

fiction

Jaoy Bangladesh

by Shiela Gujral

As a daily routine I was inspecting one of the refugee camps in Calcutta. Scores of refugees were simultaneously trying to narrate their heart-rendering tales of distress. Suddenly, I saw two women, one an elderly lady and another a younger one with a little baby in her arms. I was stunned by the presence of the young lady, her face seemed so familiar, how could she be one of the new arrivals in the camp.

As I was curiously looking towards them the elder lady came closer and asked my Secretary in an undertone, "is he Dr Sinnah?"

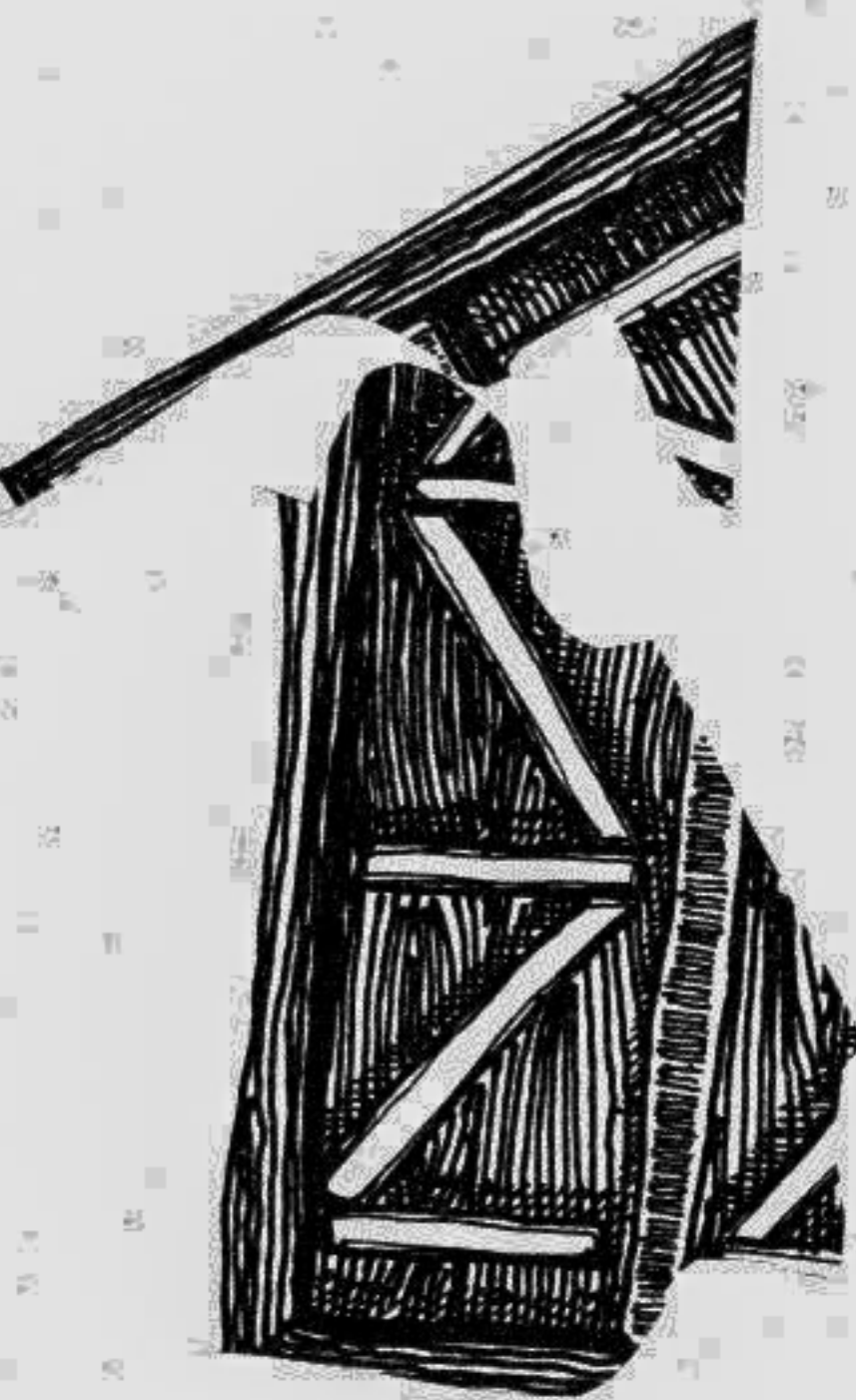
The Secretary rebuked her and said, "Keep quiet and stand in the row. You have no business to ask his name."

