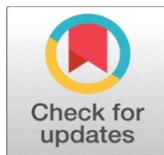
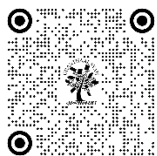


UNVEILING THE MYSTIC REALMS OF NATURE- ARTIST PREM SINGH

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ABSTRACT

This research paper truthfully and systematically analyses the creative journey of artist Prem Singh spanning over seven decades, tracing and chronocling the roots of his motivation and the role of socio-cultural and traditional environment, which played a significant role in nurturing his artistic sensibilities. The organic growth of his forms and elements points towards an inclination to unveil the mystic metaphors and presence of the immortal in his works of great artistic merit. It also recognizes his love for the ever-changing new ideas, techniques, and use of materials to make his art vibrant and pulsating with emotions. Series after series, he has poignantly touched upon sensitive issues facing the mankind and also finds solace in mystic contemplation. Despite all odds, how this artist a lover of Nature, carved a niche for himself in the field of art, is an inspiration in itself. Today, he is considered as one of the doyens of Contemporary art in Punjab and India.

Keywords: Patiala, Punjab, Government College of Art, Chandigarh, Government Museum & Art Gallery, Chandigarh, Dr. M.S. Randhawa, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi (NGMA), Veiled Women, 1984 Riots, Nature, Ink Drawings

1. INTRODUCTION

The majestic city of Patiala, Punjab was the capital of Patiala and East Punjab States Union (PEPSU, 1948) before reunion of Indian states and was a great centre of arts and crafts, fashion, music, dance, cuisine, and literature. These cultural traditions flourished under the royal patronage of various Maharajas especially Maharaja Bhupinder Singh (1891-1938), who was a great patron and connoisseur of art. It is a city of palaces, gardens, *havelis*, *samadhs* (structure build on a grave of a religious person or saint), temples, Gurudwaras and enchanting and glittering bazaars, where artisans, craftsmen, and artists from all over India, created magnificent specimens of myriad fashionable accessories like fabrics, embroideries, jewellery and gold embroidered *jutis* (footwear). Each street or bazaar in Patiala

was dedicated to a specific craft. There used to be astonishing bursts of energy and joy, hustle, and bustle in these streets. Artist Prem Singh who was born and brought up in this royal city, naturally had a great fascination for dazzling and intricate works of embroidery done in gold and silver work, as he often passed by the shops lined up in the streets of Patiala where generations of craftsmen were engaged in these crafts. Women bedecked in jewellery added a special charm. The atmosphere was seeped in glamorous razzle and dazzle. He often created floral patterns and designs in his small sketch-book using gold and silver paper. There was a profusion of metallic colours on clay toys and calendars of gods and goddesses. [Singh \(2011\)](#) The song of mirth and merriment rose from the ceremonies and customs being celebrated. These day-to-day affairs evoked royal charm and grandeur.

2. TRACING THE ROOTS AND EARLY RECOGNITION

A sensitive observer Prem Singh's inspiration grew from strength to strength, as he closely examined and studied great specimens of art done by prominent European artists like Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Rembrandt, and Indian artists belonging to the Bengal School. His earlier encounters with miniature paintings where elaborate and intricate *mukats* (crowns), ornaments, garments and floral borders enhanced the overall ambience of these great works. But these creations were produced by the artists under the patronage of *raj*as and *maharaj*as and the artists had to cater to their taste. Taking a break from this world, he devoted his attention towards more individualistic style of painting, which would satisfy his creative freedom and vision. [Sheth \(2006\)](#) Prem Singh was born to Mother Mohinder Kaur and father Arjan Singh on 15 April, 1943 in the area of old Patiala (Punjab). He was brought up in a joint family where he had a wonderful childhood, enjoying the company of siblings and cousins. Observing and listening to the tales of wisdom from the mouth of elders in the family made him wiser and here he learnt the fundamentals of living a good life. People living in this part of Patiala came from various castes, creeds, and religions but they all lived in great harmony and together they celebrated all religious festivities with great fervour. The peaceful atmosphere prevailed in every household and their children enjoyed playing and eating together. There was complete respect and cohesion of feelings and thoughts amongst all the inhabitants. Writing on *takhti* (a wooden slate) with a *kalam* (reed pen) dipped in *syahi* (homemade ink) perhaps was his first lesson in drawing and he diligently practised this creative exercise several times a day. Each inhabitant of this area visited temples, gurudwaras and *samadhs* with deep reverence and faith in their hearts. His parents named him Prem, because he was jovial in nature and easily made friends. This trait in him opened the window for fresh thoughts and ideas. Needless to say, this aspect broadened his mindscape and helped him in imbibing new trends in art. As he was often busy in drawing in his notebooks, his friends were of the view that one day, he will be a great artist. He often drew figures in coal and chalk on the walls or floor of his house, reflecting his creative manifestations embedded deep in his inner psyche. The word spread around that he can draw religious symbols and motifs with ease. Many artisans flocked to his house and requested him to draw for them to use these patterns on the walls or in front of their houses. As he drew a motif of *Ek Omkar* outside the wall of his house in relief work, his fan following grew in great numbers. His father then decided that he should join a School of art to train under able art teachers. In his earlier days, he came across several chances to visit the palaces of Maharaja of Patiala, where he was mesmerised with fascinating specimens of western art collection. The memories and childhood games he played, were started appearing on his early canvases. What triggered his

