

NOVERA: FINDING REFUGE IN ART

ART



Novera Ahmed in the 1960s.

PROGNA PAROMITA MAJUMDER

Bangladeshi modern sculptor, Novera Ahmed, was a woman far ahead of her times. She was one of the designers of the Central Shaheed Minar, and a pioneer of contemporary sculptures in the country. It was, however, a lone fight for her in an art scene where there was widespread prejudice against women artists. She preferred isolating herself from the social conventions, indulging in a silent devotion to her unique artistry. Thus, Novera remains a mystery for many. A documentary on Novera's life, "Shilpi Novera Ahmed er Srijan Bhuban: Na-hanyate", directed by Rashed Chowdhury and produced by Bengal Foundation, recently screened by the Her Story Project at EMK Centre, gives us a glimpse of her life, philosophy and incredible art collection.

The director narrates the Novera's story through interviews of art connoisseurs and practitioners – Aminul Islam, Lala Rukh Selim, Syed Jahangir and Anna Islam – who knew her closely. We learn about Novera's personal lifestyle, her independent spirit, her love for the country and also the agony for not being acknowledged as a sculptor in her own country at her time. An independent spirit, Novera was born at a time when women did not get much of an opportunity to showcase their work. She lived alone and faced many social obstacles to showcase her work. The artists of her time were also not very cooperative with her and they found it difficult to accept a female sculptor.

Lala Rukh Selim helps us to understand Novera's philosophy behind her sculptures. She argues that although Novera spent her life mostly in Europe, her sculptures do not reflect much of the European culture – they were about the simple agrarian people of Bangladesh. The universal subject matter of her sculpture includes cows, mother and children. She used form, space, light and shadow in a way no other artists of her time did and introduced a unique style. She always felt that she had a responsibility to improve the lives of her people through her sculptures, as she believed that art makes people more open-minded. This is why she took her sculptures outdoors and introduced it to the ordinary people. She also believed that sculpture should be included in the city planning.

Amirul Islam focused on the



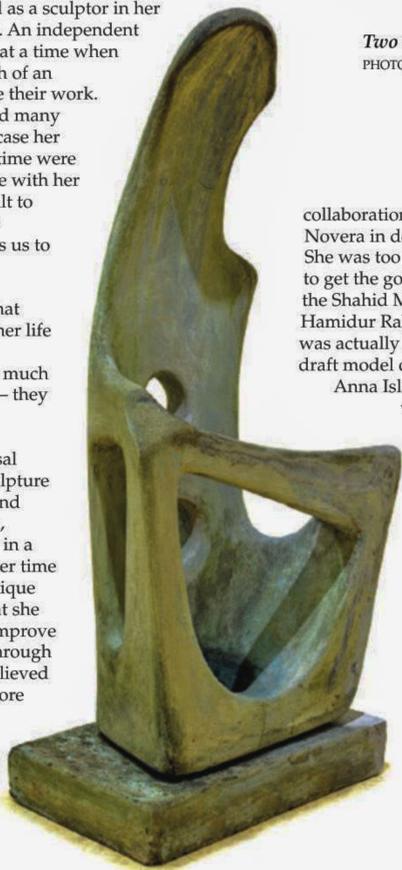
Two Figures, cement, height 31cm. PHOTO COURTESY: BANGLADESH NATIONAL MUSEUM

collaboration between Hamidur Rahman and Novera in designing the Central Shahid Minar. She was too reluctant to carry out the formalities to get the government tenders while building the Shahid Minar, he informs, which is why Hamidur Rahman's name is in focus. However, it was actually Novera who developed the first draft model of the Shahid Minar.

Anna Islam highlights how patriotic Novera was, but how she never wanted to come back because of the contemptible way the art world treated her. The point is further illustrated by Lala Rukh Selim, who argues that Charukola never valued Novera as a sculptor in the 60s.

It was only in 1997 that Novera Ahmed finally received her Ekushey Padak, one of the highest recognitions from the Bangladesh Government. The documentary provides a critical lens through which to reevaluate and revalue Novera and her work, and to acknowledge what a grave mistake our society made in not recognising her as a talented sculptor at the right time. It is one of the few sources from which we can form a nuanced opinion about Novera Ahmed.

