



exhibition No Mulling Over Broken Dreams

by Fayza Haq

GULSHAN Hossain's third solo exhibit of oils called "songs of Nature" opened at the Alliance Francaise with three candles symbolising her latest endeavour. Artist Aminul Islam comments that Gulshan is one of the best self-taught artists of Bangladesh, of which we have only a dozen.

Speaking with Gulshan, sitting in the gallery later, and dwelling on whether her paintings would have been of a more superior quality if she had had an academic training and if she felt inferior to the professionals, the artist says, "I never feel less equipped than those artists — who have been to art colleges — because the people whom I have worked with, and whom I compete with and have joined in joint exhibits, as in the recent Asian Art Biennial at Dhaka — I have never felt left behind them. I've not suffered from any inferiority complex, as regards my art career. Of course, I still have a lot to learn. I have no regrets about not having studied at the Department of Fine Arts, DU. I have participated in two workshops from which I have gleaned adequate knowledge on themes, styles and techniques. The academic students with me commented that what the workshops have imbibed in them could not have been learnt in their five or six years of routine academic studies."

The workshops were held under the eminent artist Aminul Islam, at the Shilpakala Academy in '94, and the other at the Goethe Institut, under Ms Hella Berent, a free lance artist from Cologne in '95.

She adds, "Since I have travelled the world and seen art museums like the Metropolitan Museum, The Museum of Modern Art in Paris, the Montmartre, the Van Gogh Museum in the Netherlands, the National Museum and the Portrait Museum in UK, by courtesy of my husband's job in the Bangladesh Biman, I feel I have been able to learn considerably from abroad. I hope to visit India too, incidentally."

Dwelling on why Gulshan has chosen the particular themes, the artist explains gently and patiently. "For my themes I have always had a weakness for nature. I love flowers, landscape, seascapes, and fish — an integral part of life in Bangladesh. In the portrayal of 'Festival' I have attempted to capture the happy holidays of my youth, and also tried to delineate future leisure time with close friends. At times, this piece also tries to emulate my desire to keep in touch with old friends with whom I have nostalgic attachments. Today they are scattered but I cannot obliterate the

memories of the camaraderie with them. Sometimes, when I have finished my work, my piece reminds me of some poetic lines, and I have included these in inscriptions in my paintings. The poets that I can best be moved by are Tagore and Jiban Ananda Das. I feel we reach a certain happy destination by reading them. I wish to give a pictorial delineation of this arousal of feeling of *jote de vitre*."

Asked if there was any symbolism in her work or if the paintings were straight forward decorative pieces, Gulshan elaborates. "There are definite symbols in my work. They are surely no naive or facile decorative pieces. I wish my viewers, those who both paint themselves and others who do not do so, to comprehend my innermost feelings, hopes and desires. For instance, I have painted a piece 'A tale of an insect'. In this I could have made just a beautiful depiction of an insect and a flower. The significance is that the insect destroys the flower, and nevertheless there is the work of pollination, and thus the happy co-existence of the flower and the insect."

Dwelling on why she paints — what is the urge behind her toil, and questioned if she wishes to depict only the pleasant aspects of life, or does she capture its pain, unsurity and the necessity for strife and struggle, Gulshan says, "Today I am a professional and compete with others who earn their living with paintings. I have participated in both national and international exhibitions. I have not burst into the art world out of the blue. I resumed my normal work within a week of my return to Dhaka. I always see the brighter side of life. I don't believe in pessimism. There is a lot of pain and disappointments in many lives, but I feel these should not be mullied and brooded over. Life is short and it should be enjoyed to the brim. Life, I admit is a difficult path to cross and my success has not come without my own incessant endeavour and struggle since '90. However, life for me has been a full one. Even as a child I took part in various extra-curricular activities like the Girls Guides. I have a content home, with a husband to be proud of, and three loving children. I used to dance and sing. I have travelled a lot, as I informed you earlier. I have chosen painting to restrict my energy and focus. What more can I ask from life? How can you blame me for concentrating on lyricism and buoyancy in my work?"

Talking about why men have been more successful in the visual world in delineating life, thoughts, experiences and the beauty in nature with rare exceptions like Georgia O'Keefe and Amrita Sher-Gill, Gulshan, says, "Yes, men



Blue Flower '97 oil on paper

have definitely superseded women as artists. The women have perhaps stronger urges to learn and work but they get no support, due to family pressures and social outlook. Painting is such a sensitive task that without support and encouragement you cannot progress. If you are upset, depressed or not in a mood, how can you proceed with art? Painting is not a matter to be mechanically forced out of one. Many women painters, both at home and abroad, work well but the domestic scenario deters and hampers them. Of course, in the west, the women painters are more outgoing and liberated."

