

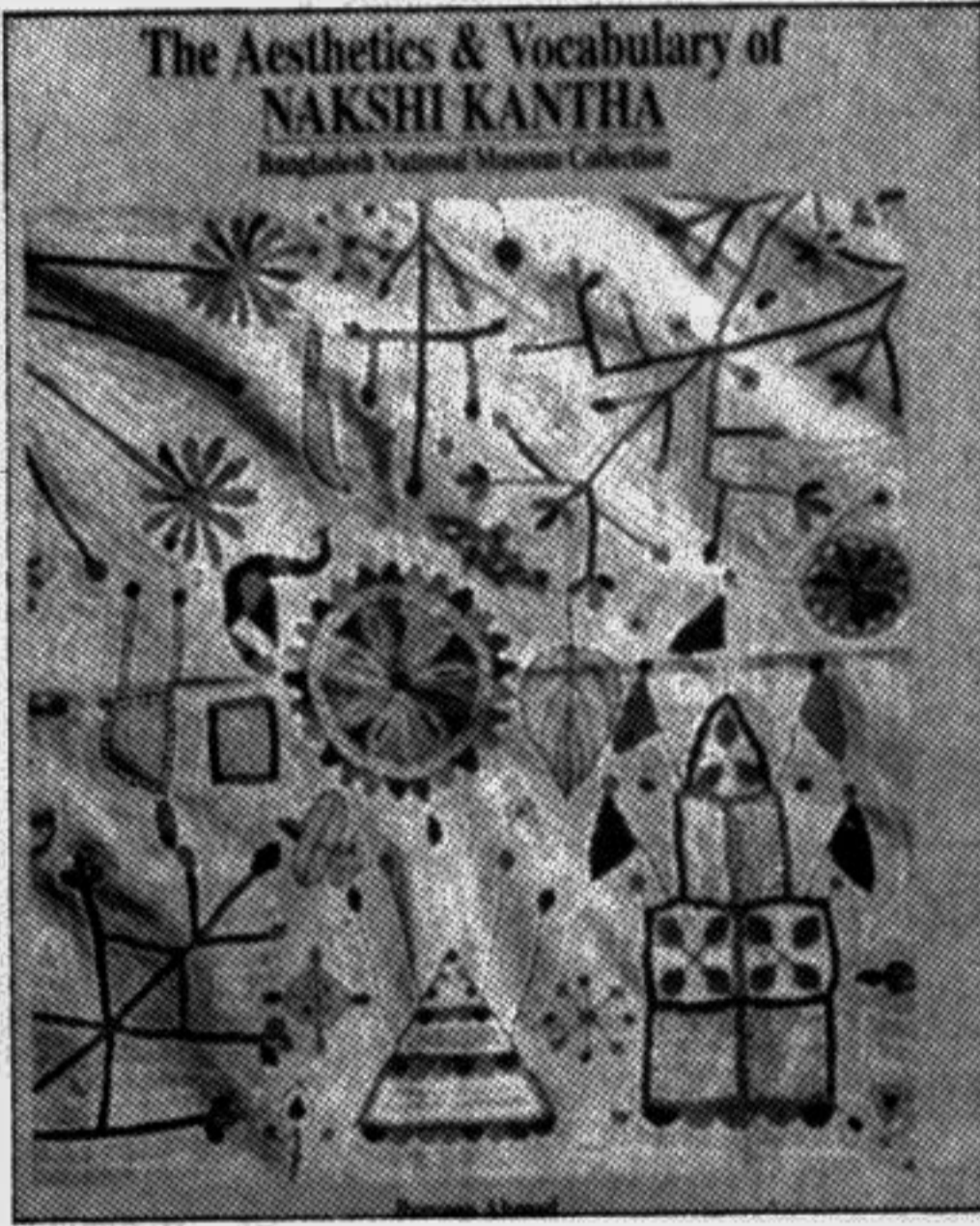
book review

Nakshi Kantha : A Truly Subaltern Art

by Syed Manzoorul Islam

If any art form can be said to be truly indigenous to Bangladesh and reflects the creativity and artistry of the people, it is nakshi kantha. Yet it is both art and utility, aesthetics and economy, and, in the tradition of the subcontinental subaltern art, narrates the subaltern's culture in an intricate textuality of its own. That textuality is stitched into its old fabrics by village women in colourful threads that contrast so strikingly with the absence of colour in their life. Usually, the narration is an alternative tale of possibilities, since the patterns emphasize harmony, symmetry, correspondence and beauty — things that are not there in their surroundings. It is a vicarious life the women live in course of their stitching and embroidery. A simple economic act — recycling old saris and lungis into quilts and cotton blankets, thus saving precious household money for other pressing expenses — becomes an aesthetic celebration, but it is more a celebration of 'what is not' than 'what is' — the celebration of an absence. The textuality of nakshi kantha is the women's marginality, her virtual non-existence in a rigid patriarchal society as well as her attempts to create and embellish an imaginary space. With a needle in hand, the woman opens up a dialogue with her creative self that gives her some meaning, and some strength to endure the grindmill of everyday life.

Nakshi Kantha has always enjoyed a special place in the popular imagination in our country. It has been celebrated in poetry and folklore, and its designs and motifs have found their way into folk art (and, in recent times, into revivalist art that explores popular myths and legends). Jashimuddin's Nakshi Kanthar Math (The Field of the Embroidered Quilt) has become a classic tale of romance where the leading metaphor has been fused into the varied motifs of a nakshi kantha, emphasizing the recurring nature of the events described —



The Aesthetics & Vocabulary of Nakshi Kantha: Bangladesh National Museum Collection.
By Parveen Ahmad
Dhaka: Bangladesh National Museum, 1997
Price Tk 550 (US \$ 20)

romance, separation, death. Nakshi kantha has been seen as an object of utilitarian art, a reassuring defence against the exhaustion of traditional art. However, as subaltern art has become an important subject in the broad field of cultural studies, more and more critical attention has been directed to folk and popular art, including naive art, and nakshi kantha is getting its due share. It is in line with the revival of interest in subaltern art that Parveen Ahmad has come up with her book on nakshi katha, which is both a research book and a catalogue of the collection of embroidered quilts at the Bangladesh National Museum. Her main focus is not difficult to identify; like the subalternists, Parveen Ahmad, considers nakshi kantha in the context of the economic, social and family life of their

