

column: *Miscellaneous Musing*

On a Road Less Travelled By - Kaiser Haq's Poetry—III

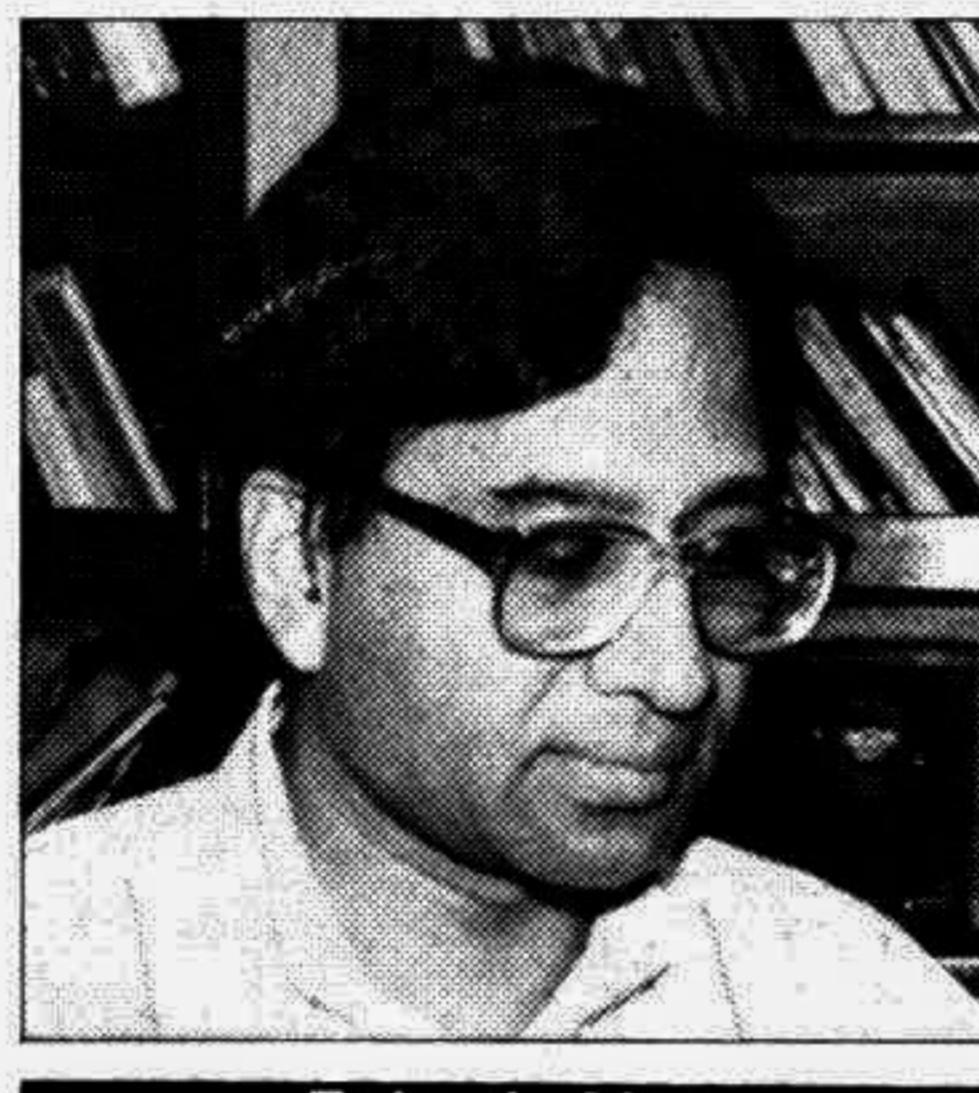
ALTHOUGH Kaiser Haq writes his poems in English, he is not totally detached from the poetry in Bangla that is being written in Bangladesh. He has, for example, produced what is arguably the best translation of Shamsur Rahman's verse in English, *Selected Poems of Shamsur Rahman* (Dhaka: BRAC Publications, 1985). More to the point for a follower of Haq's work, however, is his affinity to Shahid Qadri, one of our leading poets of the sixties and the seventies. Not only has Haq dedicated, "A Lesson in Geography", a poem published in his first collection, *Starting Lines* (1978), to Qadri, he has written a few poems which treat Dhaka and life in Bangladesh with the semi-surrealistic, whimsical, "pop" note that we find in the verse of that poet. There is thus a lot in common between lines such as these from Haq's "Surreal Morning" and some of the poems in Shahid Qadri's second collection of verse, *Tomake Abhibadan Priyota*: "I catch a traffic cop calmly chewing pan & stuffing snuff into dirty ears / & hit him on his steel helmet / with an unbound collection of very free verse."

