

GROWING up in a country that is 'totally different, rather just the opposite in culture, heritage and language — from the land of your ancestors, may be the most difficult phase anyone can pass through.

Apparently they look quite settled and adjusted to the new world but how genuinely they belong to that country is a question to be evaluated. The second and the third generation Bengalee expatriates living in London face exactly such unpleasant turning points in life. There are many Sylhetis who cannot speak Bangla. Either they speak English in British accent or a pure Sylheti dialect. They suffer from a cultural identity crisis. They are nowhere, completely unaware of their roots or origin and yet at the same time not actually being part of the new country and its culture.

Going through all the turmoil of identities and racial discrimination, these children can only understand their place in an alien society better by the help of teachers hired from Bangladesh and of course, by their parents.

Shamim Azad who was a teacher, a journalist and a Bengali writer here, is one such person whose contribution to these children's understanding of their identity is immense. Currently a teacher in London, she, with a professional playwright, Mary Cooper, has written a bilingual play 'Kola Pata Bhut' (The Hopscotch Ghost).

Bilingual theatres can have a positive bearing in a multi-racial society. The bilingual work is specifically for children who do not have English as their first language. Shamim Azad, explaining her vision of the bilingual theatre in the Asian weekly, says that it is a shared art. It may be the only time that bilingual and monolingual classmates enjoy a learning experience on completely equal terms — where each has equal ease of access to the content and equal confidence in handling the linguistic

A BILINGUAL PLAY IN ENGLAND Bridging the East-West Divide

by Raffat Binte Rashid

and cultural conventions. The theatre-in-education team of Half Moon Young People's touring Theatre has produced a fabulous, entertaining play in Sylheti, Bengali and English. The bilingual play 'Kola Pata Bhut' or the Hopscotch Ghost serves the same purpose for the Bengalee children in London.

The play, for children between 6 to 8 years is a highly relevant programme which combines music, songs and humour to create both a magical and an entertaining learning atmosphere for these children.



Director Christopher Baldwin and Shamim Azad

The subtle theme of the play is actually the loneliness the trauma of living in solitude by these multi-racial children. A child's worst fear is being left alone without any companions and friends. Being rejected by a special friend she wants to be close to. This thoughtful play explores all the flaws in friendly relations and loyalty and mainly hints at this heart-rending situation that every child dreads, having no one to play with.

The Hopscotch Ghost is

about three girls, Shanaz, Mariyam and Razia.

In the opening scene Shanaz and Mariyam are best friends. Shanaz lies to her and goes off with Razia leaving Mariyam all alone. This is when the Kola Pata Bhut or the Hopscotch Ghost enters. Basically this ghost is created in a Bengali context. He is not at all frightening or sinister. Whenever a young child remembers him and wants him badly, he comes spontaneously to the child's aid saying 'Asalumu Alaykum'. He helps the one who calls him and at

woven a story that is not only unusual but very captivating too. The whole play has been treated very sensitively and with an eye for details. This one-hour performance is a fantastic mixture of English and Bangla, with few other colloquial tongues.

The entire cast is multi-racial as well. The actors and actresses are black, Asian and British. Shanaz was played by Cahedua Nessa a Bengalee girl from Sylhet. Kola Pata was British actor Douglas Sinclair. Razia was Nilima Raichoudury, a Nepalese, and Mariyam was Sandra Vacciana a Carrebean. The musician was Christopher Ellis a British.

The most striking part is the stage of the play, there was a 'Nakishi Katha' placed on the floor where the actors performed and the audience was seated all round the set, with the musician seated at a corner on top of a platform with all his instruments, said a Bangalee spectator who was visiting London at that time. With an excellent combination of guitar, tabla, flute and cymbals the entire music was rich and entertaining. 'The performance has left children as well as the adults spell-bound, from childhood to adulthood the performers depicted every stage of human life with an unusual ease and confidence,' he said.

There was approximately about 100 stage performances of this play. Commenting on this play, Polly Thomas, Director, for New Playwright Trust (NPT) wrote, 'I was fortunate enough to attend the gala presentation of Kola Pata Bhut on 14.6.93 at the Tavanant Centre in East End, London.