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Seated Woman, grey cement, 145cmx54cm. PHOTO COURTESY: BANGLADESH NATIONAL MUSEUM

ABOUT TOWN



TURKEY BANGLA CULTURAL FEST 2016
CALLIGRAPHY EXHIBITION
Organiser: Movencare
April 7, 4-7pm, Bangladesh National Museum

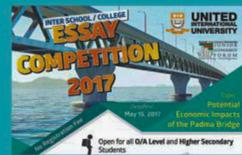


'TAMSIK'

Organiser: Teerondaz Theatre Lab
April 7, 7-9 pm, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy



TALE OF THE DARKROOM
PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITION
Organiser: AIUB Photography Club
April 5-8, 5-10 pm, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy



INTER SCHOOL / COLLEGE ESSAY COMPETITION 2017

Organiser: United International University
Email essays to this address: info@eco.uui.ac.bd
ON "Potential Economic Impacts of the Padma Bridge" by 15th May, 2017
Eligibility: Student from O level, A level Secondary and Higher
Secondary level can participate
May 27, 2-5pm, UIU Auditorium



PUTUL KOTHA (DREAM WEAVERS) FILM PREMIERE SHOW

Produced by: University of Manitoba, Canada
April 9, 5 pm, Krishibid Institute Bangladesh (KIB)

THEATRE REVIEW

In late November of last year, I was approached by an earnest young man from the Dhaka University Theatre and Performance Studies Department who wanted to talk about a performance based on Syed Shamsul Haq's works that they were producing for their final exam under the direction of departmental professor Ahmedul Kabir. Sabuj Talukder, then a student in the final semester of the Third Year and also Stage Manager for his class, spoke to me about what he called a 'unique' approach to Syed Haq's works and insisted I attend their first public performance at the Dhaka University Natmondol stage towards the end of January.

I duly turned up at the venue expecting to do no more than show my support for a group of enthusiastic, budding theatre professionals on the final leg of their journey into the real world of performing arts. In the hour and fifteen minutes that followed, I swiftly realised that I could not have been more mistaken. I have since seen the performance three times in the space of as many months, the last time being in Kurigram, the heart of Syed Haq's mythical Jaleshwari and in the land of Nuraldin himself as the opening act in the week-long Syed Shamsul Haq Drama Festival recently conducted by Pracchad Kurigram.

'Bonhi Bishorjon Ba-Dip' – which refers to the fire of revolution that sweeps across Bengal is not one, but three of Syed Haq's works – the first ever stage adaptation of a novel, *Nishiddho Loban*, sandwiched between two verse plays, *Nuraldiner Shara Jibon* and *Payer Awaj Pawa Jai*, stitched together through the use of spoken parts and carefully choreographed visual sequences involving the traditional *lathis* or bamboo poles that were used widely as both weapons and for ceremonial purposes in Northern Bangladesh in earlier times. The result is a visually striking and surreal experience that gives rise to a sense of wonder in the minds of the audience as well as leaves open to interpretation a number of important



PHOTO: COURTESY

CAPTURING THE INDOMITABLE SPIRIT OF BENGAL

DITIO SYED-HAQ



PHOTO: COURTESY

questions through a series of climatic endings.

I had the pleasure of speaking to director Ahmedul Kabir along with his colleague Ashiq Rahman Leon during my recent visit to Kurigram in-between their hectic performance schedule. During the course of our conversation, I learned that Syed Haq's works form part of the curriculum for the DU Theatre and Performance Studies course and that this performance was, in fact, the final assessment for students of the Third Year. I also learned of the rationale and thought processes that went into the production and was surprised to discover how technically and artistically evolved the field of performance art has become in Bangladesh.

Two concepts are central to the theme of the

overall performance – the Liberation War of Bangladesh and the repression of women, both of which feature strongly in Syed Haq's works. Kabir chooses to start with Nuraldin as being the precursor to the liberation movement, rather than with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, to demonstrate how the same fighting spirit which saw us through the independence of Bangladesh has remained ingrained in the Bengali psyche from time immemorial. Moving in a linear fashion from Nuraldin to the War of Independence and beyond, a sequence of spoken parts crafted by Shahman Moishan provide the glue that binds the individual acts together. Coupled with some well thought-out effects and lighting designed by Leeon, the result is a

performance in which the whole is greater than the sum of the individual parts.

When asked about the challenges faced in the production, Kabir smiles and tells me that he views the numerous hurdles along the way as inspiration rather than challenges. The defining moment for the team was when they conceived the idea of using the spoken word to bridge the individual parts and to represent these shifts visually through a sequence of *lathi nach* or traditional dances using *lathis*. Some may not know that the *lathi nach* is a form of martial art in Bangladesh that dates back centuries and that practitioners are called *lathials*. Through the symbolism of using *lathis* throughout the performance, Kabir emphasises the indomitable spirit of Bengal. Interestingly, the performance both begins and ends with a *lathi nach*, indicating that our struggle for freedom and identity is a never-ending one that returns to us in a circular fashion – The Alpha and the Omega of Liberation. A song at the end of the performance sums this up beautifully.

For Kabir and his students, the production has clearly been a labour of love to pay homage not only to a much-admired playwright but also to one who has been an occasional instructor in their department in the past. Their love and admiration of Syed Haq shines through in their delivery, as does the dedication of the actors and performers, most of whom were not even born when some of these works were penned. That they were able to master and deliver the complex Rangpuri dialogue convincingly to a native audience in Kurigram to rapturous applause demonstrates this fact. If you are looking for a whistle-stop tour of Syed Haq's works with strong entertainment value, then look no further.

Ditio Syed-Haq is a freelance writer and works in television.