But while it is necessary to stress Kaiser Haq's rootedness in Bangladesh and his links to our poetry, it is even more important to emphasize Haq's connections to Indo-Anglian poetry. Haq has himself championed this poetic tradition through his useful but misleadingly titled edition of Indian poetry in English, *Contemporary Indian Poetry* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1990). In his succinct Introduction, Haq displays his enthusiasm for the leading versifiers of this tradition. Poets such as Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, A.K. Ramanujan, Arvind Mehrotra, and Arun Kolatkar,

Haq argues, have "responded with sensitivity and intelligence to the pressures of life [in India] and to the changing cultural conditions"; the same observation could be made about Haq's own achievement as a poet in Bangladesh. Haq has paid Ezekiel the best compliment one writer can pay another by imitating the Indian poet's experiments with sub-continental English; Haq is like Ezekiel too in his responsiveness to his environment and his ironic perspective on things. On the other hand, Haq occasionally resembles Moraes in a few of his early poems as he attempts tightly controlled poems which evoke the more formal strains of English poetry while representing the life of our region. Then again, Haq is like Kolatkar in his cryptic pronouncements and penchant for surrealistic effects. Increasingly, though, Haq has been aiming at free verse forms that reflect the influence of the American traditions of versification which have had a decisive effect on poets such as Ramanujan and Mehrotra. Like them, too, he has aimed at structuring his poems through imagistic patterns. Haq's latest work, *Black Orchid* (1996), shows him getting even freer in his versification; here again he displays a kinship to Ramanujan.

Just as the best Indo-Anglian poets have benefited from their close acquaintance with twentieth-century western poetry, Kaiser Haq has made good use of the great traditions of English and American poetry. "A Happy Farewell," the title poem of his third collection of poems, has in its lines which remind one of Yeats's in his most doomsday vein in "The Second Coming": "As 12 O'clock strikes/ a voice says/ there will be no tomorrow./ Appropriately apocalyptic/ as two mil-

lennia of nightmare/ rattle to a close. The poem about life as an expatriate, "Summer Morning, Warwick", evokes in its typography and grammatical twists the experimental verse of E.E. Cummings. An early poem, "Homage to Robert Lowell," written after the leading "confessional" American poet of the post-second world war period had committed suicide in 1977, describes



Fakrul Alam

Haq's agonized reaction to Lowell's violent death: "I retreated into my room and scribbled long pages / like bandage rolls — of confessional verse to wrap around/ the wounds your lines point out like fingerposts/but I can't toe your line, it's hard." The first poem of the recent collection, *Black Orchid*, alludes to Samuel Beckett's terminal vision in his works in its opening lines, "Imagination dying/ imagine/ love," although the poem ends with an affirmation of

sorts: "Love dying,/ imagine/ a poem/ And love,/ old Lazarus,/ rises again."

But perhaps there is no need to labour the point: Kaiser Haq's is a cosmopolitan sensibility and he is a very well-read poet who has assimilated diverse traditions of writing. What is more, he has kept himself open to all sorts of influences without abandoning his quest for poetry which will remain original as well as interesting while conveying the sense of the quotidian realities of life in contemporary Bangladesh. A further point which can be deduced from his progress as a poet is his fondness for experimenting with different verse forms, rhythmic and syntactical patterns, and imagistic strands. While Haq eschews rhyme altogether and almost always prefers the short line as the unit of composition, he manages to achieve a remarkable range of effects in his poetry. The early poems, for example, are mostly terse while the more recent poems are written in a more relaxed frame. In between can be found a poem such as "Peasants' Lament" which acquires a haunting quality through its metronomic chant, "Allah," as can be seen in these opening stanzas:

Your name on granny's lips
mumbled
put me to sleep
sang in my dreams
Allah
on hungry nights
filled half the belly
the other half cried
for you, to you
Allah

Reading such lines out alert us to one other feature of Haq's poetry: he uses the tones and rhythms of everyday English and yet manages to convince us of his location as a Bangladeshi poet.