I overheard this conversation and moving towards her replied in an assuring tone, "Yes I am Dr Sinnah. Would you like to ask me anything."

She knelt down and touched my feet. A flood of tears flowed through here eyes. Struggling through her tears she fumbled, "You are the savior of our lives, me and my ..."

She could hardly utter a few words with choked voice.

Suddenly the whole panorama of



past happenings came to my mind's eyes. Nearly 30 years ago my wife fell in love with her innocent face and insisted that I should give her some job in my office. The girl came from a respectable family and her father who had been recently posted to Calcutta, suddenly died

of heart failure. Her mother was an ailing woman and being the eldest child she could be the only bread winner of the family. My wife taught her typing. She gave her basic knowledge about jotting down appointments, attending to the telephone and other odd jobs. So I agreed to appoint her as my PA.

For three years she worked so efficiently and diligently cheerfully attending to all my needs, that one day when she came and told me that she had to resign, I was indeed, sorry to lose such an efficient member of the staff. But I was happy on her account. She was getting married to a bright young professor who was being sent on deputation to different city.

I vividly remember her as a young Bengal bride decked in jewels and time robes.

And then, after a couple of years, I saw the same beauty with a babe in her arms, victim of mob fury, moaning and crying. She was entreating me to save her honour and the life of her clinging child. For two days we gave her shelter and then when the communal riots subsided because of Mahatma Gandhi's appeal, I escorted her back to her family.

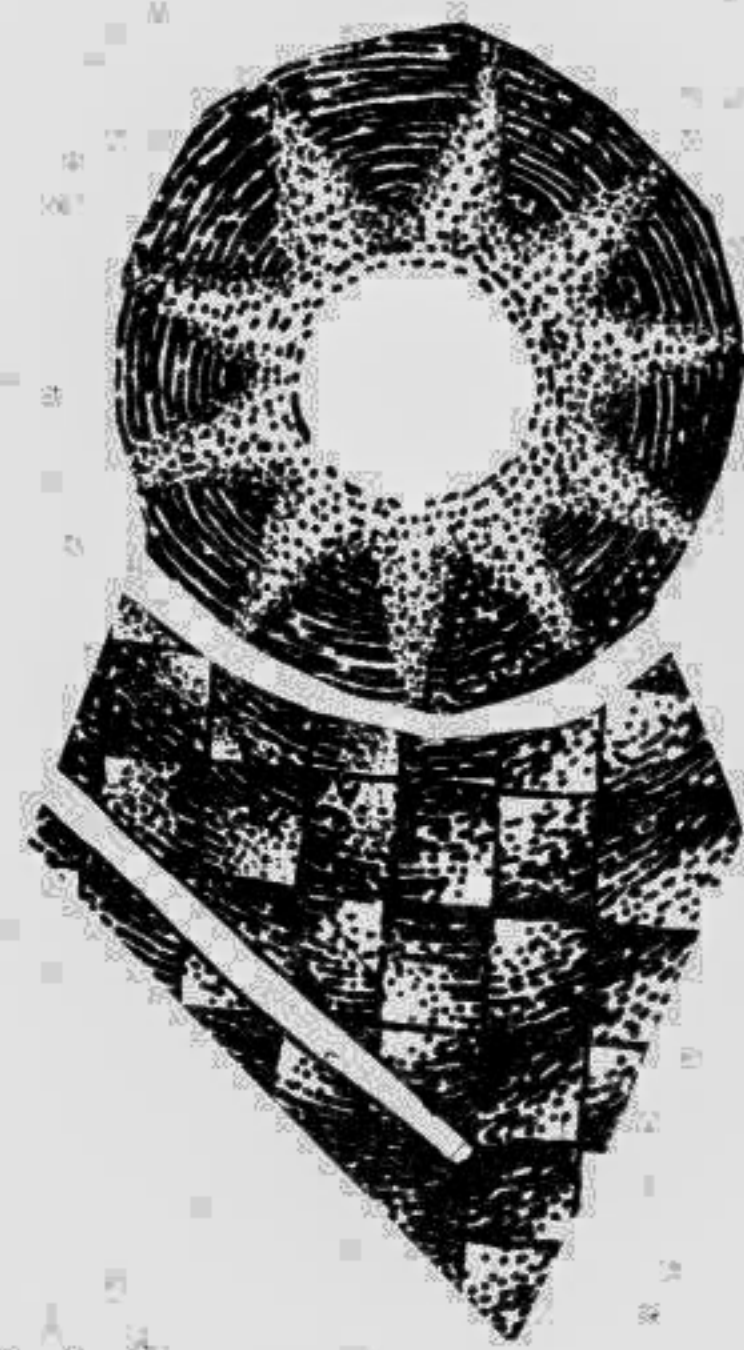
The same radiant bride, now a wrinkled old holding hand with an exact replica of her past was standing in front of me. "Are you Razia ... Razia Sultana?" I asked hesitatingly. Tears flooded her eyes. She started sobbing and could not reply.