The beautiful old hall was packed with young and old,

people of all races, speaking many different languages. We were seated on all sides, forming a square on the charming floor cloth which comprise the play's set, painted with a striking hopscotch pattern.

'Kola Pata Bhut is a play full of energy and life. The four actors easily created the atmosphere of school with children, opening the evening with a hectic series of children's games and chats in English and Bengali. I was impressed by the fluidity of Mary and Shamim's script, which enabled the actors to move swiftly between one part and another.

'The language rang through as the speeches of young girls in the playground united with the two, tongues in an easy everyday manner. I do not speak Bengali, but was able to follow the storyline without difficulty. It was good to be able to enjoy many of the comic moments that were conveyed in Bengali, thanks to the actor's skills and the writer's craft! The use of music and song in both languages added a fine touch.

'It was clear that the audience had thoroughly enjoyed the show. Just as importantly, we had all been able to enter the world of this script, and appreciate the strength of the bilingual form. Not only did the play use two languages, but it demonstrated how two cultures are intertwined as young people grow up in a multi-racial environment.

'It was a privilege and a pleasure to see such works, which both respect and celebrate differences and common ground. I look forward to the day when more audiences can share this experience.'

At present Shamim Azad is writing her second bilingual play 'The raft, (Bhela)' which is scheduled to be staged by June 1994.

To minimise the racial tension an create an atmosphere of cultural harmony, such steps of Shamim definitely go a long way and her being a Bangalee adds more to the glamour.

His Feelings in Forms

by Nazrul Islam



Abu Taher (left) and some of his works: 'Composition (3) '92' (below), 'The Masks '92' (right) and 'Composition (1) '92'.



WHEN Abu Taher first entered the Institute of Arts at Dhaka in the late fifties, it was still very much in its formative stage and was dominated by two schools of painting. Parallel to the academic school was the experimental school pioneered by a group of talented avant garde artists who had just returned from the art capitals of Europe and America. When Taher graduated from the Institute of Arts in 1963, he was already free from the taboo and fixity of academic discipline and was mentally prepared to venture into the world of modern experimental art.

Although Taher today, at 57, is well known in Bangladesh as an abstract expressionist painter, he did not reach this stage overnight. It was a rather progressive development. His first non-academic works were more in the semi-abstract tradition. His early compositions would appear as rectangles within rectangles, or as several squares arranged in a larger space of a rectangle. These shapes, however, were not purely geometrical. The inner shapes would contain faces. These faces were the images of distant ancestors. They were almost pre-historic in their appearance. No wonder, the artist called such works as — 'The Aborigines' (1963-65). From the beginning, Taher chose oil as his medium of artistic expression.

Obviously, Taher was not content with his aboriginal images for long, he began to look for a more interesting style. He seemed to find this in the German Expressionist School type of painting. He did nearly a series. The subject matter would be people, mostly faces of men, the palette changed somewhat to brighter primaries, but his new-found love for black considerably toned down the reds and greens. The facts that he diluted his paint rather thin and his painting surface was the mesonite board also played their role in making the colours less than bright. A few works in this phase evoke remembrance. One such work is the 'Three men' (1965).

But before long Taher fell in love with Pablo Picasso, whose art and life both appeared so challengingly attractive to this young man in far away Dhaka. For several years Taher painted almost in the shadow of Picasso's Blue Period, depicting people in their loneliness and deprivations. Some of his paintings of this period, such as the 'Mother and Child' (1966), are deeply touching works.

The human conditions, however, remained a persisting theme in Taher's later works. But by 1969 he had modified his manner of expression, instead of the angularity of lines, his people now were rather de-

formed. The human figures almost faded into the background. In one quite remarkable work titled 'The Wretched-Soul' (1969) the figure of a man seem to have dissolved in the soft earth. The eternal predicament of man's existence reminds one of Alberto Giacometti's sculptural figures. Taher's colour palette is once again extremely conservative in this work. It is almost monochromatic.

