



art

Shahabuddin : Behind the Dynamics

by Raziul Ahsan

Continued from the last week

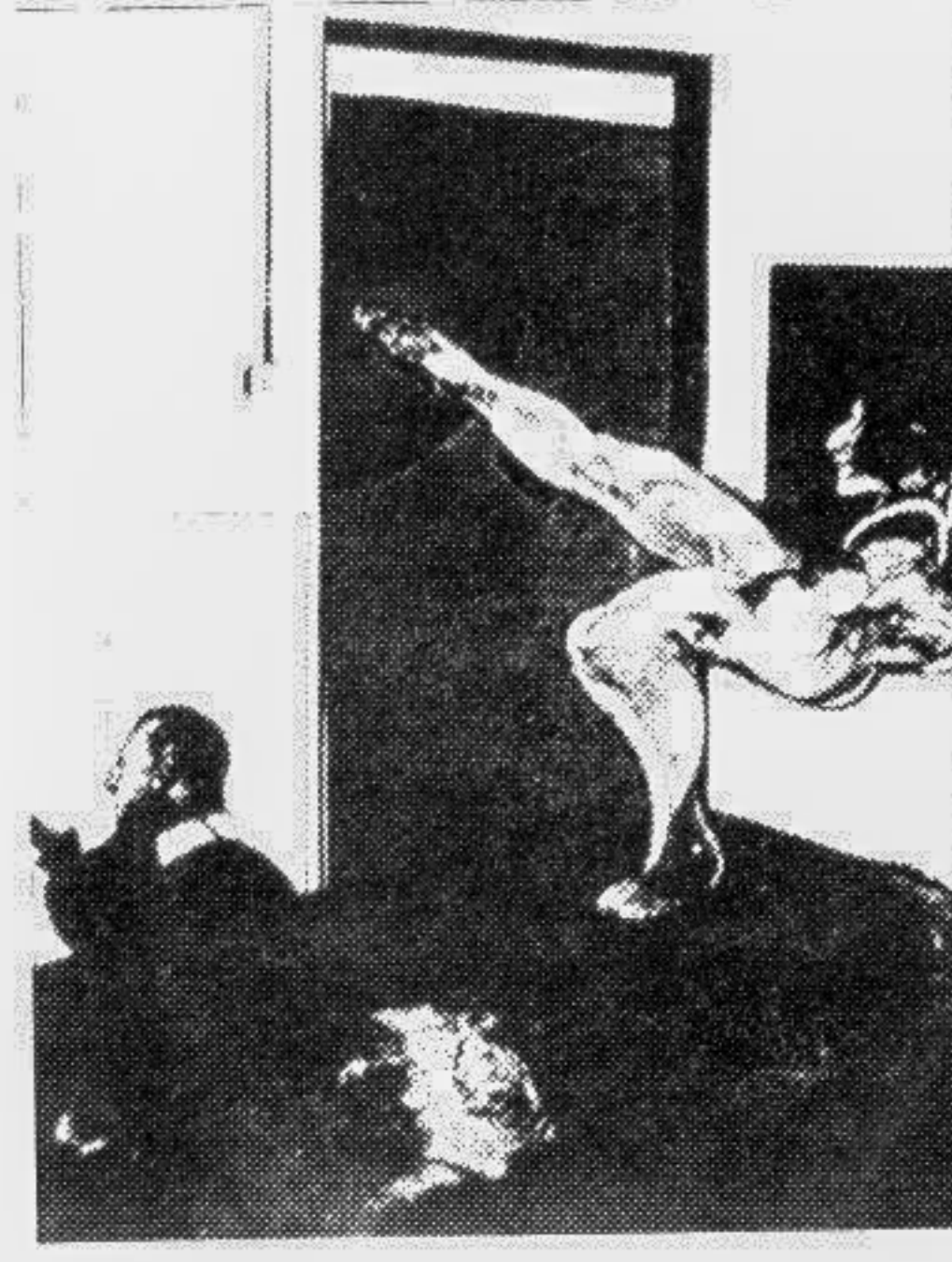
PICASSO MANY A TIME USED TO produce realistic drawings that were done as complete work and expression, because Picasso did not adopt any permanent method of expressive means. He continuously changed his language, which is one of the essence of his art. Picasso never totally gave up his attachment to realism. I consider Shahabuddin's drawings a part of his day to day exercises, not produced as independent works of artistic expression. Artists have continuously adopted and rejected between realism and abstraction in cycles. This simple conflict still continues.