Thematically, Kaiser Haq's poetry has displayed again and again a feeling of disquiet and a sense of anomie. The landscape the poet inhabits is more often than not a desolate one and only the act of writing or a willed insouciance or love offer routes of escape from it. An early poem such as "Insomnia" thus reveals a restlessness from which the poet finds relief in the act of composition. Other early poems such as "Rain", "Consolation", and "Calcutta" depict a landscape of exhaustion. In "A Happy Farewell", Haq uncovers in his notebook jottings which record life as a series of aggravations; here he is even ready to give up poetry, preferring to be "content/ in my abysmal watching of universal collapse." That Haq's perspective at this stage of his career has a lot in common with the writers of the absurd can be seen clearly in the very short poem, "Clio": "If history is/a nightmare/ let me sleep on /— at least it's unreal." When the poet endeavours to adopt a metaphysical perspective on our existence, he ends up in a cul de sac, and takes refuge in an attitude of careless abandon: "But nobody really knows/maybe all this is self-created/.../What the heck?/ Let's pile up paradoxes" ("Cosmogony").

Even in his early verse, however, Haq has interspersed the darker poems with the occasional love poem ("Hitting it Off", "Letter from Hyderabad"). His latest volume of verse, *Black Orchid*, dedicated to the "votaries of Kama and Rati", is basically a book of erotic imaginings set against what Haq punningly described through ingenious line breaks as "this pre-/ post-/ eros age.") In other words, this is a celebration of rapturous bodily experience in the fin de siecle moment and it is a work which presents

desire as the antidote to despair. The very short poem "Purdah", almost a ghazal, is typical of the volume in its sensuousness and suggestion of sexual beatitude: "Kohled eyes/ glance/ side-long,/ drinking/ ice-cold beer."

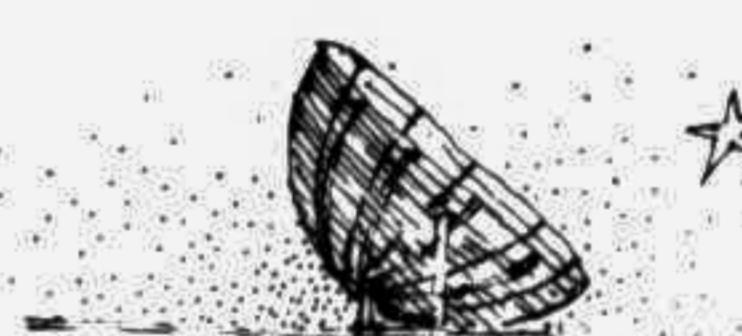
In 1994, Kaiser Haq bid a public goodbye to poetry through the title poem of *A Happy Farewell*. By 1996, however, desire seemed to have stirred him enough to make him give up the idea of proclaiming adieu to poetry forever. Certainly, the poems of *Black Orchid* have a vitality which indicate that Haq is capable of presenting us with more such delightful albeit slim volumes, in the future. Of course, seen in the perspective of international poetry in English, Haq may still be viewed as a minor poet, and I suspect that the fastidious sensibility which has prevented him from being a prolific poet will ensure that he will continue to publish only a few poems every now and then. Nevertheless, considering how lonely the road is in which he has been traveling, what he has produced so far is encouraging for anyone who has hopes for a Bangladeshi tradition of writing in English. And there are other reasons to hope for more landmarks in that road. After all, Adib Khan, a Bangladeshi now leading the life of an expatriate in Australia, was awarded the 1995 prize in the "Best First Book" category in the Commonwealth Writer's Prize; Bangladesh's leading publisher, UPL, has not only brought out *A Happy Farewell* but has also been producing books such as S.M. Ali's *Rainbow over Padma* and Niaz Zaman's *The Dance and Other Stories* (1996); and even The Daily Star has now had a literary section containing original writing in English for quite a few weeks now!

poem

Three New Poems by Kaiser Haq

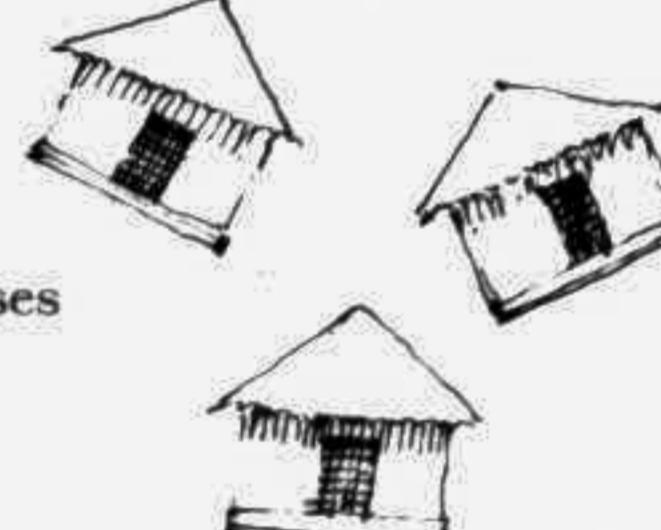
Darkness

TV news time
The power fails



What if there's no news tonight
Only an announcement

Over And over:



All is well
Don't leave your houses

Landscape

The flood has stopped coming in
but will it go away?

