

book

Creativity Behind Prison Bars

by Farhan Haq

ONE of the strangest and most revealing indicators of the progress of literary works in the 20th century is the amount — and tremendous impact — of fiction, poetry, autobiographical and political writing produced in prisons.

Spanning the novels of Russia's Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Kenya's Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the poetry of Nigeria's Wole Soyinka and Pakistan's Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and the life stories of everyone from Nelson Mandela to Adolf Hitler, the writing going on in prison cells has influenced almost every aspect of this century.

If that principle is true for the world as a whole, it holds particular importance in the United States, where Protestant reformers helped to develop the modern penitentiary in the 18th century — and which is home to more than one million prisoners today.

To give this dismal reality its proper due, professor H Bruce Franklin of New Jersey's Rutgers University has edited one of the year's most fascinating books — a deceptively straightforward anthology called *Prison Writing in 20th-Century America*.

Offering a stunning breath of literature from Jack London's memoirs to Mumia Abu-Jamal's essays, the book more than bears out Franklin's own argument in the introduction: "One of the most extraordinary achievements of twentieth-century American culture is the literature that has come out of the nation's prisons."

There are, of course, some excellent, and exceedingly grim, reasons behind this achievement. One — as Franklin dryly notes — is that the United States imprisons so many people for so wide a range of crimes.

From 1992 to 1993, he says, the United States imprisoned 519 people for every 100,000 citizens — well above the South African ratio of 368 detainees per 100,000 citizens, and tremendously ahead of any European state. African Americans fare worst, with nearly one out of every 25 black men behind bars.

The writers presented in the anthology attest to how little needs to be done to end up producing literature from behind bars.

The first piece in the anthology is a narrative from a 'freed' slave who describes how one former plantation decided to declare that all black men of that area were criminals — so that, once again, they could provide free labour to

A great deal of literary works has come out of prisons. This is one of the most extraordinary achievements of American culture this century.

their former masters as prisoners.

Nor is that example of the link between slavery and imprisonment the only sign of how easy it is to fall foul of the law. Jack London, one of the most noted US authors at the turn of the century, describes how he was picked up for vagrancy after he had just arrived in Niagara Falls. "John Law was up and out after the early worm," he narrates. "I was a worm."

Agnes Smedley, an early women's rights activist, was detained in New York City's worst jail simply for distributing pamphlets about birth control — then a federal crime. In one of the collection's more amusing moments, she complains to a fellow inmate about how scrubbing prison walls is dirty work — only to be met with the reply, "Not half so dirty as cleaning up the man-made laws in this country."

Other noted writers passed through prison on almost equally specious charges. Nelson Algren, once dubbed "the poet of the jail and the whore-

house", wound up writing the tragic short story *El Presidente de Mejico* after being detained for allegedly stealing his typewriter.

Robert Lowell, a poet convicted of evading the draft, recalls telling a famous gangster who was curious why he was detained, "Oh, I'm in for refusing to kill."

One of the wonderful things about this single-minded, often claustrophobic, collection is that it shows both the remarkable evolution of the US prison into its modern-day chamber of horrors, and the resistance — and even community spirit — of the inmates who must contend with it.

Smedley, for example, depicts a world in which extremely strong women from all walks of life band together to face the squalid conditions and brutal guards which threaten them all. Malcolm X — who has credited prison as being the place he embraced Islam and began to educate himself — proudly describes his nightly attempts

to transcribe the entire dictionary by hand, steadily building up his vocabulary while defying strictures on going to sleep.

Perhaps the most moving conception of survival in prison as a form of resistance is by George Jackson, the Soledad inmate whose murder in prison in 1971 was one of the flashpoints of the decade's political divisions. Modern prisons produce only two types of people, Jackson argues: revolutionaries and inmates with crushed spirits. "The broken men are so damaged that they will never again be suitable members of any sort of social unit," he writes.

"Everything that was still good when they entered the joint, anything inside of them that may have escaped the ruinous effects of black colonial existence, anything that may have been redeemable when they first entered the joint — is gone when they leave... They'll never count me among the broken men, but I can't say that I am normal either."

Franklin does an insightful job at showing how such writing has influenced various kinds of literature and political thought. Most of the underpinnings of black leftist philosophies, from Malcolm X to Assata Shakur (also known as Joanne Chesimard) to noted death-row inmate Mumia Abu-Jamal

today, emanates from prison cells.