We will refer here to two of his works done at the beginning of the eighties, The Dead Horse (Plate 36), and On the Train Roof (Plate 37). The human figure in the Dead Horse has been interestingly synthesized by overlapping of the figure and its won shadow. The figure has a weapon in one hand, there is also an upturned dead horse with its mouth open. The horse has been created by image distorting and also by borrowing Picasso images visible around the mouth and forelegs. The images demand association for understanding the expression but I personally don't have a clue as whether to perceive these images in the global or our national context. This dichotomy is the consequence, when the artist is alienated from his own situation and problems. The dead horse and the unknown spectre in combination communicate a disaster of undefined nature. The artist visualises horror of cataclysm in the horizon. In his case he settles for a universal horizon. Distorted fragments of unpredictable objects are disposed in a disordered landscape. One can explore as to what the artist attempted to express in the Dead Horse. When we study On the Train Roof we don't see any hint of the image of a train. What could the two characters be doing on top of the train, traveling illegally, is not known except that they are moving and seeing movement around them. These paintings remain isolated and cannot be slotted anywhere in my analysis. One comes across these waiting figures, in Waiting (Plate 40) and Charcoal Drawing (Plate 31). These paintings show the moments when Shahabuddin's figures stop and wait. Wait on top of a Train, wait together, wait all alone, for unknown reasons ... The figures don't express any visible anxiety or restlessness but we can read an indecisiveness. The purpose of waiting like the purpose of running has the same vagueness.

From the eighties we repeatedly see the monumental muscular figures clad in loin clothes, caught in motion. For years he goes on relentlessly painting these running, jumping, fighting figures



Shahabuddin Language Movement-2 Oil 1997



Francis Bacon Painting, 1978



Escape Oil 1978



Shahabuddin Window Oil 1974

in ecstasy. He goes on adding speed to the same image, the same background. The direction of the motion is monumentalised, stressed to the threshold of rupture. He goes on developing his skills in one direction, to increase the illusion of speed, and volume of muscular movement. He simply changes the sky moods without disturbing the comfort of the horizon of his icon. Just changes in the camera angles, lens type, filters, and type of focus choice, kept the painter active without imaginative efforts on the thematic development. This is a typical resignation, when the artist is complacent after final discovery of a philosophy, for permanent artistic use. His experiments are not in the chromatic zones. He limits his focusing to a telephoto mode where it has been sharpened on few features and the rest of the facts are blurred. The tiny dots, dashes, and lines sharply employed, has its usage significance on the level of format correction, of the overall composition. These correcting weights and counterweights are employed as ending acts, last moment negotiation for peace, added as preservatives for picture balance.

Except for limited changes in properties of magnitude the basic topological properties of the paintings remain unchanged. Variation is only on single level and the depth of communication has not been layered. Sublayers of symbols, images, and inventory is not explored. He compromises with peaceful methods to preserve the acceptance value of the icon he is generally associated with. We are left with a simple image of muscular movement. It is pure glory of dramatised motion, an obses-

sion with poetics of human struggle, the physical aspect of struggle of Neolithic entities. The focus is sharpened to highlight the beauty of perspiring innocents. We experience a trajectory loaded with sentimental connotations, and magnitudinal properties of physical activity. The artist's dependence on typical middle class literary values are visible. He just names these movement's differently, e.g., Disperse, Elan, Chasing Dog, Freedom Fighter, Attack, Yes, Warrior, Jump, Paratrooper, Solidarity. These names have essence of added artificial flavors to dramatise issues related to the inflated drama of the human struggle. The natures of the negative forces against which this movement takes place are not clear. He sees the problem as a universal condition, and the expression of struggle is generalised. With the figures in fluid time frame, and universal time zones, we are left only to experience one dimensional sentiment. The Warrior or the Freedom Fighter doesn't fight a specific war, he simply glorifies the ecstasy of being a warrior. These warriors don't have any national combat uniform, they are people of the universal caves with spears engaged in an undefined ideological war.

