

Hiroshima my love - to live or to die?

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There are some abiding connotations of peace and goodwill that have become icons of modern civilisation. Hiroshima is one of them. But how does an experience of destruction transform itself into an icon of peace? And yet every once in a while continue to force us into the time-worn rhetoric of 'should we or should we not'? As it has for us all on the occasion of the nearly dozen nuclear tests conducted during the month of May 98.

Somewhere there is a refreshing story to be told. Once upon a time there burst upon mankind, a heightened sense of human ephemerality in the Hiroshima-Nagasaki holocausts of 1945, followed by its tragic associations of its pictures of burnt flesh and shrinking skin. And then in the land of the chrysanthemums, Hiroshima smiled once again. The questions that beckon us today are: how did her scars heal? And who have been the ones behind the expressions of the affirmative forces of life in Japan accompanying the experience? Perhaps it is time to take note of the creative world's efforts that have gone into reviving the psyche of Hiroshima since the city's moment of destruction. And then say a silent prayer in tribute to the ability of these creative minds that have borne the collective burden of society's apathy.

In more ways than one, it has been artists and designers who have contributed towards infusing into Hiroshima a fresh lease of life in order to help her regain her sanity after the 1945 atomic explosion. But equally, it was Japan's own attitude towards such inputs that could have enabled such a resurrection. In Japan, artists and designers are not unsung heroes. Instead, the signs of their celebrations are all around. The flags of their creativity flutter with pride outside giant corporations such as Sony or Mitsubishi. The designer's inputs are viewed as an essential part of the country's export base. And certainly for a land that celebrates the ideal of beauty and the joys of living well, designers and artists have been considered critical to the creative process of keeping alive this cult of the beautiful. Without a doubt, all this happening in a country where beauty and cleanliness are considered only next to godliness.

There are at least two eminent Japanese, both internationally renowned, who have something to do with Hiroshima. There is Isamu Noguchi the sculptor who considered himself a "citizen of the earth", and Issaye Miyake the fashion designer who has always aspired to design clothes for "real people". While Miyake, by far the younger of the two was born in Hiroshima, Noguchi was called upon in the fifties to design structures for Hiroshima that would replace the ones that had been

devastated by the atomic blast. Thus arose, in the heart of Hiroshima right next to the Atomic Bomb Movement, two bridges - "*Tsukuru*" which means in Japanese 'to build' and "*Yuku*" which means 'to depart'. Noguchi had not only designed these bridges, they were even named by him, and so tellingly at that. What moved the artist the most were the changes wrought by Japan's defeat and her occupation in the aftermath of the War, followed so quickly and so cruelly by the explosions. This would make him wish to adjust his own work to the reduced circumstances of a land struggling to "find its way out of the debris" of destruction. And even reminisce over life's poignant realities through the question: "Is fortune or misfortune a better teacher?"

It needs to be said here that by the time the bridges were executed in 1952, Noguchi was already standing on a compelling legacy of work straddling across three decades of creativity that would include, amongst other illustrious signposts, an apprenticeship with the sculptor Brancusi in Paris in the mid-twenties, and creative collaboration in theatre with dancer Martha Graham soon after. Which means that neither his words nor his intentions for Hiroshima could be taken lightly. Noguchi would declare that it was his bounded duty to do what he could "to help prime the pump of (the city's) renaissance." And to help with her revival in a way in which "the arts would have a contribution to make." His outpourings for Hiroshima's condition also found reflection in some of his other works of the period such as in 'The Stone of Spiritual Understanding' and in his 'Nu' which in Zen means "nothingness". But more interestingly, and not without a tinge of irony, remains on record a brief period of social protest for Noguchi in the thirties when he had created the sculpture called 'Death', leaving us to wonder whether he might not actually have had an artist's premonition of the terrible disaster ahead.