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anonymous maker — the 'homestead-bound' woman of the villages. The embroidered quilt, she writes, "was her canvas, her letter paper, her diary. Her thoughts, feelings, imagination transferred themselves, so much so, that not only poetic or happy thoughts but her fears and anger were etched upon the cloth" (ii). The book has coloured photographs of quite a few of the quilts, but, unfortunately not one shows the woman's anger or fear. Parveen Ahmad further informs us: "Some nakshi kanthas carry messages which reflect the angered emotions of the maker, and are not shy of conveying disgust as much as love." This we know to be true; I personally have seen a few of the quilts that fit Ahmad's description, but her book concentrates on the happy and poetic images. Perhaps, the Museum's collection does not contain such quilts. Whatever be the size of the collection however, it is clear from Parveen Ahmad's book that it is rich and varied, representing a large geographical area, as well as a number of 'schools' of quilt art.

The Aesthetics & Vocabulary of Nakshi Kantha is a delightful coffee table book at first look — it provides a descriptive catalogue of quilts and highlights the dominant patterns and motifs — all in glossy art paper and durable binding. But a few pages into the Author's Preface, and we realize that we are actually reading a full-blown dissertation on nakshi kathas. The book is indeed the result of painstaking research in the history, sociology and aes-

thetics of the embroidered quilts. Parveen Ahmad, in her rich but unassuming prose, has provided as many historical and factual details as possible, without cluttering the content with research jargons; yet her Preface and Introduction sum up all the major aspects of this art form, including a discussion on the textile and the different streams of design prevalent in different geographical areas of the country. What is equally commendable is the way she accommodates her personal insights without prejudicing the reader's mind in any way. Again and again, Parveen Ahmad emphasizes the fact that nakshi kantha is not an object of household decoration only, or an object of necessity. "It was made because a village woman felt like making a kantha; some inner urge led her to outpour her aesthetic sense by folding and arranging old worn out sarees, dhotis and lungis ..." (ii), she tells us. She describes nakshi kantha as 'an inspired creation,' or 'art expression'; but it is her understanding of the condition of the woman who makes the kantha — her subjugation and her marginality that really sets the theoretical basis of the work. It is not within Parveen Ahmad's scope to explore the theoretical basis at length, however, but one realizes that the book's basic premises are true to the 'historical process' that engendered the creative imagination of this women.

