

# The French Government Honours Sayeed Ahmed

Mr Sayeed Ahmed, an eminent playwright and cultural personality was honoured as 'Officier de l' Order des Arts et des Lettres' by the French Government for his valuable contribution in the fields of art and literature.

The insignia of the Officer of the Order of Arts and Letters which is regarded as one of France's highest distinctions for arts and letters was handed over to Mr Sayeed Ahmed by his Excellency Mr Jean-Michel Lacombe, Ambassador of France at a ceremony held on Monday 27 September at his residence. The ceremony was attended among others by the eminent writers, poets, artists and journalists of Bangladesh.

Previously Dr Mahmud Shah Qureshi, former Director General of Bangla Academy and Professor at the University of Rajshahi received this award in October 1992.

Sayeed Ahmed is one of the few leading playwrights of Bangladesh who introduced new dimensions in the Bangladeshi theatre by combining deep sense of life with modern dramatic technique. Not only he is one of the dazzling figures in the history of Bangladesh theatre, he has also pioneered "modernity" in the local stage.

His first play "Kalibela" staged in 1962 in Dhaka — took the theatre world by storm. This is the first taste of an absurdist play that the audience watched in wrapped attention. In the same year the English version of the play — "The Thing" — was staged in Karachi's Arts Council in association with a visiting drama team named "The Maine Mosquers" of USA.

His next play "The Milepost" (1964) was equally thought provoking and aroused considerable interest in exploring a modern man's problem in famine-stricken then East Pakistan. After working on the absurdist method for a number of years Sayeed moved to pick up a story from the folk treasure of Bengal namely "The Fox and the Crocodile Children". He is the first person to have lifted a children's story to the adult level reflecting the injustice and treachery by all-knowing fox on the innocent seven children and gullible crocodile mother. When it was staged in 1967 in Lahore's Al-Hamra Theatre, the play aroused a lot of suspicions and questions in the mind of the Government. Subsequently the play's successful run was stopped which saved the playwright from administrative wrath.

After the liberation of Bangladesh Sayeed Ahmed wrote "Protidin Ekdin" in 1975 on the theme of our freedom-struggle. A new dimension was brought out of the tragic hero of the last Independent Nawab of Bengal Sirajudowlah in his latest play "Shesh Nawab" (Last Nawab).

Noted Bengali poet Shamsur Rahman remarked that "he has very successfully, for the first time, caused a fusion of western compactness of form with eastern sensibilities. The brevity of his language is stunning. He is the pioneer of modern theatre in Bangladesh stage. He is simply outstanding."

Sayeed Ahmed has translated some of the celebrated playwrights of the world — into Bengali. Amongst those whose friendship has nurtured his vi-

sion is Samuel Beckett and Ionesco. His plays have been translated in different languages and staged in different parts of the world. He is the only contemporary Bangladeshi playwright whose plays are being taught at different levels of Dhaka, Jahangirnagar, Rajshahi and Chittagong Universities. He is at present associated with the English Department of Dhaka University. He has lectured on theatre, art and culture in different universities and academics of America, Great Britain, France, Scandinavia, Germany, China, Russia and Brazil. He has worked as a consultant with several American theatre companies in the 70's. And the celebrated "Arena Stage" of Washington DC has dedicated a row of seats in the name of Mr Sayeed Ahmed (1976).

Mr Ahmed has written numerous essays and several monographs on the erstwhile Pakistani and present day Bangladeshi painting. He has introduced Bangladeshi theatre



The insignia of the Officer of the Order of Arts and Letters.

in the western art circle more than twenty years ago. His erudition and thought provoking plays have provided a worthwhile base for the young playwrights of the country. For his brilliant contribution to the field of drama he was honoured with

the Bangla Academy award in 1976. In 1978 eminent critic Roger Eruchley of "Bangkok Post" commented on his plays — "The themes of Sayeed's works reflected the intense of his tragic relationship his country has with nature."

## Excerpts from Ambassador's Speech

FRANCE has always praised and valued artistic and academic talents in all fields and has often welcome foreign artists who came to France to escape persecutions or simply because they found in France the right intellectual atmosphere for creativity. It is impossible to name them all as they are too many, from Rossini or Chopin to Picasso, from Fujita to Samuel Beckett, from Chagall to Jorge Lavelli or Peter Brooke.

