



INTERVIEW

Sailing the Paper Canoe in Waves of Thought

by Shamsad Mortuza

SELIM Al Deen breathes the warmth of the great tradition of Bangla theatre. He celebrates endless known and shared myths in his works to recuperate the past in present. His texts are not concerned with constructions of history *per se* but with constructing the *self* in history. Such reconstruction of the past usually demands new voices and new tools for expression. Selim has accordingly devised his own.

He has attempted to redefine his works under the brandname of *Dvaita-dvaitabada*, which in English can at best be termed as Dual Monism. This theological doctrine of Sri Chaitanyadeva helps Selim Al Deen to denote his denial of divisions of genre.

In his addendum to his critically acclaimed drama *Chaka* (*The Wheel*), Selim writes: "I won't mind if someone calls *Chaka* a lyrical narrative or even a story. I always tried to overreach the boundaries of my plays to reach the height of art. Because in art, I am *Dvaita-dvaitabadi*."

In his later articles, the playwright has also prescribed that contemporary writers should eschew existing literary forms and create in *dvaita-dvaitabadi* form of literature.

This interview mainly focuses on the aesthetic personality of Salim Al Deen, the penname of Dr Moyenuddin Ahmad. I strolled one flight up from my room at the Arts Faculty of Jahangirnagar University to reach the Professor of Drama and Dramatics in his officeroom. Two fuming *shingaras* were ordered as I

straightaway raised the issue germane to Selim Al Deen's art.

SM: *Shamsad Mortuza (SM): Would you please explain Dvaita-dvaitabada?* Salim Al Deen (SAD): There are three aspects to it. First, it is the aesthetic translation of diversified forms and patterns from one single perspective. Secondly, to see the consumption of all existing forms in pure art at its height, for instance, Goethe's *Faust* or in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Finally, it searches a unified sensibility in varied parametres of life. Rabindranath in this case.

SM: *What prompted you to devise such a term?*

SAD: I think there is an epidemic plaguing today's world literary scene. Almost all literary forms are dying. An epic is no longer written or can be written today. One cannot distinguish between prose and verse. There isn't any single novel today which can give meaning to the term 'novel'. Today's writers are simply telling tales, remaining miles apart from the height attained by Tolstoy or Rabindranath. Even poetry has become a visual medium—

SM: *You mean, typographical poem?*

SAD: Yes, the walls between literary forms have collapsed; from the ashes of all dead forms a *dvaita-dvaitabadi* text will rise. This form of literature will be nourished by consumption of all existing forms. Only a creator of a true art will be able to attain it.

SM: *I agree that the genres have undergone and is undergoing changes. But intertextuality or interplay of texts can explain the relationship between differ-*

ent forms of art. Was your coinage necessary then?

SAD: I picked my term from ancient Buddhist theology. In my reading of the past of Bangla literature and culture, I have noticed the tendency in our ancient religion to incorporate, rather diffuse, differences. Take Islamic Sophism, Chaitanya Devas' monism or in the communion of Radha and Krishna for instance. I believe same idea of unification shaped our early literature and culture.

The Western theories, on the contrary, tend to drive towards diversification mainly because of its overemphasis on technicality and scientific approaches.

SM: *It is like centrifugal and centripetal laws of motion?*

SAD: Exactly. It is from this belief, I have used the term *dvaita-dvaitabada* which can address, at the same time transcend, all times. *Dvaita-dvaitabada* is shaped by my understanding of the "submission of the self in one" felt by Tolstoy or Rabindranath. Even poetry has become a visual medium—

SM: *That reminds me of one of the basic paradoxes of our theatre. While the tradition of our theatre dates back to thousands of years, the modern theatre 'suddenly' arose after its contact with the Europeans.*

SAD: The West told us so. In our colonial hangover we have (mis) interpreted such notion. This is the famous missing link, the "Suspicious blackhole" of our literary tradition. Bangla theatre does not begin with a sudden jerk. One

Lievdev's introduction of proscenium does not start the tradition of modern Bangla theatre.