The younger woman whispered in a trembling voice, "Yes, she is my mother, Razia Sultana. She had to leave Calcutta to save my life."

In the meantime, Razia controlled the flow of her tears and said, "Doctor Sahib, the day you rescued me from the blazing hell — fire, I decided to migrate from Calcutta. Abdullah tried to convince me that the worst was over. Mahatma Gandhi has persuaded all Bengalis to live peacefully, but I dared not take the risk again and we crossed the border."

I listening to her tale of woe, I suddenly thought of that handsome youngman, Abdullah. The memories flashed back. The first time the young couple visited us after the wedding, they were both radiating with joy. How profusely he thanked me and my wife for shaping her into such an efficient bright girl!

For a moment I got lost in reveries



and then asked, "Where is Abdullah now?"

Razia replied with a hoarse voice, "Pakistan Army created havoc in our town. For years we suffered agony. Abdullah and his college team stuck to there jobs to nurture Bengali culture

and Bengali language. We women folk were shifted to safer areas. We waited and prayed for their success and long life. They faced the challenge. But at last, my Abdullah fell victim in the hands of the cruel murderers."

Narrating the whole tale she unburdened her mind. Now the dark clouds of gloom disappeared from her face and she looked reassured and self-confident.

When I asked her if she would like to go back to Bangladesh again, she replied, "We have to go back home. We are eagerly awaiting the day when we return to Bangladesh. My son-in-law is serving in 'Mukti Sena' to liberate his motherland. Abdullah is resting in his grave."

Looking fondly in her daughter's eyes she cooed in a caressing tone, "My daughter will enjoy a long happy married life in the same house where she entered as a bride."

Her young daughter felt reassured and shouted with pride, "Jaoy Bangladesh." The whole atmosphere seemed electrified. The camp vibrated with the loud echo of 'Jaoy Bangladesh' and a ray of hope illuminated all the dismal faces around me.

profile

Lateef Kapadia: The Amiable Theatrewalla

By Khurram Ali

THERE were better days. Karachi used to be a different city. Stage plays were in demand and people from a cross-section of society thronged the theatres. That was in the early 1950s. And that is when Lateef Kapadia started. He was born on 27 March, 1934, in Nasik in the Maharashtra state of India. His fate was sealed, in a manner of speaking, when he became impassioned with films made in the tradition of the New Theatre in Calcutta, such as the Sehgal-starring Devdas, Zindagi and Vidyapati. However, his family migrated to Pakistan soon after Partition. Hence, it was in those early years of Pakistan that Lateef got a chance to nurture his obsession for histrionics in the city that was once Karachi.