With the beginning of the nineties we begin to see recognisable faces as his central subject. Twenty-five years later after the War of Liberation Shahabuddin finds his inspiration in the War he has fought. We see pictures of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Rabindranath Tagore, Nazrul Islam, Zainul Abedin, Jahanara Imam. These faces are portrayed in the day to day

familiar manner like the simple magazine illustration method. These figures did not become thematic earlier or years after he returned from the War. In Gandhi (Plate 61) we see a different rendering technique. It is difficult to place his Gandhi painted like Francis Bacon's Head of a Man-Study of a Drawing by Van Gogh. Gandhi and Nazrul both are rendered in different methods than earlier works, and portraits he executed in the mid nineties. Here we see him employ the technique of distortion, image editing, dissolve and other process as a means to create the portrait formats. Tagore, Mujib, Zainul, and Jahanara Imam are portrayed in the sketch style of text book or newspaper. Shahabuddin for me appears vulnerable and I see in him a start to slide behind the popular for his validity and safety.

We see him changing his subjects, of and, on in the nineties. We also come across a selection of female bodies. He hardly presents his female bodies in high speed or struggle against invisible forces. The semi naked female figures are passive and shy with their faces turned away. He repeats the blurring technique but this time he blurs the corners and end of clothing not to express his favourite violent dynamics but this distortion highlights subtle feminine movements.

In the mid nineties we see Shahabuddin starts to combine his usual running figures with popular themes and cliches, literally. His inclination towards imagery related to Language Movement and Freedom War starts to be visible. Coincidentally with the Awami League gaining momentum in their

political strength Shahabuddin starts adding the icon of the National Flag and Bengali Alphabets, in the manner of political graffiti, beside his usual figures in motion. These symbols were calculated at a time when these imageries, themes and fervor will receive favorable appreciation from political quarters. I have seen established poets, writers, actors, and artists queue behind political powers for simple self interest ... These images were not banned for use earlier but Shahabuddin never used them in such a scale and frequency. His general images became identifiable and particular. The image benefit is being understood and exploited by opportunists at this moment goes without saying, I have seen a respected professor who started wearing Mujib coat, who was rewarded with the position of Chairman in an important Trust.

The importance of Sheikh Hasina for her supporters is not after she became the prime minister. She was in active politics for a long time and her presence has been acutely felt long before she won the election. It is now that Shahabuddin decides to paint her portrait. The 1997 portrait of Sheikh Hasina by Shahabuddin shows her posed stiff. The focus jerked before the final click and smudged the theme. The hesitant and the unresolved chromatic adventure of brushwork around her hair, her face, so long used for adding speed to figures betrays his purpose in this case. The inspirational value of this particular effort has not been timed with care, and as a result it speaks of areas in the zones of his personal interest.

This issue I highlight because this is sudden venturing into grounds of oppor-

tunism and ambition. I personally feel shaking hands with power structure isolates an artist. All the rebellious attitudes are set aside to accommodate the familiar and the popular. He gives up the precious loneliness that artists cherish. His rebirth was not with fresh dreams but he in reality reorganise his self for mediocre ambitions. The typical middle class vision of safe zone, dreaming about a safety kit for survival, looking forward to be blessed and accepted by the godfathers of culture.

After finishing the writing so far, I went and saw the Exhibition going on at Shilpangan. A greater part of the writing was completed on the basis of exhibitions seen earlier, and published coloured photographs in catalogues. After coming back I did not change my mind as to what I have written till now. I am tempted to make my gut reactions here which may sound subjective. I would not ask the readers to take my reactions as the last word because they must see themselves to find out their reaction. The very first sight of the exhibition speaks of repetition. The smaller painting of lesser price has been given the time it deserves for that kind of price. Less prices less effort. This is sad where size is the function of the price. The frenzy of the speed, and the confidence to put up anything with his sign, now expresses his impatience, his boredom, the lethargy of his creative mind. The faith on cliché subjects, obsessive dependence on rapid brushstrokes and lines, leaves his canvas chromatically dull, compositionally very shabby. Repetition is generally rejected and communication ruptures.

He makes it evident that he has made his painting like this: after choosing a subject make a sketchy suggestive image of the subject, smudge and blur the image till it looks partially dissolved but remains recognisable, add sketchy lines brushstrokes around the figure, create a partial hazy or smoky backgrounds around the image to highlight the subject, add directional brushstrokes and lines to create the illusion and the direction of the motion, paint the background that suggests the atmospheric mood, add blotches, highlight points, dashes and dabs of sharp here and there. Then sign Shahabuddin '97. This exhibition almost lays bare how he looks at the role of the artist. The artist who wants to sell. Now is the time for the price. Now the faith is in magic. We see a Shahabuddin surrounded by entrepreneurs, by divines and controllers of culture, and fakes. The powerful figures keep running, but behind the images the structure has become fragile, and brittle. The thirst, pain, hunger, and cultural icons, are lies fabricated for the market now.