SM: *Lievdev (the Russian musician who staged two plays in Bangla in 1795) is overrated then?*

SAD: Certainly. He is just a bead in the chain of our great tradition. Bangla proscenium theatre had to wait 38 years after Lievdev to see its next staging. And remember, both overrating and underrating in literature are hazardous.

SM: *Coming back to your theory again, aren't you echoing Rabindranath's idea about finite and infinite.*

SAD: Oh of course! But my main influence is from the classical critic, Longinus and his theory of sublimity. Longinus explored the 'elevated thoughts' in pure art. Great consciousness and feelings mingle with lofty figure, diction and patterns to form sublimity.

SM: *Well, do you believe that theoretical prescriptions can create art?*

SAD: Art is a product of spontaneous act and it carves out of the pages of the great tradition. Simply, theories cannot breed art. For Goethe, writing the *Faust* legend after Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* was unthinkable.

But, I think *dvaita-dvaitabadi* perspective can accelerate new creations in world literature. Theories are for readers' but for the artist/creator, it is only the consciousness of history that matters.

SM: *What is your view of time?*

SAD: Sharing the belief of ancient philologist, Panini, I think in literature,

there is no past but present. If past is present in present how can you call it past?

SM: *That reminds me of Eliot's Four Quartets. Anyway, how true are you to your beliefs while writing your plays?*

SAD: My trilogy — *Kittonkhola* (1980), *Keramatmangal* (1983) and *Haat Hadai* (1987) — is an account of the progress of man towards his destiny. In *Kittonkhola* I have shown the transformation of a weaver into a peasant. Then, how that peasant turned into a landless daylabourer and eventually a murderer in successive generations. This invisible working of social reality is no less than the classical Medusa whose sight could turn people into stones.

In *Keramatmangal*, the devoted protagonist undergoes several Dantesque spheres only to identify that he has not reached his expected heavenly layers, as is promised in his holy book.

The trilogy completes with *Haat Hadai*, the odyssey of a modern man. Unlike Greek dramas, my hero is rewarded at the end of his journey which is a characteristic feature of the orient.

SM: *What about Hargooz?*

SAD: This drama is a sudden exposure of a group of men to a terrible reality. These men suddenly encounter the unfamiliar world of dismembered, splintered human bodies. The play unfolds against natural catastrophe and genocide. I don't think, this cruel side of reality has been projected earlier in the manner of mine.

SM: *Your obsession seems to be with realism?*

SAD: I will call it classical realism: the realism of modern time and its relationship to the classics is my chief aim.

SM: *Comment on Chaka.*

SAD: *Chaka* is the story of a body which does not have a name. I wrote it after the death of Noor Hossain in the mass upsurge of 1990. His death stirred me: I relate his experience to mine. I reckon someday I will die as an artist without a name or any destination. But there will be people around to bury me before my "face swell, almost a superman." (repeating from the play)

SM: *Do you think your denial of political parliament?*

SAD: Partly true. That political interest has kept me involved in People's theatre.

SM: *What about the filmed version of your play, Chaka?*

SAD: I leave it entirely upon the audience. But, personally I feel the film has neglected some of the stories, i.e. the Saotal myths of genesis, and thereby hampered the organic whole of my text.

SM: *Do you think your denial of existing forms, i.e. the minimal use of dialogues and maximum use of plain narratives have hindered the understanding of the director?*

SAD: I don't want to comment on that. Production of *Chaka* belongs to the director and I don't want to intrude as a writer.

SM: *Thank you.*

SAD: You are welcome.

About the writer: Shamsad Mortuza is lecturer in English at Jahangirnagar University.

perspective

Have You Looked At Your Gold Medal Lately?