He had problems, though. Despite being quite proficient in English and also able to speak some other languages, Lateef couldn't read the Urdu script. These strengths and weaknesses were reminiscent of his Bombay days and although he never changed them, he devised a solution in getting his lines transcribed into Gujarati before committing them to heart (a practice he still carries on). And he familiarized himself with some of the best plays of all times through English translations. These handicaps notwithstanding, there were numerous venues for stage productions, including the Katrak Hall in Saddar and the Theosophical Society Hall on Bunder Road. Lateef joined a group of amateur artists known as the Bombay Amateur Artists' Association in Karachi. Things changed with the arrival of the playwright and producer Ali Ahmed. Arguably the biggest name in our stage history, he was a veteran from Bombay, and a colleague of such figures as Prithviraj Kapoor, Balraj Sahini and Safdar Mir. Upon his migration to Pakistan, he first went to Lahore and then came to Karachi. "It was 1957," Lateef can always be trusted for dates. He recalls two long queues on main Bunder Road. One moving to buy tickets for a film at the Taj Mahal cinema, the other for Zaat-i-Sharif, Ali Ahmed's adaptation from Moliere, staged in the Theosophical Society Hall. "It was the moment of truth," Lateef recalls. As an amateur, he was coming face to face with his limitations. When the play was taken off stage, he made up his mind to learn acting properly and become a professional. He didn't have to look very far. Ali Ahmed was an institution in his own right. In later years, he founded the National Academy of Theatre Arts Karachi (NATAK). Lateef soon became the mainstay of Ali Ahmed's productions. Ali Ahmed was one of the most towering figures on the Pakistani stage. In Karachi, he represented the antithesis of Khwaja Moinuddin. While Khwaja Moinuddin's plays were steeped in the tradition of a conservative world view, and charged with a nostalgia for the past, Ali Ahmed was a die-hard revolutionary and always at odds with the forces of the status quo in society. "His satire used to cut deep," Lateef Kapadia adds. "However, his greatest weakness was that he usually picked up his cast from amongst the amateurs, unlike Khwaja Moinuddin who had a permanent group of professional actors."

The big day came in 1969, and quite unexpectedly: PTV decided to produce its very full-length, debut play, and chose Ali Ahmed's Sheeshay Kay Aadmi. This turned out to be a big success, and Lateef came to the notice of the television producers. There was no looking back. Except for the fact that the glamour of the camera could never substitute the thrill of the stage. Stage remained the closest to his heart. Even when he was appearing on television five days a week.

Maybe there always was something of a teacher in the great theatre don. He revelled in passing on the craft of the stage to the younger aspirants. But that was as far as he would go. When it came to the principles of stage production, Ali Ahmed was also uncompromising and strict like a typical eastern teacher.

Lateef remembers how one day he took his friend Safiullah for a role in an upcoming play. In the very first rehearsal, Safi tried to add a few interesting words to his dialogue and was brutally snubbed by Ali Ahmed. Safi could not control his misplaced creativity and was removed from the team at the end of the day. He joined the film industry to become known as Lehri, our wittiest comedian. Lateef remembers an interesting anecdote from 1966. Ali Ahmed's play Qissa Jagtay Sotay Ka was staged in Lahore under the auspices of the National Bank Arts Club. This was an anti-imperialist play and, given the leftist inclinations of the playwright, it had explicit satire pointing to America's influence on developing countries. The government called for an explanation from Mr Mumtaz Hasan, the Managing Director of National Bank of Pakistan, who in turn called Ali Ahmed. "Oh, you can tell them that this play is against every government that is a stooge of the imperialist powers," The playwright suggested. "Are you...?"

