

### Transcript of Interview with Akbar Naqvi, 2008

**Maliha Noorani (MN):** So Akbar Saab, it would be great if you could tell us about how you got involved in the art world. What is your early life? What was that?

**Akbar Naqvi (AN):** Well I don't really know. It is rather strange because my family had a very strong poetry background. Basically from *marsiyya* – listening to those *marsiyya* in *muharam* and people used to recite it at home. But I am not aware of anyone who was a painter. In fact painting was considered not quite permissible.

**MN:** Really?

**AN:** So on and so forth. I remember that when I was 12 or 13 year old, I started drawing picture of Quaid-e-Azam and Iqbal from newspapers - pencil drawings...

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**AN:** I used a different word. Mixing, I said naturally flows one into the other.

**MN:** Fluid.

**AN:** For the very simple reason for the kind of person you are. The autobiography that I am working on at the moment deals with this subject. And I say that I was born at a place called Hajipur, which was established by one of my ancestors, though nobody lives there now, Bokahri Syeds.

**MN:** Right.

**AN:** I was born there. By the side of an ancient river which has a religious status, it's called *Gandak*, in a bungalow in which my grandfather lived. So you've got to put these three together. You've got to put Gandak with Hajipur, and when you talk of Hajipur, you talk about my ancient village which was founded in 18th century. And then you've got to talk about bungalow. In my autobiography, there is a separate chapter named 'Bungalow' and I talk about the experience of living in a traditional *haveli* in my village. And what I felt when I was living in bungalows of all kinds with my grandfather and father. Different experiences, altogether. And how my grandmothers, they converted that bungalow into a *haveli*. That was also an experiment, it's all discussed there. Because I- I cannot talk in the abstract. I've got to talk in terms of objects.

**MN:** Absolutely.

**AN:** And bungalow is not just an abstract thing for me, a bungalow lives for me. It's an architectural symbol - I can feel it. Like I can feel a tree and a flower or my position about a human being. And to live in a bungalow is a different experience - and I remember it, I recall it. Living in *haveli*, you live with *jinns*. In bungalow you didn't live with *jinns*. Every *haveli* in my ancient- in my old village, it had a population of *jinns* and one portion of the *haveli* was left to them. Nobody disturbed them. The rooms were empty. People have seen *jinns*, I have seen one too. When I was fourteen years old, I saw one.

**MN:** You did?

**AN:** I did. Yes, so I can't- maybe it was an illusion but what I saw was not an illusion. So that experience you know, I have not forgotten it. And I don't see any contradiction between that experience and what I am today. When I've got to listen to Michael Johnson, and his - the way he twists and turns - obscene. But I can connect the two.

**MN:** Right. But this is interesting because before when we were talking, we were talking about the either/and versus the either/or and that fits in to this-

**AN:** I don't reject anything because all is a part of me. I don't reject evil either because evil is a part of me. Don't forget that Adam has two sons: Cain and Abel. There is a Cain in you and a Cain in me. There is an Abel in you and an Abel in me. Now the Christian concept that you reject one, which influenced Muslim thought also - is impossible, you can't. You'll create problems for yourself. But if you find a strategy to live in terms of peace with him or her then you can move forward. That's what we do, that's the strength of our culture. We accept contradictions as paradox. And paradox is a source of mystery. What you enjoy is mystery. Don't try to understand everything, you'll kill it. Leave it to scientists.

**MN:** Right. Also coming back to the- this is interesting, when you're talking about that no culture is pure. But do you feel like that there is a movement to, a purist version of what Islam is, and what Islamic history is, that is sort of dictating that we have any kind of Hindu, Arab, or any kind of indigenous- South Asian indigenous connection, and that is pure steam that is coming along.

**AN:** You see Newton's third law of thermodynamics works everywhere. Every motion has equal and opposite reaction. So in every culture you will find an urge to reach after purism. But that's enough - at some point, every culture does. Whether it's Hinduism or Christianity or Buddhism or Islam. It tries to claim that it's pure, this is its pure essence. But that is not true, it's changing all the time. Take your identity. Who are you? You don't know. You are not a fixed object. You are changing all the time, I am changing all the time. So does culture. If the culture is a living thing, dead cultures are pure. Dead cultures. Only a corpse is pure. That's why with such great respect- if I can break into Urdu?