In the Preface and the Introduction Parveen Ahmad traces the historical origin of the kantha, and the etymologi-

cal root of the word kantha. She is necessarily restricted to citing secondary sources at this point; but she ranges more freely in areas where she has some personal expertise — like the classification of the motifs; the types of kanthas by region; the common factors and different types of stitchery as well as some other 'technical' facts. She then lists the 994 nakshi kanthas of the Museum's collection by categories, e.g., bostanis, ashon, sujni katha, dastar khaan, etc. Then in 10 chapters of the book, Ahmad discusses such topics as the Hindu symbolism in kantha design, Buddha-stupa image and Islamic decorative motif; traditional geometric patterns, the tree of life, decorative motifs as well as the leading motifs like Kalka, Rath and Masjid etc. The discussions are illustrated by kanthas from the Museum, complete with their accession numbers, and in some cases, their photographs. The book sometimes appears more as a series of illustrated lectures than as a written document — which certainly goes to the credit of the author. It is not an easy task sustaining the reader's interest while explaining all the details of the pattern and texture of the quilts.

One of the high points of the book — at least for me — has been the comparison Ahmad makes between certain kantha designs and form, and some images from modernist painters like Kandinsky, Klee, Miro and Frank Stella. Since the kanthas predate the artists, the women embroiderers could not have reproduced them from these artists (although how

many of the living embroiderers would've known about Kibria, let alone Klee or Kandinsky, would be a hard guess indeed); but were the European artists influenced by these village women of Bengal? The question is a bizarre one, but it deserves a hard look, since the images are strikingly similar. Parveen Ahmad doesn't labour the point, but a logical conclusion could be a Jungian paradigm — a collective unconscious working through a time space continuum! Whatever be the reason, the similarities are interesting, to say the least.

One of the main strengths of The Aesthetics & Vocabulary of Nakshi Kantha is its methodology. Although meant to be a descriptive catalogue, the book is convincingly analytical, exploring a whole range of social history without which the kanthas can never be understood as what they are — women's 'letter paper' or 'diary' and a document of their marginality as well as their dreams of a more harmonious existence. In some nakshikanthas, the women actually tell their stories — I myself saw a couple of them in a village at Sylhet where the stitch work and embroidery has unfolded a tale of a village life, including the scene of a girl going to the in-laws' house in a palki. The subsequent images show a dhaki (grinding mill) and household utensils, which, through the guise of some symbolism, narrate the women's hard life at the in-laws' house. I believe these 'narrative' quilts are still being made, and the Museum should make an effort to collect some of them.

Parveen Ahmad has been crusading for recognition to the crafts of Bangladesh villages; she has been instrumental in organizing many handicrafts exhibitions in the country, including the First National Handicrafts exhibition in 1974. This led to the setting up of the first artisan's organization in the country, The Aesthetics & Vocabulary of Nakshi Kantha is the latest in Parveen Ahmad's list of achievements for which she deserve praise.