Like a basin with clogged vent
you cannot see it drain.

Water thickens on top
spreading vaginal odours:

can they reach the sky.
now free of clouds.

blue and so tall
it reaches beyond the sun?

Nature

A man moves to the side of a road,
simultaneously raises his lungi
and lowers his body till he squats
on heels, remains in that position
a while, then reverses the process
till he is erect once more,
and with light step
rejoins the passing crowd.

The sun goes down
spreading tomato sauce over the scene.

exhibition

Colours in the Chemistry

by Fayza Haq



Laila Sharmin *Golden Bengal-1*



G. S. Kabir *Abstract Thought-3*

THE Twelfth National Art Exhibition at the Shilpkala Academy marked half a century of art in Bangladesh. Thus it had contemporary and future importance. The world of art and culture has gone through enormous transformations. As a result international styles have influenced the artists so that local styles have been said goodbye to. Although technology has not gripped a country as poor as Bangladesh yet there is a lot of insecurity and tension in our society and this had been reflected in the tension seen in contemporary works.

being replaced by new ideas. There was a move towards more freedom and the exhibition gave new dimensions in art trends. In the world of visual art Bangladesh moved forward and the exhibition held high our hopes.

The Bangladesh Shilpkala Academy award went to KMA Quayum for his "Pressure II". This abstract piece depicted a cloth being torn and pulled with scraps of hastily done repair work done all over it.

"Behula Kahinee-6" by Tarun Ghosh got the Arab Bangladesh Bank Award. This too was an abstract piece with the boat of the story seen as a white plinth while the subjects from nature around were depicted as coloured spheres seen against a background of gold and black.

In the recent past there was time of exploitation and a rule of the upper classes and this was apparent in the works of the 80s. There was portrayal of grief and frustration of the people. Abstraction had then become apparent. The 90s saw more anarchy, social and political upheaval and this influenced the young painters and sculptors. Traditional themes and techniques were

burnt sienna and yellow ochre. Waqilur Rahman's buoyant "Quay-1" won the Pacific Group Gold Medal. This wide print had red and black calligraphy — like motifs on it with one figure smoothly blending into the next.

Ahmed Nazir, Rayhanul Kabir, Alak Roy and Dilara Begum Jolly got honourable mentions.

Mohammad Eunus's "Pleasure in Broken Forms-1" brought in pure abstraction with colours floating from one end of the composition to the other. Blue and red were his dominant colours, with black and white interspersing. Jamal Ahmed's "Bar-2" was a fascinating depiction of a bar with pouring colours presenting actual labels for bottles of alcoholic drinks. This evoked the atmosphere of a bar with tremendous realism although all one could see was splashes of colours.

Dhali Al-Mamoon's "Some Images from 71" brought in abstraction once more with lying and dead figures scattered all over the work.

Ranjit Das's "Life and Reality-11" brought in squares heaped on squares with a peering face emerging from the mass.

Nazlee Laila Mansur's "In

Street urchins seen at play was the theme of Sheikh Afzal's "Composition 1" which won the Bhorer Kagaj Award. The children were done in a wonderfully realistic way including protruding bellies, squinting eyes and tattered clothes held up by strings.

In the massive painting the backdrop and forefront were all awash with gold with variations of

black and white. Iftikharuddin Ahmed's "Destination" depicted man's struggle portrayed by the cross and the pendulum. This was a dynamic creation in shades of blue and yellow, touched by red. Kazi Hasibul Ahsan's "Lamentation-3" brought in destruction, havoc and pain in scattered abstract forms.

Shamim Sikder's

"Shamim-3" had a mind-boggling creation with household cutlery arranged over a black cloth. Pradyut Kumar Das's "Sitharan" had a depiction of a chariot done from left-overs of a metal heap. Hamiduzzaman Khan's "Mother and Nature" had abstract pieces of metal put together so that plants appeared to flower from the arms of a human being.

Hashi Chakraborty's "Passed Beyond" had swift economic and dynamic strokes to glorify the Liberation War. The faces and hands alone of the struggling fighter was depicted. "Come and See the Game" by Shishir Bhattacharjee was another symbolic depiction of our corrupt society done in shades of black and grey.

