



Images from a timeless past

Tassadaq Sohail has done in painting what Intizar Husain has done in fiction — localising the mythical

By Quddus Mirza

art

Despite having lived in England for 41 years, Tassadaq Sohail holds a significant position in the Pakistani art scene. His method of image making that includes a peculiar way of building surfaces, drawing (scratching) bodies and creating a supernatural environment, is distinct and is admired by many art lovers here. He frequently exhibits paintings made on small papers, boards and canvases with people and animals composed in imaginary landscapes.

His characters — pre-historic beasts, fish, birds, bearded men and naked females — are involved in diverse activities in fictitious and extraordinary settings. The relationship between the figures and the background is not real but Sohail tells of it in a way that reminds one of thoughts, dreams and fantasies. In fact, the only logical connection between

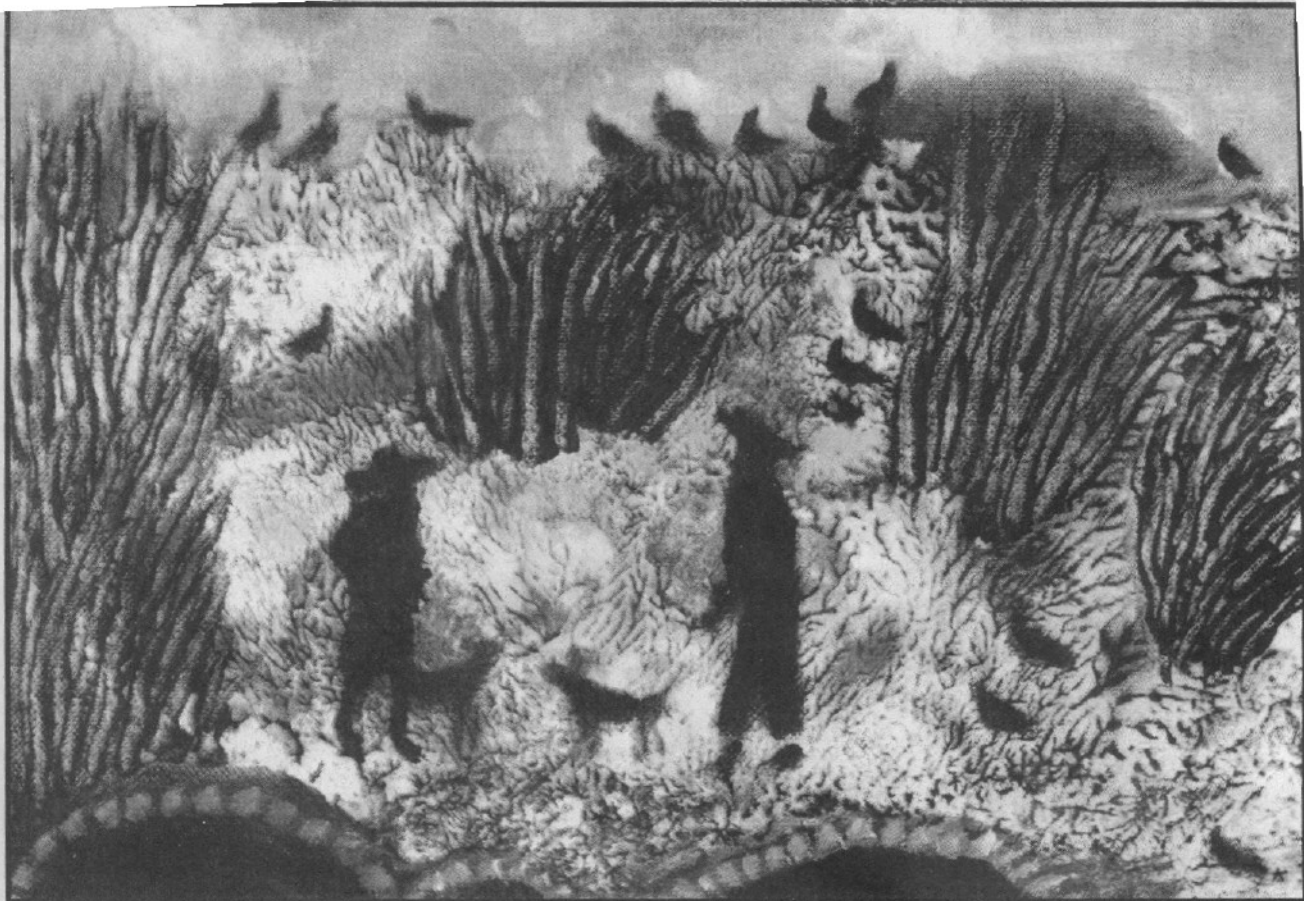
This is what happens in Sohail's works titled 'Sleeping in the Forest' and 'God Sake! Take me out of here. Will you?'. 'Personified' snake and fish are frequently drawn in his paintings. These animals suggest sexuality — particularly associated with the male gender.