Similarly, a surprising amount of the writing in many typical genres owes a debt to prison writing. The anthology shows how Iceberg Slim's bleak ghetto narratives, Chester Himes's ironic mysteries, Robert Lowell's chilly poetry and Malcolm X's pro-empowerment rhetoric all spring from the same source: their effort to avoid the ways in which prison life can crush the individual spirit.

Even lesser-known writers prove the same lesson, as Carolyn Baxter does when she muses, in a lengthy poem about her detention: "I smell lemon powder, thinking of my name. Trying to remember femininity."

Prison Writing in 20th-Century America is not an easy book to read, and certainly not one which can be read in one or two sittings: the mood is almost unremittingly bleak, leaving the reader to feel somewhat penned in, as well.

At its best, however, it shows how those behind bars struggle against not just imprisonment but the human condition itself — at a time when the bars are encircling more people, and becoming one of the defining features of US society.

— IPS

heritage

Fairy-tale Fort is in Tourist Peril

by A. J. Singh

THE honey-coloured Jaisalmer fort looks like a fairy-tale kingdom from a distance, standing alone amid hundreds of kilometres of flat desert overlaid with low acacia scrub.

By the light of the setting sun, the subdued yellow sandstone buildings emit the lustrous glow that gives Jaisalmer its name of the Golden City.

The walled city — 650 km west of Delhi in the heart of the Thar Desert — is virtually a museum, containing ancient palaces and old Jain temples within a winding maze of narrow cobbled alleys. The streets are full of Rajput men in their bright turbans and women in loose-fitting bright scarves and skirts complemented by narrow, patterned waistcoats.

Like the fort, all the houses inside are made of soft yellow sandstone. The delicately sculpted flat-roofed merchant houses or *havelis* are famed for their latticework and floral designs. Their facades are replete with sculpted filigree windows, delicate pavilions and

beautifully intricate trellis-work balconies called *Jharokas*.

All this makes Jaisalmer a major tourist destination in Rajasthan, one of India's most visited states. Over 200,000 tourists — mainly westerners — descend on the desert city every year, almost four times Jaisalmer's estimated population.

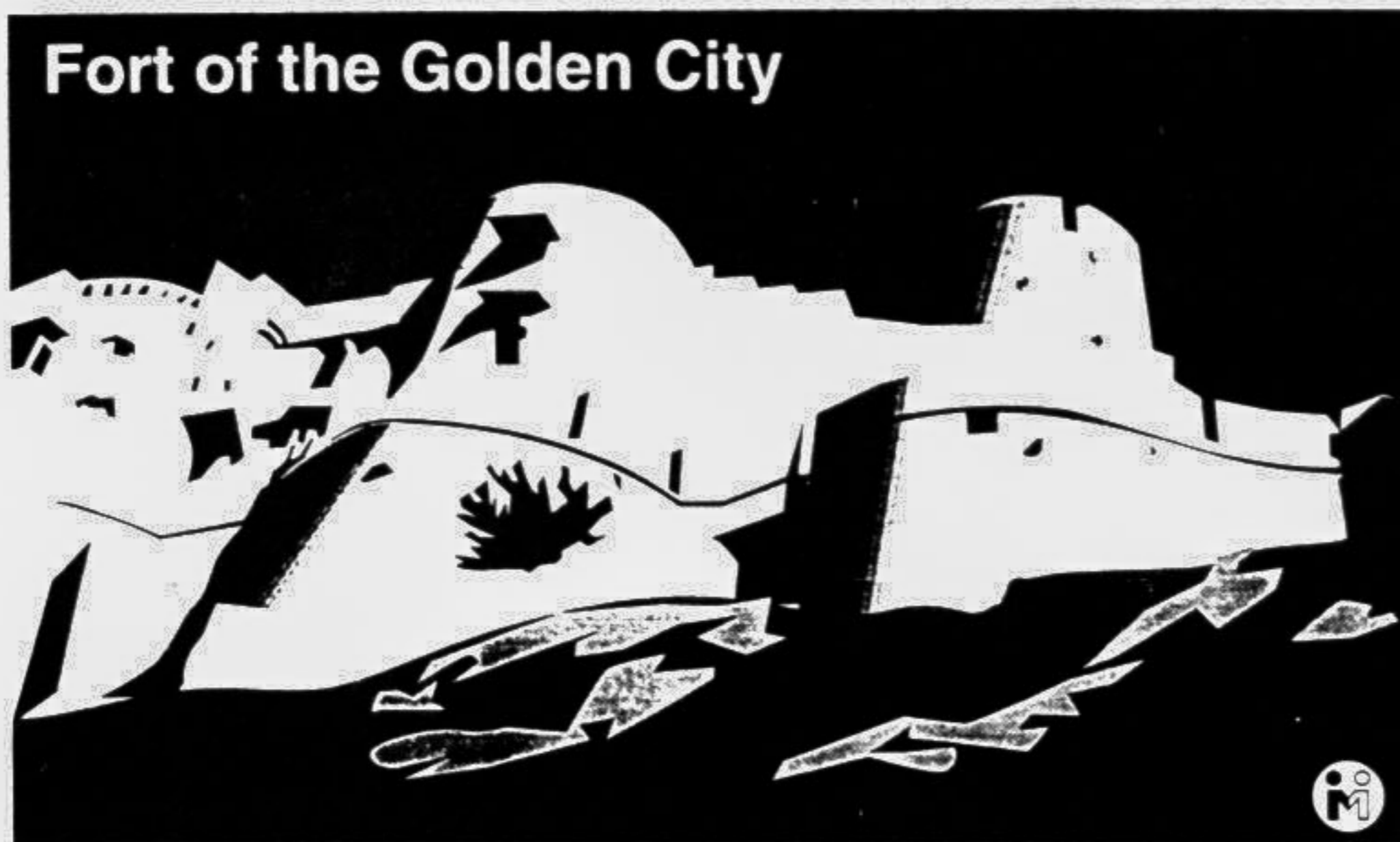
But the walled city is becoming a victim of its popularity.