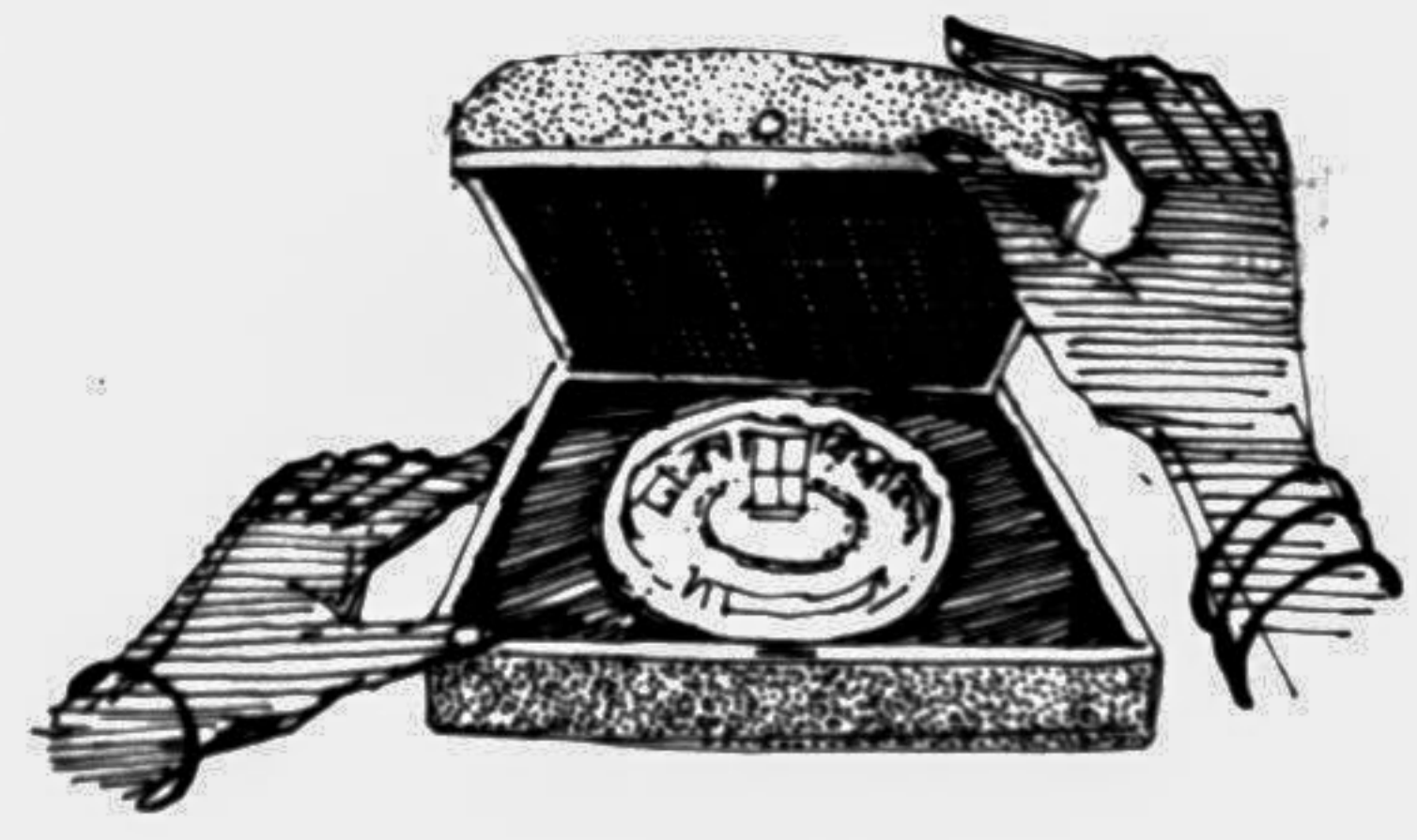
by Rebecca Haque

A long time ago, on a calm, clear, sunny evening, my university gave me a gold medal for my zeal. Oh, it was a grand affair, with silken robes and tasseled caps and cameras all around. With me being so honoured, in my discipline, were Syed Manzoorul Islam and Firdous Azim. The fourth honoree, Kaiser Hamidul Haq was away and missed the ceremony — he was at Warwick putting the final, finishing touches to his brilliant doctoral dissertation which he did with Bernard Bergonzi.