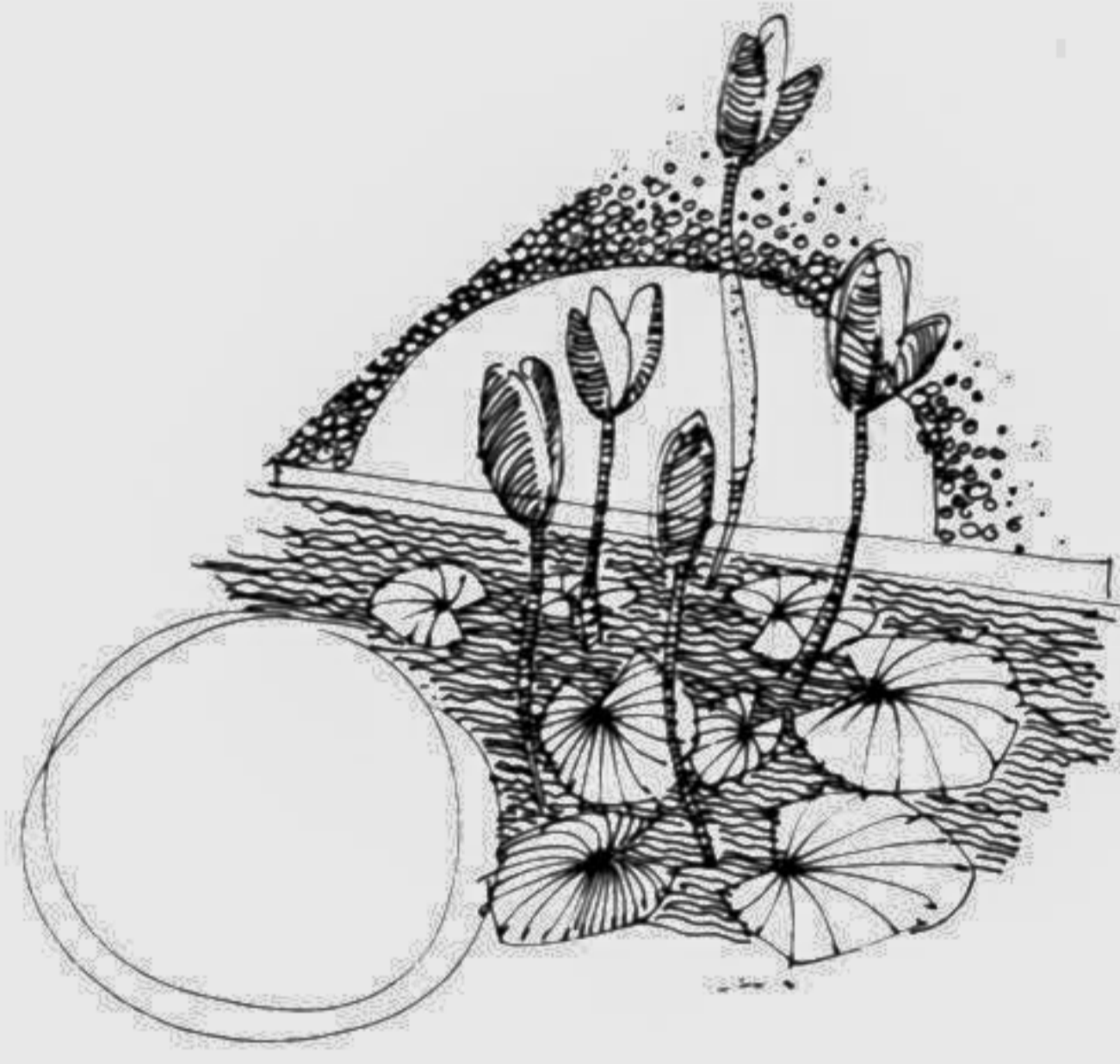
poem

Loneliness of a Poet

(Opening section of long poem entitled The Poet)
by Fazal Shahabuddin

A poet is a lonely being,
He is a helpless worshipper
and lives in his own solitude.
Nobody ever tries to understand his loneliness.
None ever wants to know
why he is alone.
Why he is to live in a perpetual deserted world
which he is to create for himself.
Why a poet has no escape.
Why he is to accept and sustain and bear
this remote agony.
Agony to be alone inside a never-ceasing loneliness.
He is to bear this agony
Inside his blood
Inside his bones inside the deepest dark
of his consciousness.
Inside his total meditation his intellect and emotion.
Nobody knows nobody cares to know why a poet is to be alone all the time.
He is to live alone.
Roam about alone.
He is to wander alone —
Inside the endless solitude of his own cosmos:
Like the sea which is turbulent and alone
Like the sky and the space beyond
which is eternal and alone
Like the wind blowing inside a deserted city
which is unknown intimate and alone
Like the sound of the great river on the mountains
which is constant continuous and alone.
The poet is a lonely being, he is all alone.
His loneliness has no equal.
Like the face of that sad woman who once lived
Like that valley in an ancient land which is no more
Like the twilight zone inside a prayer
with all its shadows a immortality.
The poet is a lonely being and he has no escape.
The eternal agony of loneliness is always with him.
The loneliness nobody ever care to understand.
And the poet also can never express it explain it
with all his poems with all his words, he never can.
When a man is in love for the first time.
And when he cannot express it to anyone
A mysterious and unknown loneliness grips him.
Suddenly he becomes totally alone.
He finds himself inside the splendour of a nature
which he never thought could exist
An absolute alien voice
whispers around him
A deep emptiness mounts everywhere
In every direction there is only one
total engulfing nothingness
He feels like a naked tree in the wilderness
with no leaves no flowers
He feels like that distant valley
with its last flowerbud alone and lonely.
And then his love inside his loneliness
begins to bite him without mercy
Then he discovers a restless faint continuous music
which is absolutely his own
He starts to pronounce intimate dialogues
Unbelievable lines from impossible lyrics
And a secret garden blooms inside his blood
Inside his heart
And without knowing it
The man is in love for the first time

