

Literature

In Pursuit of Freedom

by Azfar Hussain

The cycles of movement and stillness, progress and retrogression, confidence and confusion, discipline and directionlessness characterize the somewhat complex literary scene in this part of the world, observes a young literary critic in the following piece which focuses on certain crucial aesthetic trends and styles, with a particular emphasis on the literature of the nineties. "The future of Bengali literature certainly awaits a new generation of revolutionary geniuses," observes the author.

BENGALI literature did not begin its course with any dramatic suddenness after the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent, sovereign state in 1971. True, today, Bangladesh arrives at the age of twenty-five; but, Bengali literature does not. For Bengali literature is much older than Bangladesh; it has a long history which can be narrativized only with a sense of inadequacy, given the complexity and rich diversity of this history. However, one can barely lose sight of certain crucial areas and avenues that tend to foreground themselves more significantly than others. And, one of such avenues, easily noticeable in our literary history, is the historical interaction between the birth of Bangladesh and the course of our literature.

Let us now begin by asking ourselves this question: when Bangladesh was born, did our literature take any turn? Yes, it did. And it did visibly. Whether the visibility of the turn in question corresponds or attests to any major revolutionary stylistic and thematic breakthroughs is yet another question deserving one's critical interventions. But, it is difficult to ignore the fact that the poetry of the seventies, for example—and also fiction and drama written during the first half of this decade—immediately captured the imaginations and aspirations typical of the middle class. One can say that the "War" itself—the armed struggle—constituted a recurring theme in both poetry and fiction. Abu Hena Mustafa Kamal once justly maintained that during the first half of the seventies, there was not a single poet who could write without reference to the War. Given this irresistible response to the War mostly in a mood of victory and in a tone of excitement, one can say that a great deal of creative writings appeared at that point of time to be *occasional*, attesting to that aesthetic of correspondence between literature and its physical-social milieu. The older generation of poets including Shamsur Rahman, Hassan Hafizur Rahman, Al Mahmood, Shaheed Quadri and many others, and the new generation of poets who first appeared in the seventies—both seemed to share and celebrate the unity of the themes of war, liberation, victory, dream, and so on. On the other hand, a number of fiction-writers and playwrights belonging both to the old (the 50s and the 60s) and new (the 70s) generations also celebrated the moment of their unity in their response to a newly-born state like Bangladesh. Thus, this moment amply charged with excitement and with a certain amount of the immediacy and directness of perception was more than visible—was identifiable as a turning point in our literature.

It needs mentioning here that the mood of excitement and the rhetoric of rejoicing were not the only abiding literary realities at the time. Also, the mood of loss accompanied by the images of horror, nightmares, deaths, damages, devastation, and the experiences of massive sufferings and strenuous struggles were captured in varying degrees and dimensions in literature, starting from Shamsur Rahman and Syed Shamsul Huq through Hassan Azizul Huq, Akhteruzzaman Elias and Mahmoodul Haq and also through Selim Al Deen to the poets-fiction writers-playwrights of the seventies. But, then, there was always a "music in the midst of desolation" and a glory shone upon tears. In other words, the mood and rhetorics of rejoicing did not constitute the monolithic structures of literary experiences; but, then, they were certainly the predominant ones. This predominance is one of the characteristics of the literature of the seventies, broadly speaking.

But, the mood of rejoicing did not last long. It was also in the literature of the seventies that reversals of expectations accompanied by breakages and wreckage of ideals and principles envisaged earlier were imaged and experienced both directly and indirectly by creative writers belonging to the 50s and 60s who continued to write throughout the seventies, including new writers exclusively belonging to the later decade. Roughly speaking, the second half of the seventies was a period of disillusionment, despair, directionlessness—which, of course, had to do with politics and society at large. Acute socio-political consciousness was one of the marks of the literature of this period. A good number of stories, for example, were written by the new-generation writers who zoomed in on the details of living in a society that was fast moving away from the boundaries of dreams drawn earlier. Poets and playwrights—both old and new—captured and constructed these moments of dream-breaking, mostly with sloppy, sentimental romanticism, and sometimes, with commendable artistic strength and success.

Now, caught in the cycle of dream-making and dream-breaking, how did our literature progress? The progress of literature cannot be ascertained so easily; it cannot be ascertained decade-wise either; for, literature needs to endure an uncertain passage of time. But, then, looking back, one can at least say that the literature during this period was, in the first place, playing fast and loose with romanticism of sorts which subsequently generated a new consciousness among the creative writers of the eighties. The War certainly generated excitements: dream-breaking, mostly generated sentiments and inane rhetorics, but the struggle to turn excitements and sentiments and rhetorics into art was not, however, totally absent. In some works, signs of strengths and a certain degree of success in shaping a distinctive language can be detected, but only sporadically.