Discussing her patrons — whether they are foreigners, friends or industrialists, Gulshan says, "I have had no specific buyers in my solos. I sometimes have no notion as to who my buyers are. Usually they are foreigners. However, there are plenty of local patrons too who are industrialists. The middle-class connoisseurs too have bought my paintings at times."

Once again Gulshan is pressed into talking about why she brings in bright colours and poetic motifs in her work — would she say that this is a true picture of Bangladesh — is it a land of contentment, colour and exotic flora and fauna? Gulshan insists, "When artists

paint they naturally imagine somewhat too. Sure, there is need, pollution natural disasters, hartals, and breaking of cars and bombing during political upheavals. Yet, when we paint we become somewhat romantically poetic. I want to please the eye and mind with the lure of nature around us. You may call it a form of escapism. But why should we present the ugliness and dirt in our life to the rest of the world? I want the world to realise that there is a lot of charm and beauty in our country, which the western people are often not aware of."

What has Gulshan kept in mind while depicting the riverscapes and landscapes — why has she taken the hackneyed flower and fish as her subjects — because of their universal appeal or are they typical of Bangladesh and so a sincere depiction of her environment? Gulshan says, "Bangladesh is a green country, on the whole. During the different seasons, the country acquires a different hue, as brown in autumn and in winter. I have attempted to bring in the harmonious pictorial aspect of the greenery around us in general. While attempting the landscapes, I couldn't help recalling some of Tagore's songs' words such as 'Esho nipo boney' or Jiban Ananda Das' 'Abar Ashibo'. When I depict birds flying away homewards, I

bring these words in. There are the wild flowers amidst the grass and little houses are included. I feel I have lost myself in the land of poetry of Bengal. Since our land is that of rains, I have tried to capture the fresh clear affect after the rain, the transparency i.e. The environment makes your heart leap up. True, our surrounding is getting more threatened everyday, but why cannot we hope for better times?"

Asked why she has taken the hackneyed fish, flower etc as her themes — because of their universal appeal or are they typical of Bangladesh and so the appeal, Gulshan says, "I never work on a fixed theme all the time. I vary. My previous exhibition had realistic work with themes similar to this one. My last one was on semi-precious stones that I have had the opportunity to admire in Washington (USA). Next time, I might change my theme. My style and technique may remain the same, of course, I admit I have a passion for flowers and so repeat that theme. My semi-abstracts with thin water-colour like washes, as in the work of Aminul Islam, is my technique. I have used brushes of different points for my work — as well as the spatula."

Talking about why she has chosen semi-abstracts — is it because it best expresses her urge to create or does she feel that she has her husband's financial support, and so she can create at leisure, and not get unduly concerned about sale profits — Gulshan explains, "I am experimenting with texture. I get my equipments from overseas when I travel myself. I have a large south-side huge verandah in Dhanmondi, where I wear jeans and a T-shirt, after my morning household chores by 9 am. I listen to piano and sitar music while I work. I also switch off the telephone. My semi-abstracts are a product of my own sales. I do not depend for canvas or paints on my husband. I want people to contemplate on my work and so I have chosen semi-abstracts. I don't want them to understand my work at a passing glance. Of course, I don't want to remain ambiguous. My sale for each painting averages from Tk 7,000 to Tk 15,000 and that is adequate to egg me on to further creations."

In a seascape there are fishes etched in an outline form composed in green, blue and carmine. The water is brought in an oblong splash to the right, in a bubbling blue cascade of colours. A black fishing net is juxtaposed amidst the other images in an impressionistic fashion. Touches of red and brown complete the work. This is called "Fish and Fishing Net".

"After the Rain" brings in tiny freshly washed pebbles and flowers. There are patches of blue and green with

flowers done in minute details, while leaves are found mostly in the backdrop. The foreground brings in the lines "Jodi torey nai chini" from one of Tagore's songs about spring.

In the oil "Red Leaf", we see leaves done almost like etchings. It is in red while the details of the veins and the stems are brought in all the four leaves. In the foreground, to the left, one detects blue leaves, done in a more abstract manner. Tiny flowers and a crisscrossing branch are also included in this autumnal scene.