The War of Liberation of Bangladesh left a very deep mark in Abu Taher, as it did to many of his fellow artists. But he had more than an average artist's share of the excruciating experience of the nine months of captive life in his own country. He was taken away by the occupation army for questioning. Although he was spared the physical extermination, the torture was horrifying enough. This nightmarish experience made it nearly possible for him to feel the moments when the nation's several top intellectuals were most brutally murdered by the Pakistani Army at the last phase of the war. Taher paid his Homage to the Martyred Intellectuals (1973). Indeed, it is one of the most evocative works of art by a Bangladeshi painter on such macabre events in the War of Liberation. It is a large oil; the composition is simple; it depicts three human figures completely wrapped, like ancient Egyptian mummies, blindfolded, executed and then thrown into a mass grave. This painting is now in the permanent collections of the National Museum, being a gift of the Centre for Urban Studies at Dhaka University. The Liberation of Bangladesh had a profound effect on Taher's attitude towards painting. He gradually turned to more brilliant and luminous palette. By 1974, there was almost a burst of warm colours — lots of reds, yellows and oranges. Other primaries came with almost equal ease and brilliance. After Picasso's death in 1973, Taher painted a picture as his Homage to Picasso (1974). It was a clear break from a conservative darkish palette to one of scintillating brightness. After his 'Picasso homage', there has also been a transfer totally with the abstract expressionist tradition. Taher's most recent works are like feeling in forms. These are his 'outward expression of an inner need'. Taher's inner need was probably for breathing free as an artist.

Even in the latest of Taher's artistic developments, one may discern two simultaneous approaches. In one, his compositions are simply colour forms or colour-space-bodies. These colour forms are evolutionary and sensuous. The style displays vigour and intensity and deep emotional involvement of the artist. Although parts of the

compositions resemble techniques of action painters, but parts are result of careful slow brush work. Thus there is a combination of the rough with the tender. Taher has a number of very successful works in this approach of abstract painting. Some examples are the 'Whirlpool' (1978), 'Aggression II' (1980) and 'The Old hut' (1981). These compositions are also very large in dimension, measuring upto 215cm X 115cm. Taher shows considerable skill in handling both large compositions as well as tiny ones. The details are noteworthy in both.

In the second approach of his abstract style, instead of the splash effect, he uses the spatula to create long wide impasto bands of colour which criss cross one another in many directions ultimately bringing balance in tension. Sometimes the bands of thick paint have mixed colours giving dimensions even within a band. Some outstanding works in this band approach are the 'Bird' (1992), 'Stone' (1982) and 'Stop Genocide' (1982), 'The Burnt Earth' (1985) and 'Composition' (1992). As the titles suggest, even in the most abstract form, Taher's works derive their inspiration from land and life.

In 1985 the world witnessed one of the saddest natural catastrophes that swept away thousands of lives on the Bay of Bengal from Uritchar and other offshore islands; the haunting impression left on the mind of the artist by this disastrous events found abstract but apt expression in the paintings done in 1985 (In memory of Uritchar).

For his current and eighth solo exhibition of the works of 1992-93 (at the National Museum, 1-10 October, 1993), Taher has also included nearly 25 miniature paintings in oil on paper. Stylistically, these show an interesting synthesis of Chinese landscape painting with abstract expressionism. There is an element of spontaneity in each work.

Abu Taher's artistic life spans over three full decades. He has always been a very disciplined worker. In spite of many constraints like space and money, Taher has proved to be very productive. Since he paints almost six days a week, throughout the year, he has so far been able to put up as many as eight solo exhibitions, each time with new works. He has also participated in all the national shows of Bangladesh painters organized at home and abroad. Even at 57, Abu Taher is very much like an active young man. He lives a very invigorating family life with an extremely understanding, supportive and intelligent wife.

The writer is Professor of Geography, University of Dhaka.



Scenes from the play: •The Ghost — Douglas Sinclair



Douglas Sinclair and Sandra Vacciana

1993 Books Focus on Individual Identity

IF there is a unifying theme in the 1993 crop of novels, essays, scholarly works, and poems by American writers, it is a celebration of individual identity — the search to give voice to the experiences of Americans from different backgrounds. This search for diverse expressions is also clearly reflected in the year's literary prize awards.

Novelist Toni Morrison won the 1993 Nobel Prize for literature for her lifetime achievement as a novelist. Morrison is the first African American and second African woman to be so honored. (Pearl S. Buck, the first African woman to do so, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1938.)