One can certainly refer to drama, in particular. It would be no exaggeration to maintain (against that oft-raised and well-known complaint that the Liberation War has not hitherto been able to produce any major literary work) that the new surge of activities in the field of drama was triggered off perceptibly by the Liberation War—by its spirit, its energy, its *elan*, its pressure. A great variety of experiments were enthusiastically and daringly undertaken; a strong sense of history was cultivated and exhibited; an uncompromising but creative quest for roots, indigenous myths and other unexplored aesthetic resources went on almost untrammelled throughout the seventies and eighties, producing dramatic *oeuvres* that perhaps do not have parallels in any earlier decade whatsoever. One can hardly resist the temptation of referring to Selim Al Deen and Syed Shamsul Huq whose dramatic works quintessentially represent the creative spirit of liberation.

In so far as fiction is concerned, I must mention that Akhteruzzaman Elias whose novel *Chhikothar Sepal*, though written prior to the Liberation War, amply represents the creative spirit of liberation in terms of singlehandedly shaping the language of contemporary fiction—a language which has kept its magic-influence almost unswerving even today, attracting a considerable number of younger followers over the last twenty-four years. Some of Elias's subsequent stories make creative use of the War, and the aesthetic effect they produce is simply outstanding by international standards. The field of poetry, crowded as it is, always presents scales and spaces that tend to unsettle the singularity of instance. Yet, it may be said that part of Al Mahmood's creative pursuit in the seventies appears remarkable in tone, tune, tenor, and text.

To move on from the seventies to the eighties is to enter an atmosphere of self-consciousness, sometimes tellingly stylized. The creative writers of the fifties and sixties continued to produce their works, mostly in a repetitive manner. Here, I do not wish to concentrate on those older, well-known, well-reviewed writers. In fact, it would be worthwhile to focus on some of the promising young writers—comparatively unknown—who made their debut in the eighties. These writers, inordinately conscious of the sloppy, aesthetically ineffectual romanticism of the seventies, embarked on a stylistic struggle towards forging a language that would look masculine and rocky, symmetrical and quintessential, more imagistic and concrete than idealational and abstract, more metred-and-rhymed or more measured and formal than free. A new kind of

architectonic sensibility and sculptural dimensionality could be detected more than easily in the literary works of the younger writers. On the one hand, the spell of Eurocentric and Anglo-American modernism in the Baudelairean-Yeatsian-Poundesque-Eliotesque tradition could not be dispensed with, and on the other, there was a kind of going-back to the older traditions of Bengali literature—the lyrical world of the medieval period, to the mysticism of Lalou Shah, and so on. Young poets like Masud Khan and Subrota Augustine Gomez exhibited at least sparks of brilliance in their poetry. On the other hand, short-story-writers like Selim Murshed, Mamoon Hussain and Parvez Khan exhibited potentials and quality through their experimental works. All these writers are still active, and we are yet to see their more matured works in the course of time.

If the striving in literature to be intelligent, skilful and disciplined, and also experimental may be taken as a marked feature of the eighties, particularly exemplified in the works of Subrota Augustine and Mamoon Hussain, it was only towards the end of the eighties that a new mode of aesthetic awareness emerged with works exhibiting semantic and syntactic recalcitrances, structural iconoclasm of sorts, a certain kind of *political mythopoeisis*, and a strong sense of history. One cannot but observe that while the aesthetic shaped by the somewhat abortive little magazine movement in the eighties aimed at producing works as "carefully achieved entities", the nineties now tend to dispense with such consciousness, but not always at the expense of verbal precision and concentration. It is also worthwhile to notice that most of the writers making their debut in the eighties have now moved away from the self-conscious aesthetic pressure (which has been described by some critics as *self-policing*) to a sense of freedom marked by various experi-

ments whose outcomes and impact are yet to be seen. New poets and short-story writers have also appeared on the literary scene, exhibiting some potentials and possibilities, though the field of the novel does not appear to be at all exciting, particularly in terms of new appearances. But, some of the older-generation novelists—for example, Akhteruzzaman Elias presently working on a new novel, part of which had already appeared showing signs of tremendous strength—have remained quite active.