**MN:** Of course you can.

**AN:** With such respect- I don't know if you have seen how we wash the dead body and bury it. It's a beautiful ritual. Why do we do it? Why do we take all that trouble? Why do we return to God something that's given to us in a state of purity? We wash it, we perfume it. Why do we do it?

**MN:** Why?

**AN:** Because he's pure. That's his right. We are not. Don't forget we are children of Adam. [inaudible] And Adam had two sons, one of them was Cain and the other was Abel. Satan is in us, as Sufis say- Satan is in us, it's not something outside there.

**MN:** It's within.

**AN:** God is in us, Satan is in us. Everything is in us. When God created you, there was a covenant between man and God. Allah said that you could be anything but God, you could do anything but not what is especially reserved for me, don't aspire after that. The problem with modern age is that people try to be God. Allah doesn't say there is any limit. You can go to the moon, you can go to Saturn. What is this symbol of Mi'raj? The Prophet went right up. Even beyond the angels, went up, right up to the chair of Allah. What does it tell you? That's the potential of a human being. And the potential of a human being to do evil and to do goodness is illimitable. And God has given you the will - he has given you the will - don't blame God, he has given you the right to choose. We don't have to learn that from West. We choose. We have got the right to choose.

**MN:** Akbar Saab, coming back to when you were- when you had just finished your thesis. You were-

**AN:** 26 or 27.

**MN:** 27. Then what happened?

**AN:** I came back to- Partition had taken place. I was not married. So I came back to Patna where my father was posted and I started teaching again. At Patna - I was teaching at Patna College before I went to England, so I started teaching at Patna College again. And I lived with my father in Patna for about

three years- in the meantime, I got an offer from Columbia University. I wanted to do a book on American writers and Lionel Trilling was the Head of the English Department at Columbia University and I was great admirer of Lionel Trilling and one of my ambitions was to work under him. So I wrote to Columbia University, to him. And he asked me to send him a synopsis of 3000 words of what I wanted to do. I sent him a synopsis. And he wrote back to me and unfortunately I have not preserved those letters so you can say that I'm lying. It would be quite justified because I don't have the documents to prove it. He wrote back and he said that we'll offer you a job- part-time teaching and part-time research, and we will publish your book, Columbia University will publish your book. Unfortunately my father fell very seriously ill and I couldn't go. So, that thing fell through. And after that I never tried. I got very disheartened, I got married, I left India, I came to Pakistan, and I changed my career. I told you I started my career in Pakistan with the first hundred rupees I borrowed from a friend of my uncle's in Lahore- that's how I started in Pakistan. I was the only son of my father. My father was not a poor man, he was a man of means. But he was a very strict man in many ways. He won't let me take any money of his, or mine even, which I had saved there because it was illegal. He was so law-abiding.

**MN:** It was illegal to take money?

**AN:** Well, naturally. I would have smuggled it, and my father couldn't [inaudible]. Do you know how strict he was- my father- when I came back from England he asked me, 'Do you drink?' I said, 'Yes, socially.' I was the only son.

**MN:** Absolutely.

**AN:** And my father said, 'Fine, it's entirely up to you. You can drink. Fine you are still my son. But you can't live with me. You will have to make your own arrangement if you want to drink. I said I won't drink.

**MN:** Akbaar Saab, are you okay? It's drizzling a bit.

**AN:** Yes, it's okay.

**MN:** It's alright?

**AN:** So I said no, I won't drink. So, I didn't drink for three years.

**MN:** You didn't drink for three years while you were under his roof?

**AN:** Well I said no- even when I go to England I stay with my cousins- they are very strict Muslims. I don't drink when I stay with them. I'd love to. They live by the Thames, there are beautiful bars along the Thames. I would love to sit and drink, have a pint of beer. I don't. As I told you, see, the pleasure of giving up something- if you learn that, then you can learn to cope with life. That's what we don't do, we want to have the cake and eat it too. That's true of life, ethics, morality, of painting. Most of the painters, I'm telling you now, some Pakistani painters, they paint, you give a painting to them and ask them to read it and they can't.