"After the Festival" is about a happy memory of a festival with minuscule scarlet bunting crossing the canvas paper. The blue and green abstract patches try to capture the happiness during that moment. There is salmon pink in the forefront created from original vermilion. The windows and doors of an old home denote the ending of the joyous period. "Purano Janio Chenona Amakey Dekho Akhero Koney" (Tagore) (keep me in your eyes fully although I am gone). This recollection of childhood and the past is as admirable as the rest of her 44 works.

"Sunflower" has flowers in the forefront and background and has been done with touches of yellow and brown. The work appears near impressionistic. The backdrop holds oblong shapes and circles in ultramarine. Furthermore, green flowers are included in the left. Pencil sketches have been included for experimentation and variety. The canvas paper in the background has been left untouched.

One sees more abstractions in "Composition 41" which is a complete abstraction of circles and oblong spheres in shades of blue, brown, orange and black. Included are hollowed black images. This is less sombre than the other paintings, and has been done in order to bring in variation in the display.

The one included in the recent Asian Biennial "Spring" brings in, once again, circles and oblong blobs of blue green, and yellow, with a touch of vermilion travelling to the left centre. There is a considerable white in the backdrop to highlight the buoyant colours and shapes. Stripes of grass image also traverse the canvas paper. This includes a poem on spring "Jodi Tare Nai Chini" as Gulshan feels this heightens the effect of the oil piece.

Gulshan has participated in five national art exhibitions; held three solos; and has taken part in 15 other group shows in Dhaka.

Gulshan's three children include Sarah, Intiaz and Shahriar. Apart from reading books on painting, Gulshan swims and plays badminton in the evenings.

poetry

A Critical Evaluation of Al Mujaheedy's *Mrittika Otimrittika*

by Raqib Chowdhury

PERHAPS the main feature of Al Mujaheedy's poetry is the way he establishes linguistic indirectness in metaphor. This marked feature separates him at the very beginning as a poet to the reader. He is a consummate artist of synthesizing feminine glory with all its beauty, timeless appeal and aesthetics with tidbits of history, mature and life itself. His obsession with the elemental makeup of life is pervasive and fundamental to his poetic outlook. His roots in the remote village of 'Naruchi' are strong and so is his tendency of pulling readers back to their roots — the roots of nourishment and affection.

But it would be wrong to suppose that Al Mujaheedy is a poet of pastoralism — romantic and idealistic in his treatment. The fact is far from being so. Here is a poet who is both a reactionary and a radical in his poetic outlook. His strong grasp on tradition and traditional paraphernalia along with his confident familiarity with the common folk is always at ease with his tendency of going abruptly beyond and above the commonplace. His deep trust in the common man, in the soil of the homeland with its little sorrows and joys, its struggle and victories is transcended and replaced by a larger canvas of an abstract art — by a world of mystical belief and personal mythology — at which Al Mujaheedy finds his best expression.

It is perhaps because of the latter strain that his volume of poetry "Mrittika Otimrittika" (Earth, Superearth) since its first publication in February 1993 has attracted the attention of many. Readers already familiar with Al

Mujaheedy have discovered him in a newer, perhaps truer light. Readers who were new, found a new mode of outlook and a new treatment of a subject as familiar and as oft-told as those of the classical legends.

The prefatory epigraph is from Goethe: "Our spirit is a being of indestructible nature: it works on from eternity to eternity; it is like the sun, which though it seems to set to our mortal eyes, does not really set, but shines on perpetually." The spirit, like 'soil' or 'earth' is therefore perpetual and it defies metamorphosis. It is "timeless and temporal" — to borrow TS Eliot's words — it is simultaneously the *raison d'être* of being and its essence. Al Mujaheedy's treatment is secular with mythical undertone. He believes in the classical concept of the elements and the fundamental role it plays:

Here...
Here then is the mystery of creation
You live on...
(Mrittika Otimrittika)
And his robust confidence in the elements:
Culture is the greatest belief
of mankind, O, earth,
you are my culture incarnate,
my off-read first chapter.

Finally in the last lines of the poem (which is the last poem of the volume) the poet's universal longing finds expression in an emotional outburst of universality:

O earth, bring to me the verses
Plebeian, Trite, Persian, Arabic,
Latin, Hebrew...
You are the pulse of our being...
In the fertile terrain of Padma,
Meghna, Jamuna
You are my epic, complete.