Yet another marked aspect of the nineties is a kind of growing dissatisfaction with the modernism of the thirties which, over the last fifty years, has been able to retain its magic-spell on our literature. Resistance to this brand of modernism mostly modelled on Baudelaire-Mallarme-Yeats-Pound-Eliot-Auden has sometimes tended to assume the label of *postmodernism* which is, however, now more a matter of debate and excitement than any established literary-aesthetic creed or culture. It is also being felt that Eurocentric or Anglo-American postmodernism is not what one can viably stand for; for, our postmodernism, if it is at all possible to think of any, must evolve out of the forces of our own history and society; it must be rooted in our soil. In the name of modernism, the spell of aesthetic neo-colonialism has been in existence for long. Let not postmodernism induce or enhance the same spell!

Thus, roughly, the three decades of Bengali literature in this part of world have exhibited both prospects and crises. It has been difficult for me within an extremely limited space as this to document faithfully and accurately the whole gamut of achievements and failures in the field of our literature. Feel are urged to observe a few signs and symptoms, trends and tendencies that I feel are crucial to the literary pursuit, whose future certainly awaits a new generation of revolutionary geniuses.

Music Music Everywhere

by Waheedul Haque

MUSIC nowadays is everywhere. In the sixties restaurants and other eating houses offered high-decibel music with their mouthfuls. Before that one had to wait for the *pujas*—specially for Durga and Saraswati—and *Dhakalya* local wedding celebrations for having some music. Loud-speakers were a rarity and only on such few and far between occasions they were hired to fend the air with doleful numbers of the Bengali modern and Hindi film songs. The lugubrious melodies with very touching words, blown up to volumes reaching across miles, used to create an illusion of music coming as if from the heaven and reverberating through the hills and dales, much like Edward Munch's *The Cry*. During the fifties portable transistor radio sets made their way into every little home. Gone were the days of heavenly music. Domestic music was now the in-thing.

Another musical phenomenon was also making a silent exit, never to return. That was the 78 rpm gramophone disc together with the spring-drive mechanical gramophone. It was almost the end of an epoch. Thomas Alva Edison's wonderful contraption, by the opening years of the twentieth century, had wrought a musical revolution first by democratizing it and then preserving it *live*. As with the railways and photography, the subcontinent was among the pioneers of recorded music and the gramophone industry. Although H. Bose of the Kuntalin hair-oil-fame—and father to Nitin Bose and Malati Ghosal—had years before done true groundbreaking work by doing cylindrical recording specially of Rabindranath Tagore, the singer—this wasn't a technology to blossom into industry. The His Master's Voice—HMV—people set up their 78 rpm disc and gramophone industry at Dum Dum soon after they had commissioned their parent plant at Middlesex, England. HMV not only immortalized by their name and their legendary trade mark Edison's dog listening to his master's voice

played over a brass-horned gramophone, they went ahead to immortalise the best of subcontinental music—classical and folk and modern, vocal and instrumental and percussion—for sixty years, starting in 1901.

This epoch of the gramophone and the 78 rpm disc—from the standard 10-inch to the outside 22-inch—was fast going out at the end of the fifties. The void was to be filled first by long-play discs and, in the more opulent homes, by ponderous radiograms. And before the sixties were out every home boasting either of culture or wealth or of both had a spool tape-recorder of either Philips or Grundig reminiscent of the status symbol of the pre-40 radio receiver days—Philips of Holland, Blaupunkt and Telefunken of Germany. The long-play discs could not quite wholly replace the 78 rpm ones mainly because its player could not become a household item owing to its forbidding price. Cheaper brands were so low in quality as to put the sophisticated 33½ rpm LPs completely to waste. If LPs could only persist as the main source of pre-recorded for a longer span of time, there is no doubt quality players could come in cheap. But soon after the spool tapes had a field day, the cassette came with a bang and simply wrote off all earlier attempts to play and listen to music according to one's choice and without any music makers performing at home or in some for-off studio. Cassette recorders became the cheapest and almost universal source of canned music, making available all the wealth of the 78 and 33½ discs and spool-tape recordings.

Although CD is already here, we are still deeply immersed in the cassette world. TV's audio-visual incursion into homes—both live and piped as well as VCP-helped canned listening-viewings, has rather than cutting into the cassette sweep, augmented phenomenally the tally of exposure to music and the access of music trade mark Edison's dog listening to his master's voice

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Painting

24 Years of Pursuit

by Syed Manzoorul Islam

IN writing about art history, one cannot begin in *medias res*; one has to explore the background, as far as least it relates to the period of time that one deals with and also understand the perspectives that clarify one's main arguments.

