MF Hussain Unbound: ‘Remembering the Artist Who Loved His Country’

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(This photo essay consists of 9 pictures published by the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust archive after painter MF Hussain sentenced himself to self-exile in Qatar, relinquishing his Indian citizenship due to widespread protests against several of his ‘controversial’ paintings.)

(The photographs / art work used in this article is originally from the SAHMAT archive’s collection ‘Hussain at 94’, and is being reproduced with due permission from the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust.)

A 91-year-old, frail and “vulnerable” (in MF Hussain’s own words) painter shouldn’t have had to put up a fight — a fight for his identity, his work, and beliefs. As Ramon Magsaysay award-winning journalist Ravish Kumar recently said, “Not all battles are fought for victory — some are fought to tell the world that someone was there on the battlefield.”

On his 104th birth anniversary, here is a glimpse of painter and iconoclast MF Hussain — a man who loved his home, his country — its diverse and vibrant culture — perhaps more than anything else.

Coming to the question of art and law. Simplistically speaking, art does not limit us. It empowers freedom, volition, unfettered expression and creative prowess. Law, on the other end of the spectrum, delineates right from wrong, the permissible from the impermissible, and the valid from the invalid. Your ‘interpretation’ of law is redundant to the Law. It commands the attributes of objectivity, pragmatism; is guided by reason and chooses to tread a followed path.

So from where I see it, law offers solutions while art offers perspective, and leaves the audience to arrive at its own solutions. Yet somehow, this reasoning seems abysmal in the larger scheme of things. The fact remains that Hussain left his beloved country in fear, despite being acquitted of all charges of obscenity by the High Court of Delhi. Today, 13 years later — what purpose did it all serve? In the end, a noted artist was hunted and chased out by so-called watchdogs of social censorship.

Let’s look at how other painters responded to Hussain leaving us, through their art.
How ‘Batman’ Hussain Fought ‘Saffron’ Forces

Arun Kumar H.G’s ‘tribute’ to Hussain after the latter’s exile.(Courtesy: Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust)

No superpower — just raw talent, creative prowess, grit and gumption.

Our crime-tolerating ‘Batman’ Hussain relentlessly tried to fight off the ‘saffron’ forces, even employed the not-so-Batman techniques of offering an apology to smoothen any creases of hurt sentiments.

But instead of Batman’s brooding personality and Dionysian figure, ‘Batman’ Hussain holds an olive branch reference of a innocuous paint brush.
What does indelible ink signify?

"I have exercised my legal right to vote" but now I must adhere to the 'one person-one vote' rule. What the electoral ink also stands for is its inextricable link to my right as an Indian citizen, in painful contrast to the fact that Hussain will never exercise this proud right again.
A ‘Happy’ Hussain

A happy Hussain.

Like any other painter — in his element. Unfettered, gleeful and jubilant.
The Swish of Hussain’s Brush

Painting by MS Prakash Prabhu. (Courtesy: Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust)

Tranquil and content, at ease with the flow of his pain brush. Rather tricky to discern whether it is his hand guiding the brush or the other way round.
Is there another entity more symbolic of freedom than the free-flying, high-soaring bird?

They explore untrammelled skies just the way an artist traverses his empty canvass.

But there is an enormous obstruction in the way of these birds, caging Hussain on the other side of the barrier. It is a negation thereof. A vivid, unimaginative, perverse negation of his freedom of expression, of belief, of liberal hands and a progressive voice. It is a disempowering and condescending repudiation of our constitutional rights, let alone the antithesis of all that he stood for.
Painting by Ram Rahman. (Courtesy: Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust)

At home, amongst his own.

Hussain with his brethren (friends from his circle of artists at the National Gallery of Modern Art).
Why Appeal to ‘Moon & Masjid’?

This painting is supposedly congratulating Hussain on being acquitted of charges of defamation (of the national flag) and obscenity under the Indian Penal Code. It is dated to 2009 and the judgment absolving him on all accounts was published in 2008.

But why appeal to the moon and the masjid? A man who chose to stay this side of the border post the partition of 1947 surely did not do so because of easy access to a masjid. The text of the above artwork reminds me of a shair (couplet) by Allama Iqbal which reads as follows:
I remember those days gone past  
the springs in those gardens, the sounds of chirpings  
where is the freedom of nest now  
coming and going at one's own pleasure

A Glum, Forlorn Hussain

Although never depicted as particularly exuberant, Hussain was not always portrayed as glum; but here he is. A glum, forlorn Hussain is drawn against the Jumeriah Towers in Dubai where he had to flee to, fearing death threats from right-wing fringe groups. Maybe his only luggage was the paintbrush he packed; to reminisce the days he spent painting giant hoardings in Mumbai and saving money from his day jobs to catch a train to Gujarat to paint the temples he grew up around.
Was Hussain Happy to be Back in His Land?

There is no disputing the underlying idea that the person with the luggage cart is Hussain — the barefoot reference speaks volumes about the painter’s hallmark trait. But are those men standing across the Arrivals section at the airport waiting to arrest Hussain on account of the then non-bailable warrant issued against him? Were they happy to see him? More importantly, was Hussain happy to be back in his land? Or was he turning around to see his country one last time before going away forever?

(Aaliya Waziri is pursuing her L.L.B from O.P. Jindal University. This is a personal blog, Views expressed are the author’s own. The Quint neither endorses nor is responsible for them.)