Work created with the force of conviction with which Noguchi did has a powerful life-cycle, and its long-lasting impact on the sensibilities of the arriving generations cannot be understated. Exactly around the time that these bridges were built there was a young boy who would stop to ponder over their names every time he crossed these, which was every day on his way to school and back. Years later he would become one of world's foremost fashion designers. This was Issaye Miyake, one of world's most innovative fashion designers today. Known to most for his talent and his gregarious optimism, Miyake expresses his debt of gratitude, again rather tellingly, in a letter to Isamu Noguchi written in Japanese last year on the occasion of an exhibition to commemorate Hiroshima's fiftieth anniversary. Interestingly, the exhibition itself was executed in collaborative effort between these two geniuses.

In this letter, Miyake would reveal that he had reinterpreted for himself, the names of the bridges to mean "to live" and "to die" - not just because the bridges' designs had had a way of conveying life's ephemerality, but also because the strength of the designs would leave Miyake gasping with a sense of "sentimentality and strong emotion." He confesses to the sculptor through this letter that his daily experience of these viewings in his adolescence years was what gave him his first understanding of the concept of design itself. Miyake says "that was the time when I became clear about the word design" - a clarity that usually takes an artist years of experience. In that sense, Hiroshima became one of his best teachers. And when Miyake explains that the Japanese word "*fuku*" has two meanings: clothes and happiness, then we know that the psychic wounds left behind by the atomic devastation of his early childhood have found an opportunity to heal through art's rites of passage through time.

Miyake's connection with Hiroshima is deep-rooted. He was born there. He had studied there. And years later, on the 25th anniversary of the massacre he would pay homage to the mindless destruction in many different ways. But the one that sticks for its simplicity and directness is when Miyake and his colleagues, a hundred of them, sported T-shirts with a line drawing of a dove of peace on the eve of a major fashion opening of Miyake's in Tokyo in 1995. It tells us that Miyake's heart never, in fact, left Hiroshima although the high profile nature of his job would required him to have to spend much of his time in Paris, New York, Milan and London.

In more ways than one, therefore, Miyake carries himself as an ambassador of great abiding quality for Hiroshima simply by his ability to have escaped cynicism as the usual way out of life's unfortunate experiences - born as he was in the decade of the War and of the explosions. Which is also what has enabled him to focus his designs around 'everyday living'. And again, with the early years of his life opening up at the threshold of great uncertainty as would be the fate of most of the young from Hiroshima following the decades of the explosion, it was left entirely to Miyake to evolve a design ethos that could reflect the aspirations of a generation that had dreamt between the two worlds - the old and the new - of a past that had needed to be left behind in order to open up to a new future.

Miyake's works lend to this designer the essential quality of a person who values his roots without wishing to get parochial, and in that sense making him what could be described in his own words the "pioneers..... the harbingers of a new Japan." And again, as a natural inheritor of this new Japan, Miyake's own expression on how he likes to make clothing can hardly be more appropriate. He says "I am trying to make clothes that blend in with the air, the light, the wind." Away from Western

plasticity. And in complete affirmation and conviction of the beautiful and yet the enduring qualities from around his own environment. Attributes that had once been completely embattled and destroyed. And yet, by some collective power of the will, the dreadful images from his childhood had been conquered and put to more constructive, imaginative and creative purposes. So, if clothes could say in a few words what words would have in a thousand, then Miyake's designs definitely echo both the outrage of the past as well as the promise of the future, just as it had in his colleague Hirokatsu Hijikata's singularly-purposed 1968 poster - NO MORE HIROSHIMAS.

And then of course remains the utterly unforgettable, poignant love story made around Hiroshima by the French film-maker Alain Resnais in 1958, which was a great way to express grief for a tragedy that had by then surmounted all sense of physical boundaries. The title of the film 'Hiroshima mon amour' translates into English simply as 'Hiroshima my love', a meaning that requires little deciphering for most individuals, for at some point of time or the other in our lives we must have surely loved! It is around this universal appeal of love that the film revolves. Considered path-breaking for all times for its cinematic innovation in a much-vaunted area - the treatment of time in cinema - Hiroshima remains heart-rending simply by the way a single film can relate the untold sides of a tragedy without getting lost into the quagmires of despair and despondency. This film allows Hiroshima to carry on a love affair with all those individuals who have cried over Hiroshima's plight, and who have pondered over its consequences.

