

essay

## Song of Freedom: An End to Revisionist History?

by Naeem Mohaiemen

MUKTIR GAAN (SONG OF FREEDOM) IS THE first ever full-length feature film on Bangladesh's 1971 liberation war. In 1971, the Bengali revolt against Pakistani domination and the subsequent army crackdown captured world headlines on an unprecedented scale. The papers enthusiastically dubbed it "The Bengali Holocaust." For a war-weary generation in the West, already on edge from Vietnam war protests, the "genocide" in Pakistan enflamed passions and triggered agitation against US arms policy, blockades against Navy ships, and guerrilla theatre in front of the White House and Hyde Park. Yet for an event that inspired such passionate, and seemingly selfless (unlike Vietnam, there were no Americans coming home in body bags), acts of defiance in the West. The Bengali liberation struggle disappeared from radar screens with unseemly haste. There were no collected "guerrilla poems", no romantic novels with heroes parachuting into the middle of occupied Dhaka, no anniversary articles in the New York Times. The media disappearing act was helped by the fact that the liberation struggle's charismatic leader Sheikh Mujib turned out to be an inept administrator, and his 1975 assassination left no larger-than-life leader to glamorize. Ultimately, media sources moved by their usual logic. With the end of the war, there were no more dead bodies — reporters simply got bored and moved on.

The Discovery of Levin Film-maker Lear Levin, whose work is the core of Mukti Gaan, discovered the brevity of media attention span the hard way. When he set off to make a film on Ben-

gali guerrilla camps in India, the struggle was the cause of the moment. Protesters had set up camp inside mock cement pipes outside the White House (an analogy for the Bengali refugees huddled in construction pipes in India); Bill Moyers and his merry men had created human flotillas to prevent US Navy ships from leaving harbour; Chicago was treated to the bizarre sight of a sari-clad white woman on a crowded street carrying out guerrilla theatre depicting the "Rape of Bangladesh"; George Harrison and Joan Baez had both written hit songs with Bangladesh in the title; and presidential aspirant Ted Kennedy was clopping Nixon over arms shipments to Pakistan. But, by the time Levin returned with over twenty hours of footage from India and Bangladesh, the media and the public had moved on. Cambodia, Watergate, the continuing struggle in Vietnam, and a host of other events had conspired to make the obsession with Bangladesh one of the brightest, yet short-lived moments in the history of media feeding-frenzies.

Disheartened by his failure to find commercial buyers for the footage, Lear Levin consigned his film stock to a Brooklyn basement. As the myth goes, a chance remark at Tareque and Gatterine Masood's wedding in Dhaka led them on the twenty-year-old trail of Levin. In New York, the Masoods hit the jackpot when they not only found Levin, but also obtained permission to use the footage without any royalty. Compared to the exorbitant prices the film-makers had to pay for the few minutes of archival news-reports obtained elsewhere, Levin's gift was a windfall that made the

film possible. A process of reverse script-writing then began with the Masoods extracting sequences from twenty hours of footage to piece together a story of a travelling band of Bengali musicians collecting funds for the war effort and raising the spirits of the guerrillas. Along the way husband-wife team found assistance from a variety of activists in the Bengali community in America, including invaluable help in raising the seed money from fund-raisers. For a community that is still struggling for economic stability in the US, being instrumental in a forty thousand dollar project was no small achievement.

### Mukti Gaan as History

The finished film is the story of a singing cultural troupe travelling through refugee camps and eventually crossing the border into liberated zones of Bangladesh. Interspersed with this is invaluable documentary footage, including Sheikh Mujib's famous speech of 7 March, 1971 ("This time the struggle is for freedom") — the first time the cautious Mujib echoed the radical student factions' long-running demand for total separation from Pakistan. Also here is the spectacle of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who precipitated the crisis by rejecting the Bengali victory in the 1970 Pakistan election, tearing up a UN resolution and storming out — with a listless George Bush looking on. The troupe's song performances are gems of folk history, and the enthusiasm of the refugees at various shows is captured with a minimum of intrusiveness. A standout is the kirtan-style song where Swapan Chowdhury alternately goes into a trance and then dissolves the chorus

into an orgy of group clapping. This song's lyrics are also the film's sharpest barb at the role of the Nixon administration in trying to send the 7th Fleet to the aid of Pakistan.

But now the Pak army flees for their lives. And with them flees the 7th Fleet. Then Yahya Khan cries out, "Tell me, oh tell me, where did Uncle Sam go?" But now the thugs flee. And with them flee the collaborators. Then General Niazi cries out, "Tell me, oh tell me, where did Uncle Sam go?"