The tradition of modern Bangladeshi painting is invariably linked up with what happened in the 1920s and 30s in the undivided Bengal, for it was the Calcutta Art School that attempted to bring a modern approach to painting in this part of the world. The stress on experimentation—and the need to go back to tradition (the orientalism of Abanindranath Tagore) were distinguishing qualities of the school. The first batch of modern Bangladeshi painters—Zainul Abedin, Anwarul Haque, Saliuddin Ahmed, Qamrul Hasan and Khwaja Shafiq, had linkages to this school in one way or the other, although each of them attempted to perfect his idiom and his own style away from the influences of that school. With Zainul, it was destined to be a maverick's quest for novelty which he achieved, and along with it, an international reputation, for his water colours, and sketches of the 1943 Bengal Famine. These sketches devastated the complacent and solipsistic society, and showed, in an age charged with Marxist ideas, what art can do to arouse social consciousness.

Although primarily known for his sketches and drawings, Zainul also worked in water colour and oil, impressing on each work a distinct, vibrant style, with an articulate colour-scheme. His themes were always the land and its people, and on occasions of great change and upheaval—as during our struggle for independence in 1971, or the devastating cyclone a year before that, Zainul painted haunting portraits of the events.

After the 1947 partition of India, Zainul and others settled down in Dhaka. Next year, through their efforts, Dhaka Art College opened its doors. This began the most formative phase of our recent art-history. For it is this college, which was the pivot of a growing movement in painting and sculpture, that brought together the likes of Mohammad Kibria, Murtaja Bashir, Rashid Chowdhury, Aminul Islam, Abdul Baset, Abdur Rauf, Gayum Chowdhury, Abdur Razzak, Syed Jahangir and many others

resident in Bangladesh to spend one single day in a whole year or even a decade without being invaded or reached by music.

And there is hardly any among the tens of millions of people exposed to music who has in a whole year or a decade or even in his whole time has experienced a real musician perform in his presence.

Music is everywhere but the musician is nowhere to be found. Moreover, hardly any of the exposed ones can either play or sing upto whatever standard. The universal spread of music, thanks to technological progress, has miserably failed to generate a population or generation of heightened musical sensibility. And has rather spawned a whole nation of musical illiterates.

Forget about Tagore and the other four great composers, have we in the last so many decades had anyone composing music upto the Kamal Dasgupta mark? What about great performers—vocalists and instrumentalists? Have we had one in all these Pakistan and Bangladesh years who would be remembered and avidly heard in say 50 years' time? But are we not filled with the performance of singers and instrumentalists may be dead fifty years back? And how about our lyrics? It seems they are written expecting them not to survive even a decade. And they obligingly do not tarry longer than that. Irrespective of quality, it is in the nature of commercialism that old products must make room for new merchandise. A particular genre is, however, proving quite tenacious. Some of the IPTA songs and many created in their wake in Bangladesh by Altaf Mahmud, Sheikh Lutfar Rahman and Sadhan Sarkar have a gritty staying power, partly because of political need.

Music is a two-way art. As Tagore has said: *Ek jon gabey kheta gawla arek jon gabey monet*. Music listening, to be listening at all, has to be participatory. This participatory aspect has all but vanished from Bangladesh.

"As we look back to the long stretch of post-liberation years, we are amazed by the speed with which painting has progressed...," says one of our foremost art-critics.

It is, however, not only the simple tale of progress that the writer has brought to the fore; but, voids and undersides remaining in the history of painting in Bangladesh have also been exhibited through a critical unfolding of certain crucial events and experiences.

although not everyone was connected with the college.

These artists, based mainly in Dhaka, soon spread out to the art-centres of Europe for formal education and came back, equipped with all the recent theories, ideas and techniques. The painters and sculptors in the sixties amply exhibit a remarkable awareness and understanding of dominant western thoughts in art. It is true that some inane imitations also took place as those happened practically everywhere, but overall, the accent was on breaking new grounds and attempting to synthesize western concepts with our own district backgrounds and conventions. The technical excellence of some of these painters and sculptors was remarkable. The sixties thus had fully launched, what was fondly described by the artists themselves as, an art movement. By this time, Chittagong, Rajshahi and Khulna had grown their own centres of activity. Exhibitions became regular parts of the yearly art calendar, and sales of art-work picked up.

By the end of the sixties, three broad trends can be seen in the painting and the graphic art of Bangladesh: abstract expressionism or simply abstractionism that somehow became synonymous with modernism; figurative or half-figurative representations of realistic scenes (realism also extended to nature-studies and still life); and stylized folkism which also included the repetitive motifs that one usually associates with folk-art but were selectively applied by the artists to highlight a certain mood—like a strong nostalgia for the past, and for a life-style that someone got lost or, at any rate, could not possibly be lived any more. Here, too, modernism was seen as an antithesis to the pastoral vision that folk-art represented; therefore, the new folkism in painting pointed at the anti-pastoral that clouded people's perspectives. The anti-pastoral, however, would not develop as a statement before the late eighties, when post-modernistic preoccupations brought elements of the anti-pastoral into the composition where a dystopic vision became inevitable.

