

# SUNIL DAS ON PROSTITUTES' REPRESSION IN INDIA

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Sunil Das, a prolific master of sensitive brush-strokes and expressions, well known for his art-works throughout the world. It wouldn't be wrong if said that after Francisco de Goya and Advard Munch, Sunil Das was a proficient artist in executing powerful expressions through brush. He picked up the subject for his painting related with suffering of prostitutes specifically living in Kolkata. After witnessing their distressful condition and anguish in life he endeavored to reveal the pain experienced upon his soul. Sunil Das was residing at Kalighat road in Kolkata; this territory is identified as a red-light area.<sup>1</sup> As described by social workers the condition of this area is very miserable and pitiable state who were ignorant and marginalized in the society, hence influenced Sunil Das. Life of these unfortunate women would have been raised several questions in his psyche and played a significant role in opting this subject i.e. prostitutes for his paintings. It was Sunil Das's prime and most important motive to fetch attention of people and the Government towards them by illustrating various aspects of their life.

Sonagachi is the largest red-light district in Kolkata, rather one of the largest territory in Asia, where several multi-story brothels exist and about 10,000 sex workers are struggling for their livelihood. Widely acclaimed writer Zana Briski and director Ross Kauffman produced a documentary film on the children of prostitutes of Sonagachi, the film title is '*Born into Brothels: Calcutta's Red Light Kids*' which won the Academy Award for the best documentary feature in 2005.<sup>2</sup>

Kidderpore is a third largest red-light area of south Kolkata. There is also a small red-light area at Mushigunj Road, near 'The Statesman's printing press'<sup>3</sup> communicates several stories related to brothels and underprivileged prostitutes living there. In Bowbazar, opposite to the 'Calcutta Medical College and Hospital' another brothel is situated populated with 12,000 prostitutes.<sup>4</sup> Baruipur, Garia, Lebu Bagan, Tollygungy of Kolkata are other red-light districts.<sup>5</sup> According to the study of M. Shahid's specified in 1917 there are 30,000 Bangladeshi women in the brothels of Kolkata.<sup>6</sup>

As Sunil Das lived and worked all his life at Kalighat, Calcutta, which is surrounded by places inhabited with professional prostitutes, he could not had kept his attention away from noticing their continuous torment and anguish. According to Sunil Das not only Kalighat is populated with such practices but a major portion of Calcutta is occupied by community engaged in the profession of prostitution. Sunil's curiosity increased immensely and forced him to peep into the darkness of their mysterious life. To his astonishment these communities were living in a mess. Consequently, he decided to unfold their miseries through his artworks and developed new imagery and a language of brush, so that he could weave stories through web of brush strokes. The painting with the title *Prostitute IV* (Plate No. 1) and *Prostitute I* (Plate No. 2) are concrete evidences confirming their wretched situation. The painted images, expression, dialects, respective psychology, metaphors, mystery of surroundings in dark, gloomy colours and chaotic brush strokes are remarkably expressed. Plate no. 3 and 4 are the similar idioms presenting true picture of sex-worker's life through broken, chaotic strokes with mysterious shadows, moving arrow, geometrical puzzle drawn as gossamer of web in the background elaborating about never ending sufferings and pain, which simultaneously confirming their vulnerability. *Queen of Neemrana* (Plate no. 4) narrates about the brutal murder of womanish desires of a prostitute through red half moon, which a symbolic imagery. Her green lips and flabbergasted eyes, makes the viewer restless psychologically and leaves questions about the painted subject. *The Queen of Neemrana* is shown wearing 'Mangalsutra' (traditional garland indicating married state of a Hindu woman), which is a myth for her because prostitutes are not allowed to have permanent relationship but the theme indicates the Queen's fantasy to become a wife or have an eternal and stable relationship. Gossamer of geometrical web around Neemrana confirming tension and her anxiousness. The expression of repression is noticeable. Sunil Das painted a series on this particular subject, probably to cover and elaborate other phases of miseries faces by her. A painting titled *Awaiting* presenting a prostitute under a cover, explaining her all kind of indifference with customers but her professional deal.



Plate No.1, Prostitute IV, oil on canvas, 1996.



Plate No.2, Prostitute I, oil on canvas, 1999.

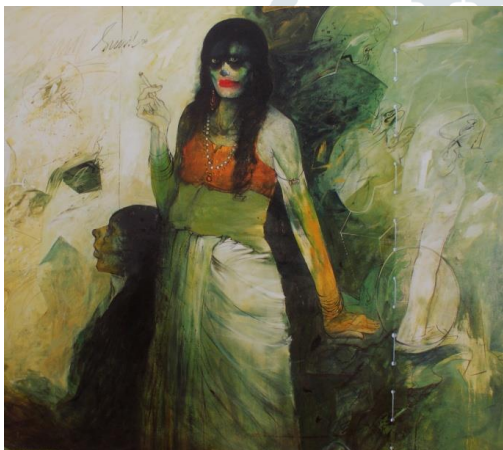


Plate No.3 Anunch, oil on canvas, 1998.



