



art

# Women in the Contemporary Art World of Bangladesh: Images and Reality

by Lala Rukh Selim

**T**HE ART OF THIS REGION HAS A long and wonderful past. As part of the Indo-Pak sub-continent, Bengal shared various trends in art that developed and flourished in the rest of India. Regional distinction also found expression in the arts of Bengal at different times with the changing socio-political context.

As in the rest of the world, the changing socio-economic status of women has also found expression in the arts of this land. Women as bearers of life, symbols of fertility, mysterious and powerful beings have from the very beginning fascinated, perplexed and overawed men. Worship of the fertility of nature, on which mankind depended, developed and fertility itself has been embodied in the form of the pregnant woman, the mother goddess. With the advent of civilization and the changing cultures and values, women have always featured in art as society, and in most cases, patriarchal society has chosen to depict them. Role of women in the 'high' arts have always been determined by men while the folk or popular arts have been relatively less restricted as they have sometimes been practised by womenfolk themselves and have shown the women's perspective in different cultures. This same pattern weaves the fabric of our own art world.

The advent of Islam in Bengal brought about a break with the past tradition. Islam frowned upon the figure in art. Culture became compartmentalized into Muslim and non-Muslim culture. Things became further complicated with the advent of the British who, for a beginning, placed very little value in the wealth of art teeming in this part of the world. They set up their own art institutes to train people not to be artists but to learn to create objects to glorify and further consolidate the British empire. Thus, the fine arts developed, as in all cultures, from ritualistic, religious or political needs. With the British academic schools that were set up in different parts of the sub-continent the artist community came into contact with their highly formalised, rigid schooling. These academies were rarely attended by Muslims from our parts as Islam is intolerant of art and women dabbling in this field was out of the question. Thus women have only recently stepped into the arena of the 'high' or fine arts. We see no women among the first generation of artists who laid the foundation of the modern art movement of Bangladesh. We hear of no women students studying in the Govt. School of Arts, Calcutta, parallel to Zainul Abedin, Quamrul Hassan, Shafiquddin Ahmed or S M Sultan, who were the pioneers of modern Bangladeshi art.

With the partition of Bengal and the birth of Pakistan the issues of national identity and integrity became further disjointed. Were we Muslims first or Bengalees first? Which roots should we recognize and follow? Religious values were strictly imposed to bind East and West Pakistan together where almost no other common boundaries existed.

The Government Institute of Arts was established in Dhaka in 1948 after the partition of Bengal. Zainul Abedin was instrumental behind the founding of the institute. The first batch of female students joined it in 1954. They were Tahera Quayyum, Rawshan Ara Amin, Moena Iqbal and Hasina Zaman Minu. It is to be surmised that they were not ordinary girls from ordinary families. They had the courage to stand up to being regarded from under raised eyebrows which must have followed them around in those conservative times. However they could not go on to become successful artists. We have examples of women getting admitted to leave the course unfinished and some who actually completed the course never to put their training to any creative use. Somehow the bondage of marriage, family, children and art have not proven a good combination at least for women. Social pressure and the duties and obligations of the family can never be conducive to the concentration, dedication and above all else the constant practice that is a must for the creative process to work. The creative process requires the harmony of vision, intuition and execution without which true art cannot be created. For men it is allowable that they found a family, earned the bread and remained in the position of the remote outsider from other family duties. Not so for women. Even today the economically independent woman is more harassed than in the past with the effort to synthesize her different worlds of the home, the workplace and at the same time tapping her creativity for the flow of Art.

It is interesting to note that the first woman to leave her mark in the modern art movement of Bangladesh was a social outsider, Novera Ahmed. Novera Ahmed's appearance in the art scene of Bangladesh was not the culmination of social events which made the appear-

ance of a woman artist inevitable or acceptable. She was more like a comet which suddenly appears lighting the sky with blinding light to vanish without a trace. She had no antecedents and left no immediate predecessors. She created a turmoil in her times so that whoever who was in any way connected with cultural matters knew of her presence. Her presence was no common presence! "... [Novera] appeared as an apparition, a spectre. On closer view, it was a small, intense woman, dressed severely in black, with a bead necklace around her neck and no other ornament, penetrating eyes and a mysterious mien, that reminded one of the priestess of a long forgotten cult, a votress in a temple." These are the words of Abudus Salam editor of *Pakistan Observer* written in the catalogue printed for the first exhibition of sculptures in this country by Novera in 1960.