**MN:** That is a very real problem and I'd like you to talk more about that. Because they come up with these visuals but they can't seem to talk about their own work.

**AN:** They can't.

**MN:** Why?

**AN:** I'll tell you a story. Like my Sufi buzurgs tell me stories are the best way to communicate. When I used to go to London, at least twice a year, twice every year or once a year, regularly- now I haven't been there because I don't keep good health. The first thing the next morning I would do from Banff, I

will catch the tube from Hammersmith and come to Leicester Square and walk straight to the two museums- the Portrait Gallery and I would spend the whole day just sitting in front of certain paintings which are my favorite, like the famous one of Seurat, 'The Bathers'. I'll just sit there for hours. I have an artist friend who has a big name here now and selling his paintings like hot cakes. I don't want to mention his name. Once he invited me for a burger, he says let's meet at Leicester Square. I said fine why don't you meet there a little earlier. Because what had happened was the National Gallery was exhibiting a painting of Rembrandt- I'm forgetting its name. It's something about Bathsheba. A very famous painting. It had been loaned by Frankfurt Gallery which was being renovated, so what National Gallery did was they put up that show piece and along with that the few Rembrandts that they had they put it together in one room. And I used to go there and sit for hours, just looking at Rembrandt's painting. Particularly the use of red color there. And he has said that it's almost like sherry, I feel as if I've drunk sherry- it's going down my throat, the colour is going down my throat. So I took this artist friend of mine, we sat there for five minutes, he got very impatient. He didn't quite understand what I was looking at. He didn't understand that every time I used to go there and look at a particular part of that painting. He didn't understand that. So we went for an early lunch and I told him don't come ever with me, to any museum. You're not fit. Now go on painting what you are doing, the rubbish that you are doing. So that's a problem. And the problem is because of the absence of a good museum of modern art or whatever art in Pakistan. See, it comes from seeing.

**MN:** Yes.

**AN:** If I count the number of hours that I've spent. I was even prepared to sacrifice my PhD work. If there was any new exhibition in Paris or in London, I would find time and money to go and visit that. So it's all a question of your interest and your dedication.

**MN:** At that point when you were going, and looking at work what was the work that really drew you? What were your favorite pieces?

**AN:** It's very difficult to say. For instance, in Liverpool, I saw the first ever exhibition of Paul Klee's painting. It first came to Liverpool and then went to London. I saw that, it was a revelation to me. A small sized painting, and absolutely brilliant so it struck in my mind. Then Liverpool Walkers Gallery had a very fine collection of pre-Raphaelite art. Now people don't mention it, but I have a recollection of that. I like pre-Raphaelite art. That's a recollection. Then I saw Picasso's ceramics exhibition in London. That stayed in my mind.

**MN:** What year is this?

**AN:** Either it was '56, '58, or '57. And in Paris basically I used to spend a lot of time in the Louvre. Paris had then the museum of modern art sort of a thing with lots of Picassos. And the UNESCO office there- there were lots of murals there and Picasso and this and that. I just used to spend my time there, I had no other interest. I just would loiter there, just sit there for hours looking at the paintings.

**MN:** So you were there in England for a while and then you came back to Pakistan with a hundred-

**AN:** Came back first to India and then to Pakistan.

**MN:** With a hundred- borrowed hundred rupees.

**AN:** Borrowed hundred rupees. I had no money. Borrowed a hundred rupees in Lahore.

**MN:** Where did you go from there?

**AN:** From there I came to Karachi.

**MN:** Why did you shift? What was wrong with Lahore?

**AN:** Because I was coming to Karachi via Lahore.

**MN:** Oh right.

**AN:** I had come to my uncle- my youngest uncle lived in Karachi. So I came here and then I waited till someone could find a job for me. And then Mr Abbas got a job for me in Eastern Refinery. I went to Chittagong where my wife was, my in-laws were. And I stayed in East Pakistan for three years. Came back from East Pakistan before the debacle in '63-'64-'65. I came in '66 to Karachi.