Other songs are familiar patriotic songs, mixed with chants of "Destroy the Pak invaders." The songs alternately affirm love for the land and proclaim universal brotherhood — themes popularly identified with Bengali nationalism in the late 60's.

From Jessore, Khulna, Bagura, Pabna, Dhaka they hail. Not Hindus, not Muslims, they are all Bangalee.

The sad irony of these lyrics and the presence of a large number of Hindu performers in the cultural troupe seems to have escaped audiences at most screenings. Given the recent surge in Islamic iconography in Bangladesh politics (with even Sheikh Mujib's formerly "secular" Awami League adopting visibly Muslim trappings), and the gradual diminishing of the Hindu presence in Bangladesh's cultural-political scene — the film is a sad reminder that although the 1971 liberation struggle was celebrated globally because of its secular beliefs (one League poster proclaimed: "Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, Muslims of Bengal are all brothers"), subsequent governments of free Bangladesh failed to approach any of the ideals de-

clared on the battlefield.

Mukti Gaan succeeds as an affectionate portrait of the travelling musicians in war-torn Bangladesh. The subtext that is not explored in the film, but is clearly visible on screen, are the class differences among the Bengali refugees and freedom fighters. The troupe members are, for the most part, from middle-class backgrounds. Yet here in the course of the film, they mix with village refugees, farmers and foot soldiers. There is some awkwardness in these interactions, as when the troupe embraces a group of soldiers at a liberated zone. In these few moments, one of the fundamental contradictions of the war effort is visible on screen. The Awami League's anti-Pakistan posturing was the expression of a nascent middle class frustrated in the face of competition for resources with the Punjabi and Urdu-speaking middle class.

But when the war broke out, the conflict mutated into Bengali vs. non-Bengali — class differences were temporarily forgotten as peasants fled across the border in the same cattle-carts as their city-bred "better." Throughout the nine months of conflict, the middle class leadership repeatedly declared the struggle to be for the "Workers and Farmers of Bengal." But as soon as the war effort was over, each faction retreated to its own camp. With a nation of their own, the Bengali middle class prospered, the peasantry that returned across the borders of "free" Bengal found their status unchanged. Most of the cultural troupe members are now well-placed members of Bangladesh society. But a search for some of the peasants seen on screen

would probably place them in the same straw huts they lived in before the war. Not surprisingly, New York screenings of Mukti were conspicuously missing the city's enormous working class population.

Ritual celebration of the war remains a middle class phenomenon — the only class that was truly "liberated" in 1971.

### Mukti vs Censor Board: The Political Struggle

The difficulties faced by the Masoods in putting the film together paled in comparison to the difficulties they faced in attempting to release the film in Bangladesh. Inevitably the film ran into the inter-party conflict that characterizes the Bengali political establishment's approach to the history of independence. Narratives glorifying the liberation war have traditionally helped the Awami League, whose strongest nostalgic connection to the voting population is through its role as leaders of the liberation struggle. The League's traditional nemesis, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), attempts to weaken the AL's hold on "pro-liberation" sentiment by emphasizing their founder, General Ziaur Rahman's links to the struggle. A long-running and often raucous debate — played out in newspapers, speeches and parliament — focuses on Zia's famous declaration of independence on Chittagong radio. In symbolism obsessed Bangladesh, Zia's radio announcement is brandished as proof that he first declared independence, although the AL repeatedly points out that the announcement was made in Sheikh Mujib's name.

To be continued

## cyberscope

## French Literature on the Internet

Thanks to two book-lovers, who are also computer specialists, "a selection of great works of the French-language literary heritage" is gradually being installed on the world Internet network, in the French language. About forty works are already available. ABU on the World Wide Web: <http://www.cnam.fr/ABU/>

by Jean-Marc Dupuich

IT IS NOW POSSIBLE TO READ MAUPASSANT, Stendhal, Flaubert, Rousseau, Racine and Moliere, without having the book and free of charge, simply by connecting up to the Internet. The work chosen appears on the screen practically without any delay. It takes about ten minutes to transfer it to the hard disk. The text can then be annotated, underlined thoroughly analyzed and printed.

Two French book-lovers are at the origin of this electronic publishing. One of them, Pierre Cubaud, teaches computer science at the CNAM school of science and technology (Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers) in Paris. The other, Eric Dubreacq, is a member of the International college of philosophy in Lille (in the North of France). Their first concern is to save rarely consulted old books from oblivion. So they decided to install them on the Internet. As they were going through the



Net, they happened to come across Descartes. They were quickly disapp-

pointed to see that the work of this philosopher, famous for his "Cogito ergo sum", in his "Discours de la Méthode" (Discourse on Method), was only available in an English translation.