This attraction for all sorts of creativity explains the origin of a special order of award: L' Order National Des Arts Et Lettres (the national order of arts and humanities) for rewarding those who, in the all world, have represented in one way or the other, the human talent.

The talent is perfectly illustrated by Mr Sayeed Ahmed whose bio-data shows that in Bangladesh as well as in France high ranking officials can also be creators.

In fact, Mr Sayeed Ahmed, who comes from a well known and honourable Dhaka family, has pursued a career of international civil servant and has held high ranking posts in the administration of his country after Bangladesh attained independence. However, during all those past years, he has never stopped continuing to express himself through arts and literature which are for him essential substances of life.

His gifts has allowed him to show great interest in music, as

a student of the great star player Ustad Alaouddin Khan who has also taught Ravi Shankar. It is noted that Mr Sayeed Ahmed gave a concert in 1955 in Paris at the Musee Guimet.

But it is not for his skills as a musician that he is well known but as a playwright. His well established talent has earned him many awards, national as well as international, and this reward which I give him in the name of the President of the Republic and the Government of France, will add up to the others.

However, this award bears a great significance: You are in

fact the second recipient in Bangladesh after Mr Qureshi, Professor at the University of Rajshahi, that places Bangladesh in the first rank among the countries of the Indian sub-continent as nobody in India has ever received it, as far as I know.

Therefore, it is through you that I salute a cultural tradition, sparkling and secular, with the hope that Bangladesh will remain forever a land of artists and poets and that the cultural links between France and your country will continue to be strengthened despite the differences of languages.

## Sayeed Ahmed's Speech During the Ceremony

My association with France dates back to 1955 when at the invitation of Musee Guimet I went to Paris to give Sitar recital in their auditorium. Since then my association with eminent artists and writers of France had been growing deeper every day. In my recent play named "Shesh Nawab" (The Last King of Bengal) I analyzed the active support given by the French government through the services of M Sein Fret to the struggle of Bengali nationalism in the 18th century. Our relationship with France is over two centuries old! Today is a day of great significance for me. I extend my best

salutations for the honour bestowed on me by the French government. France's contribution in the field of art and culture, like Bangladesh, can be traced to several centuries back. Two culture-minded countries have come forward to further strengthen the bond of age-old friendship. As a humble playwright of Bangladesh I welcome the gesture wholeheartedly. I am sure, in the days to come our young writers will be able to bring more laurel for the country. Artists bring human beings closer to each other. Let us sit together. Let us enjoy this beautiful world.



Sayeed Ahmed being decorated with the insignia of the Officer of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French Ambassador, Jean-Michel Lacombe.

# Kothao Keu Nei: A Review

## 'Baker Bhai' could have been Saved

by Chowdhury A A Quaseed-bin-Husayne

I could venture to say that Humayun Ahmed is a very successful author of contemporary times. Each of his many serials dramatised on TV has captivated millions at home and compatriots, creating waves that shall be well remembered. However, it was "Kothao Keu Nei" which jarred the passive viewers out of their seats and homes to protest against the celebrated author's tendency of creating a character loved and adored by all, before sentencing him to doom in the hands of fate. The death of a minor girl, the disintegration of two mighty aristocrat families and finally, the hanging of the innocent Baker Bhai, are all examples of this 'morbid' approach.

Whenever any one in the neighbourhood was ever precipitated into any sort of trouble, Baker Bhai was certain to lend his strong and able support. A light-hearted jovial soul who stood by the oppressed, molested or wronged. He caught thieves and returned stolen property and fought away hoodlums with his bulky friend Majnu and a comical little fellow Bodi. All of a sudden Baker Bhai is falsely accused of murder by the malevolent Rebecca and he has to suffer by death. The author could have evaded this heart rending incident in this serial, that had been saturated with humour, and some

family problems to go along with.

Even if Mr Ahmed claims that what happened was practical, I would assert that the plot was rather manipulated to meet his wish of killing Baker, for had this been a reality, there were numerous loopholes in the prosecution that could have been used to save Baker Bhai.

Physical evidences were very few. To the best of my memory, the real killer used bare hands on the knife. So finger print testing could have been resorted to. Also, would a killer be so foolish as to leave the blood-stained murder weapon in his own house? Are our courts that blind or primitive enough to overlook these vital points?