Kanak Chanda Chakma's "Red in the Mind" had an idyllic depiction of tribal women seen against a background of domestic vessels.

Khalid Mahmood Mithu's "Life and Reality" was another piece that made one stand and stare. Goutam Chakraborty's "Those Faces in Procession-9" had human faces, seen almost like haunting cut outs in shades of blue. Mohammad Iqbal's "Nomadic Faces" brought in the lure of the bauls and their strange vibrant ways.

Farida Zaman's "Fishing Net-30" had a romantic depiction of fishermen's nets done in shades of yellow, with the wind blowing against the hanging and sweeping nets. Laila

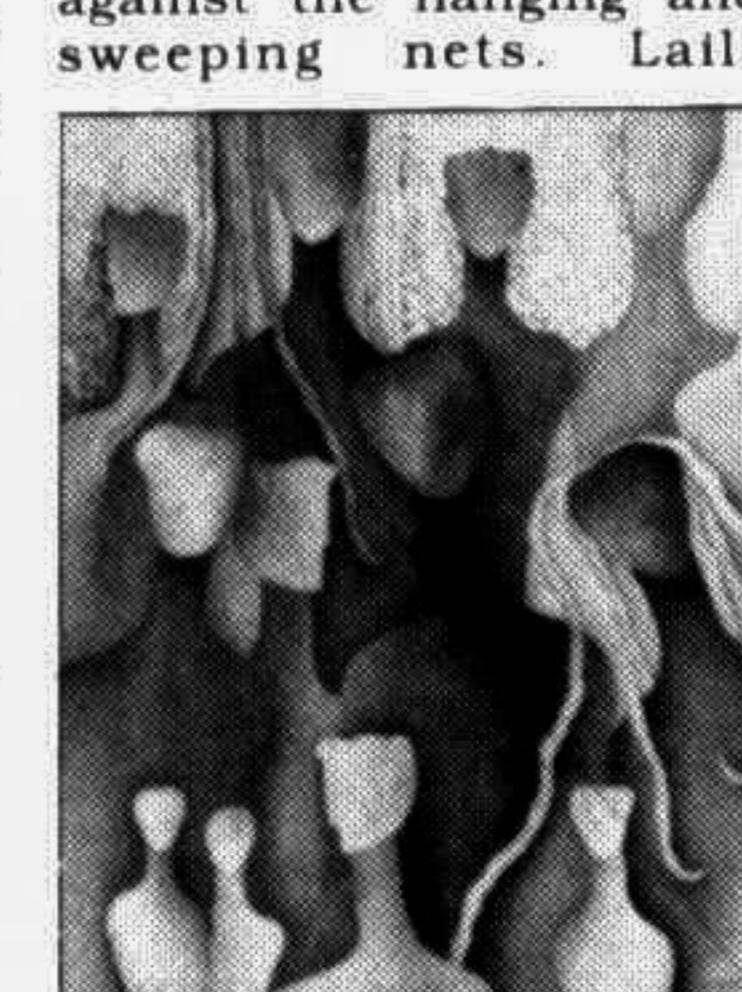
Sharmeen's "Golden Bengal-1" had mosques, trees, boats and clouds done with ethereal simplicity. Nilofor Chaman's "Midnight Mystery" had dreamlike images set in shades of blue. Saidul Haque Juise's "Face and Mask-1" had the artist's preoccupation with masks rendered in a cube of multi-coloured images. Nasreen Begum's "Freedom" brought in the theme of women's lib.

Women were depicted as confined to the four walls of the home, with their vision fixed on the future. Raft Haque's "Dairy 71" was a collage print bringing in scenes from the past including Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's famous speech.

The senior artists also had new samples of their work. Qayyum Chowdhury's "Joy Bangla" was a piece bursting to the brim with patriotism and colours. Abdur Razzaque's "Image" was a fine abstraction with black strokes intertwined with bottle green, brown and vermillion.

Debdas Chakraborty's piece and Syed Jahangir's "Story of a Solar Eclipse" were also stirring and soul searching. The entries by Rafiqul Nabi and Hashem Khan were also arresting and thought provoking. So also was Kalidas Karmakar's "Homage II".

The exhibition was specially laudable for the numerous entries by women painters and the inclusion of relatively young artists. ■



Nazlee Laila Mansur's "In"



Goutam Chakraborty's "Those Faces in Procession-9"