the gaze of surveillance, which is obviously determined socially and culturally. Another colour drawing 'Couple', 1996, showing a pot bellied bald man sitting on a higher platform than the female with piquant look, rebukes the pliant female with downcast eyes seated at his feet signals the masculine authority. But also, there are images of couple where the man consoles a woman or a demanding female dominates a passive male, express gazes attributing to their mental states. Like the picture, Couple, oil on canvas 1995, show a female clad in a red saree expressing her rage to her passive male companion is perceived sharply as the pupils almost pop out of her eyes. Half-closed dreamy eyes of a young girl with a languid gaze (Face of a girl in dry pastel, 1996), or a woman lost in day dreaming while resting on an embroidered pillow (Woman III, dry pastel, 1996) in a close-up view-point exemplify the organic expression of eyes in spite of being highly stylized. And the play of the gazes remains confined only in the picture frame in both of these works.

Therefore, it is a fact that conspicuous gazes in Jogen Chowdhuri's works play the key role in building up the mood of his pictures. In this context, one may recall Jamin Roy's works where the stylized eyes play an important role. But the flat cutout shape with a black dot in the center, leitmotif of Jamini Roy's fish-shaped eyes only projects an archaic look whereas Jogen's subjects never fail to achieve the effect of an organic eye to delineate the psychological dimension of the subjects portrayed. For this the painter evolves a language of his own. Although for art historical reference one can trace down remotely the fierce expression of the eyes of late Byzantine, 14th century Russian iconic paintings or even Persian manuscript paintings with prominent eyes. Back home, stiff stances of the traditional Jain paintings, fish-shaped eyes of Basohli School and wide extended eyes of Bengal Patas reflect explicitly the morphological ground

of his stylistic evolution. however, such kind of interdependency refers to the artist's reconciliation among cultures far or near.

The iconic gaze of goddess Durga that he recognized in his early years had a deep impact in his psyche that is why later in his paintings such kind of influence surfaced on and off. Say, for example, the iconic gaze of Lord ganesa that he draws with a sure hand. Such idealized but animated eyes interact with the naturalistic European idiom resulting in a hybrid style, certainly denoting feature of Indian modernism. To impart dimension Jogen mostly paints the eyes with thick black lines denoting the upper and lower eyelids that also suggests the presence of eye socket hinting his fascination for European academic realism as he applies different tones to get the effect partially. Similarly, to affix the direction of the gaze's in different angles he places the pupil in the required angle thereby achieving the naturalistic plausibility of the gazes effortlessly. On the whole, the trajectory of his pictorial vocabulary willfully shows a polarity between tradition and modernity, which is again redeemed in the rendition of the gazes of his subjects.