**MN:** A year after.

**AN:** A year after. And stayed on here. And then I took up a job with Exxon Chemicals and stayed with them until I retired in 1989.

**MN:** So, Akbar Saab, at that point when partition happened- east and west. What was the environment like? What were people feeling?

**AN:** Terrible before partition- people have forgotten there was a serious Bihar riot in which even our house was attacked twice in Patna. I worked in the refugee camp there. Women coming with their breasts cut and limbs missing. Terrible times. I remember very distinctly that the ceremony-

**MN:** Are you okay? Hope you don't fall sick.

**AN:** It's okay. The departure ceremony took place at the Patna airstrip- flying club. I had a very acute sense of loss, that a major part of Muslim, East Pakistan and Punjab, it becoming a separate country. Don't forget you see that Lahore and Punjab- I have memories of Lahore and Punjab from the age of six. Punjab wasn't just for the Punjabis, like how it is now after Pakistan. And Lahore meant something to us, Peshawar meant something to us, Multan meant something to us, even a child of seven in India, in my family at least. Incidentally I originally come from Uch in Bahawalpur. My ancestors came from Bukhara and settled down in Uch. So we always related- I used to hear stories, the name Bahawalpur used to be mentioned. My grandmother until very lately she dressed in the nomadic style of Bahawalpuri desert women- the *lehnga*, *kurta* and *dupatta*. And the slippers they used to wear it was always called the Bahawalpuri *jooti*. And I would ask 'What is Bahawalpur?' and they would say very vaguely, 'Oh we originally come from there, her ancestors came and settled in Bahawalpur.' So Pakistan that way, what is Pakistan today has always been a part of my psyche. Lahore is part of my psyche. What pains me is to see what Lahore has become, what Lahoris have become. There are no more Lahoris that we knew.

**MN:** What was Lahore?

**AN:** Lahore's a beautiful city. Garden City. Garden City- Hindustan had two. Two cities were called Garden, one was Lucknow the other was Lahore and Lahore was very quiet, small, very civilized, very cultivated. You didn't see the ruffians like Nawaz Sharif and Shahbaz Sharif whom you see today riding in big Mercedes car. By, in '60s, in winter, by 6 o'clock the Mall used to be deserted. And if you would count the number of cars that would cross the Mall throughout the day, so few of them! Lahore was a dream city. Kipling's Lahore. Kim's Lahore. And before that the Lahore of the Mughals. It was a dream city.

**MN:** So coming back to the East and West. You were in Chittagong when partition happened-

**AN:** No I was in Patna then. I must have been about 14 or 15 when partition took place.

**MN:** East/West?

**AN:** I was in Patna.

**MN:** No when Bengal was, when Bangladesh was formed.

**AN:** Oh when Bangladesh was formed I was in Karachi. I had come over to Karachi fortunately.

**MN:** So what was that feeling and the atmosphere at that point and did it spill over into the art world at any point?

**AN:** Unfortunately when I lived in Chittagong, I was so busy with my work, learning new work, I didn't have time, time to meet artists there. But I had no problem with Bengalis. I never learnt to speak Bengali. I could understand Bengali, couldn't speak it but never thought it necessary that I should even speak Bengali. Because as I told you, I spent all my life practically with Bengali families, Brahmin/Bengali families. So they found that I was more Bengali than they were. Even though I didn't speak Bengali with them. And with me they used to speak Urdu.

**MN:** Is that a mark of respect?

**AN:** Yes must be. They said you are more Bengali than us. You don't speak Bengali so what? You understand our psyche, you respect us, you know us, you treat us, you don't treat us as human beings as equals. Punjabi and Muhajir, that was the alliance then. East Pakistan in, and said you know, you treat us (like) you are one of us. I had no problem, no problem with Bengalis ever.

**MN:** But you see this big shift, this huge traumatic thing happen in the country's history when the art hasn't spilled over, when there was no, there was no addressing that in the art world.