The Archeological Survey of India (ASI), which controls the fort, stipulates that no construction is allowed within 100 metres of its walls and that the architectural style of structures within the walled city cannot be altered.

That policy is being observed more in defiance than in observance. To cash in on the tourist boom, many of the *haveli* owners are converting their homes into hotels, installing modern facilities, altering the age-old design. *Jharokas* are being replaced with ugly iron grills. Billboards, iron grills and newly built modern facades dot the walled city.

"No landlord bothers about rules here," says teacher Mukul Sharma. "They pull down interiors of their houses and rebuild them as they like."

Jaisalmer Fort has withstood invaders since the 12th Century, but it may not survive an ongoing friendly invasion — by tourists. Gemini News Service reports on how the people living inside the walled city are altering the fort to cash in on the tourism boom.



Fort of the Golden City

The erstwhile ruling family has converted its palace inside the walled city into a luxury hotel. Locals allege that the family has been selling portions of the fort to be altered for commercial use.

Even the 842-year-old fort's huge walls, which have protected the people living inside, are now themselves in need of protection.

The fort's drainage system cannot cope with the 35,000 gallons of water flowing through it each day. Water is collecting in the system and seeping into the stone walls. The damage is clearly visible at several places where stone slabs have eroded, making parts of the fort's structure unsafe.

Much of the damage could have been avoided if the civic authorities had fined owners who have not installed sewer lines. Instead, one-third of the households within the walled city have not bothered to spend the money on installing sewer lines.

Last year, on 17 October, an eight-metre portion of the wall collapsed, killing six. Observers say they will not be surprised if another portion collapses in the future.

When the walled city was built, few people lived inside and water was scarce, so the drainage system worked well. But all this changed after India and Pakistan went to war in 1965 and 1971.

Jaisalmer's location close to the border gave it strategic importance to the Defence Ministry. UN observers and oil explorers followed. In 1968, the city was connected to the national rail network.

After India exploded a nuclear device in 1974 at Pokhran, 100 kilometres away, the journalists arrived in Jaisalmer. Some wrote about the majestic fort amid the barrenness and tour operators noticed its potential.

Ground water reserves were discovered and the Rajasthan Canal was built, assuring a regular tap water supply to the citizens.

Today, in addition to the tourists, the city gets a large number of visitors involved in gas exploration and construction, as cement factories and a new stadium are built.