imagination towards individualistic style was the painting of lions, each different from the other and he decided to paint his own version of a lion. Parul (2016, September 15) With lots of aspirations and dreams in his eyes, he joined Government College of Art, Chandigarh in 1962 to learn about the fine nuances of art and painting, where he acquired enlightened vision to look at art in broader perspectives. Presence of Government Museum & Art Gallery in the campus of Art College, he often visited to savour the grandeur of Gandhara sculptures, miniature paintings and works of Contemporary art. He quenched his thirst for finding deeper essence of art which was satiated by an art exhibition in 1965 organised by Guest Keen Williams Limited- a Calcutta based company. This exhibition comprised of paintings by students at the major art colleges in India. His joy knew no bounds when he was selected to be exhibited along with eleven other artists in a calendar selected by an eminent panel of judges. Kapoor (2017) *'The credit goes to my own individualistic style and judges found it as a fresh and brave approach'*, states Prem Singh. The other artists included in this venture were A. Alphonso (Madras), Jayant Parikh (Baroda), Shyam Sunder Sharma (Lucknow), V.M. Sandanandan (Madras), R.B. Pavamani (New Delhi), Arun Dutta (Calcutta), Pritpal Singh Sahni (Chandigarh), D. Venkatapathy (Madras), Santanu Bhattacharya (Calcutta), Tapan Ghosh (Calcutta) and T. Vishwanathan (Madras). This reinforced his journey into art.

3. ENCOUNTER WITH HARSH REALITIES

In Prem Singh's first Solo Show organised at Chandigarh, there was a profusion of figurative compositions with emphasis on colourful backgrounds. Two of his paintings were acquired by art connoisseur and commissioner of Chandigarh Administration- Dr. M.S. Randhawa for the permanent collection of Government Museum & Art Gallery, Chandigarh. His journey with exploration of mood, meanings of life and Nature continued till 1975. It entered into his imagination that if a piece of stone could tell the story of an era, why not then one can paint without gestures and glances, which were present in most of the works created by the artists in those days. He started painting images of veiled women- a symbol of Indian womanhood in all its sculpturous grace and winsome modesty, expressing their emotions and feelings through folds of drapery. Bhatti (1987) During an exhibition of these works in New Delhi, Dr. Karan Singh (erstwhile Maharaja of J & K) happened to visit the gallery and a curious lady inquired, *'why there are no faces in these artworks?'* Before Prem Singh could address this question, Dr. Karan Singh who a connoisseur of art was himself promptly replied that the lady is free to add her own face- this is the story of women in nutshell and not of an individual woman.

These were the horrific times in the last week of November, 1984 when Prem Singh was displaying his works in an art gallery in Delhi. Violent riots broke out that shook the world. He breathed the riot hit air in Delhi and met riot ridden families. While his heart was crying, he got a letter from his friend Afzal from Madhya Pradesh which gave him solace that someone still loves him and appreciated his art. There was a pal of gloom and desperation as he entered his studio where echoes of uneasy silence pierced through his ears. Then he started a series of Ink drawings expressing his anguish that a woman who gives birth to life, only she can feel the intensity of its loss. In 1985, he exhibited these drawings under the title- *'Images from the scarred city'* at Alliance Francaise, Chandigarh. Later on, he came to know that the secret agencies of Government started keeping a strict vigil on his activities. These drawings were also exhibited in Calcutta. Going through the reviews, All India Radio cancelled his interview, but he resolved to show these drawings in Delhi and Bombay.