Of course, the higher ups in the government were quick to reply that they weren't, and the whole matter was thankfully buried. Lateef, also employed by the National Bank in 1952, was living a double lifestyle by shuttling between the fixed pace of his banking career and his hectic theatrical pursuits.

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yar aur Abba Jaan, it was one of the most expensive stage productions for over four hundred thousand rupees. Even though we did use some banners to be on the safe side, we managed to sell big on the box office." This play was written by Shoaib Hashmi and staged in 1994. "I haven't given up," says Lateef. And then he goes on to disclose his intentions of staging another production in the near future. "Acting isn't sufficient. I see characters around me everywhere. Nobody writes about them, nobody writes their language. If you take a walk on Bunder Road and look at those vendors sitting by the road, they have stories. They speak a language that is not flowery and doesn't attempt at hiding reality. I have often asked my playwrights why they put literary phrases in the mouths of ordinary characters. They have no answers."

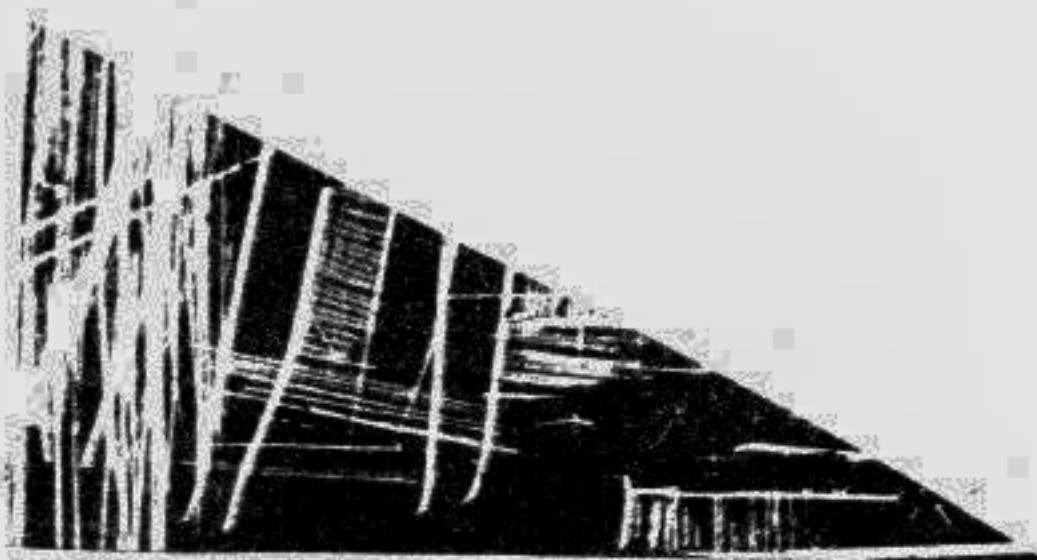
Sometimes I object to such lines and request that they be changed. And sometimes my directors think I am saying that because I may have language problems. I have no language problems, and I would be happy to speak lines written in Persian as long as they suit the character." There are dreams and more dreams. Lateef is committed to transfer his bit of dreaming to reality even if doesn't change society around him. "There is no interest in going to the theatre in our society at any strata:

lower class, middle class or upper class." And yet, for those who have seen its heyday, theatre is a passion that simply wouldn't go. Of course, his mainstay are the television roles. He is one of the busiest artists. He doesn't seem to be overcritical of the private production companies that have sprung up over the recent years. "Personally I have benefited from them in a monetary sense," he says with a naughty smile. Yes, the standards of production have become worse. But the main factor in that respect is not 'who is making the play' but rather 'who is buying it.' As long as the channels are looking only at the money they earn from the sponsors and not at the quality of what is being broadcast, the standards will continue to get worse. Lateef Kapadia is often remembered for those roles which he played with a Gujarati accent, right from the memorable Seth in Sheeshay Kay Aadmi to the several comedy blurbs he did in Fifty Fifty and afterwards. However, he doesn't like this situation. "In the last four years, I have played several roles on television and only one of them was a Memon role, how could you have missed all the rest?" His voice doesn't allow you to believe that he is amused. Maybe this is just another case where a particular image of an artist grows larger than the artist himself. At the age of 65, Lateef Kapadia can boast of a huge career in acting with a whole variety of roles. And he still wants to go on. But possibly in a different dimension. "Now I want to produce something," he says at the end of a long conversation. "As long as you are acting a role, you are doing what the others have written for you. Stereotyping does happen. Although I have been given roles that do not require me to speak in a Gujarati accent all the time, I have mostly still been cast in negative roles. I want new challenges, roles that would require me to appear sensitive and to respond to the intensity of human

characters. The problem is that most directors these days don't want it easy. They cast me in roles, I have done before so that they don't have to think, they don't have to direct. They want the actor to make it easy for them by being his own director." Lateef has nurtured his penchant for several fields of arts. He has an aesthetic sense which allows him to appreciate painting and sculpture. His interest in music, film or non-film, has never declined. He can remember Kanan Bala, Sehgal and Pankhaj Mullick as if those voices never faded, and still praise Udit Narayan and Kumar Sanho. "Actually I prefer Udit because there is more bass in his voice." He can give you an analysis of A R Rahman's music, "Listen to him using headphones, to that you can pay attention to the magic he performs in interval pieces with his unbelievable mastery over the instruments of an orchestra." And then you may expect him to round up the conversation with a simple, heartfelt, one-liner for Mehdi Hasan, "But Mehdi Hasan is Mehdi Hasan, after all!" Lateef's close friends often comment that if he had taken up singing, he would have made just as big a name as he has made in acting. So what's next? "There is so much in our society that has gone un-chronicled," his voice rises with excitement. "Why doesn't anyone rise up to question the cliches? When you speak of those 'westernized women,' why do you stop at their appearance? Why don't you also say that they don't lie, their minds are not rendered useless with insecurities, and that they are taking the major load of civil society on their shoulders by running all these NGOs, and running them well. I am giving you just an example." And he has several examples. All ready to merge into a theatrical collage that he might put up one day. Hopefully in the near future.

Courtesy of The DAWN

poem



"The World of Countless Cats"