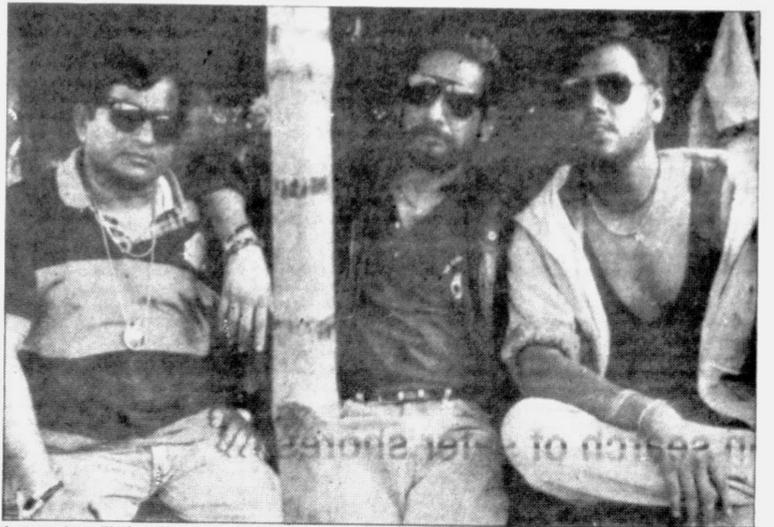
The moment Moti Miah was proven a liar on the witness stand, the validity of all of the plaintiff's witnesses should have been brought into question and those found guilty of perjury should have been punished according to law.

A lot of other people should have been examined. Bodi's wife could have provided Bodi an alibi by asserting he was with her the whole night. Moona could have vouched that Baker Bhai was in her presence at about the same time as the murder was taking place, a fact which could have been corroborated by the owner of the tea shop in front of her house

wrong for which Baker had been turned out from home was none of the offences described by the prosecuting lawyer. It was a matter of life and death, it was expected that the brother would come.

Suruj. When was he brought to court before trial that the prosecuting lawyer had seen him? Or was it the detective in grey safari who reported his presence to the prosecuting lawyer? If that was the case, is it not too far-fetched to conceive that Rebecca should have so powerful a hold "on so many people, that she should be strong enough to induce a policeman to turn corrupt? Why and how come? She was not that fabulously rich, but instead a person with a widespread ill-reputation. Humayun Faridi should have also taken advantage of his opponent's confession of having done away with Suruj, instead of passing an irrelevant remark about smoking, in the verandah of the court.

The author himself contradicts the image of Humayun Faridi that he created when the defence lawyer objects to the prosecutor's allegation that Baker robbed and molested women, by denouncing them as irrelevant issues. It would be more appropriate for a lawyer depicted as competent as him to have declared that "none of the



A scene from 'Kothao Keu Nei': Bodi (Abdul Quader), Baker (Asaduzzaman Nur) and Majnu (George).

# Mixing Memory and Desire: Razia Khan in Eliot's Rose Garden

by Inger Hastrup

THE purpose of this paper is to compare certain central themes in Razia Khan's two recent volumes of poetry in English 'Arus Under anaesthesia' and 'Cruel April', containing poems written from the 1950s until 1977, with similar themes in TS Eliot's poetry. The title 'Cruel April' at once leads the reader to Eliot, who is in the background of Razia Khan's poems, although he is not such a strong influence on her themes and language as to leave her no scope for independent creative effort. Eliot is there rather as an affinity of spirit. Razia Khan uses his themes and images in her own context expanding them into a world of ideas and feelings of her own which has been shaped by her country Bangladesh.

She is like Eliot's hyacinth girl of The Waste Land, who is a

memory of the past returning at a later age when everything has dried up.

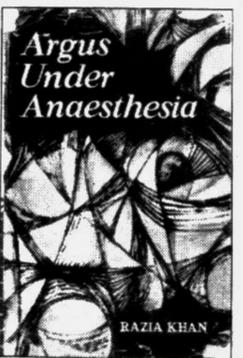
As she says in "The Grave of Time", her adolescence, love, joy, laughter have gone, and only their shadows remain. The carcass of bejewelled moments/Assumes the shape of stone-tears/Without moisture. Yet, as in Eliot's Four Quartets, time past and time future meet in the rose garden when

Sudden in a shaft of sunlight Even while the dust moves There rises the hidden laughter

Of children in the foliage Quick now, here, now, always—

Ridiculous the waste sad time Stretching before and after.