It remains to be seen what long-term impact this development in Jaisalmer will have on the walled city. — GEMINI NEWS

fiction

A Strange Self-denial

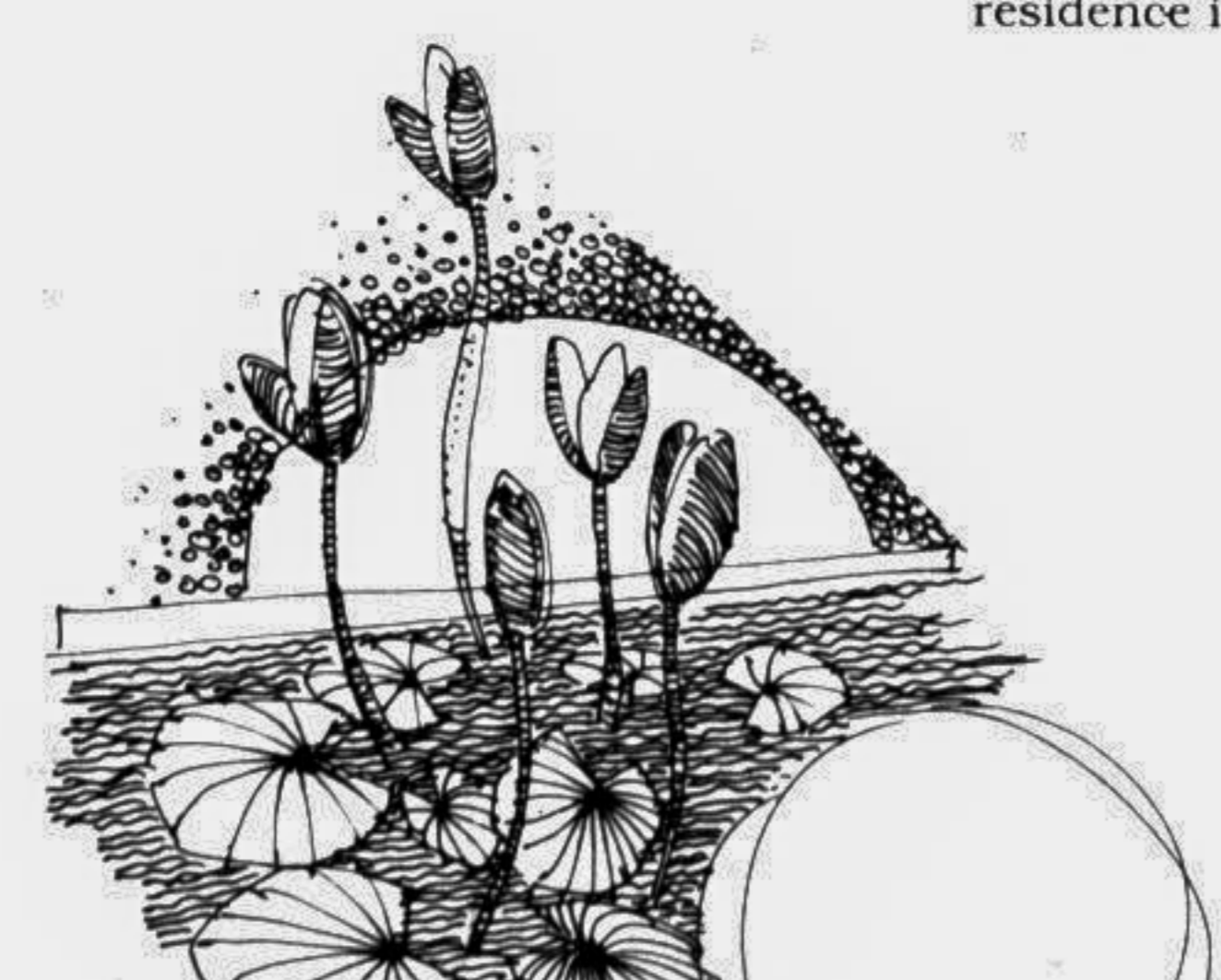
by A S M Nurunnabi

IN the process of growing up, a youth generally acquires a mixture of sensibilities and emotions which throws open new dimensions of attitudes and outlook on life. At this stage, new feelings of attraction and repulsion tend to develop in a marked degree. Sohail, a young man of eighteen was no exception to this trend. It was, therefore, quite natural that a young girl living nearby should attract his attention. But the characteristic aspect of the whole affair was that the centre of attraction for the girl was not her whole beauty but only a part of her countenance.

To make the point clear, it may be stated that in the eyes of Sohail, the attractive part of the girl lay in her bounteous long tresses. As she sometimes used to dry the long hairs in sunshine on the railings of her veranda, Sohail looked transfixed at the beautiful scene.