From her earliest novel, 'The Bluest Eye' (1969) to her latest, 'Jazz' (1992) Morrison has explored the dilemmas of African Americans in white America. In her historical novel 'Beloved,' which won the Pulitzer prize for literature in 1988, a mother kills her baby rather than see her sold into slavery. The Swedish Academy, in conferring the Nobel, described Morrison's prose as having 'the luster of poetry.'

One of the best-known American literary awards, the National Book Award, went to Vermont-based writer E. Annie Proulx for her novel 'The Shipping News,' the story of a failed journalist who makes an unlikely pilgrimage to start anew in a small town in Newfoundland.

'Shipping News,' a Seattle Times critic wrote, 'hangs together beautifully... The prose is spiky and sublime... and its portrait of Newfoundland is so deft that readers may feel they've come away from a season there.' Publisher's Weekly said the book 'depicts the voracious sea, the grim, unforgiving climate and the people who survive there with an honest eye.'

The National Book Award also went to caustic social observer, historian and man of letters Gore Vidal for his collection, 'United States: Essays 1952-1992.'

Critic Jonathan Raban wrote in the Los Angeles Times 'At 66, Vidal appears to be just

A Report from Washington

coming to his full dimensions as an erudite writer: one of the best, most stinging pieces in the book is a passionate attack on Christianity — and, for good measure, Judaism and Islam — published last July.

Raban quoted a typically caustic Vidal, writing in 1986 on Japanese-US economic competition: 'Last summer (not suddenly, I fear) we found ourselves close to \$2 trillion in debt. Then, in the fall, the money power shifted from New York to Tokyo, and that was the end of our empire. Now the long-feared Asiatic colossus takes its turn as world leader, and we — the white race — have become the yellow man's burden. Let us hope that he will treat us more kindly than we have treated him.'

A R Ammons won the National Book Award for his poetry collection, 'Garbage.' This work, according to the New York Times Book Review, 'has a rueful grandeur and characteristically splendid oddity. Over the last 40 years Mr. Ammons has consistently demonstrated the democratic percept that 'anything is poetry and here he playfully takes up — takes on — the subject of trash. Thus a mountain of junk near the I-95 (interstate highway) in Florida becomes the site of his moving and often comic speculations about natural processes.'

Although best known as an award for journalists, the Pulitzer prize also recognizes creative writers and scholars. 1993's Pulitzer prize for fiction went to 'A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain,' a collection of short stories by Robert Olen Butler chronicling the lives of Vietnamese refugees in the Southern United States.

In a review of the book in The New York Times, George Packer wrote 'Each of the 15 stories is told in the first person, from the viewpoint of a Vietnamese transplanted from the Mekong Delta to the Louisiana bayou. The Americans have become foils; it's the Vietnamese who are now at the center, haunted by the past,

ambivalent about their hosts.' Poet Louise Glück won the Pulitzer for her book of poems, 'The Wild Iris.' Elizabeth Lund of the Christian Science Monitor called the book 'a turning point for its author... Most of the poems use a flower as both metaphor and indirect subject.'

The Pulitzer prize for biography went to 'Truman,' by David McCullough. Critic Alan Brinkley called the book an 'honest and revealing portrait of the ordinary man who became an extraordinary historical figure. The Pulitzer prize for history was awarded to the 'Radicalism of the American Revolution,' an exploration of the origins of American egalitarian culture by Gordon S. Wood.

Tony Kushner won the 1993 Pulitzer in drama for 'Angels in America: Millennium Approaches.' Kushner's 'Angels' series of plays are long, emotional and deal with the dilemmas of

homosexual men caught up in the AIDS crisis.

The National Book Critics Circle Award went to Cormac McCarthy for 'All the Pretty Horses,' a novel about two American boys who head down to Mexico in 1950 to work on a horse ranch. Writing in the New York Times, Madison Smartt Bell said the work is 'powered by long, tumbling many-stranded sentences.'

The Washington, DC-based PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction went to Ms. Proulx for her earlier novel 'Postcards.' The PEN/Faulkner-Bernard Malamud prize for the short story went to veteran writer Peter Taylor, known for his lucid, classically-written stories about ordinary Americans. The National Medal of the Arts, awarded by the United States government, went to poet Stanley Kunitz and Pulitzer-prize winning novelist William Styron.