A similar moment is found in Razia Khan's childhood garden, symbolizing a Garden of Eden from which she has been sud-



denly expelled and to which she is longing to return. Her childhood experiences leave her with an ache and a longing that determine her attitude to the world for the rest of her life (of "My Journey", "This Land of Golden Grass").

Love in Razia Khan's poetry is never a lasting relationship of two equal partners. Love is described in images of spring with the passion-red flowers that are so characteristic of that country in spring, but mostly on the background of parting, renunciation and resignation. Love means memories of short encounter's treasured in a marriage with an indifferent, status-conscious husband, "The Old Man and the Girl" expresses the essence of the life of many women in this country:

As his nervous fingers made a knot With the pale blue ribbon, he never imagined

That I had seen my fate In the shape of the imprisoned

Satin within the loops.... I closed my eyes And thought of women whose bosoms

Heaved day and night Not in ecstasy but grief Over greedy and ineffectual Men trembling through the love-ritual

And I gave out a shriek.

Even "The Return", the one poem of fulfilled love between husband and wife, begins with the husband's visit to a prostitute. In the poem "Cruel April" she, one of the two characters

in it, is married and has children, but she has always loved someone else, a man who has come regularly to her house all through her married life. In a series of "Momologues", dialogues and silences, they review these years which for her have meant a life together with a cold husband and therefore a life suppressed passion, for him a life of rise and fall in politics accompanied by a love affair.

Together they renounce 'false gods', i.e. fashionable life and art, and join in a feeling of stupefaction or bliss which implies an absence of desires and a search for 'the right prayer'. They are approaching the dark night of the soul of Eliot's Four Quartets, and the poem ends with the other Eliot theme, the rose garden and the dream children, used very consciously.

They are descending toward the state of nothingness with the doubtful hope of ascending and meeting again. 'He' says ironically:

Might we resume our tete-a-tete

At some future date If you can steal a couple of hours

From your wedded bliss— Say fifty years hence?

"The New Mould" can be seen as a further development of the previous poem. It takes up both the theme of the rose garden and of the dark night of the soul, linking these poems with the series of Carmel poems at the beginning of the 'Cruel April' volume.

The untrained heart Which sought the rose garden Is now chastened... Is now quietened....

From that day Christoph The fiery encounter awaited Us and our unchastened soul Burnt and burnt to become this black

Soaked in poisoned tongues, at last Past all poison; At last smilingly receiving the licking

Tongues of the mounting flames.

The man and the woman go through a refining fire like martyrs and win through to new birth (Razia Khan also has a poem on St. Joan; and she uses the phoenix as an important symbol).

Cruel April strikes another Eliot theme: The Waste Land's ennui, the meaninglessness and emptiness of city life, and the fear of growing old. Razia Khan gives excellent descriptions of Bangladeshi city women in a westernized world of big cars, saxophone music, dancing, parties, cosmetics, fighting to stay slim ("Euphony of Eugenia", "Time to Grow Young", "Death of Phoenix"), and beneath it all there is a despairing sense of boredom. Again there is an added dimension in Razia Khan's poetry which gives Eliot's theme a new perspective, because this high society world is seen together with the world of the poor and hungry outside the door. The rich men and women fill their time with parties, lovers and luxuries, while the poor outside are fighting for survival. In moments out of time they may meet, as the children do in "The School Wall", but most of the time they live in separate worlds. "The Fire Flower", which is one of Razia Khan's best poems juxtaposes the rich bureaucrats who artificially prolong their youth and a young carpenter from Old Dhaka with his fine body, a young man who should have had the life, ecstasy, warmth and dreams of youth, but whose hard work dooms him to an early death. The theme is not new, but Razia Khan's imagery and her compassion and protest make this a very good poem. The bureaucrats, whose artificial youth is described as 'the life-like polythene/Hong Kong blooms permanently young, live

a claustrophobic life, whereas the young man whose mahogany body is burnt in the sun will rise against them like a phoenix. Like a fire flower he will spread his golden petals.

