

In vogue since antiquity

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Music, like love, is easier to experience than define. It has demonstrated its tenacity for not being trapped within the confines of a concise definition. Pakistani melodists have wholesomely contributed to the refinement of film music, which has now acquired a distinct identity of its own. A number of songs of Pakistani master composers have won trans-national acclaim.

In the domain of folk music, there is more for us to cheer than in other spheres of melodic expression. Although a number of frontline folk singers died during the last half century (Alam Lohar, Faiz Baloch, Saeen Akhter Husain, Mai Bhaagi, Faqir Abdul Ghafoor, to name a few), the void created by their demises was filled by a new crop of young melodists, including Arif Lohar, Abida Parveen, Ataulah Isakhelvi, Mashooq Sultan, Shazia Khushk and scores of lesser-known singers from the Punjab, NWFP, Balochistan and Sindh. Not only have they carried forward the traditions of their ancestors, but also enriched these with their own creative ingenuity.

The tradition of singing and dancing under the cathartic impact of Sufi poetry is very old in the province of Sindh, which is far ahead of other regions in the country in its popular musical repertoire and potential. Culturally, Sindh has always occupied a high position in the Sub-continent, which continues to remain so

even now. The vim and vigour of Pakistani folk music stem from its tenacity and resilience with which it has resisted pressures from various cultural currents and cross-currents spawned in the past by continued interaction among different civilizations, although it did absorb some musical influences. However, it has firmly retained its original ambience, form and character, along with its charm, flexibility and mesmerising power.

Among the most enchanting songs from the rural hinterland of Pakistan are the kafis, waees and raags of Shah Abdul Latif, Shahbaz Qalandar and other Sufi saints of Sindh; The kafis of Ghulam Farid, Shah Husain and Bulley Shah, and the dohas of Sultan Bahu; the waars and boliaan from the Punjab; the patriotic songs of Khushal Khan Khattak and Rehman Baba from the North West Frontier Province; and the epics of Sassi Pannu and the songs of Mast Tawwakali from Balochistan, sound as fresh and invigorating as ever before.

Among the most popular kafi and wae singers of Pakistan are Abida Parveen, Pathaney Khan, Shahida Parveen and Hamid Ali Khan Bela, who enthrall their audiences with mystic songs of the Sufis, which they render feelingly and with commitment.

As a literary form, kafi originated during the Middle Ages when, in the realm of the spirit, other-worldliness completely overshadowed medieval thought. Composed only in Punjabi and

Sindhi languages, kafis were used by Sufi poets as a vehicle to launch their poetical and philosophical thoughts, which generally revolved round such themes as Divine Love; the mortal nature of the world and its illusory character; the probationary status of our lives, stressing the point that the world is merely a preparatory ground for a better and fuller life to come; pantheism and self-negation.

Kafis were composed originally for the enlightenment of rural folks using simple diction, easy-to-understand metaphors and similes, and without the use of high-flown jargon. That is why kafis written by Sufi poets centuries ago are still well-understood and enjoyed by a vast majority of people in Pakistan.

Over three years ago, this scribe and Khalid Hasan, a former Managing Director of Shalimar Recording and Broadcasting Company initiated a project, which was aimed at preserving an invaluable treasure of recorded music (over 1.5 million minutes available at the National Sound Library, Islamabad). After much hard work done in scanning this huge reservoir of music, material (representing all genre of our melodic system) for 57 compact discs (CDs) was set aside for re-recording. So far, all but classical vocal category of this collection has been released. ☺