**AN:** No...

**MN:** Why? Why do you think?

**AN:** Well that's the problem with art. Sema Seni, the English poet, Nobel Prize winner - he has written, he wrote a book, it's actually a collection of his lectures, if I remember the book correctly, something... 'The Sovereignty of the Government' or something like that. He does argue this point, that very indirectly it does. Very indirectly. Directly it doesn't accept in Marxist realism, the Soviet Russian type. Or if you go it does in what was called realism in France. For instance if you look at Millet, if you look at Courbet, particularly Millet, then he was associated with the peasant movement, he was associated with the socialist movement, or Goya for instance he has done that. When the French occupied Spain, his famous paintings. So you find that but generally what happened was that when religion and art got disassociated, as long as religion and art were associated, within the context of religion art addressed many things other than 'art'. When it was disassociated particularly in Europe with art for art's sake movement and all that nonsense. So the disassociation did take place. And besides it's very simple question, if you feel strongly about contemporary problem then you can become a Mujalib, nobody stops you, he's a great poet, you can become Faiz Ahmed Faiz, there are a lot of poetry, a lot of politics in his poetry. Nobody stops you but generally you will find that artists tend to take broad cultural problems which I will put within politics. Politics is a very broad term to be used, and they attack society from different angles. So you can't dismiss them because they don't talk about poverty or feminism, so they should be dismissed. No, they are still addressing society.

**MN:** But it's interesting because Sadeqain was and he was a, he was a painter who addressed the problems or he at least was sort of looking towards the masses. His art appealed, had a wide sort of—

**AN:** Well he said he did it. But if you really look at that art, it is beyond politics. He said it, that was Sadeqain's brief Marxist phase when Vietnam War was on. Like Ijaz ul Hasan's very good painting of a Vietnamese woman and Ferlos in the background, so they did do it, some good paintings came out of it. But then you had the joke, a scandal of intelligent women's exhibition with Salima Hashmi curating it...so I, before it went to England, it was exhibited at Chaukhandi Art Gallery and the question I asked, 'Why do you have to use the word intelligent?' Are you assuming that women are not

intelligent? I found them from my childhood experience to be the most intelligent! They always got the better of their husband at least in my family. Very smart! You think she's forced; women are dangerous.

**MN:** That's true.

**AN:** Look, read Jane Austen! Forget about Urdu literature, read Jane Austen! Who is the stronger party? Elizabeth Bennet! It is not easy to subdue Darcy or Emma in *Emma*, read her. Read Waris Shah, *Heer Ranjha*, who is the strongest party? Read Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, who is the strongest character in his stories? Always the woman. Because don't forget she brings to it strength one that of a mother, you can't take it away from her, her motherhood experience is awful and no man can imagine it. It brings that, it's inherited. And plus, she knows her world, she knows her life and she has got the stamina to stand the nonsense of her husband. A woman befools men, keeps his ego inflated, strategically and he feels as if he's dictating. It's like my Nana, nobody knew that my Nani, small, better than my wife, she was the ruler of the house. When passed away... [inaudible] She never ever, never to her children let them feel that she wore the breaches, she wore the trousers. She did.

**MN:** And then, so then that's interesting, coming to then women painters of Pakistan starting with Zubaida Agha, what has your perception been?

**AN:** Very strong woman. Her perception, you must remember one thing that she belonged to a very progressive family, colonial family, like us, her father was in the colonial service but then still there were certain things she could do and she couldn't do. Within that she found a way. Now everyone talks about *parda*, *hijab* this and that and I've used the word *hijab* very positively. Her whole art is about *hijab*, she doesn't come out, she painted a nude, she painted a self-portrait, a brilliant painting and then she disappears- there's no figure, it's all colour and light. That's what she experimented with, and form, full of movement.

**MN:** And did you find her work growing more abstract as-

**AN:** I wouldn't call her work abstract, it's certainly very difficult, let's say- well it was between figurative and non-figurative and when I say figurative, she made her own forms. I mean I can use the word biomorphic. As she painted colours evolved naturally and organically, biomorphically when it was required, it's all instinctive, but it's full of movement...