As often happens, 1993's literary awards at times clashed

with the world of popular culture. In the popular book category, counter-culture radio disc jockey Howard Stern's autobiography, 'Private Parts' rocketed to number one on the best-seller charts shortly after publication. Stern's scatological, obscene and racially-tinged commentaries have become popular with some middle-class audiences alienated from the 'politically correct' bland intellectual and media establishment. Likewise, the 'Bridges of Madison County,' by Robert James Waller, which some critics found too sentimental, became an enduring best-seller.

Edith Wharton's classic novel 'The Age of Innocence' became a paperback best-seller 56 years after her death following the release of the movie based on her book. Elizabeth Marshall Thomas' controversial 'The Hidden Life of Dogs,' a serious attempt to describe the emotions of man's favourite companion also made the best-seller list. And readers for whom even a furry friend is not enough to drive away the blues made Peter Kramer's 'Listening to Prozac,' a best-seller. — USIS Feature

Paula has not been to the barbers for a while. Her close cropped blonde hair has grown an inch or so, turning her shaved head into a shaggy blonde mop.

But she wears the obligatory 'Doc Marten' workboots and the bulky green flight jacket. Her jeans, in slavish adherence to the details of the fashion, have two neat little turns at the bottom.

to a time when the skinhead message was multi-racial. 'Whether it's the mod or the skinhead movement, its roots lie in ska (music) from Jamaica and in rude boys, the gang culture of Jamaica,' says Sophie Wolff, a skinhead working at Merc clothing, an all-skinhead London clothes shop off Carnaby Street.

In the 1950s and 1960s, migrants from Jamaica brought the music and style to Britain. Young Jamaican rude boys, with their 'Sta-Press' trousers, two-tone suits and close cropped Afro hairstyles, were the root for two British styles: mods and skinheads.

In the 1970s two bands — Madness and the Specials — adopted a black and white logo. Says Wolff, 'It was black and white check to symbolise the two cultures of the blacks and whites merging.'

In all fairness, even at the beginning, boomer boys in big working-class overalls and huge boomer boots would go around

Britain: Now, Skinheads Fight Racism

The racist Skinhead movement has roots in black music. Lucy Johnson of Inter Press Service reports from London



beating up Pakis (South Asian immigrants to Britain), she says.

Still, the real hijacking of the movement by the right wing came with the birth of a blend

of skinhead style and punk rock called 'Oi' music, says Wolff.

'Oi' music, if you can call it that, was a much more contrived effort to create a youth movement to link far right poli-

tics and music than was appreciated at the time,' says IPS Europe Regional Editor Asoka Jayasekera, who reported on the issue in the 1980s.

Youth magazine writers like Garry Bushell made a detailed case for Oi as the voice of a disaffected generation, he says. 'But apart from the fact that many were quickly put off by the truly dreadful music, Oi's core fans were so mindlessly violent that they simply defied political organisation, let alone political thought.'

Bushell went on to become a populist right wing columnist on the Sun newspaper. The Oi movement collapsed in 1981 after a mob of enraged Asian youth broke up a concert by one of its leading bands, the Four Skins, and burnt down the venue.

Little was heard of either racist or anti-racist British skins until media attention was reawakened with the rise of skinhead violence in Germany.

Today, the two skinhead

factions now say they despise each other. Neo-Nazi skinheads reject the black cultural link and ska-fan skinheads dismiss the racists as 'boneheads,' says Wolff. 'There's a big split growing again between the back to the roots of ska and rocksteady skinheads and those who are splitting off to the right-wing, the boneheadish type.'

Bonehead skinheads are presently very busy, particularly with the rise of the far-right in Germany, where savage attacks on immigrants by skinhead racists have made world headlines.

'Dev' Bannan, of the Greenwich Action Campaign Against Racist Attacks in South London, says he has a problem distinguishing harmless skinheads from the boneheads.

'I did go into a pub in north London recently and there were loads of skinheads, and I thought, "That's a bit odd," but the more I looked at them, the more I realised that the problem is you can't tell by looking which is which.'