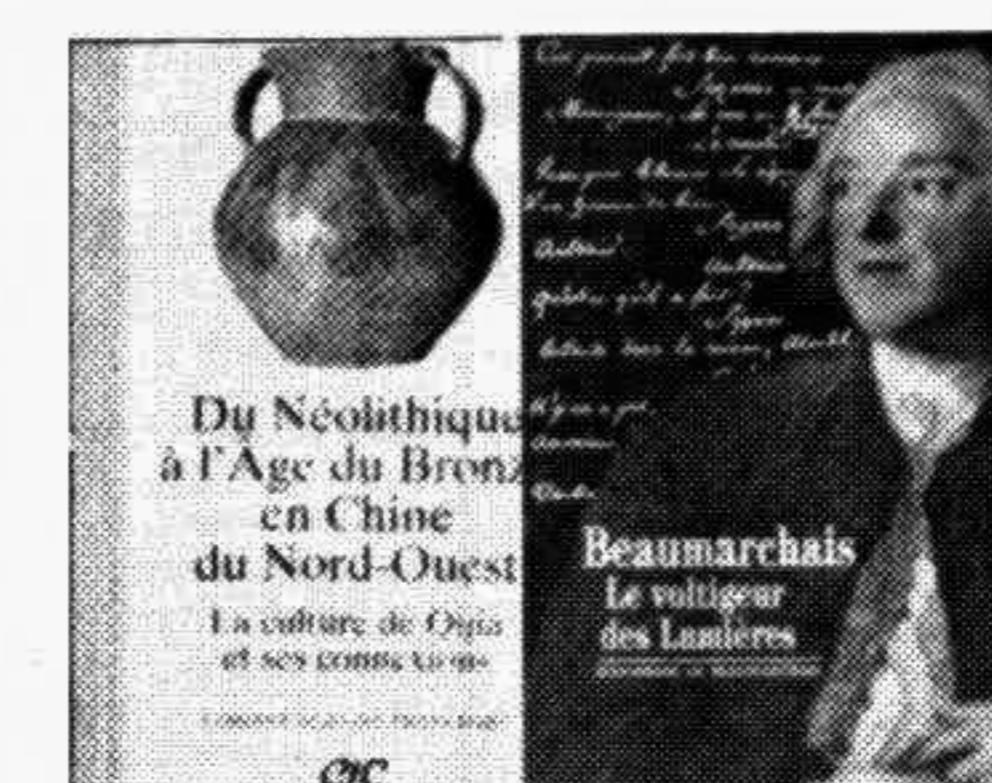
The two men suddenly realised their mission. It was up to them to embark on the huge undertaking of installing the French literary heritage on the Internet. In 1993, drawing inspiration from the Gutenberg project which digitizes English-language literature, they set up the "Association des Bibliophiles Universels" (association of universal book-lovers) or ABU, named after the computer in Umberto Eco's novel "Foucault's Pendulum."

ABU was established as a non-profit-making organisation and groups together about fifty voluntary workers who digitize the books a page at a time using a scanner and a character recognition computer programme. They are like the monks of old, copying

books in the era of virtual libraries. When the work is too old or too fragile to be faithfully reproduced, the text has to be typed on the keyboard.

The system of royalties means that contemporary works cannot be made available on-line. Raymond Queneau's "Exercices de Style," which had been fed into the system by an admirer at ABU, had to be quickly withdrawn after the publisher Gallimard pointed out that the copyright on the work had not yet expired. In addition to the classics of French literature, which also include Valéry Larbaud, Nerval and even Boris Vian, ABU also offers the "Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen" (Declaration of Human Rights and of the Citizen) and the text of the Maastricht Treaty which established European Union.

This treaty is one of the most highly demanded works, together with Jules Verne's "De la Terre à la Lune" (From



the Earth to the Moon). Unlike the other works which are presented as bare texts, the story, of the interplanetary voyage is decorated with the black and white illustrations from the original edition.

— the French library —

Every month, fifteen thousands readers link up to the Net to read ABU's

publications on their screens. "We are already a worldwide publisher. We distribute works all over the world at no cost and we work without any subsidies which proves the effectiveness of our procedure," Pierre Cubaud congratulates himself.