Once again, as a powerful piece of rhetoric, the film had done for the restoration of Hiroshima's pride far more than any of the embattled cries from politicians at that time, steeped as these cries had remained in an utterly sanctimonious brand of hypocrisy that was already making its way for nothing less than treachery. For, was it not after these very explosions by the Americans on the shores of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 that the Japanese government would give the green signal for nuclear stockpiling by the very same Americans in Okinawa? And would it be too much to wonder if it were not for the mute testimony provided by the creative efforts of all artists and designers, what might have been the fate of the betrayals suffered by Hiroshima, and all of it under the world's gaze!

Buddha Purnima as the birth date of the apostle of peace, for one. Hiroshima - the final resolution for what we must never repeat, for another. And against this, our recent tryst with destiny surrounding the nuclear tests on May 11th and 13th that have revived the timeworn question - should we or should we not? But if we were to move away from these immediate compulsions to a land where Buddhism finds its largest number of worshippers after Shintoism. A land where Hiroshima smiles again because its scars have healed a great deal since 1945. Could we hope to find a few areas of sanity in the works of individuals who have nothing to do with either religion or with warfare? The answer could be a decisive yes. In Japan the real celebration comes from the joys of living well, and the real heroes, therefore, turn out to be her artists and her designers. These are individuals who have, since Japan's reconstruction after the Second World War, have managed to build an entire legacy out of the cult of the beautiful.

Of particular interest to us on this occasion would be two eminent Japanese, both of whom have something to do with Hiroshima. Isamu Noguchi the sculptor and Issaye Miyake the fashion designer. Both of them stand out today as shining examples of individuals who have worked in their own countries for most parts of their careers and yet have caught the world's attention, undeniably through their brilliance and creativity. While Issaye Miyake, by far the younger of the two was born in Hiroshima, Isamu Noguchi who considered himself to be a "citizen of the earth" was called upon in the fifties to design for the city of Hiroshima. On August 31st last year Japan closed an exhibition that had opened in summer and which was entitled 'Isamu Noguchi and Issaye Miyake - Arizona'. The amazing thing about the exhibition was that it not only paid tribute to these two creative minds that have carried Japan to the distant shores across the world in entirely opposing styles of creativity. But the exhibition itself was executed in actual collaboration between these two geniuses.

Even though Miyake has made his mark internationally, with his shows in Paris in the recent years being held at the Salle le Notre - a huge auditorium in the new underground section of the Louvre created by architect I.M.Pei in 1989 - Miyake has never really left Hiroshima. While in Tokyo for the spring event of his show in 1995, Miyake and his colleagues would sport T-shirts printed with a line drawing of a dove of peace on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima. So this would seem like a natural culmination of a historical fact, coming from a person born in Hiroshima but also coming from a designer whose concerns have revolved around everyday living and around "real people".

There is also the matter of Noguchi and Miyake's interfacing with the West that bonds the two artists. While Miyake's book 'East meets West' of relatively recent times has served to build bridges between the two worlds of the East and the West with their different ways of living and with their distinct visions of their futures. This vision of unison actually follows in the footsteps of Noguchi, who in the fifties would attempt a synthesis of the Eastern and the Western arts through his own sculptures. Just as he would also build actual bridges in Hiroshima right near the Atomic Bomb Movement. These bridges designed by Noguchi and completed in 1952 were named by the artist "To Live" and "To Die" - rather telling in their connotations by any account! And perhaps beckoning us to take a leaf out of Japan's post-War tradition of pacification to build our own 'to live' and 'to die' bridges with our immediate neighbours.

But the best of Noguchi surfaces in his contributions as an Abstract Expressionist of the highest order known to Modernism. Noguchi's innovations would lie in his being able to straddle across the various forms of the arts. Noguchi designed bridges. He landscaped gardens. He sculpted figures as an expression of his inner thoughts. In other words, Noguchi moved with ease and commitment between the various art forms.