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**AN:** "How did Muslim art evolve?" He said that Muslim artists- first it started with, with the decoration of the, um, Masjid al Aqsa in Jerusalem. So what they did was- three elements. They borrowed the leaf motif from Greece with which I don't agree. He doesn't know Islamic history well enough. Anyway that's beside the point. They got the leaf [inaudible] floral decoration, and Persian- something from Persia I forget what. They got the line from Assyrian art- a very powerful line. They put- mixed the three. And I am quoting his words now: "They created an art that is unique and ruled the world for one thousand years." Read that, find out what it is, whether he's saying is right or not. Read it. Your teaching method is just by the textbook. Start teaching children from school. Why shouldn't every school, whether senior Cambridge A-level or O-level, why is it that they should not be teaching my book? Ask someone else to update it, I wrote ages ago- from Stone Age to the present. How is it, I claim, that we are the custodians of what is called Indian culture.

**MN:** How is it?

**AN:** If Mohenjo-daro is part of us, so is the Jhelum Valley where *vaid* came, where [inaudible] came, *Mahabharata* was fought nearby. [inaudible]...came much later.

**AN:** Everyone is, I haven't found a sincere person, not in intellectuals. I am... are educated people. Not him, not my driver, not my cook. If you explain something to him he will try and understand. Read the first chapter of Shahi Shahzad's and you will understand my thinking. The biggest problem is the intellectuals. They come and sit on the altar. Since the distinction between man and woman has gone, anyone can sit on the altar, he bearded also sit on the rooftop. It's disgraceful. Absolutely disgraceful. And nobody is here to point a finger to say you are doing wrong. You do it in India at least you will find ten people pointing...

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**AN:** You see, art criticism is a discipline. Art history is a discipline. You will find when travelling abroad, you will find that people who practice it in newspapers or universities that are all qualified people. People who have been to the university, taken a course, written books.

**MN:** Akbar Saab, the ability to deconstruct, is what is really the essence of good-

**AN:** I again don't use the word deconstruct.

**MN:** What do you-

**AN:** I call it analyze.

**MN:** Analyze. Analyze, break apart, put it together, turn it around-

**AN:** Analyze, synthesize. I'm old-fashioned that way. It has connotation of deconstruction which I don't want to bring in. Again you are bringing in connotation and, and historical associations which don't apply to us.

**MN:** But in terms of what- because I keep coming back to this question because I'm very interested in knowing your views on it- on a larger scale when you look back at 60 years of Pakistani art, what are the pockets apart from the modernists that you feel have been- have fueled some kind of fire or have laid some kind of solid foundation?

**AN:** Well it's all gone after the women artists.

**MN:** Which women artists do you talk about?

**AN:** All of them. Lubna – there was a group- Lubna Agha, Naheed-

**MN:** Laila Shahzada-

**AN:** Laila Shahzada, then there's- Samina Mansoori was the last. After that what you see happening today in Pakistan is basically trendiness.

**MN:** But do you think they were making fun of their ancestors-

**AN:** I hope they were. They are not even serious about that. They don't know what they are doing. They are just distorting. Hung up on word. They make- what is it, why do we make it how do we make it. Let go of it. It is not painting.

**MN:** Absolutely.

**AN:** People get – hang up over words and expressions. Move from there. I would like to discuss with a painting in front of us. Fine, you have reached this point. Where now, what now? The greatest subverter of miniature painting was- the greatest master of miniature painting, Baizad. Now see how he introduced perspective in a very a subtle manner. How he Europeanized miniature painting without

losing its character. So there have been subverters. You are not the only one. So I want to see what's your point. Like I predicted how Shazia Sikander is a flash in the pan for a few years.

**MN:** So far she's still there.

**AN:** Huh?

**MN:** So far she's still there.

**AN:** She'll be back don't you worry. Won't happen for a long time. English patronize for a reason and gets very happy when you make fun of your tradition. Try making fun of their painters.