Plate No.4, Queen of Neemrana, oil on canvas, 1998.

During my detailed discussion with Sunil Das particularly on his selection of the subject related with prostitution, he replied:

*'Yes, I have categorically opted this subject for my paintings..... willingly or not willingly these women are selling their body. This is not only today's story, this tradition is continuing since ancient times when women were put on display for selling purpose. I have observed similar kind of display in today's world as well, as images of women are being used in advertisements. I always asked my female friends to protest against the magazines displaying half naked women, specifically those used for promoting sale..... It also surprises me immensely when women's body is used everywhere, for all commodities of life like motorbike, bathroom accessories or what not else. I have reached to the conclusion that due to such practices her status has been lowered down more and more.'*<sup>6</sup>

Sunil Das condemned even the ancient tradition of selling women and called it unethical Human-Trade, strictly against the humanity. According to him Male-chauvinism is responsible for this kind of practices and system in the society, which he opined as a mean and dirtiest way of exhibiting power. He argued against the saying 'man and woman are equal' which he believed a false notion never practiced in the past or will never be applied in future by any social-system. As our discussion advanced, he narrated about the similar problems related to women's atrocities exists not only in India but

present all over the world.



Plate no. 5, Confrontation, oil on canvas. Plate No. 6. Confrontation IV, Oil on Canvas.

He remembered 'Notre Dame Cathedral' of Paris where a brothel is situated close to a church but no attention is ever given to downtrodden women of the brothel. It was ignored even by the religious authorities of the cathedral. Sunil Das visited this place personally and felt sympathetic towards the community living there in brothel.<sup>7</sup>

Sunil Das expressed his worry about growing centres of prostitution in Delhi, Bombay and at other places in India where this profession has taken an enormous shape over the years. This exclusive subject reckoned his soul and he decided to express his anxiety through his paintings. His painting with title 'Red Light Area' presents such places as a curse on the Universe. His painting entitled *A woman in her failings, Woman IV, Radha, My Woman, Shree Radha* (plate no. 8), *My Monalisa* in the collection of the Delhi Art Gallery portraying woman of substance modeled from prostitute community. Sunil has realized that aesthetics lies in realities of those women struggling for their sustenance and fundamental rights. Due to this reason Sunil's Radha or Monalisa is none than other those who are strong enough physically, psychologically and spiritually to face challenges in today's world. As evident through Sunil's paintings his bent of notion and conviction is purely feminist and can be considered as a substantial and significant contributor to the avant gaurde of contemporary movement of feminism.

Sunil very openly and sincerely spoke about the remedy in terms of eradicating or reducing these evil practices from the contemporary society by providing this very crucial matter a serious attention by the Government and NGO(s) as well. He emphasised education is the only source to resolve the problem and save the victims from further downfall. Moreover, welfare of the children of prostitutes should be seriously attempted. He communicated that he used to spend around one lack rupees annually on the education of the children of prostitutes living around his residential area.<sup>8</sup>

To my astonishment Sunil communicated that prostitution profession is growing fast and transforming as a corporate business in metropolitan cities. At present women from sophisticated backgrounds living in lavish houses or flats are involved in this business. The business starts from ¾ lakhs to up to 30 millions.<sup>9</sup> These women are very sophisticated, engaged in prostitution profession clandestinely, sometimes even demand 30 million rupees. This business has entered amongst elite class now, women are selling every day, everyone knows about it but nobody is raising objection. Sometimes girls go to Bombay for stardom but mislead towards disaster. Sunil commented that money has overtaken honor and respect, which is inevitably a state of deterioration of contemporary society.<sup>10</sup>

On asking Sunil how far the selection of the subject related to the prostitution would influence to the society and would it change people's psychology or women would stand up for their self-respect? Sunil answered that education is the only instrument to counter the evil, which is a gradual process but would consequently liberate women involved in prostitution profession and improve their status in society.<sup>11</sup>

Sunil Das's series artwork entitled *Confrontation* (Plate No. 5 and 6) communicating about a conflict between body and soul. As Sunil's protagonist is a woman, evoked at many instances with suggestions of terrible agony, they undergo through their body and soul. In the above pictures traditionally clad, unidentified women portraying a metaphorical image of Indian woman, who is a martyr of sacrifices engraved in red color symbolically. In both the above paintings woman's allegorical image is emerging out from white surface, shown with covered face depicting suffocation and speechlessly surrendered to the situation, although portrayed as in her full youth with voluptuous body, able to fulfill desires of her buyer. In an unsigned article published in 'The Statesman' newspaper, Delhi, January 13, 1986 the critic credits Sunil with following appreciation 'witnessing and projecting in a flash onto the canvas backdrop, an almost

