



exhibition

A Feminine Niche

by Fayza Haq

WAITING For Iffat Ara Dewan to arrive at the Divine Art Gallery at Sonargaon, where she was holding her second solo exhibition, renewed my chronic backache. But seeing the gorgeous and lyrical creations got rid of my psychosomatic pain like some wave with a wand of magic.

Asked if it is necessary to go abroad for higher training to paint well — after all SM Sultan and Zainul Abedin did a good job each before foreign exposure — Iffat says, "With going abroad, you see new art forms and your vision widens. However, I don't think that it is essential to leave the country for foreign exposure to paint well. If you have talent within you that alone can suffice."

Discussing what one should have as one's aim when one paints — express the feelings of mankind around one or one's own personal thoughts or make the quick buck and easy fame, Iffat comments, "Definitely, I should express my personal thoughts. I should delineate what I feel and see with colour and brush. As for depicting my surroundings, I will do it only if I can do so adequately. I may want to do it but my faculties might prevent or deter me, I do still life as it comes to me effortlessly. Similarly the portrayal of the interior of the living room of my home is no major task for me. The subjects should appeal to my sensibility. They should soothe my nerves and that of my viewers."

"I should be able to handle my subject with suavity. My other preoccupations, like singing or household chores, incidentally, do not hamper my painting. However, if I had more time for my painting I would not limit myself to my present themes and techniques. Maybe, academic training might have changed my style. I began in '90. Art has been my favourite subject even since I had been at school. Waheedul Haque, the well-known journalist, opened up new venues of art for me by lending me his art books and discussing their contents with me. My own family had a soft corner for visual art interest too. I do not keep a private tutor because I refuse to be dictated at my age. Of course I would like to have my own income through my



paintings."

Why do people paint — as an urge, a necessity, for decorations, or to express deep thoughts — after all abstract paintings and semi-abstracts are finding recognition in Bangladesh only of late? To this Iffat says, "People paint as they have a strong urge to do it, I believe, and this applies to me as well."

Asked if our artists are being too western or hanging on to the hackneyed boat, sari-clad village beauty and the bullock cart scenario, Iffat comments "Artists should have the freedom of expression to paint what they wish to paint."

Why do people buy more paintings now in Bangladesh than they did before — is the appreciation greater or is the purchasing power more? Iffat comments with reserve, "The appreciation is certainly more because in the last 15 years there has been a great change in art

connoisseurship. Ordinary people are also going to visit galleries in hordes to see what the artists have to offer. Since I have begun my venture into visual art, I too saunter in, to as many art shows as I can in the city. You would say that people, apparently, can understand, appreciate and buy more paintings today than say two decades ago."

Discussing what make people understand and care for paintings and sculpture more of late, Iffat reiterates, "The frequency of art exhibition arouses interest in art."

Asked if she is happy that she is known for both singing and painting, "It gives me more confidence, but I'd like to be known for my painting alone too, as that is a different world. However, I am trying to reach the maturity which I have obtained in my singing through my painting as well. You have to be able



to develop your technique and capture the attention of the audience. Of course, I am keen to learn more as there is no end to learning. However, I will not deviate from my own personal style. Paintings, eventually, express inner thoughts, ambitions and feelings. These remain my themes", Iffat says.

Asked if she has a studio and how she paints, Iffat explains, "I have a studio of a sort in my verandah which looks out into the garden. I prefer to listen to Rabindra Shangeet, at times the sitar of the Uchanga Shangeet, and occasions western music too. As for my interest in western music during work, it is limited to jazz."

Dwelling on the question of an artist progressing without appreciation, Iffat says, "This is not possible. This also applies to singing. Even Van Gogh had his brother Theo to support him. For those like Matisse, the urge to paint has helped. They believed that someday they would eventually be recognised. Without appreciation they have suffered acutely, as you know."

Talking about what has made people understand more painting and sculpture in Dhaka — art criticism, exhibitions or foreign exposure — Iffat reaffirms, "People spend their time in galleries and this helps. Otherwise they would spend more time on say channel TV or rock music or even the cinema. This gives a natural impetus to artists themselves too."

Dwelling on if industrialists and foreign buyers help the painter, Iffat says promptly, "Yes, definitely. As for bureaucrats and foreign buyers, they go in for both abstractions and village scenes. I bought some myself to decorate an eating place 'Kushum' which I ran myself. I chose those paintings that depicted Bangladeshi life by local artists. I had kept a few abstracts as well."