And I, your's

(ibid)
The first poem of the volume ('Shumrittika', 'Good Earth') sets the tone of the volume, giving it its thematic exposition — an orientation to Al Mujaheedy's aesthetics and mythopoea.

Shumrittika, do you know
What we most need on earth is cool air:
Will you open the casement and let it in?

In his address to our primal element 'Shumrittika', 'good earth' or 'good soil' ('Mrittika', which is Sanskrit in etymological origin, means both 'earth' and 'soil' in Bengali, the poet is in pique. For 'Shumrittika' "Like the flickering light of the Swati in the evening/burning/... spreads melancholy on lemon hedgerows." True, Shumrittika does hold in her depths snapshots of a glorious past — a past rich and beautiful, charming and technicolour, at once pristine and pastoral, but "Bengal's heart is too melancholy" to perceive her — Shumrittika, who is the "dusky darling" and the "vernal virgin." Possibilities of comprehension await, and so does the poet.

It is characteristic of Al Mujaheedy to identify the elements correspondingly with various aspects of the traditional and eternal femininity. Hence Shumrittika is the 'vernal virgin' as mentioned earlier, and the poet, her beloved, is in a state of piqued love with her:

Is it only frowns you'll shower me with?
Or is it with
A sea of frosty serenity:
How much more do I have to cross
rivers, lakes, and the rippling bay of
Bengal
for eternity?

"Kledaj Kushum" is a poem of pure sensuousness. It evokes the ideal world of the secular hedonist in deft strokes of minimum detail. The title is borrowed from 'Charles Baudelaire's' 'Les Fleurs du Mal' and the occasional morbid undertones are obvious. This is a world of tactile bliss. "Talks with my Prisoner Father" is an exercise in Donnan Pseudo-logic where the son promises his captive father a sunny tomorrow. His wishful thinking "I know you will return someday" sounds like an uncertain certainty. The no talk of pathos is pervasive. Puns and rhetorical interrogatives point towards a fanciful promise which is perhaps unlikely to fruit.

'Metropolitan Verses' is an urban poem where the poet longs for a fanciful escapism — to an isolated art for art's sake from the harsh realities of urban life. Lines here and there are reminiscent of Sukanta.

Metropolitan people
They snatch away like bread the
night's spotless moon:
God suffer a budget-deficit; yet my
tongue
Savours the last breath of poetry;
now nothing
Satisfies my appetite but poetry...
Give me a poem
Only one...
I am the saltwater homosafien
I build poetry from the constellation'
bel's

everyday
everyday...
In 'Mohabishuber Kaal (Vernal Equinox) the poet duels on the sterile times of modern civilisation in an Elitesque manner with the concluding optimism:
Again
Lives will resurrect, this wasteland



Al Mujaheedy: Continues to build his personal mythology

dress in green. In this vernal equinox tell the world about its people — let this tale be inscribed in walls of centuries.
'Earth's or 'soil' is the most important and the primal of all elements in the poems. Love it, or hate it, one has to stand and tread in it. Words associated with 'Mrittika' are used recurrently in the poems which are rich in association. Persian, Urdu, or Arabic words are brought in to provide allusion. These allusions are either mystic or hedonistic in nature. The overall result of diction

therefore is somewhat that of the long tradition of sub-continental mystical-romantic poetry.

It is towards this element that the poet feels love or hate or pique or joy. He is overwhelmed at the supreme mystery that it holds. The ungraspable phantom of this elusive element is what he hankers after. But in a romantic escapist pique, he also leaves it behind, and Shumrittika waits "leaning on the threshold of a frightened house "like the traditional patient and stoic Bengali woman waiting for her lover. Metaphors like "You wait in solitude in a smooth lunar turban" or "your emotions engraved... in a parchment wrapped in an aerial envelope," strengthen the romantic optimism of the future — the restoration of things after the ravages of war. He has kept dreams alive for a post war possibility of fruition. For he believes, "Nothing can go wrong in this world/as long as you and I live," reminiscent of brownings optimism in "God's in Heaven..."

Mrittika is the Motherland in Swadesher Nandipath ('Prologue to my Motherland')

My soil
I sing your beauty in your own language;
my country, to each of your dust particles
I dedicate these verses...
Mrittika is finally apotheosized and adored as the sustaining essence of life. Al Mujaheedy successfully creates a mythology of his own and builds around it his own system of thought:
Earth that is my past and present
and the existence of my innumerable futures
I engrave in the frieze of dawn its name, O, dusky darling.