Apart from the three main trends, the sixties also created its own versions of symbolism, which influenced practically all branches of fine art. The sixties marked a time when, both in the west and in the east, the leading tendency (in art, literature, philosophy) was to discover and explore interior spaces. This search was not purely psychological, or phenomenological; it was partly a reaction against the uncertainty and the disillusionment that gripped younger generations across cosmopolitan centres, and partly an inability to sustain a meaningful dialogue with the external world. The result was therefore a loss of centrality, and certainty; symbolism became an attractive means of focusing one's views and coming to terms with a world and reality that forever dissolve their shapes. By the end-sixties, symbolism often began to take surreal dimensions which reminded one of the dual operation of a desire for a locus, a centre, as well as the fear of being dispossessed that characterized individual pursuits at the time.

When the War of Liberation began, the political (and subsequently the military) scene was charged with high expectations and immense possibilities. The question of self-identity had been settled once and for all; it was just a matter of time before the resolute struggle would bear the expected result, and a free nation would be born. The need for symbolism was there; symbolism here was seen as a concretization of desire and dream. Surrealism was definitely incompatible with the robust optimism and firm resolution displayed by the country as a whole. The War revived the genres of realism and folkism—was anywhere paint stark images of death, destruction, achievement, and glory; realism becomes the

etching, engraving and applied techniques—needed patience. The seventies development had shocked us into a time of passivity, no doubt, but slowly and gradually, we were also steeling our nerves, and preparing for a different tomorrow. Graphic art represented that kind of applied involvement with an often slow process that delivers its goods at the very end. Painting, especially water colour—in contrast with graphic art—uses up emotions and visions as soon as they materialize. The seventies did not produce great water colours. The eighties began to take this medium with all seriousness. The nineties are more congenial times. Painting, like politics, has its moments of passion and moments of pain, of extrovert involvement with external reality as well as interior journeys into the still centre of creativity. The seventies brought these facts once more into the light.

The eighties added two new trends to the existing ones—painting became introspective and self-exploratory, at the same time it was trying to discover the world not just what lies outside the artist's experience, but what his outside of time and space as well. The latter trend was not mystical in any sense—it was rather concerned with reading history (which brings facts from another time to our time) and imaginary spaces (fiction, for example, or myth—creates spaces that lie beyond our own immediate spaces). An intense involvement with history and myth began, and a shift towards the narrative became noticeable. Artists began searching for symbols, paradigms, archetypes, imagery in national myths, folk stories, in the political and cultural history of the country; and at the same time started experimenting with the narrative forms. By the end-eighties, a number of characteristics had begun to emerge that reflected the new modes of thought and work. The canvas began to incorporate—a preoccupation with themes drawn from myth, history and folklore;

—a stylization that reworked folk-motifs, principles of abstraction and representation into an idiom that faithfully captured the shifting perspectives of the time.

—a shift towards narratology that brought personal visions to bear on leading tales of our time

—a highly personalized or individualistic (signed) interpretation of time and space;—a predilection for self-criticism;

—an understanding of colour that transcended the traditional 'grammar'.

The nineties, we may add, had continued to reflect these leading characteristics. But the end-eighties/early-nineties generation that is active today has brought a new vision to play in visualizing, conceptualizing and executing a dominant idea. The different developments of the eighties—political, social, academic (the Asian Biennales became a regular feature, opening up the world to our artists and impacting on their imagination in a way one does not anticipate from exhibitions like this)—provided the necessary impetus to our artists to go for a personalized idiom. The traditions of modernism had exhausted themselves—what more can one expect after empty canvases and the minimalist projections of images of emptiness and exhaustion; folkism had become an escape route, more or less; figurative and representational art had tended to be formal, lifeless. Only through interpreting, moulding, shaping, distorting, blowing up the elements of all these styles in a manner that becomes necessary for realizing personal goals and needs can the art scene come alive again. The new generation of painters—who are still very much active—has to a significant extent fulfilled that need. They have gone for a blending of reality and fantasy, illusion and reality; they have scant reverence for grammar; surrealism has been re-invented; colour has become a personal choice and the leading vision is often a reiteration of negative feelings—like those of dystopia, or of a personal fantasy. In other words, the post-modern pursuit has started.

As we look back to the long stretch of post liberation years, we are amazed by the speed with which painting has progressed—and by progress I am not stressing the usual qualitative considerations, but also the dimensions, the depths and the intensity that create conditions of an ongoing dialectic. We are made hopeful of the future, to say the least.