Serially, with lights flashing and people staring, one by one we skipped up the rickety stairs of the TSC stage to be garlanded by the diminutive, inarticulate VC who mumbled so. (He never showed me any respect. Once, student counsellor, I sat with my Chairman taking refreshments after Orientation Day in the small, musty, dusty room up the odif-

erous stairwell. A lull in the wanky, manly chit-chat made me take my chances, and I dived in. I asked him, can we not do something about this sloganeering in the university building corridors? He was seated at an angle, with his face turned away from me — and after a pause or two he brushed his voice away like a gnat about to squat on his bulbous nose. I rose immediately, and taking leave of my Chair, I strode out of the room softly mouthing glorious vituperative from my Shakespearean glossary.)

Years of solitary traipsing followed, over three continents, in search of an elusive dream, and my gold medal languored in my jewelled box in its secret built-in wardrobe case. More years followed, years of pain and sorrow, when with ashes in the mouth, eviscerated gutted body, and crucified mangled soul, I mourned the deaths of my two beloved



sons. No outward signs of grief were there, no mud-daubed forehead, no slate-grey torn sari. (What profit the world to share in thy misery! At Dalhousie, alone, at night in my posh Queen Street apartment, of University Avenue, I would clutch my dripping breasts and howl like an wounded animal, and I would get up and write my papers, Martyr, you ask? No, just a poor, unselfish, sophisticated thinking animal.)

Back in Dhaka, I did a nose-dive, and just before I crashed, he came, my friend and teacher. His eyes touched my dragged, puffed-up face, and softly, he said, oh so softly, "come back to work." I did. I am alive again, and now my voice rings loudly in rooms 2081 through 2065, and my laughter bounces off the corridor and down into the lounge as I troop in for my favourite beverage. Now, with an upcoming wedding in the

family, and a desire to adorn myself, I brush away the cobwebs and look into my treasury. Chunky, hand-tooled stone-set pieces from my mother-in-law's dowry. Bangles and rings and necklaces aplenty, and, cloistered, sequestered beneath a pair of golab-bala, the chocolaty-maroon slender box of my gold medal. Eager fingers unclasp the lid, and I stare at the disk. Blackened! Tarnished! Gold-dipped, not even gold-plated!