Shamim Sikdar Distigue

Novera was born in the early 1930's in a culturally inclined family. She learnt to sing and dance and grew up watching her mother make clay models. This probably dictated the decidedly 'unfeminine' calling she chose in life. As a young woman she was married off to an eligible suitor but she rebelled against the marriage to run away to her elder sister who lived in London. She enrolled in the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts in London to study sculpture under Sir Jacob Epstein and chose to come back to former East Pakistan after she finished her course. In Dhaka she lived alone, kept no contact with her relatives to protect her independence and commenced her solitary battle to create sculpture in a land where it was totally a new territory, considered irreligious and unacceptable. It was she who created the first outdoor sculpture and the first frieze on the wall of a public edifice which alone should have given her a place as a forerunner in the field of art. In the words of Zainul Abedin in the catalogue of Novera's 1st exhibition, "In East Pakistan's art world, it was a minor revolution, when Novera Ahmed gave the city the first frieze on the wall of the Central Public Library in 1957 and then the first open air sculpture in 1958. We, the citizens of Dhaka, have been living with this [sic.] two magnificent work [sic.] for [the] past few years. But I still think, we shall take generations to assess the impact of these two work [sic.] in our art life." Alas, Zainul Abedin's words have proven prophetic because even after almost forty years have elapsed we are still unable to correctly evaluate and acknowledge the historical and aesthetic significance of these two works and the body of works that Novera left behind in this city of Dhaka when she left it forever, disillusioned, rejected and probably disheartened. She had her dreams, the dreams of building a city enlivened with sculpture and other works of art to create citizens enlightened by them. "We must ignite among our people the spark of curiosity, about the inner visions, meanings and truths of life, which can come only by bringing art within the horizon of our city life."

Apart from the challenge of establishing sculpture as an art form, creating her own language which would at the same time spring from the roots of her own culture, the whole process of coming to terms with her medium must have been considerable for Novera. She who was used to working in an institute with all modern facilities of models, materials and technicalities, came to Dhaka to find it barren indeed in these areas. She remoulded her methods of execution and her forms to suit the conditions and materials that she had at hand and within a very short space of time successfully created her own language.

In Dhaka in those days of political fervour and activism she must also have been part of the surging nationalistic zeal which was born after the Language Movement of 1952. Novera chose to look eastward to her own tradition when she struggled to create her forms and images. Thus we find forms captured from the folk dolls of our region simplified, exaggerated and activated by her skilful analysis and her presence. Village dwellers were often her source of

inspiration. Her work testifies to the struggle to combine her Western schooling with the spirit of national identity.

Even though she was a very individual artist and a very private person with her sculpture definitely created for herself alone, to give meaning to her existence, she was not unconscious of her social obligations as a responsible and conscious person. She was deeply involved in the planning of the Shaheed Minar, designing fountains and sculptures which never materialized.

The fascinating part about Novera's work is the image of the woman. We see her generation of male artists struggling to marry the voluptuous sensuality of European females with a romanticizing of women so prevalent in our country. Stilted, suggestive scenes of rural women bathing in clinging drapery, at their toilet with comb or mirror, sniffing a bloom, etc. Women were reso-



Farida Zaman Fishing Net

lutely kept out of the world of activity. Other than this the image of 'Ma', motherhood, an eastern concept which is the saving grace that gives woman an elevated status in this part of the world, is the prevailing image. In Zainul Abedin's famous famine sketches we do see women—as a part of the vast sea of suffering humanity devoid of sentimentality "and all other western or eastern feminine attributes. Occasionally we even gaze into the face of a pensive woman in his paintings because he was a compassionate and feeling person with a concern for people irrespective of sex. Yet the characteristic woman is definitely not one 'in action'.

Quamrul Hassan is a completely different matter choosing himself as the focus, all his women are his. Either his mother, wife or daughter. Devoid of individuality or feeling, they are created with the sole idea of pleasing others. These two major artists are mentioned here as examples of the female image in the eyes of male artists to compare with Novera's female images.