poem

Ballad

by Mohammad Rafiq

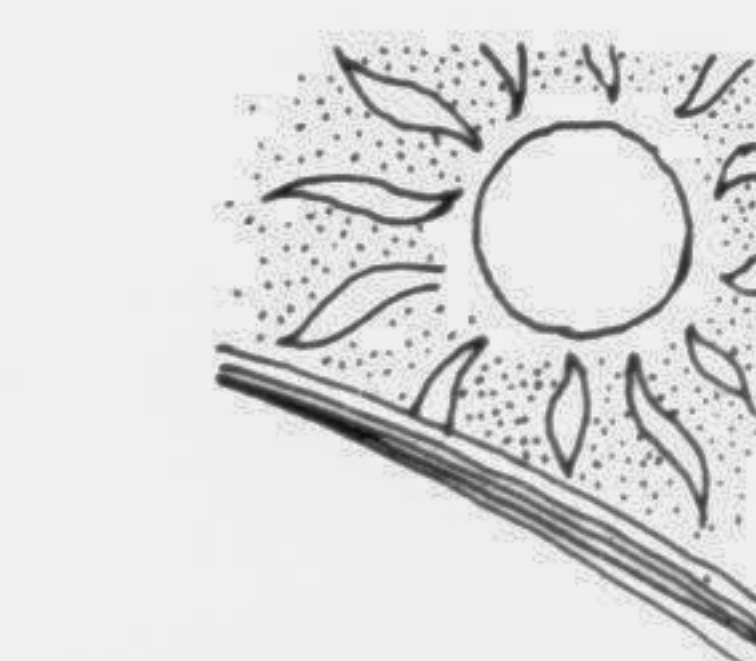
Let others speak of her shame,
I speak of my own
— Bertold Brecht

gracing the emerald world
mother of us all, verdant maiden
you don't parade your beauty
this much may be true — even so

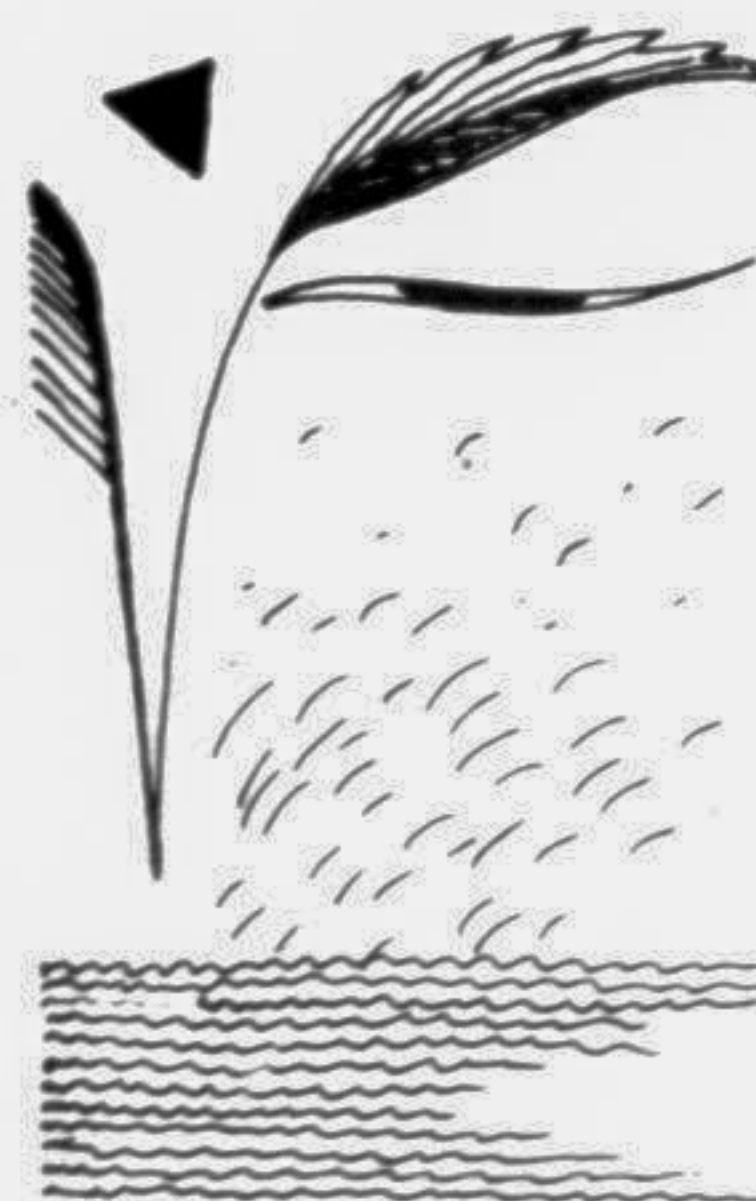
no one will ever match
your devotion to simple tasks
the deftness of your labors
in your own realm

