

theatre

Habib Tanvir: His Theatre on the Modern Stage

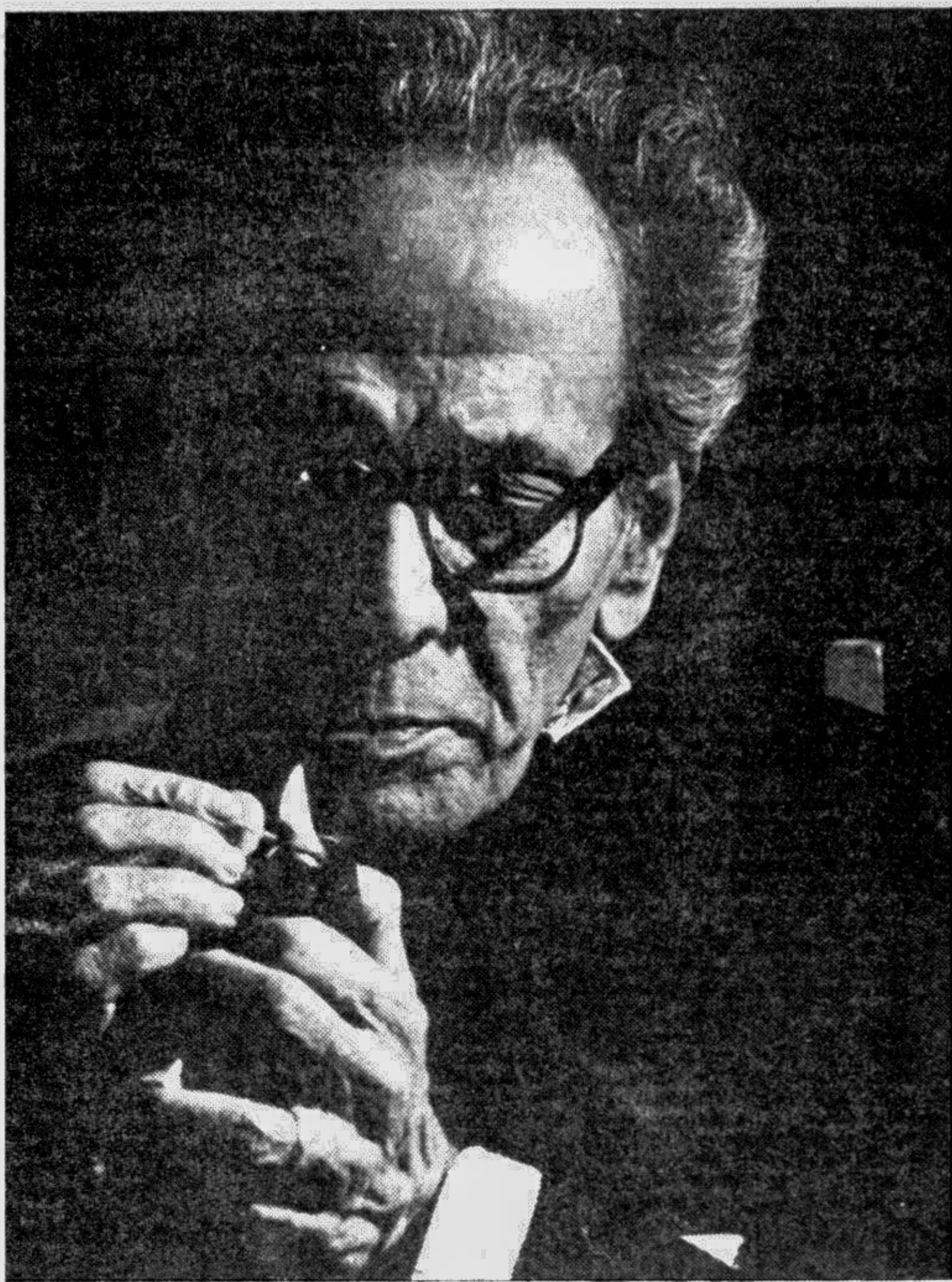
by Sayeed Ahmad

THERE have been many experiments in modern theatre having links with folk drama, beginning approximately since the 1930s in the subcontinent. Talking of Bengali theatre which has been influenced by the modern temperament or sensibilities, we can particularly name several famous works. With the advent of Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) in Calcutta some stalwarts broke away from the established traditions. One of the first such plays was "Navanna" (The New Harvest) which touched the hearts of spectators and jolted the conscience of the masses. It was Bengal which took the lead on an all India basis.