Novera Ahmed's work shows the female image in a totally different light from the eyes of men. Her female forms are not seen through the idealizing focus we notice in men. In her groups men and women are seen as units coming to-

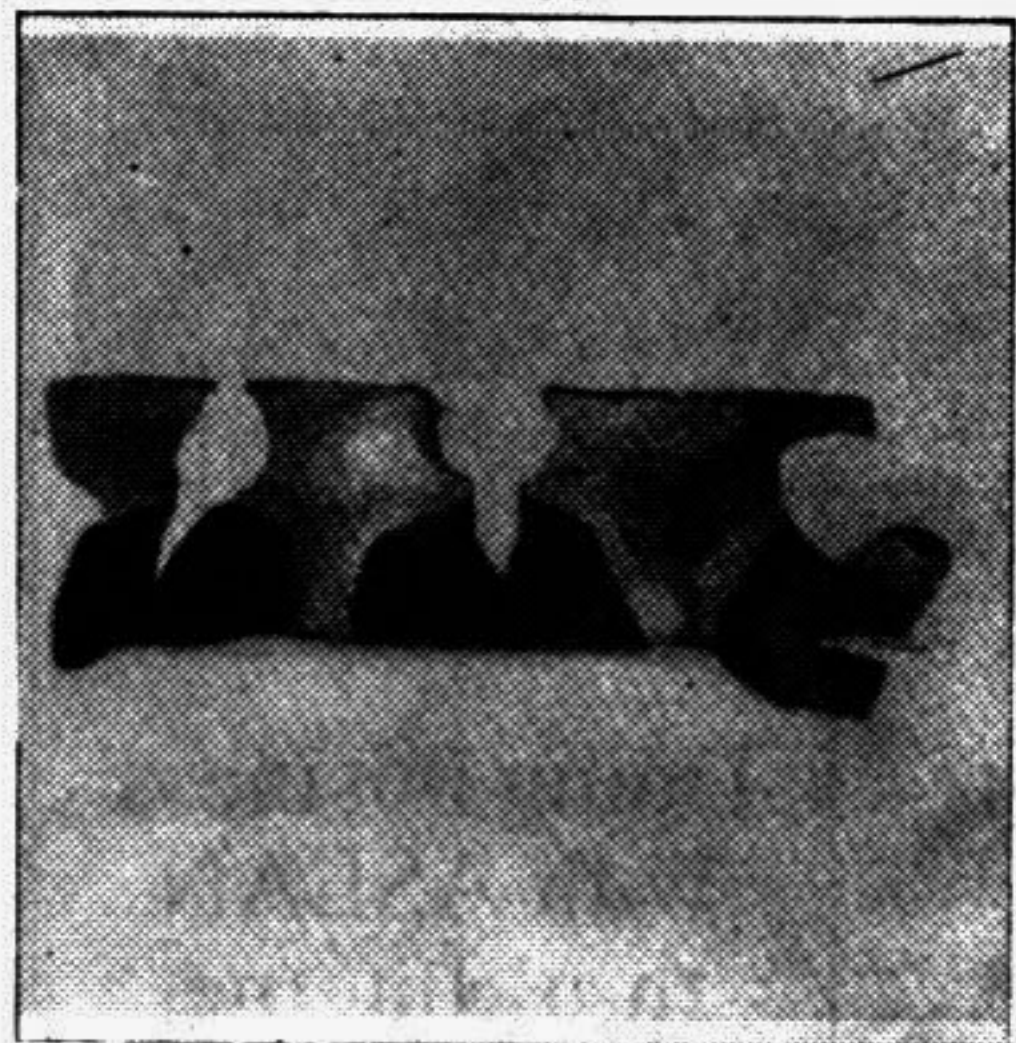


Nasreen Begum Uncoordinated Life A'

gether to form a whole, to create a compositional design. What strikes me as a distinctive feature in Novera's work is her effort to go beyond the creation of superficial and pleasing forms. She wanted to peel her forms of all excesses to present her vision and her statement in meaningful, simple and original terms. This is no easy task because one has to rely on the truth of the concept much more than on the skill of the craftsmanship. She was definitely interested in presenting certain ideals and on occasion, reality. She had the driving force of her convictions and her total concentration on her art alone in her position as the eccentric outsider that gave her the power to relentlessly keep at her work and explore new territory with her inner gaze. When Novera created women in sculpture she stripped the images of all maudlin sentimental-