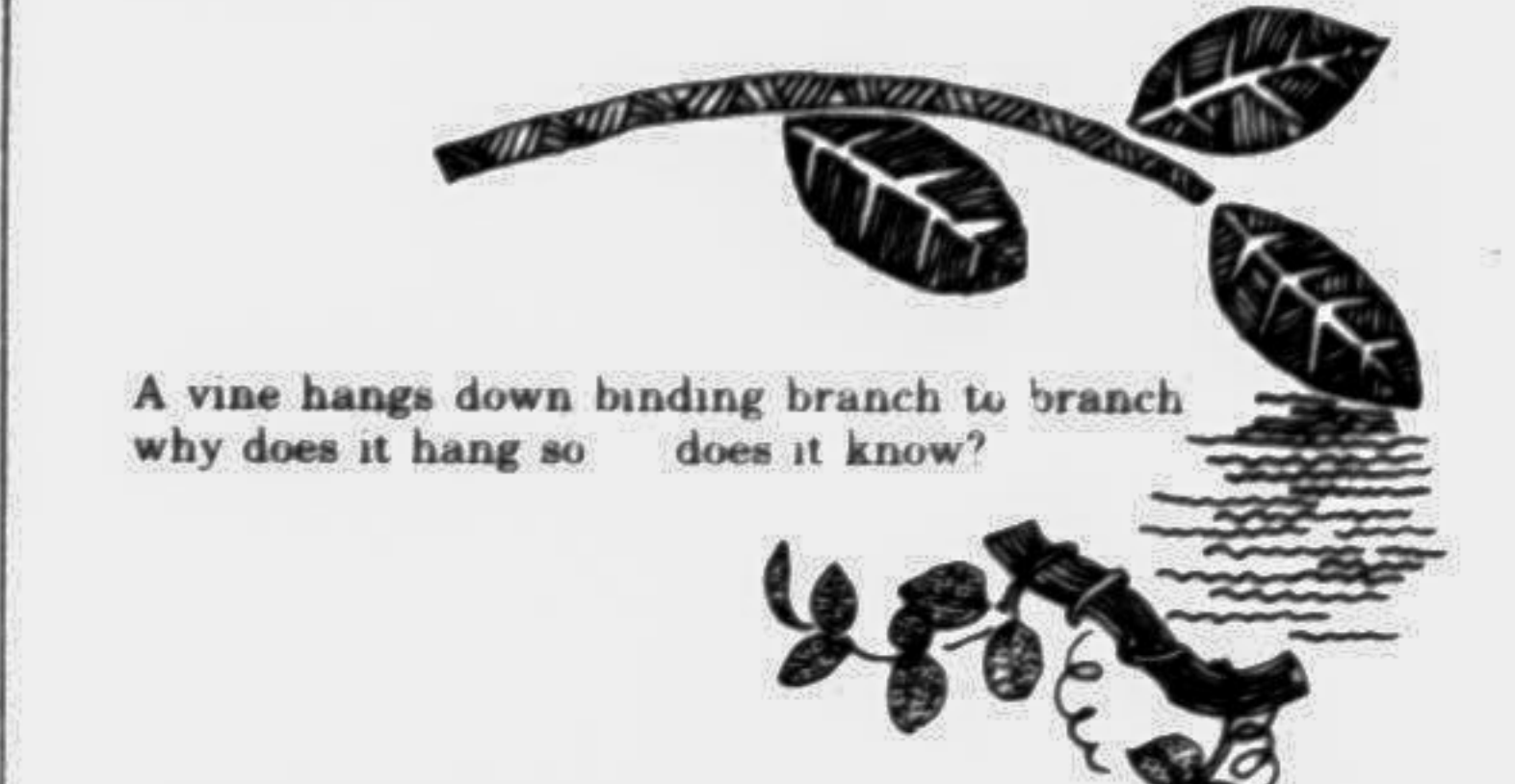
A cluster bomb explodes in my head, and pounding blood dilates my pupils, and my expanding lungs bellow with fury: "you whomongering swinish loutish curs and pye-dogs of thieves and dacoits and nabobs of huggery! How dare you do this to me?"

This was to have been my daughter's inheritance.

About the writer: Rebecca Haque is associate professor of English at Dhaka University.

A Poem from Kirtinasha

by Mohammad Rafiq
An arching *ashshaora* leans over a canal, why does it lean so does it know?



A flock cries out and scatters bird by bird, why does it cry out so does it know?



Burning shadows stretch across field after field, their stench scorched and coppery



Soldering leaf to leaf the sunstruck *chaitra* sky lights its own pyre



But why just so does it know? Sharp-sheathed reeds recklessly crack and shatter



The wind chases itself in breathless play, why does it run so and die does it know?

Translated by Carolyn Brown

exhibition A Spate of Self-Expression

by Fayza Haq

THE exhibition of painters from India, held at the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, as a part of Utsav, put women in the limelight again. This included the works of Amrita Sher-Gil, who is one of the most important individuals of the modern art movement in India, and who had tremendous influence on the women artists who came after her. Her works expressed her dynamic personality while her colours and techniques set up a new standard of self discovery and self expression. Sher-Gil's work commenced from the personal and expanded into the universal. Her portraits were both introspective and outward looking, being 'fundamentally Indian in spirit'. While portraying her inner world, her works glorified miniature painting of Moghul and Pahari schools, the Ajanta cave paintings and the Murals of Mattancheri and Padmanabhapuram. Sher-Gil has been described as 'veritably a one person art movement'. Her 'Ancient Story Teller', an oil on canvas and 'Women on Charpai' brought in the essence of Indian life with mastery. The colours were put on with flat strokes and there was subtle combination of light and shade.