The story is based on the famine of 1943, when five hundred thousand people died of starvation. I was a boy of 13 then, and had a horrible experience in front of my eyes, seeing such a lot of corpses lying openly in the streets. Playwright Bijon Bhattacharjee was a member of IPTA and he wrote that play which is a landmark in Indian theatre. Explaining his play Bijon said "..... suddenly I felt, if the people could speak for themselves, could perhaps talks in their own terms, for I know the people very well, how they talk and laugh and think and convey their emotions." A whole lot of intellectuals of Bengal, be it is theatre, in literature, painting and dance, all congregated to enthuse a new understanding on the subject of famine.

"Navanna" showed another dimension of Bengali, nay, of the Indian stage for all to see. It was a folk play as well as a political play. A folk theatre form which starts as a ritual play may in course of time, take the shape of a political play. Bijon Bhattacharjee came from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) and had his schooling and sensibilities shaped in that society. What is more he was a leftist. Being a product of a middle class family he opted to live with the deprived masses. He gave his first hand experience and realistic knowledge to the theatre arts of Bengal. Ritwik Ghatak who also belonged to an elitist family of Bangladesh was a film maker par-excellence and in his earlier life kept the company of Bijon, Mrinal Sen, renowned film director, also from a well off family of East Bengal used to keep company with them. They were all in search of a modern gamut of theatre in Bengal.

The whole IPTA group was convinced ideologically that theatre was a medium of mass appeal. They had a mobile truck filled, with theatre groups, actors and musicians and travelled from locality to locality, labour colonies and schools and other institutions to propagate the ideology of the Leftist Party. The man on the street who had nothing in his stomach wanted to hear about change and revolution. In Bengal, in fact in India, most of the down-trodden people were clamouring to change their situation from poverty and deprivation. But



Director and Actor Habib Tanvir

it was a long way to go. The adherents of the leftist group gradually swelled but not to that extent where a radical change was visible in the social order. British administration was at its zenith. The Second World War was raging and India as a colony was forced to join the war effort.

Another play of significance was "Cherra Taar" ("Broken String") directed by Tulsi Lahiri a veteran director, actor and activist. This brought about a qualitative change in Indian theatre. The dialogue was rural, unsophisticated and it made a great dent in the field of drama. Tulsi Lahiri was a man of Rangpur, East Bengal, now Bangladesh. He worked hard to take the play from city to city to expose the corruption of society. The government and businessmen had joined hand in hand to exploit the masses and Tulsi beamed the spotlight on them.

Mr. Lahiri came to Dhaka, East Pakistan in 1950 which was the initial period after the Partition of India. It was a

bold step to stage the play. I was commissioned to compose the music for the play held in Dhaka in Curzon Hall.

At that time I was involved in composing music for radio and stage shows — a lad of 21 years. It was an honour for me to do the musical score for "Cherra Taar." Two other young bubbling actors and director who were the mainstream of the Leftist movement, joined this band of dedicated people to promote their cause. These were Shambu Mitra and Utpal Dutta. It was Shambu Mitra who jointly directed the landmark play "Navanna" with playwright Bijon Bhattacharjee. Unfortunately we lost all these refined minds in recent years.

In the criss-cross of the Indian nationalist movement, Habib Tanvir drew a hard line of a leftist. After the 1947 independence of India, Habib Tanvir became acting General Secretary of IPTA in Bombay. He was constantly under vigil. In this period he played for the workers of mills and factories, putting up playlets or one act plays in remote

corners of the city where his audience was receptive. It was a hand to mouth existence but charged with the spirit of nationalist and independent identity. The players to were all dedicated people and staged performances with minimum fees.

In his early acting career Habib Tanvir held that theatre education is a must for persons in this line, and nurtured a desire to study theatre in England. Habib Tanvir was in London from 1953 to 1956. He tried to absorb the British acting tradition, but one day he came quite dejected to the class and could not find interest in the proceedings. He went to the Principal of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts and complained to him that the curriculum was not suitable for him. He said "I don't want to learn only about the language of the elite, pronunciation and speech. I want to learn the methods of acting, of presenting the human being on stage." Quick came the reply of the Principal "Go my lad to the British Council and tell them what you want that you want to learn acting, not just the King's English." After a while Habib Tanvir was sent to Bristol Old Vic Theatre where he enjoyed the methods and mores of the class. The finishing touch was given by the British drama League and Bristol

Old Vic Theatre.

Already another stage personality, Ms Moneka Mishra who later became his wife in 1959 had made a name for directing and acting on her return from the US with several year's experience. In 1954 Moneka Mishra and Begum Zaidi were at the forefront of staging plays in Hindustani under the banner of "Hindustani Theatre." Three years later Moneka set up a professional company called "Naya Theatre" (New Theatre).