As an artist who has relatively recently begun painting, Iffat refuses to comment on comparative merits of subcontinental artists despite all coaxing. "I don't spend much time on comparative paintings," Iffat shyly admits.

Discussing why sculpture is not more popular in Dhaka, Iffat says, "Though this is the seat of learning in Bangladesh, one finds more prevalence of different forms of art: there is a good art college and adequate teachers, yet



sculpture is often ignored. Perhaps our culture has somehow not encouraged it."

Talking about how well know Bangladeshi female artists like Kanak Champa Chakma, Nasreen Begum, Rokeya Begum and Naima Huq have taken bold steps to show the way to other local women painters, Iffat says, "Yes of course this is so, without doubt."

Coming to her own themes and styles of still life and semi-realistic work, Iffat says, "I do realistic work mostly, and adore chalk pastel. I get the inspiration from my own garden. My choice of colours is a bright and uplifting one. The appeal of the vases too are of great consequence to me. The designs on them the shapes and colours too matter."

Asked where art is best taught, Eu-

rope USA or Japan, Iffat says, "Any of these places will give you a good training on the basic techniques of painting — as they all have established universities and good teachers. Of course styles differ and you have to choose what your wish to perfect."

Giving her opinion of the Bangladeshis art teachers, Iffat adds, "They are very encouraging but of course 'session jams' harm the students."

In "Potted Plant 2" *dolonchampas* are held in an orange vase. It has soft hues with gentle ochre dots in them. They are accompanied by fleshy, sensuous leaves. A brilliant orange red vase, touched with blue, holds the flowers. A wash of lighter ochres gets deeper at the top in the background. The basic blue of the paper is amalgamated with the work.

An Italian turquoise blue ceramic jug is another favourite of the artist. It holds *gondhoraj* (gardenia). It has deep romantic leaves and this was done in March, when Iffat's the garden was in bloom. The background is a shade of brownish grey. Yellow ochre and grey blend with the backdrop.

"Kuchupata" is done with shades of green with flecks of white for the veins. The leaves, the subject, are juxtaposed in various stylised direction to give a lyrical impact.

The portrait of a woman "Fatima" has not used any model. It was done from pure imagination and has been done in a simplified semi-abstract way. "I did what I felt was visually appealing and appropriate," Iffat says. Sensuous "limpid pools" for eyes complement the curly hair and striped sari — all done in charcoal.

Another piece an oil, delineates a reclining woman who is reading on a divan, surrounded by a grey screen. This too has a typically feminine vision. Here Iffat has gone in for life drawing for experience and experimentation.

Iffat enters her subject with seriousness and dedication and is totally engrossed in her task of visually appealing still life. Her preoccupation with flowers lends no boredom to the viewer. The effect is soothing and admirable, specially for a self-taught woman, with other preoccupations to absorb her time and energy. She has two sons, Muammar and Mahmud.

5 poems of Jibanananda Das: Translated by Fakrul Alam

The Cat

Daylong I seem to meet a cat here and there;
In the shade of a tree, in the sun, and in the thicket of brown leaves;
After his success somewhere in stripping a few pieces of fish to the bone
Celebrating in the dust for a while
Like a bee wrapt up in the contemplation of its flight;
Then clawing the barks of a *krishnachura* tree
And afterwards chasing the sun daylong
He shows himself for a while
And then disappears who knows where.
In the soft saffron-coloured glow of the late autumnal sunset
I see him rub his white paws in play;
Then catching the darkness as if it was a small ball
Scatter it on the whole world.

Cities

My heart, you have seen many big cities;
Cities whose bricks and stones,
Accents, affairs, hopes, frustrations, and terrifying deprivations
Have turned into ashes in the cauldron of my mind.
Nevertheless, I have seen the sun arise amidst thick clouds in a corner of
the city
I have seen the sun on the other side of the river of a port city.
Like a love-struck farmer, he bears his burden in the tangerine-cloud
coloured fields of the sky;
Over a city's gaslights and tall minarets I have seen — stars —
Like flocks of wild geese heading towards some southern sea.

