

# Husain pens an unfinished portrait

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commodation during his early stint as a billboard painter in Bombay.

**COURTSHIP:** Watching him execute those giant hoardings from her verandah was Fazila, the girl Husain was to marry in 1946. She recalls a particular instance when he worked all night on a giant 40 ft. cutout of Durga Khote. (Husain often began work at 2.00 am when the roads were empty of traffic so he could spread his giant canvasses on them.) On this occasion, he completed work at 5.00 am only to awaken after a short slumber to find his efforts covered in excrement. Fazila and Husain's courtship consisted of clearing up the mess and stealing cups of tea when she was home alone.

As his career blossomed so did his relationship with women and the book contains a half-century's worth of Suraiyas, Fazilas, Aasiyas and other incompletely-identified ladies who so enthralled Husain that he once publicly described the act of putting brush to canvas as similar to sex.

The book's most torrid compositions, however, are devoted to Namrata, a girl under 20 who

bewitched Husain completely in his mid 50s. A letter to her appears on the book jacket along with an epitaph by Yevtushenko (see picture).

But like all his liaisons, this one, too, runs into trouble. Namrata is possessive and jealous and as she cools off, Husain turns on. "I used to get three letters a day," he complains. "It seems your mind is somewhere else. Is there a cold wave? ...You send me an ice cube here it will become a ball of fire. I am burning with desire. The want. The whole of you. Your body have gone white with snow flakes, my desire would sprinkle blood on your beaming bosom and make the two piercing nipples erect and hot...let the nuclear tips of my fingers detonate the twin points of atomic energy. ...Raging fire which the sun would melt into a Lava."

When he does hear from her, he is overjoyed. His letters portray him as an ardent and indulgent lover. "How wonderful are your letters," he writes from Bombay in 1968, "soaked in deep emotion and sprinkled with your heartfelt fragrance of love." The adolescent prose gives way to adolescent poetry: "Extra beat of my heart/Sneaks out of my/Thatched earth bones."

The letter ends: "I felt like making hundreds and hundreds of drawings on postcards. They are my imprints of words turning. They are highly inflammable, might catch fire. I am glad you don't smoke yet you often play with fire."

Curiously enough Husain, who neither drinks nor smokes was to 'steal' five packets of Dunhill cigarettes for a later lover, to whom he turned when Namrata proved to be less accommodating than his long suffering wife.

**LATE LOVE:** She was Nahid, a well bred, older woman who enamors Husain, now in his 70s. She pervades his work, "I put a mole on a face and it became your portrait." On a visit to London he sends her postcards one of which consists of the portrait of Caroline of Brandesburg-Ansbach picked up from the National Portrait Gallery and adapted to portray Nahid who is described thus: "Here you pose like an angelic heavenly body. Body filled with pure honey and unadulterated milk. Lips wet with fresh orange juice. Your eyes fried eggs and the tongue bacon. Your face painted like a platter of fresh-

ly cooked morning breakfast. Your mid-body painted like a two 'course' mid-day meal, with two hamburger well-done. Your lower body painted like having unlimited course of midnight dinner served with large portion of brinjals richly stuffed with freshly whipped cream — style of portrait— (shall describe to you in person)."

If, as the saying goes, all geniuses retain a childlike inner core, then Husain never grew up in his relationship with women. Always a seeker, searching for perfection and harmony, his love affairs had a built in obsolescence. The author, Ila Pal's long and intimate association with the painter is never alluded to directly but her peevishness comes through on a couple of occasions, particularly when she discovers that Husain has taped interviews for another biography.

This one, edited and colluded with the master himself is short on criticism and long on adulation. Once the ink runs cold on it, the artist will come out with the second instalment: his autobiography. Will it be as prurient as this one? You don't need two guesses.