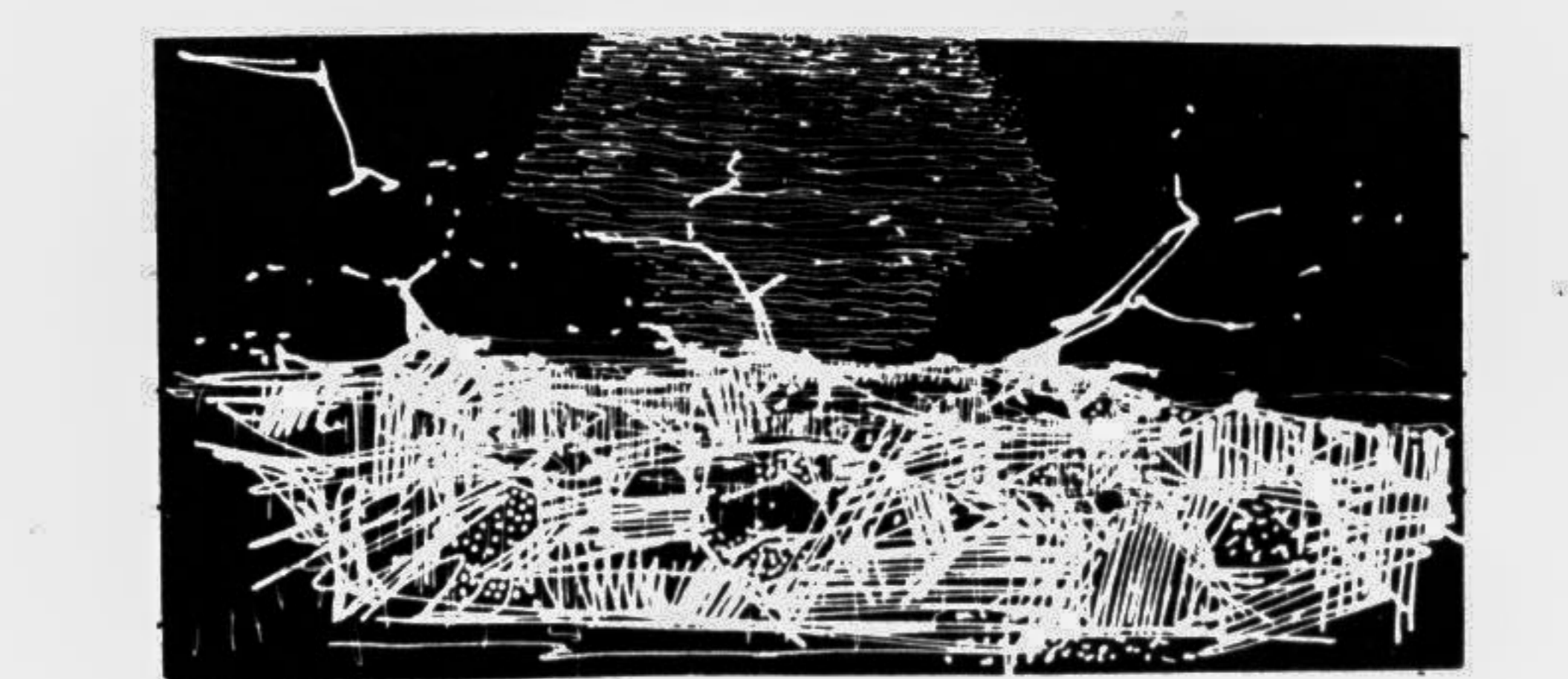
Sohail had no knowledge whether the girl was aware of her ecstatic feelings about her hair. Some might interpret it as a sign of love harboured by Sohail about the girl. But in fact it was not so, for Sohail never came near her or talked to her on any occasion. Yet Sohail felt a sort of compulsion gripping him whenever the enchanting spectacle of the girl drying her hair presented itself.

However, in the process of inexorable



march of time, everything changes. In the case of Sohail, the feelings of enchantment by him for the girl gradually faded and such feelings became less obsessive. He even forgot what happened to that girl when her family left that locality later.