Paintings of Hajra Mansur

Art Dawn 10.2.02 By Saira Dar

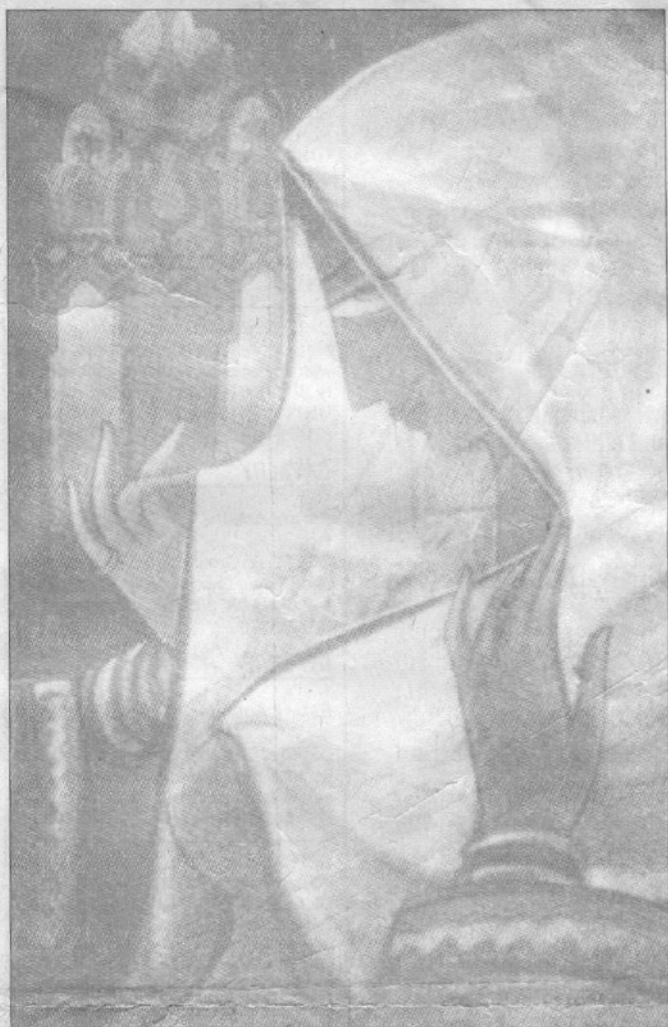
HAJRA Mansur has been exhibiting her paintings for almost four decades. A diploma holder from The Government College of Arts and Crafts, Lucknow, India, from where she graduated in 1964, she migrated to Pakistan in 1966, and together with her sister, Rabia Zuberi, founded the Karachi School of Arts. A well-known artist in her own right, she is the wife of Mansur Rahi, a Pakistani artist of considerable repute.

Hajra's recent collection of water colours have been put up at Ejaz Galleries for public viewing till Feb 14. For all those familiar with Hajra's work, it is obvious that the passage of time has brought negligible or little changes in her approach to painting. An exponent of what has been termed as 'oriental art' by some, Hajra continues to paint in a style that is 'romantic' in an eastern way, and reminiscent of Chughtai's work. The medium and technique of water colour washes, the stylization and symbols derived from Mughal art have Chughtai's flavour, but in a considerably simplified, almost watered down way.

Women are the central theme of Hajra's work; highly stylized pretty faces and slim but curvaceous entities that sit coyly and dream away into oblivion or towards some Mughal prince in the backdrop. The huge elongated eyes that reach out even beyond the frame of the face, the small aquiline noses, rosebud lips and flowing locks of hair are all 'romantic' fantasies that the artist has indulged in for the past many years and have become her signature tune. It is amazing how Hajra has not tired of her theme and a bygone imagery of her gender.

In addition to the female form, Hajra employs other symbols and figures in her compositions; birds, peacock feathers, 'diyas', geometric motifs and figures and architectural details reminiscent of the Mughal style. However, there are accessories to the central decorative entity — woman — who is both concealed and revealed in sheer and flowing drapes.

Hajra has considerable control over water colours and in



many cases the luminosity of the washes give the work a jewel-like quality. The current work has a dominance of mauves and lilacs as well as glowing reds and earth tones. The pleasing colours and flowing lines give the work a decorative appeal.

With Chughtai as a reference point, it is worth noting that while the women in Chughtai's work were highly stylized and 'other worldly' they still possessed a substantiality and dignity which is absent in the figures we find in Hajra's work. Her female forms may only be mistaken as ethereal; they in fact are more rooted in worldly fantasies of a sensuous kind, almost embarrassing for women who prefer their gender to be portrayed in a more substantive

way. The modern and well as ancient woman of the East, has a far more formidable character than that portrayed by certain novelists and poets and which find their visual embodiment in such art. No doubt, fantasy and its portrayal are the prerogative of an artist and every artist has his or her own calling.

The burden of being an artist, however, involves the fact that artists, especially those with influence and repute are guides and torch-bearers who also show the mirror to the society they live in. In this context, and considering Hajra's experience and expertise, it would not be unreasonable to coax her to also explore the theme of women and eastern culture with greater depth and dynamism.

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