ity to create forms of real women, stubborn, determined, with a frank eroticism such as we see in *The Long Wait*. Her mothers are not pretty but are strong and bold and struggling. Often they go beyond the realm of mere individual feeling to become symbols of mankind. As Mervyn Marshall of England said of this piece, "*The Long Wait* is a typical example of Novera's work. In this basic, primitive outline, one feels the longing and the despair the resignation and resolution of a whole people waiting for deliverance!"

Unfortunately enough the efforts of Novera have till now found very little appreciation in our art world and Zainul Abedin's words echo down through the years as the bitter truth. One questions oneself why is Novera forgotten? Would she have been allowed to sink from sight as she did if she had been a he? What happened to the '100



Naima Haque Composition-2

pieces' of sculpture that finds mention in the 1960 catalogue of her exhibition? Why was she compelled to leave the country while many other artists (and many of lesser merit) found fame and social acclaim?

Novera's crimes were many. For a beginning she was a woman and a beautiful one at that and again she was born in the 1930's. She chose sculpture as her calling and not the better accepted painting. She was delightfully bohemian, unable to conform to any social norms and could not be measured by them. Her eccentricities were not pretensions to attract attention, they were actual demonstrations of her concept of life, how she wanted to be and was. She was not a successful public relations person, she could not sell herself by improving the packaging or developing glib 'sell talk'. She was honest and she was what she was. What happened was that men were fascinated by her because she was beautiful and extraordinarily uninhibited in her relations. As a result



Rokeya Sultana Madonna with Passengers-1

when one talks of Novera with her contemporary males they speak at length on Novera as a personality but have very little to say of her work which seemed minor to them in comparison to her persona. Many wish to dismiss her work as the useless exercises of a flighty female. I may add that this has gone to the advantage of many who wish to be recognized as pioneers of areas which were already covered by Novera years ago! Thus the Novera phenomenon is resolutely a skeleton in the cupboard and she is as much a victim of sexism as was Joan of Arc. Her name is not to be mentioned in the academies that teach art in our country. Some of her '100 pieces' stand maimed and broken and some have only very recently been collected by the National Museum. If she had been a man would we not have eyed her eccentricities with tolerance and

indeed glorified them as we do those of all our great men? We can only say that there is still time for us to look, analyze and record our history with reference to reality. With the vanishing act that Novera performed in the 1960's we unfortunately lost the only woman in the field of art for years to come. Novera's generation of male artists returned home from abroad in the sixties armed with western aesthetic values and relentlessly set to battle often to set their roots in the air instead of into the earth and the Modern Art movement in Bangladesh was underway. Women artists struggled under-water never to properly reach the surface while the image of woman found a place in the arts as the object of romance, sentiment or fantasy of men. Only in the 1970's again do we see women as artists emerging as a tangible part of the art world, holding their own to some degree. This seems to be the actual fruit of social change and a change in the status of women. Such artists as Laila Mansur Nazlee, Masuma Khan, Farida Zaman, Naima Haque, Shamim Shikder, Sadhana Islam, etc are artists who completed their studies in the institutes in the early 70's and are active as artists to this day. The first group show of women artists was by the "Group of Four" in 1974 which included works of Farida Zaman, Naima Haque, Shamim Shikder and Sadhana Islam. This is a landmark in our art world. These women struggled on and mostly went abroad to further their studies. Farida Zaman was the first ever woman artist to receive recognition from the government by being awarded the "Young Artists Award." This change in the position of our women artists was the fruit of our awareness as a people which had sharpened from the Language Movement of 1952 to the climax in the War of Liberation in 1971. It was the liberation of our beings as a total nation. Men and women struggled equally for freedom and nationalistic fervour overcame the confines of religious or social restrictions. It was the time when the nation had dreams and hopes and anything was deemed possible. To believe in the equality of men and women came to be considered a basic requirement for any progressive being.