Likewise, Miyake's forte arises out of his ability to bridge the old with the new in Japan. He holds the view along with a contemporary Japanese designer Eiko Ishioka that because of the wholesale destruction of old values they had "to be pioneers... the harbingers of the new Japan". A generation that dreamt between the two worlds. And then finally broke away to go global.

The Isamu-Issaye exhibition carries the name of Arizona after the two artists' own impression of a place on earth that meets with heaven. For those who have visited Arizona, there is no escaping the raw edge to its stark dry landscapes where the sky meets the earth, as though carrying God's own message for the people living there. But there are also the Grand Canyons and the miles and miles of rough weather-beaten red coloured sandstone mountains which nurse almost secretly within their greener laps, the enormous Zionist National Park. But all of it inescapably located in a land of the treacherous flash floods that would make any person wish for a heaven on earth more often than one is usually inclined to. In Issaye Miyake's own words Arizona was meant to "incorporate the concept of heaven and earth", just as the choice of the venue named after the teacher Genichiro Inokuma was intended to be Noguchi and Miyake's way of "conveying to the children of the 21st century the mindsets of 'creativity' and 'progress' "

because in Inokuma, the children of Japan had found a great drawing teacher.

And how do we know about all this? They come from a wonderful piece of communication in the form of a letter written in Japanese by Issaye Miyake to Isamu Noguchi. In this letter Issaye talks about the 'to live' and 'to die' bridges that he would get to cross on his way to the Kokutaiji high school and back where he had studied. And the collective effect of the trips in his teens leaving him with a sense of "sentimentality and strong emotion". There is more to ponder over here. Miyake confesses that his first understanding of the concept of design would arrive from the daily viewing of these bridges. These would be his very first lessons in designing. He says in this letter "that was the time I became clear about the word design".

In continuation with his admiration for the older artist, Miyake would travel in 1981 to visit Noguchi who had by then moved to an area that had once been a land-fill. This is where the younger designer would stand listening to Noguchi's thoughts on "time and space". And needless to say, "Isamu's House" as Noguchi had named his own house would seem a veritable piece of poetry on Noguchi's abiding philosophy expressed in Noguchi's words: "It is the sculptor who orders and animates space and gives it meaning." As an artist who had designed gardens in which sculpture and nature would remain intertwined, as is evident from the garden of the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, it would seem of little wonder that Noguchi's own house would also have a large garden of sculpture "encircled by a big stone wall and framed by the neighbouring mountains". Apart from being a picture of a little piece of the heaven envisaged in the years ahead by the by now much-older Noguchi in his sagely nineties (precisely ninety three in 1997), and the more mature Miyake, exactly half the age of Noguchi.

Notwithstanding the harmonious relationship between the two artists - or perhaps because of it - the age-gap between the two needs a bit of reflection. While Noguchi was being included in the last full-scale Surrealist show held in 1947 in Paris, Miyake's vision of the world would yet be through the eyes of a toddler. It is a well known fact that in the mid-40's when Hiroshima had just been scarred, Noguchi's sculpture would attempt to move towards an ordered equilibrium against the chaotic state of the world. And then in the fifties would arrive his experience of tranquillity with Zen, expressed through the very abstract 'Bird C - or Mu' (Mu in Zen meaning 'nothingness'). Ironically, most of Noguchi's social protest culminating in his sculpture called 'Death' would take place in the thirties. Does it mean, therefore, that the artist had had a

premonition, a deep sense of foreboding, about what was to arrive ahead in the forties in the form of the nuclear holocaust in Japan?

It is comforting to think that Miyake, the younger genius, has managed to come out relatively unscarred or cynical - born as he was in the forties, the decade of the World War as well as that of the holocaust at Hiroshima-Nagasaki. Miyake carries forth the quintessential Japanese love and respect for the elements of nature. He says "I am trying to make clothes that blend in with the air, the light, the wind." But his letter stands in testimony of a much larger intent - viz., the ability to make space for a legend who has given the world seventy insightful years of creativity.