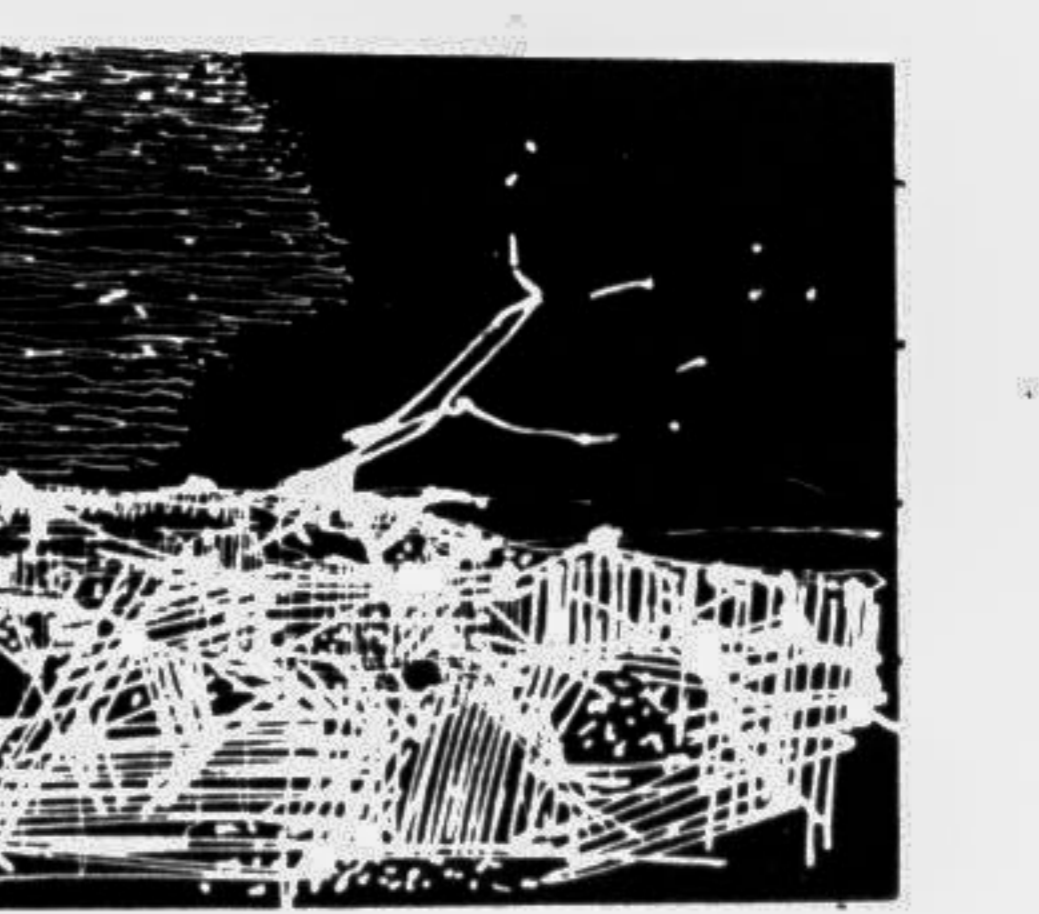
After a couple of decades when Sohail passed into middle age, a strange twist of fortune awaited him. At an important shopping complex in the Dhaka city, Sohail came across the same woman whose long tresses once threw him into fits of ecstasy. He had no difficulty in recognising that woman after such a long period because of their long residence in the same locality.



Though Sohail never talked to her before when she was young, the long years intervening in their life which have now placed them both at the threshold of middle age, the erstwhile reticence which stood in the way of any previous communication between them before, disappeared instantly as they could recognise each other.

Sohail came forward and said: "We must be known to each other. Isn't it?" The woman had a few moments of hesitation as she tried to remember and then her face lit up with memory of remembrance. She then nodded her agreement.

They then made mutual queries about their present life and where-



abouts. Sohail learnt from her that she was presently a college teacher with two teen-aged boys. As the occasion was not suitable for more detailed talks, they parted company and Sohail promised to see her again at the address she gave him.

This chance encounter could have been an ordinary event but for certain of its fall-out effects. Sohail could not help noticing that the woman's hair which were once an object of glory were less bountiful now with most of them turned completely white. Their present state of lacklustre facade sent pangs of grief over something irrevocably lost.

At the stage when Sohail saw her with her past glory of hairs in limbo, Sohail also in his middle age had some strands of grey hair, which he had sought to cover up with regular use of hair dye. When he subsequently compared his own image with his dyed up hair side by side with the bleak features of the middle-aged college teacher woman, he seemed to lose all incentive for improve his features by hair-dyeing. He then decided to allow the remaining parts of his hair to go grey without any help of hair dye.

It all seemed pointless to him to keep trying to look young with black hair when he found that the object of his adoration once cherished in the woman in her early years proved so ephemeral.