In the Carmel poems ("Far From Carmel", "Far Beyond Mount Carmel", "Towards Mount Carmel", "Song of Pilgrims on Way to Mount Carmel", "Ascent to Mount Carmel") the poet uses the writings of St. John of the Cross and Eliot's Four Quartets to describe her own situation. She belongs to the world of the rich society women, but is a rebel against her society because of her refusal to accept the traditional role of the passive, submissive woman as well as the modern role of the busy society lady. Yet she has not been able to find fulfillment in a life of her own choice, perhaps because she has not had the courage to follow her feelings through to all their consequences (of, "Far Beyond Mount Carmel", "Cruel April"), and through disappointments and suffering she has gradually reached the stage described by St. John as the dark night of the soul. She is now ready to divest herself of all human desires, to go through a purifying fire and then ascend to Mount Carmel and be filled with God in a re-birth. The Carmel poems contain the most direct influence from Eliot, but seen in the context of her other poems they represent a stage in Razia Khan's own development, and the earlier poems which do not deal with this theme directly still lead forward to it.

In her later poems she seems to have gained new confidence and strength to accept a life which has richness in its own private sphere. The flower imagery which is characteristic of all Razia Khan's poetry is used in one of her most recent poems "Beautiful Trivandrum" to express this. She seems almost to have fond again her childhood garden while accepting her life as a grown-up woman who feels a shy pride in isolation:

And thus beautiful Trivandrum Hidden in the deep South, Like myself, from the world's eyes

Crowned me queen.

From the Journal of Indian Writing in English.

Questioning residents of the area would have divulged the good conduct of the valourous Baker Bhai and his friends, quite contrary to the picture of a terrorising hoodlum, as the prosecutor had painted. Certainly not every body could have been bought or intimidated by Rebecca.

Rebecca herself should have come to the witness stand. She could have been undone by the shrewd and cunning Dhunkar, the defence lawyer. Her allegations were so full of faults! She had stood in the verandah and watched Baker and his friends come, force themselves in, commit a murder and then leave before calmly contacting the police, rather than raising hue and cry, which would have been the more spontaneous reaction. She mentioned the light of her verandah as having been lit. If so, then it could be experimentally proven that she could not have clearly discerned people in the relative darkness outside, especially since they were hiding their faces. Is it credible that the murderer took off his cloak and wrapped it around the corpse considerably before departing — being careless enough to uncover his own face? She was a socially notorious woman. The three girls under her care could have exposed her evil character in the court, bringing the motives behind prosecuting Baker into serious concern, since they were not in any immediate physical danger and since they had enough respect for Baker Bhai, — to avenge his wrongful hanging by murdering Rebecca later on. If they loved him so much why had the elder two allowed the third to incriminate him? In court they could have requested protective custody if they were scared of Rebecca. This really puzzled me. Investigation into Rebecca's murder could have also unearthed information that might have saved Baker, since the hanging came much afterwards.

I have never seen a murder trial where the accused was not questioned. By omitting this, the entire court proceeding was turned into a game. If not Baker's brother, then at least his sister-in-law should have come to clarify that the said

allegations have any supporting evidence and so are baseless, he ought to have denounced them as lies. By not doing so he mars his own image. He should not also have been so flabbergasted by Bodi's treachery, for his absence at the dock that morning should have alerted Humayun Faridi. He should have riddled and shredded Bodi with questions that would have aroused his compunction and induced him to reveal the secret deal upon which he was working. Changing statement would have led to the cancellation of Bodi's testimony as perjury, leaving Baker yet another route for escaping.

Another question haunts me: Would three men have come to slay an old fellow and then let a witness live, especially when it is known to them that the witness has only three girls in the house as companions?

Thus, what impression are we left with after an elaborate scrutiny? The plot is a weak, unconvincing one, where the author compelled Baker Bhai to die. Since we find that most of the evidence was circumstantial, with a little twisting of words the entire case could have been torn apart, especially since it was mostly based on the testimony of earlier proven, unreliable witnesses. We must also remember a term so severe as death is not usually passed on a case so full of controversies and contradictions. It seems if Rebecca's idea had not been conceived, Mr Ahmed would have slain the heroic Baker with disease or by an accident, simply to leave the signature of his style; at least that would have been more acceptable than such an ill-planned conclusion. If it is a protest against capital punishment which was the propaganda of the drama, I am certain that the author could have contrived some other means of conveying the message rather than terminating the life of the much loved Baker Bhai.

If BTV is concerned about retaining its viewers then I recommend their providing happier and less error-filled entertainment. For viewers are not prepared to have their hopes build up only to be hurt and disappointed in the end.