Although publishers are wary of the virtual library, those in charge of the French National Library (Bibliothèque Nationale de France) acclaim this French-language initiative. "When one knows that the Internet is 99 per cent English-language, it is quite an achievement," one of them comments. The French National Library is itself working on the digitization of a hundred thousand works which could be consulted on screens as soon as the building with its four towers opens in Paris, but only on the spot. The computers of the Bibliothèque Nationale will not be linked up to the world network before the year 2,000. ■

## art

## Symmetry and Design : Raziul Ahsan's Paintings and Compositions

by S. Manzoorul Islam

ONE DISCOVERS CERTAIN ARCHITECTONIC qualities in the paintings of Raziul Ahsan — such as a predilection for solidity of composition, a structured approach to the arrangement of objects and images, and a measured placement of figures within geometric grids and circles — one has simply to be reminded of the fact that Raziul is an architect by profession. The professional training he received has helped him to paint with an eye on the various dimensions of the images — the outer as well as the inner, as if he is weighing the volume and the space, and the interrelationship between the forms that finally appear on the canvas, and the feelings they generate. And when Raziul uses plastic, steel scraps and frames, metal parts and wood for a composition — both as elements and as props to harness an image — one is finally convinced that he has been able to make good use of his architectural sense.

An exhibition of Raziul's paintings was held recently in Drik Gallery in Dharmundi. In Dhaka where hardly a week goes by without a couple of exhibitions being inaugurated, Raziul's somehow went largely unnoticed by the general public. One reason may be that Drik is commonly associated with photography; but a more plausible one could be that Raziul is not much known as an artist beyond a small circle of friends and admirers. But the exhibition sprang its own sur-



prises. For the works that were displayed marked a refreshingly new approach to art. True, the exhibition displayed a few drawings, water colours, gouache and collage-pieces which have been done in the traditional, academic style, but the really delightful ones were the paintings done in oil, and mixed media and compositions using steel grids, wood, plastic, enamel etc.

Raziul's colours are vibrant and splashy; they generate a sense of speed that transforms his images into living reflections of experience, although some of the paintings are meant to be quietly reflective. The juxtaposition of several strong colours brings out the urgency from each; they clash but reflect each other, and in the end produce a unity that is not quite the harmony one notices in similar works by

the painters Raziul admires. But the unity proves to be deceptive. As in life, where an apparent unity among discordant forces may belie the real diversity underneath, Raziul's canvas also reminds us of a hidden disunity that one needs to search out, and if possible, address. In this reflective sense, Raziul's paintings are a part of our experience of reality.

The titles of Raziul's paintings provide a commentary on his preoccupation. Breaking Mondrian is a bold attempt to present his own version of a Mondrian composition, but executed an empty space with MS section, sheet, oil and enamel. The composition evokes the rhythm of Mondrian, and the neat division of space does resemble the Master's measured strokes, but the sparseness of composition and

empty space leave behind the sense of harmony Mondrian so famously imparted, when he wanted to his work. There are some descriptive titles: Partial Leaves and Pot, Face, Tree, Still Life with Squares, and Still Lifes. The still lifes pieces are remarkably done, with a high degree of stylization, which in the end take their stillness away. The compositions become moving pictures of a moment's vision.

Raziul is his innovative while working with steel, MS sections, wood and plastic, for, in these works he can combine his painterly qualities with the qualities of a sculptor. There were a couple of sculptures or sculpture-like pieces in the exhibition — but they lacked the concentrated finish of sculptures. These rather occupied the halfway ground between the steel and

plastic constructions. Raziul it seems, concentrates his vision in a moment of experience, and likes to reproduce the arrangement of that momentary experience. His works therefore capture both the urgency and the quietness of that experience.

One notices the simplicity of Raziul's compositions. He seems to believe in the 'less, the better' approach to visual representation. His lines are bold and sparse — so are the geometric and stylized forms.

What distinguishes Raziul's paintings are the neatness of their composition, and their colour scheme. The compositions are dynamic, since the different elements of the composition exist in a mutually supportive relationship. This also implies that Raziul's sense of space has to be precise and

profound at the same time. Despite the sometimes overloaded surface may (not in the sense of two many figures/objects; but in the sense of their domination of the composition). Raziul is able to open up the perspective — which also means that his composition always has a breathing space. A typical composition by Raziul would begin with a concentration on the idea — the thought, the feeling, the awareness — and then arrange the element of his composition around that idea. In the process, they take on the meaning, and become metaphors of a larger idea. The interconnection between the cerebral and the visual in his paintings is another quality that an architect's training has prepared him for, although when it is repeated in painting after painting, it tends to be a bit dry and lose the fine balance once in a while.

Raziul's paintings are not poetic, or narrative or even abstract. He uses abstraction more as a design than as an equivalent of pictorial/conceptual response to experience. His paintings are measured statements on the diversity of experience that should be grasped at a unified source. Raziul arranges his images in such a manner that such an interpretation becomes inevitable. He works hard, harnessing every resource at his disposal until his desired effect is created. Artists like Raziul do not produce much, but what they produce, deserve close attention. ■