Two decades after Sher-Gil's death in 41, Meera Mukharjee (b 23) went to the heart of Bastar in search of tribal aesthetic, much in the same way as Sher-Gil abandoned her Paris education in favour of Indian studies. Mukharjee left Munich to pursue local sculpture know-how. She developed

the indigenous metal casting to present social hopes and visions. Her work may appear somewhat generalised but it idealised the working class. Pilloo Pochkhanwala (23-86) is a contemporary of Mukharjee, who has had 8 solos in Bombay, 2 in New Delhi apart from ones in Europe and USA. Another early sculptor whose exhibits were included in the show is Leela Mukherjee (b '16) who has had solo displays in Calcutta, Delhi and Bombay. While Pochkhanwala's work displayed great sensitivity of feeling in sculpture Mukharjee showed boldness and dynamism in 'A Sequence Floats' and 'Together (both mixed media on paper)'. Mukherjee had studied art at Shantiniketan and learnt woodcarving from a master carver at Kathmandu. She combined the figurative with the abstract in her work as was seen in many of the works of the 60s and 70s.

Nasreen Mohammadi had a cloistered and lonely world in her simplified but strong display of lines and colours in her sensitive landscapes. Born in Karachi in '37, she won a scholarship to Paris in 61 and then held eleven solo displays in India and the Middle East, while her works were included in the Festival of India, London '82 and Paris '85. She got the National Award in '76 and was honoured in the Atul All-India Exhibition in '81.

Arpita Singh (b '37) worked with similar single-minded purpose and determination. Singh filled her work with naive objects like



Shubika Lal *Silhouette-1* Iron & Aluminium



Jaya Ganguly *Two Figures* watercolour & ink on paper

checked tablecloth, flowers, ducks, aeroplanes, cars and goons — all presented in a simplified manner with its aura of Alice in Wonderland atmosphere. She represented the fears and tensions in a woman's world. She said about her own style "My intention is not to make great work but to search and find unknown things, to go to unknown planes, of which I have faint hints". Singh, who has had solo shows in Delhi and Bombay, has paintings in collections at Fiji and Malaysia. Nalini Malini (b '46) has used an expressionist medium of the '70s with psy-

chological insight. Malini said of her style "the emotions one finds in these paintings can range from extreme destructiveness, hatred, violence to intense concern and love.... I work from my personal experience and fantasy, aiming to move from the particular to the general". Malini has exhibited in UK, Germany, France and Japan. At home she has exhibited at Bombay, New Delhi and Chandigarh. She has had two years' training in Paris. A younger artist, Jaya Ganguly (b '58) had her canvas similarly emotionally charged. In her *Two Figures* the women had feline features with slanted eyes, angry lips and massive hands. They appear annoyed and tormented. In Gogi Sarog Pal's work men were seen behind a world of barbed wires. Animals and human figures are wrapped in loneliness. From this arose the mythical figure of the animal woman Pal had studied art at Lucknow, Rajasthan and Delhi. She has exhibited her work at London, Yugoslavia, Lucknow, Delhi and Calcutta. Aparna Caur had a similar vision and her women were often seen surrounded with a sense of danger. Her

'Earth and Sky' depicted the ordinary labourer dreaming under the load of bricks on the head, and believing that it was the crescent moon that she was carrying. Even though surrounded by fear and anguish her subjects hoped and dreamed of a beautiful tomorrow.

In Jayashree Chakravorty (b '57) we saw a depiction of human relationship in city life. The figures were rounded and appeared to be floating in limbo, with hot lava surrounding them in swirls. Rekha Rodittiya's 'The Visitation' had a figure with animal head and a human body: the world was a dream world of fantasy combined with reality. Display of human emotions were at the bottom of Anupam Sud's graphics. 'Window' showed human limbs framed by a window. Prayag Jha's 'House without Women' also played with domestic pathos and poignancy.

In the sculptures of Shubhika Lal (b '53), Latika Katt, Madhvi Parekh (b '48) and Mrinani Mukherjee one saw dynamic comments on life and myths. Inbuilt beliefs were combined with religious rites with suavity. The exhibition has given a fine depiction of women's visions, beliefs, fears and dispositions. They have carefully but boldly combined the reality with myths and motifs. In painting, print and sculpture these women have poured out their minds and hearts to depict life around them. With sophisticated sensibility, they have expressed a woman's world as has never been witnessed before in the metropolis.