He is destined to be doomed, but he survives.
In that garden of eden he kisses the lips of a new life.
His youth with its sword of desire
splits his loneliness
with unending strokes inside his blood.
And he is saved.
But a poet never knows what to do.



He has no way-out.
Nobody can save the poet.
The flowers the trees the dreams the desires
Cannot save him.
And not even his woman with all her magic can save him
The unfortunate poet
He never has a womanlove
who with all her grace and glamour and charm and love and lust
can destroy his loneliness.
Nothing stays permanent in a poets mind and emotion
It never can be
He is to live alone
He is to be lonely
He is to be burnt inside all the time
He is to be alive
with the ashes of his flesh and blood.
And one day he is to find himself
a part of that eternal wailing in the cosmos.
The existence of a poet blooms
inside that cruel sea of his loneliness
which he had to create.
The poet like god, is to be alone.
It is his destiny
A poet is a lonely being
helpless in his own isolation.
A distant worshipper
He has no way-out from his eternal solitude.
He is to undertake an endless journey
alone inside his own blood his own flesh
and his own cosmos

Day in and day out
a poet lives inside a disturbed and restless agitation of love
His love has no end
He burns himself in an endless inferno of love
Love with the fire of a perpetual agony

A desire in its body form absorbs him entirely.
The sound of a continuous prayer makes him deaf

He feels he is lost
A poet must be in love and he is in love.
He is in love with the women the trees the mountains the valleys
The grassflowers the rivers the seas
He is in love with the birds the land the cornfields with wilderness
He is in love with the earth and the world beyond
He is in love with the sky and the skies beyond.
He is in love with everything in vision and beyond vision
He is in love with delight and ecstasy
With sorrows and sadness desolation and emptiness
A poet must be in love.
But it is his destiny, he is to be alone.
Nothing remains static or steady in his heart.
He is like the south breeze, warm and full
He is also like the biting cold from the north
forlorn and friendless

In his restlessness in his flesh or in his blood
A poet is to live alone.
He is to roam alone.
Beyond life and beyond death he is to wander alone
Throughout the cosmos and beyond the cosmos.
And during all these voyages
nobody is with him, he is alone.
Only his perpetual loneliness is with him.
With all his passions and with all his dialogues
With all his voyages and amours
With all his prayers and meditations
His lone companion is his loneliness
his endless solitude.
Nobody can be with him, no one can.
When a poet makes his journey to the past
back in time, millions of years ago
To a mountain to a valley or to the misty shadows under a tree
Watches the splendour of colours
on the ancient wings of the great butterflies.
Listens to the wailing sounds of the wind
And the groaning cries of the water on a riverbed
Encounters the flame of youth in the fire of lovemaking
During all these moments
a poet is to be alone
Nobody is with him no one can.
When a poet undertakes that unbelievable
journey to the future
Or to that steller sky, vast great and endless
May be to a new planet or inside the glowing dark
Of the nebulas
When he watches the future scattered all around
like beautiful fragments of time and eternity

When the poet touches the bodyform of all superbeings
He is to be alone
Nobody is with him no-one can
The poet, like the anguish of the spirits
dissolves inside a kiss inside a copulation inside a meditation
He starts blooming like a flower which never exists
But which will remain forever
Inside his emotional loneliness the poet discovers the ultimate agony
And the knows he is write and he writes
From the unbelievable depth of his agonising loneliness
The poet suddenly recognises the sound of poetry
And he is to write
He has no other way
No alternative
He has no escape.
A poet is a lonely being
He is a helpless worshipper and lives in his own solitude
Nobody ever tries to understand his loneliness nobody can.
Translated from the original in Bangla by Meera Afiab