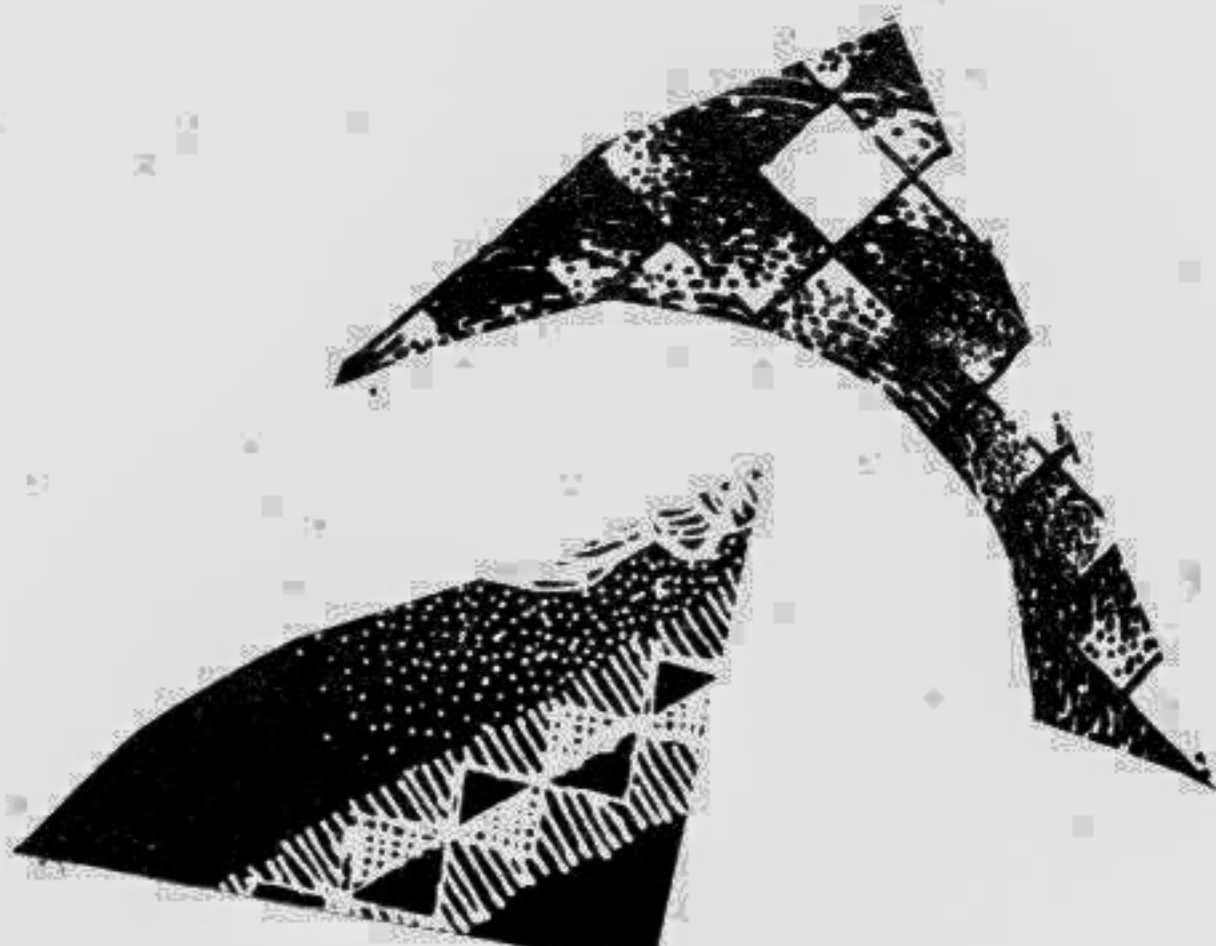
(Written By Sonia in Bengali on 25th December, 1998
and Translated By Monie on 25th April, 1999)

Drop me in the world of Countless Cats
They will tear me into portions
And devour me.
Sometimes if you drop me
Amidst the cowardly mild windy vixen's land
Whilst the half-moon
Mourns the dark—
They will cut me into pieces
And again eat me my body
And the helpless soul.

Yes, I Have Seen the Dark Side of the Moon

by Rebecca Haque

A quick, sudden snap; a short-circuit in the brain.
Comatose, floating in amber craters,
Gauzy pinpoints of light wavering underneath my upper eyelids.
My soul merges with my dead infant's aura,
As I lie supine, oblivious of the earthly connection.



Door battered open, the slim body rescued.
Distraught parents, stoic husband, and a jewel of a daughter
Stand vigil by the yawning kingsize bedspread.

Two nights, two whole days, asleep
In a timeless, fluid, mesmeric cocoon.
No memory, yet with synaptic tissues intact
I blossom and heal and swim in a translunar darkness.
While, quietly, unostentatiously, God works his miracle upon me.

Yes, I have seen the dark side of the moon.
Climbed, Mt. Fujiyama, sailed down the scintillating blue waters of the Blue Nile.
Voyager, survivor, my eyes click open.

Manna flows outward from my body to embrace my family.
And I look into the reflecting mirror.
My face, crushed and broken into myriad fragments with grief,
Is whole again. Complete, serene, replete.