4. NEW BEGINNINGS

Prem Singh depicted his sorrow and helplessness in works post these riots. Each passing day gave a new jolt to his psyche, as violent events continued off and on. Luckily, he came out of this shock after seeing the works of eminent Dutch Post-Impressionist- Van Gogh known for his distinguished sensibility and creative vision. He was deeply struck by Van Gogh's emotional and spiritual state which he truthfully expressed in art against all odds in life. Prem Singh yearned to meet him in imagination. Van Gogh's inspiration resulted in the creation of new series. An artwork from this series was selected for permanent collection in the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA), New Delhi. *"I was happy to share space with all time greats such as Amrita Sher-Gil, Rabindranath Tagore, Abanindranath Tagore, Nand Lal Bose, Jamini Roy, Sailoz Mukherjee, Ram Kinkar baij and several others in an exhibition curated by eminent art critic- Geeta Kapur in 1994'*, says Prem Singh who was then part of the faculty of Government College of Art, Chandigarh. He ultimately retired as Principal of this college. To experiment with other mediums, he started exploring the possibilities of Ink and water colours and one of these works was selected by the National jury for display in Indian section of 8th Triennale India, a world art exhibition organised by Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi. The three-men jury comprising of William Leiberman (U.S.A.), Dough Hall (Australia) and Satish Gujral (India), impressed by his drawing, selected it for the coveted Triennale India International Award in 1994. [Kaur \(2016\)](#) He feels that water colours and Ink medium has tremendous possibilities in expressing thoughts playfully and spontaneously, while many artists believe oil colour is a better medium for the longevity of the artwork. *'I started working on Chinese rice paper and produced works which made me realise for the first time that the brush is not only meant for applying the colour, but one can also breathe through it. This infused a new life in my work'*, explains Prem Singh.

5. EXPLORATION OF MYSTIC METAPHORS IN NATURE

Nature remains an inexhaustible source for Prem Singh, as it is the cradle of all living forms. [Singh \(2011\)](#) It has the ability to rejuvenate creative impulses, as divinity is manifested in abundance, which provides food for thought and propels meditative emotions. Natural forms of flora and fauna, ever-changing shapes of floating clouds over rolling landscapes and meandering rivers, formed vivid geometrical patterns in Nature, which touch the sensitive chord of his imagination. The paintings of this versatile painter represent glimpses of a world full of mystic spiritual parlance imbibed from Mother Nature. Out of the magical and mesmerising forms and colours, a melody soars into the sky like a grateful prayer.

The essence of art critic, curator, and scholar Santo Datta points towards the narrative that even the eminent art critics observe that Prem Singh is not repetitive in representation of his ideas. He gradually improvises and each time he reinvents new aesthetic vocabulary, which comes like a whiff of fresh air, resulting in creation of engaging works of art. His each canvas echoes an intense vibration, oozing an aura of sublime light bathed in ethereal nectar. All through his long journey in art, the source of life of his imagery always springs from the womb of Nature. Visuals germinating in the divine soil thus provide answers to his never-ending quest to touch the sensibilities of human intellect. The formation of his metaphors may seem familiar and mundane to some, yet he possesses an ability to unveil the inherent currents and under-currents of subconscious mind. Overloading his canvases with

nimble and swirling brushstrokes, he covers the uneven terrain with vibrant hues of autumn leaves. The leaves then arise like a phoenix from the smouldering ambers of worldly tribulations. It is in fact the presence of the Divine. Closer look at these leaves reveal that he delicately loads his canvases with broken colour fields like the abstract expressionists, purely swirling round the emotional nuances of this artist. Like an efficient orchestra conductor, he raises and lowers the aesthetic pitch to create an enthralling symphony. Datta (2005) There are myriad moods, a sombre or gloomy spell or a warmer glow, the range goes on using blues, greens, violets, ultramarines, golden yellows of the morning and shades of evening and the dusk. First, he makes curving strokes with charcoal. The charcoal strokes define and interpret the area where he wishes to apply paint. This free-flowing exercise is apparent in several of his canvases which lends a magical charm. In the dark spaces, a splash of light colour suddenly lightens up the composition in a mesmerising manner. Canvas after canvas, he successfully captures the volatile relations with the world around him and one can see a glimpse of his inner life or state of mind. His preference for colour, shades and hues is unlimited and has the capacity to illuminate the presence of the Creator. The titles to his canvases though may provide a cue to what he intended to portray, but that will have a limiting effect, as the expanse of thought is infinite, and words can hardly surround it. To name a few titles, one often finds mention of spring time, the ethereal and illuminated presence of the Creator, Din & Bustle and Beyond of daily life and whispers of immortality.