Compared to other painters who reduce the female form to a symbol of beauty and pleasure, Sohail treats it as a voyeur's activity: of gazing at the naked female body. In a number of paintings women are shown posing before a group of bearded men gazing at the naked figure. Probably, Tassadaq hints at the fascination held by men for women, often disguised as an aversion which culminates in imposing multiple restrictions on them. The act of gazing and the scheme of arranging human beings in a line, transforms the whole picture into a stage play unfolding before an audience. In a few works ('No 35' and 'Feed the Birds') these nymphs, however, are painted without another character in the pictures. Here it is the outside viewer who assumes the

An important detail about human figures in the paintings by Sohail is their appearance. Most of them have beards and many are dressed like religious leaders. They resemble biblical personalities. The work appears as an illustration of various episodes from the Jewish history. One explanation for this kind of imagery can be found in the painter's long stay in a London suburb, heavily populated by Jews.

The basis for the biblical mood in these paintings may also be traced in the vernacular literature, especially in the fiction by Intizar Husain. The master storyteller takes up themes from the Old Testament and weaves contemporary material around them so as to localise them. Tassadaq Sohail (also a writer with published books to his credit) seems to be doing the same. In his paintings, though Intizar Husain has moved on to other subjects, motifs and techniques during the last many years.

The fact that Tassadaq Sohail's work has not changed noticeably for years can be a



(top left) 'Happy family'; (top right) 'Jews in London', and (above) 'We cannot show the other side of her because that will be rude'.

This sense of timelessness or the 'pre-historic time' is enhanced in his paintings by the inclusion of the beasts belonging to the ancient age,

damsels because of their dresses and background, they cannot be linked to any specific era in the known history. Instead, they evoke a feeling of timelessness or appear like images and visions from a primitive period.

This sense of timelessness or the 'pre-historic time' is enhanced in his paintings by

All these aspects contribute in transforming his images into signs for emotions, fears and nightmares, rather than only being the records of a real world — or even scenes from a metaphysical realm. But this feature, which has become a peculiar sign of Tassadaq Sohail's style, is

review

logical connection between the separate parts of the picture he draws is how they are manipulated in shaping a narrative.

This type of narrative is often seen in literature where animals are endowed with human attributes, appearing to interact with men and women or engaging in a conversation.

the pictures. Here it is the outside viewer who assumes the role/position of the inner spectator.

This scheme of attaching an observer to a painting is visible in Sohail's other works as well, where figures are composed as a group of individuals gathered in front of a camera. Here viewers replace/substitute the mechanical device for capturing an image (by storing the scene in their retina).

work has not changed noticeably for years can be a matter of concern. But on a deeper level this aspect is related to his subject matter and the way he approaches it. His construction and the formal aspect of his paintings convey a certain idea about time. That time — like his art — remains unchanged. This concept of time is akin to the eastern notion of time that is fixed and cannot be altered, which is usually described as fate. And whatever happens in

for example dinosaurs.

the world is merely a manifestation/replication of the original plan. In contrast, the western idea of time is not of an eternal time (fate) but is an entity that moves or evolves in a linear direction and introduces variations in its course. This movement of time is usually defined as progress.

In the paintings by

Tassadaq Sohail, the fixed and unchanging time is shown in multiple manners. Sometimes, it is dealt through a constant representation of light with figures and actions composed in natural environment or near some structures. Though human beings in these works can be identified as priests, ordinary folks and nude

the inclusion of the beasts belonging to the ancient age, for example dinosaurs. Similarly, the serpent — mentioned in the sacred text as playing an active part in the fall of Adam and as being one of the earliest inhabitant of Eden — also symbolises the primordial epoch. Other animals — such as elephants and rhinoceros — though still around us, too resurrect a pre-historic connection.

under review by four portraits of young girls hanging in the gallery. These canvases, in their simplicity, basic skill and elementary approach, fail to impress visitors who are otherwise captivated by the uniqueness and lucidity in the rest of his paintings.

The exhibition will remain open till April 10, 2003 at the Croweaters Gallery, Lahore.