In came Habib Tanvir with his introduction of local theatre. Moneka Mishra produced several of these plays. It was the extraordinary ability of Habib Tanvir which led him to establish his unique style.

Naya Theatre under its new joint management of Habib and Moneka staged their first production "Saat Paisay" (Seven Pennies) a one-act play written by Habib and directed by Moneka. The play was staged in August 1957 at the tiny YWCA auditorium in Delhi. Among other early productions were "Jalidar Pardey" (Lace Curtains) and "Phansi" (Execution) both written by Habib Tanvir. Naya Theatre's major production came in 1960. It was "Sohrab-Rustom" (a tragic story of father and son) by Agha Hashar. This was

followed by "Mirza Shohrat Baig," Moliere's adaptation of "Bourgeois Gentlemen" which was renamed "Lala Shorai Rai" in a later production. The company became a registered non-profit establishment in 1964 and a professional theatre in 1972. Habib Tanvir received his Sangeet Academy Award in 1970 on which occasion he revived his play "Agra Bazaar." The play which he first wrote and produced in 1954, ran twenty straight shows in Delhi, followed by several other shows all over India. Included in this production were Chattisgarhi folk actors, (Chattisgarh is in Madhya Pradesh) six of whom had initially worked in the production of "Mitti Ki Gari" (The Clay Cart) in 1958. Habib Tanvir was so boldly experimental that he took his cityscape situation play "Agra Bazaar" and had it acted out by Chattisgarhi rural players. The village actors were given roles of a city vegetable vendor (Madan Nishad), the sweet seller (Thakur Ram), water melon seller (Babu Das), a Enoch (Bulwa), a harmonium player (Devi Lal), a clarinet player (Jag Mohan), a Brass band leader (Lalu Ram), and the drum player (Shiv Dayal), in a completely urban setting.

To be continued



At rehearsal in a courtyard (Habib Tanvir is on the left).