The Corpse

Where the silvery moonlight moistens in the reeds,
Where swarms of mosquitoes make their homes;
Where gold fish snap at these blue mosquitoes
In silence, expectantly;
Where in a corner of the world, all alone,
The river takes on the tones of the silent fish;
Where the river, from its bed of reeds and tall grasses
Only has eyes for the reddening evening sky;
In the darkness of a starlit night,
Like a woman shaking a huge knot of blue hair,
Some other river stirs; but this is a river
Of multi-coloured clouds and yellow moonlight;
Look up and you will see all that is dark and light disperse here;
Red blue fish clouds — pale blue moonlight
Take over; this is where Mrinalini Ghoshal's corpse
Will float forever; in blue red silvery silence.

Horses

We haven't died till now — yet new scenes come continually to sight;
Maheen's horses keep chewing grass in the late autumn moonlight;
As if horses from some paleolithic age — lured
Into grazing in a dreadful dynamo of a world.

The stink from the stable drifts in with the onrushing night breeze;
The doleful sound of rustling straw rubs onto steel machines;
The few empty teacups are like kittens — asleep — under the slack watch of
mangy dogs.

Chilled, you make for the cheap restaurant near by.
The placid puff of time blows out the paraffin lamp of the stable
Touching the neolithic-still moonlight of these horses.



A Day Eight Years Ago

The word has spread:
To the morgue he had been taken dead;
Last night — in the darkness of *Falgun's* early spring night!
When the five-day-old moon had dipped out of sight
He longed to die.

His wife had been lying next to him — his child too;
He had love, he had his dreams — it was moonlight —
Why then would some ghost haunt him? Why then could he sleep no longer?
Or perhaps he hadn't slept for ages — at any rate, now he sleeps soundly
in the morgue.

He probably wanted this sleep!
Like a plague-infested rat, mouth foamy with blood,
Neck huddling against some dark corner, he sleeps;
He will never get up again.

"He will never get up again
He will not bear anymore
The heavy burden —
The deep unceasing pain of consciousness."
As the moon dipped down — In a strange darkness
Close by his window
Some mute thing, humped like a camel,
Delivered him this message.

And yet, the owl will stay awake.
The putrid paralyzed frog still pleads for a few more moments,
Looks for a gesture from another dawn, and yearns for its heat and light.
I can still feel invisible mosquitoes swarming in monastic darkness,
Circling in vain the impenetrable wall of the mosquito nest,
Impelled by their lust for life to stay awake.

Even flies take off towards sunlight after perching on blood and filth for
sometime;

How often have I seen winged insects at play in waves of sunshine!
It is as if the sky is their own element — as if some diffuse life force
Masters their minds;
A grasshopper caught in the clutches of some wanton child
Still twitches and shudders to evade death;

Yet — after the moon had dipped and darkness spread over the land
You went all alone to the *aswatha* tree, a coil of rope in hand;
You knew that the life given a grasshopper or the *doyel* bird
Was not the same as what to a man is offered.

Didn't the *aswatha* branch cry out? Didn't the swarms of fireflies startle
the bunch of golden flowers with their light?
Didn't the doddering blind owl come and say:
"Could it be the old hag of a moon has been swept into the swirling
floodwaters this day?"

How splendid!
Let's catch a rat or two now!"
Didn't the owl deliver this cryptic but loud message?
This lust for life — the whiff of the ripening grain in the late autumnal
afternoon was to much for you;

Has you heart had its fill in the morgue?
In the morgue — where you lie in oppressive silence
Like a battered rat, lips smeared with blood?

Listen
To this dead man's tale.
No woman jilted him in love
He did not miss
A bit of marital bliss;
His wife went beyond what custom required
And gave him the taste of honey —
Honey from the hive of her mind;
He never knew in life what it was to shiver
From the chill of pain or the shame of hunger;
And is that why
Flat out on a table in the morgue,
Defeated, he will lie?

Nevertheless, I know
A woman's heart — love — a child — a home — will not suffice
Not riches nor deeds nor even a life of ease —
Some other beguiling disaster
Frolics in our blood;
It wears us;
Wearies — wears us out;
But the morgue
Is free of weariness
And that is why
Flat out on the table in the morgue
He will lie.

But still every night I look up and see,
The doddering blind owl land on the *aswatha* tree
It blinks and say: "Could it be that old hag of a moon has been swept
into the swirling floodwaters this day?"

How splendid —
Let's catch a rat or two today!"