6. A MIRROR TO HIS WORK THROUGH SERIES

To express his collective anguish and sorrow, Prem Singh worked on a new series titled- 'The Veiled Women' as women were the real sufferers in the aftermath of distortedly barbaric riots in Delhi and other places in India. They loss their dear ones and breadwinners and suffered irreparable mental trauma. In such times, solace comes from one and other. These evocative paintings truly describe the agony and struggle of rebuilding their lives from a scratch. As he wanted to express his own agony through these veiled women, he did not paint their individual faces. Their gestures and folds of their dresses express everything. In this remarkable soulful painting, two veiled women are standing in a field full of shrubs and grass, staring at the bleak silver lining in the deep blue skies. The hint of a flying bird gives them the hope that life goes on. It also suggests that their souls and spirits should also take a flight, escaping from the harsh realities of life. Figure 1

Figure 1



Figure 1 When Morning Awakens..., Oil on canvas, 1985/86

Source Artist Prem Singh's Collection

In another powerful painting pulsating with deep emotions, a veiled woman raises her hand and wishes to touch the soaring heights. The colour palette simply mesmerises the viewer as there is a profusion and explosion of green and earthy tones. The woman is dressed in typical Punjabi *Ghagra* and a *chaddar*. The raised hand is bathed in divine milky white light symbolising a yearning for peace and tranquillity. The whole composition presents a masterly brushwork. [Figure 2](#)

Figure 2

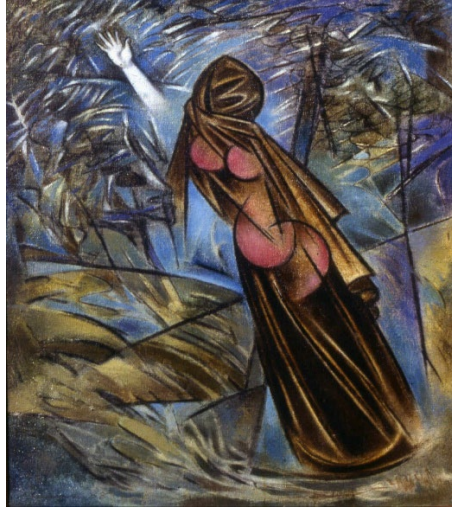


Figure 2 Visible Voice, Oil on canvas, 1985/86

Source Artist Prem Singh's Collection

The painting titled- 'Golden Song' takes the viewer with it to the heights of ethereal delight and drenches it into nectar of peace, joy, and merriment. It is a celebration of the human spirit which provides hope and fills it with a harmonious melody. The painting is a confluence of sombre and dark notes, the very essence of life itself. [Figure 3](#)

Figure 3



Figure 3 Golden Song, Oil on canvas, 2003

Source Artist Prem Singh's Collection

In the painting - 'Whispers of Immortality', the artist captures flowing petals and leaves engaged in a magical trance that is the dance of life. This work has a lyrical charm with unusual colour palette. It soothes the nerves and calms the chaos present in the environs. The painting oozes with unmatched rhythm and streaks of life and joy emerge stronger from some darker tones. The artist operates like a music conductor having full control on his symphony. [Figure 4](#)

Figure 4



Figure 4 Whispers of Immortality, Oil on canvas, 1996
Source Artist Prem Singh's Collection

'Din & Bustle and Beyond'- criss-cross lines running here and there across the canvas in measured strokes depicts the mastery of this artist over his art and portrays that he can make them dance to his tunes and passing notes, capturing myriad and delicate emotions. There is unruly growth of grass and shrubs, the result of a long spells of rains creating swamps and filling the terrain with undulated and wayward growth. [Figure 5](#)

Figure 5



Figure 5 Din & Bustle and Beyond, Oil on canvas, 2004
Source Artist Prem Singh's Collection

7. CONCLUSION

Prem Singh's quest for newer pastures is still intact even after his creative journey of six decades. He is in search of new idioms, new meanings, new pictorial vocabulary and new beginnings. His contribution in the Contemporary art of Punjab and India deserves to be applauded. National and international art critics have profusely admired his vision and his perennial dedicated efforts in exploring the new horizons and realms of creative sensitivities, all the while maintaining his individuality and thirst for experimentation. His thought-provoking works have the potential to mesmerise and enthrall any viewer as he has mastered the art of expressing his innermost philosophical perspectives through seemingly simplistic forms in Nature- the source of all life.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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