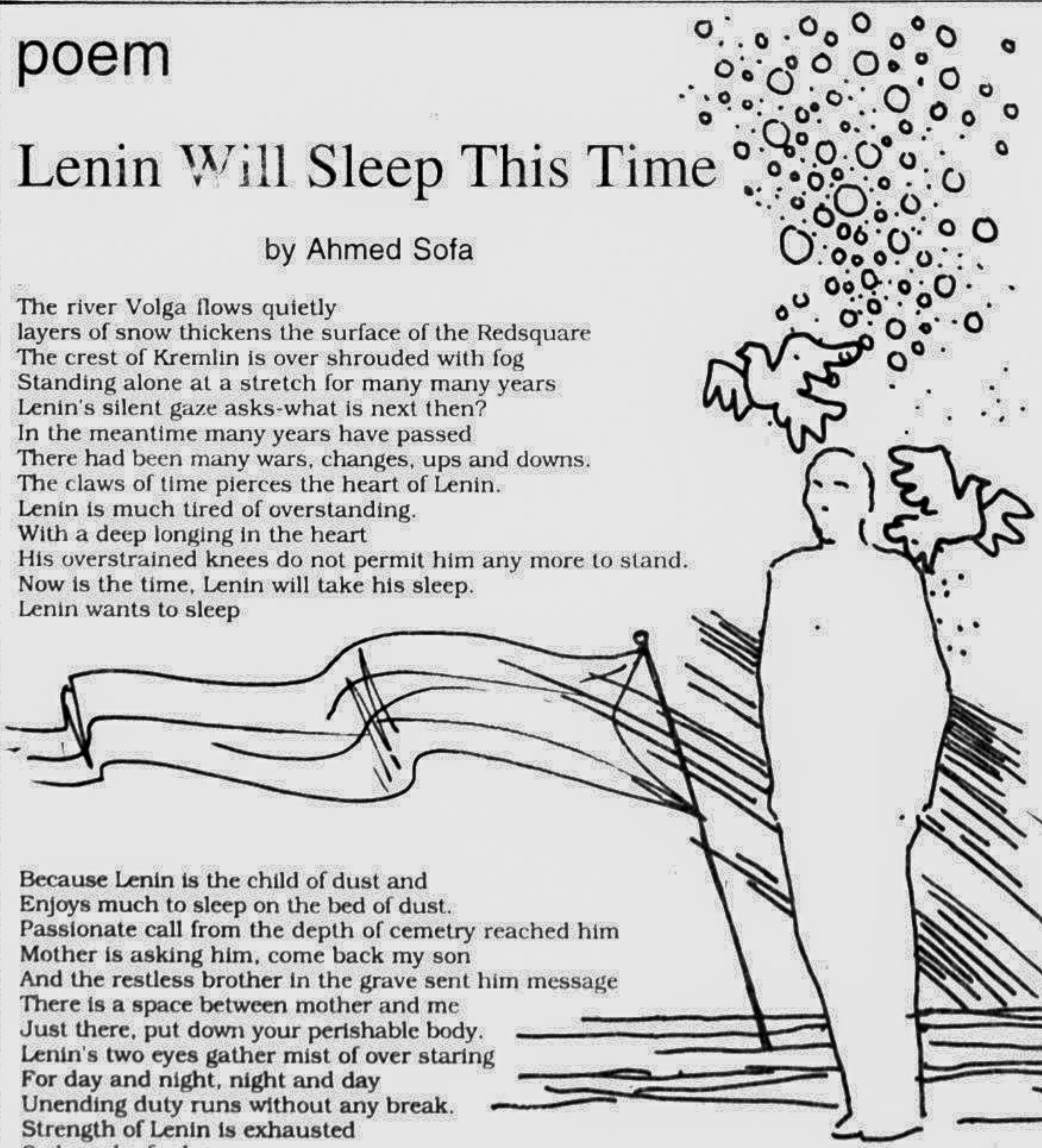
poem

Lenin Will Sleep This Time

by Ahmed Sofa

The river Volga flows quietly
layers of snow thickens the surface of the Redsquare
The crest of Kremlin is over shrouded with fog
Standing alone at a stretch for many years
Lenin's silent gaze asks-what is next then?
In the meantime many years have passed
There had been many wars, changes, ups and downs.
The claws of time pierces the heart of Lenin.
Lenin is much tired of overstanding.
With a deep longing in the heart
His overstrained knees do not permit him any more to stand.
Now is the time, Lenin will take his sleep.
Lenin wants to sleep

Because Lenin is the child of dust and
Enjoys much to sleep on the bed of dust.
Passionate call from the depth of cemetery reached him
Mother is asking him, come back my son
And the restless brother in the grave sent him message
There is a space between mother and me
Just there, put down your perishable body.
Lenin's two eyes gather mist of over staring
For day and night, night and day
Unending duty runs without any break.
Strength of Lenin is exhausted
So he asks for leave.
He seeks leave, because he thinks



It is futile to watch over time.
Calls of mother created stir within him
And brother's message made him restless.

More over, Lenin is cherishing a sweet dream
To have his final sleep on the soil of the sacred earth.
Much time-sea of time had passed.
All the time, standing alone, no more strength to stand.
Now is the time Lenin will take his sleep
Amidst biting and fierce cold of Volga
Hairy darkness like the embrace of Tundra bear
Threatens the night of Moscow.
Lenin quietly listened the wailing of
Moon and stars, over the kremlin sky
Cricket sound in the night enraged Lenin
And Lenin wants to escape
Pursuing the route of owls and rats.
There is tremor in the vault of steel
Heat of the passionate desires exert immense pressure
Lifeless Mummy struggles, to come to life.
Fire arm in hands, the unmoved sentries
Shouts in alarm, Just stand erect in the vault.
Lenin wants to escape,
Surmounting all the riddles, crashing all the odds.
Now is the time, Lenin will take his sleep.
Lenin accepts all the mistakes
And wants to declare in plain language
The red dream of revolution is not yet dead.
Human love streams through the heart
Like the flow of an unseen river.
A waking is stopped for the time being
The dream of revolution lost is cutting edge
This is only a transitory phase.

But in every human heart, there resides
A burning mantra
At the first chance the have-nots will stand again.
The over greedy bestial desires
That want to transform a simple person in to a master.
Why Lenin has to pretend as a modern pharao.
Why he will have to decorate himself,
With steel armor and stone garments.
Like the tide of sea the strong desire of
PARINIRBAN gathers speed in Lenin's heart
Lenin wants to be a human child in the human history
Prior to that, in order to have the taste of human warmth
He wants to lie down between brother and mother
Now is the time, Lenin will take his sleep.
Lenin Knows exactly
He is the source of inexhaustible Human potentiality.
And his destination is the soil.
Soil contains the sacred fertility
That can produce man with the vision of a new Buddha.

Sitting alone in the depth of the vault
Lenin can make the right reasoning
The soil knows the chemistry
By cleansing the sins of the past generations
It can expedite the birth process of a purer human race
By becoming Bodhisatva of an allround revolution
Lenin wants to have his birth again
So tracing the route along the thick layer of snow
Lenin wants to escape into the depth of soil
Because mother asked him to come
Brother sent message to have him in his side.
Prior to that Lenin will have to take
A long sleep on the sacred layer of the Earth.
Now is the time, Lenin will take his sleep.