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**AN:** The problem with miniature is that artists here don't have the genius to find out where do they go from where they are. There is a need to go forward so this is one of the ways they are practicing. But it is not the only way. Somebody else should think about it. Where do you go? What do you think company painting was? If there was no subversion. Has anyone studied company painting? Does anyone know the name of company painting? It was subversion of the royal Mughal style, Pohari painting was a subversion of the royal Mughal style, Malwa painting was a subversion of the royal Mughal style, company painting was a subversion-

**MN:** But what makes that subversion and this imitation or making fun?

**AN:** Because you can see a link. Chughtai miniature painting, 18<sup>th</sup> century Pohari Rajput painting, company painting, back to Chughtai and Chughtai's influence on modern painters despite the fact that they said he was you know passé. You make a mark in history. He did try, I do not deny it, you can have fun. Have fun as long as you can. It's not a movement. It doesn't satisfy me intellectually...In the sense they have been taught insincerity, it is moving forward. It will end, then there will be a question, what after this? After some time there will be a question, where do we go from here?

**MN:** What about the other forms?

**AN:** It's good, it's good that it's happening. If trendiness is good, it's happening provided the students are taught properly. Thinking minds should be cultivated-

**MN:** That is a big-

**AN:** When there is no discussion about this.

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**AN:** Oh I love Lahore. I loved Lahore until the late 60's or early 70's when I used to visit Lahore and spend some time there. I loved the city, I loved its ambience. What do you see there now? You live there. I don't want to go back. I told you Lahore is not what I saw when I came to Pakistan. Lahore was my dream city. I dreamed of it. I read Iqbal used to sing with my school, with Hindus and Muslims "Better than the rest of the world, my Hindustan". We were told about Iqbal and Lahore. I know of Lahore since then. I didn't discover Lahore when I came to Pakistan. The Urdu magazines we used to read as children were from Lahore.

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**AN:** You see this question of choice. Either you just borrow trends, styles, images and symbols, and incorporate it with obvious symbols. Hindus have got facility for that- put a *moorti*, *bhagwaan*, *swastika*, like Raza did. That's a very easy way. We don't have that.

**MN:** Sure.

**AN:** We'll have to work hard. We will have to do what Foucault called- used the word- excavate our minds. What are our symbols? Color, line? Basically abstract elements. What do you create out of that? Out of that you will create your own vocabulary of art. Backed up by discussions, teaching- proper teaching. Because when I look at this flower I look at this in so many ways. I look like it as European, I look at it in the tradition of things- watercolour painting. I'll complicate this further for you- I look at it in the tradition of English watercolour painting, Bengal school of painting, in the use of flower in our decorative art, ornamental art. My thesis is that with certain flowers you can't paint in oil, in fact I'm thinking very seriously of going back to watercolour- whatever I've learnt. I can paint it only in the watercolour medium. There are two types of watercolour medium, British style in which the water carries the colour, and the other is opaque. People usually don't know about this. Why don't you experiment with these while painting a miniature painting. The problem is the absence of museum, permanent museum, absence of academic support, absence of art review- educated art reviews, and the absence of teaching of art history- your own art history- cultural and artistic at the university, in the college. Until you don't fix that, this will keep happening. Because the British destroyed that purposely to make you a dysfunctional culture.

**MN:** And what has the success been in India?

**AN:** I don't know – I don't know much about India. I think India is worse off than you. I don't think they have handled it pretty well.

**MN:** And are we to look-

**AN:** Trendiness is all over the world- go to China, Bangkok, Japan. How do you fight against this influence?

**MN:** How?

**AN:** I'll give you a quote. Milan Kundera- you've heard the name. When he received the Nobel Prize in his address he says that "to me it's a great honor that I became famous first in my own village, my own country", though he writes in-

**MN:** English?

**AN:** In French now. He was bilingual, know German and French. Unless you have that sense. The pioneers of modern art had that sense. That what I am creating is for myself and for my country, it's a new country. If it can have a PIA it must have art that is different from others. And they showed that it is different from others. You study those. Show their work, open museums, show students. You go to National Art Gallery anytime do you see students imitating any of the painting? You learn from imitation. You don't have those resources. Your painting teachers only teach what they know, and know little, they don't work hard themselves. [inaudible] He could paint in the expressionist style, in the cubist style, he could paint in the abstract style- everyone doesn't have that strength- he had that talent and that strength.