From the 70's onwards women have become increasingly active in the art scenario of Bangladesh. The number of female students in the art institutes are increasing as are the number of teachers. Farida Zaman, Naima Haque,



Alia Islam Anne Suddenly One Day

Shamim Shikder, Rowshan Haq Dipa, Nasreen Begum, Rokeya Sultana, Dilara Begum Jolly, Nilofar Chaman and others are well known in the art field as serious practising artists. Our women are receiving acclaim both at home and abroad. There is a strong participation of women in any national or international exhibition held in the country and they are active in all the different media. Group shows by women are also common fare nowadays. As in the rest of the world, women artists in Bangladesh are in focus now.

Women artists do not have to achieve the level of intensity and solitude that Novera Ahmed needed in her time to declare her individuality and freedom of spirit. She does not have to dress and make-up to look bizarre or shocking to announce and retain her existence and her faith in it as Novera did. Things are

easier, on the whole.

With this loosening of boundaries we see certain changes transforming our art world, the emergence of new trends and a diversification of subject and style. In the wake of the footsteps of our women the feminine perspective and feminine value is added to art. It is no easy task to liberate the female image created by men, all our training, all the books on art and the visual materials that confronts us drums it into us. Yet the female image has come out of the stereotype into more fluid and 'real' forms as they are created by women themselves who are inside the spirit of the forms. This is not to say that all our women are engaged in creating art that is socially committed and feminist. There are many women who are practising non-figurative or non-representational art. Those who are doing representational art are not dealing specifically with women's issues but since they are women their experience and attitudes definitely find expression in their work and this is totally different from that of men. Women are here real beings, not figments of the imagination. There are some women who have consciously used their art to make social statements about the plight of women, statements against religious fundamentalism and repression. On the whole when one is confronted by the work of a group of women artists one is made quite conscious that women are thinking about themselves, for themselves.

To discuss a few examples we see in Laila Mansur Nazlee's work the image of women predominating mostly a social panorama where the claustrophobia of a woman's existence is the focus. Her women are active, flesh and blood persons depicted in different gestures. Rowshan Haq Dipa has at times painted women who are obviously in difficulties and are unhappy. Strong and sensuous women hounded or overshadowed by men who look threatening, almost menacing. Dilara Begum Jolly is a frank feminist in her themes. Her paintings and prints show her in the role of a social critic. She has satirized and presented violence in society and very often violence against women in her work. Religious fundamentalism was her focus for a long time. For instance her 'Noorjahan' is the expression of her personal agony and her feeling of solidarity with Noorjahan who was a village maiden buried to her waist and stoned by her villagers at the instigation of fundamentalists who had accused her of adultery. Noorjahan later committed suicide. Jolly's women are women with all their failings and strengths. She is no romantic and life is no dream in her impassioned creations. Nilofar Chaman's paintings are a world of fantasy, a gloomy, acid coloured world peopled by women, men and animals who are immensely cerebral and intensely bored, sad? Her men and women are almost indistinguishable and emerge as similar forms. Her works are quite unique. Her fantasies are symbolic depictions of what is often her outrage at what is happening around her. The phallic forms that she uses and her erotic imagery is derived from a female point of view. The frank eroticism in her images of humans, animals and plant life shows her individuality and a feminine perspective of sexuality. Rokeya Sultana who has been working on her Madonna Series for quite some time shows her Madonna in an urban setting, a woman with her child struggling against the crowd of adversities that afflict a working mother.

All in all, one is quite conscious of the fact that women are victims of social injustice and this comes across quite strongly in the work of a lot of our women. It is undeniable that the work of our women is as much overshadowed by the identity crisis as is our total art world which is looking for ways to synthesising its cultural and national identity while at the same time being international and individual with the overpowering influence of Western art movements gripping the every foundations of its modern art.

Considering the last 30 to 40 years I can only say that our women have definitely changed the climate of our art world with their presence. The female images that they create are charged with lived experience, strength and depth of feeling and the truth of their very existence enlivens them and gives them verity. Yet women are still only on the threshold of all that can be achieved. Just as art is not a discrete and unique phenomenon, separated from society, neither are artists. True genius may transcend all barriers but much strength and goodness may be lost in the process.

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