under your own rule
you never sat in the marketplace
selling your pearls — even so
the jewel-hungry snake-god

monsters, hired thugs
raided your immaculate courtyard
is this a fairy-tale of chastity
sweetened with fantasy



or something else, with another twist
you were raped — even so
your virginity is eternal
returning with the dawn each day



mopping courtyard and doorway
you rub out the spattered blood
covering over the blight
with fresh dirt and dung paste

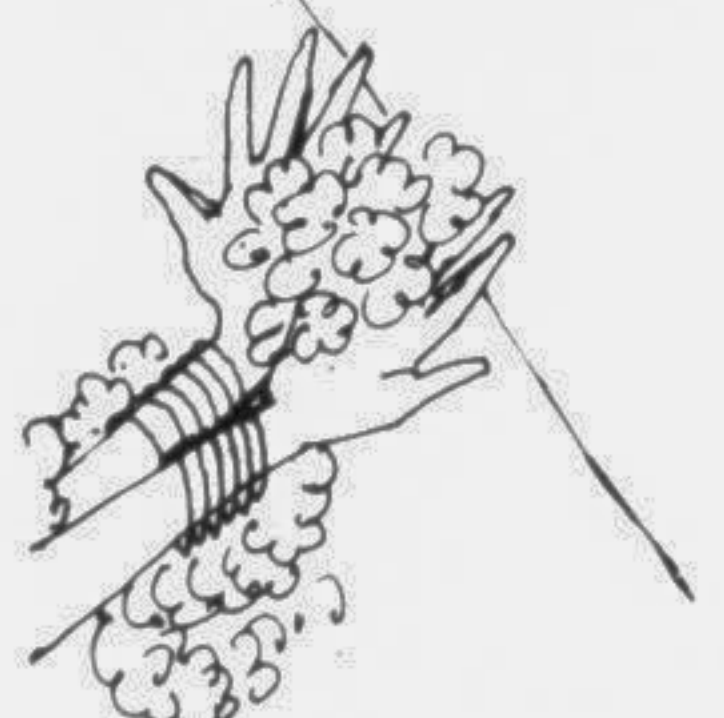
you've stood tall, rows of sky-grazing
sandalwood trees reflected
in your eyes, brow darkly etched
by fire-showers from the blazing sun

you were so young when you
sat on the jackfruit-carved
wedding piri, palms of your lotus
hands paisleyed with henna

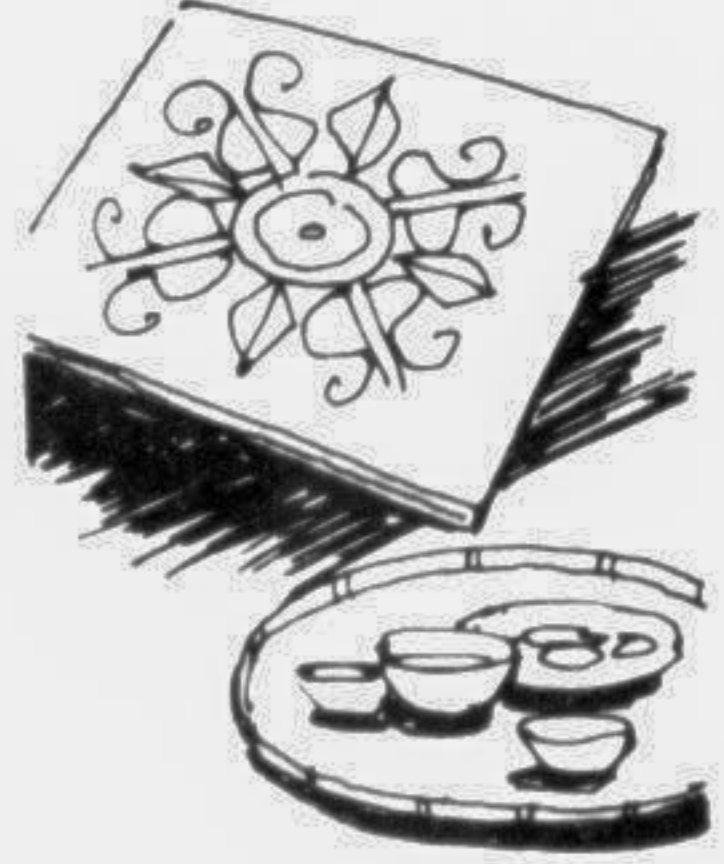
because it's the custom here



that's why a girl of sixteen
is already blessed with several
children — from house to house