*epiphanic phenomenon of time dead encircling time alive in a perspective of the soul's agonized inner existence..... And as such they appear to any finely tuned viewer only as a general symbol of a rare psych-spiritual or mystic experience, arrived at by the artist through the mortifying agony of the soul..... Sunil's canvases are replete with richly complex visual data.'*<sup>12</sup>

Sunil's the most remarkable artworks revolved around the themes like Man-woman relationship, Woman in her sexual empowerment but lonely. Paritosh Sen has praised Sunil's paintings and has mentioned, "*... I have always been haunted by the mysterious looking women who frequently appear on Sunil's canvases. Their eyes shine like two gems from the infinite darkness of their sockets. Their faces painted in white against a white background; framed by dark flowing hair and their bodies endowed with all the attributes of the female figure ... leave an indelible impression upon viewer's mind.*"

*Neera*, Sunil's another imagery as parallel to *Neera*, is corresponding about the contemporary Bengali poetry and dark lady of Shakespeare's Sonnets but unlike the heroin of poetry, she is not a young beautiful woman shaped out of a poet's imagination or fantasy, Manasij Majumdar awfully portrays Sunil's *Neera* in his book 'Art moves' in following lines, "*The Neera of these canvases is rather a lower middle class woman- even if not plain looking, she is by no means a beauty. Sometimes she has shapely female figure of pronounced curves, immodest glance in her eyes, figures rippling with passion. Sometimes she is alone, sometimes in the company of an elderly lover. In other frames she is past her prime, the body bears marks of her ravaged youth, staring invitingly at the male viewers, her eyes set deep in dark hallows, desperate in displaying unabashedly her body residual assets to hook a client for the evening.... Their sagging naked flesh speaks more of their suffering than of their sinning. In one of the frames an elderly lecherous client eyes the viewer with macho pride exuding from its craggy, bare body while reptilian fingers entwine with hers, as she sits beside him with a straight face and a still cold gazing of her deep dark eyes.*"<sup>13</sup>

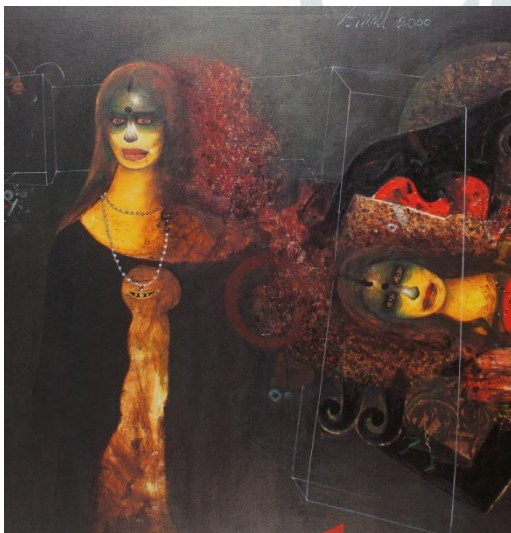


Plate No. 7, We Two, Oil on Canvas, 2000. Plate No. 8, Shree Radha, Acrylic on Canvas.

There is another painting with the title 'We Two' (Plate No. 7) presents split personality of a prostitute, wherein Sunil shows conflict between outer and inner persona of a sex-worker wherein her soul or inner-self shown as undergone through a torture leading to wreckage of her personality but from outside she is supposed to appear calm and composed. *Shree Radha* (plate no. 8) is another portrayal interpreting inner agony of the protagonist, her wide open red eyes are illustrating inside ache, entangled hair, smeared lipstick, dark gloomy background, etched lines and a half shown figure telling story of a shards prostitute.

Sunil Das has encompassed this large section of women community deprived from their fundamental rights as native of the contemporary Indian society. It is indubitably appreciable that he dared to paint issues related to deserted and spiteful community, whose one issue entwined with thousand questions, which he painted clandestinely on canvas through his powerful brush-strokes and vibrant colour scheme. Paintings executed are dexterously exposing bitter and bare truth, having possibility to stir viewers. As discussed Sunil Das was concerned about the children of prostitutes, mostly are illegitimate having no future and present filled with deprivation from the proper means of sustenance, education, health and hygiene etc. Sunil very confidently emphasized on one hope that literacy only can bring a transformation in the status of this downtrodden marginalized community. Hence, Sunil's painted concubines are powerful

medium not only for corroborating about socio-historical background of the prostitutes' community but inviting viewers to join hands to provide justice to them.



Artist Sunil Das & Prof. Zeba Hasan

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## REFERENCE

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