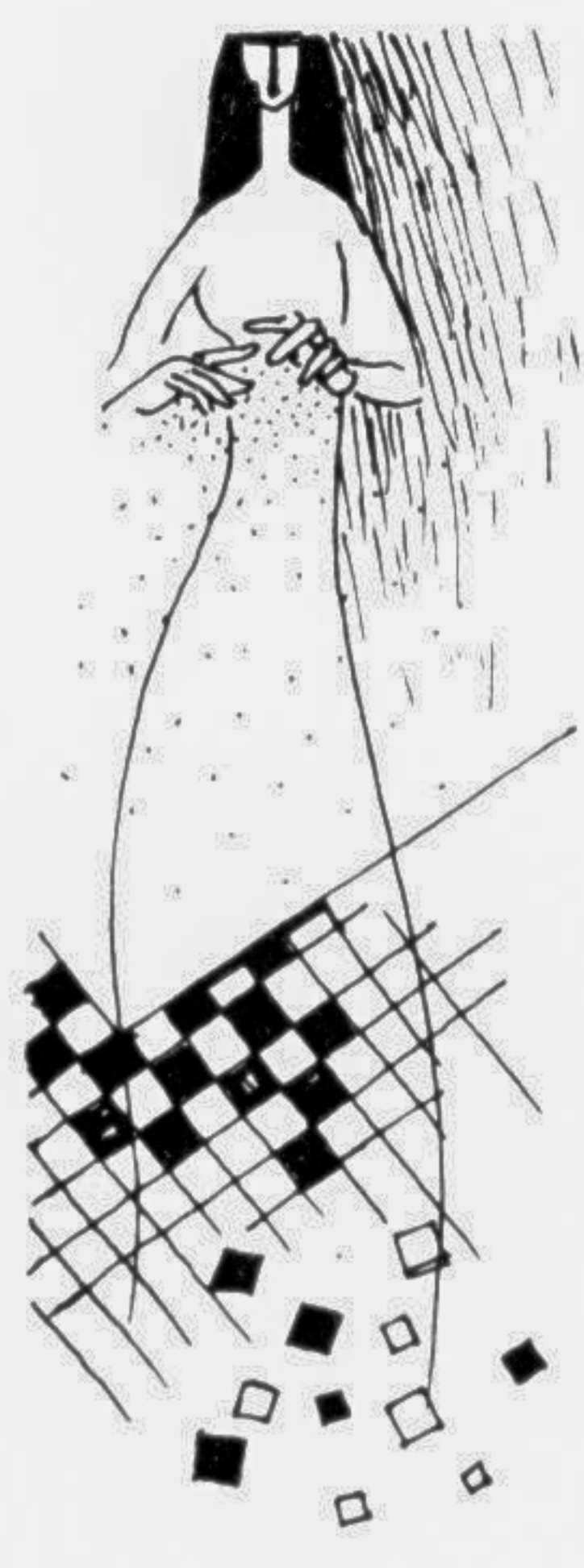
lighting lamps in prayer
or raising the cry of azan
circulating the news
throughout this desolate land



why should the cows worry
once their shed has burned down
that's how you've become
mother to thousands, millions

some crippled, lame
some maimed, some gasping
for air before your eyes, you
grieve, helpless, distraught

even so, you're not ashamed
but some of your children
have been scheming
to trade on your devotion



the wisdom of your almond eyes
the worth of each teardrop
the grace of your veil of hair
the dignity of your pale limbs

after selling them
some of the swindlers
write at your feet, your
offspring bawl, "ma, ma"

what else can you do
you're a mother, you believe
in forgiveness, bodies of innocent
children lie in your courtyard

those who peddle blood
compose ballads praising you
and whose blood is being sold
that child does not know you

tattooed with prayers, beaten
by motherhood, my mother

Translated by Carolyn Brown
April 14, 1997