

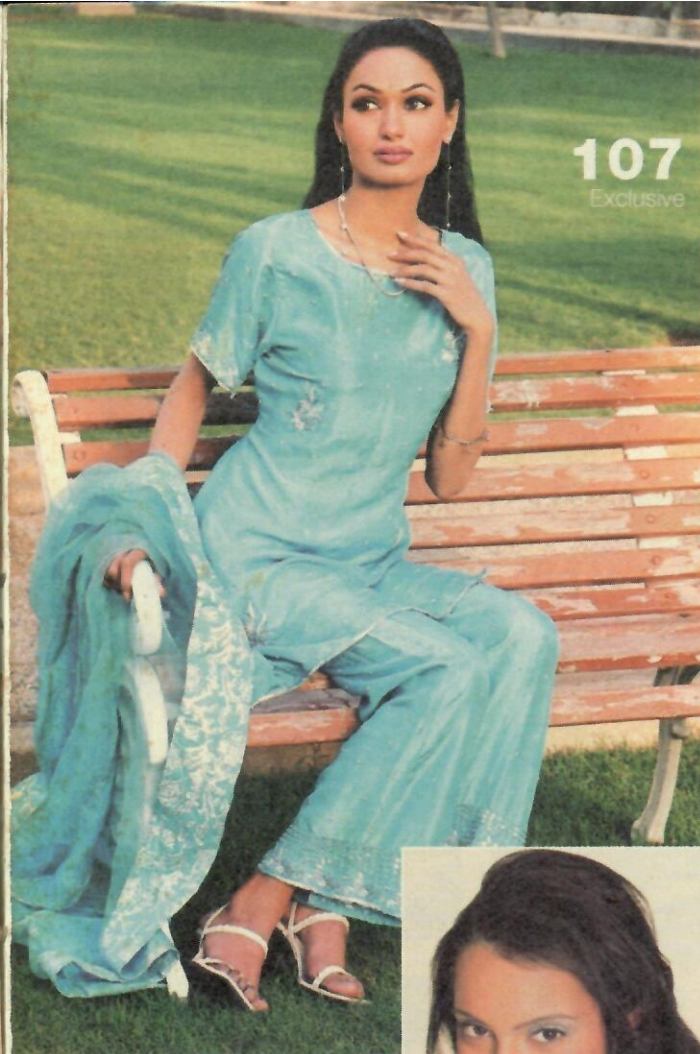
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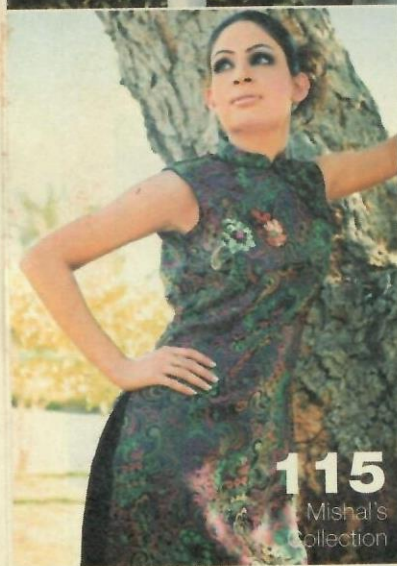
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Women's Rights

Are you serious Mr. President?

Zubeida Mustafa, our guest writer this month, questions President Musharraf's real intentions behind his brave promises of women's empowerment.

President Pervez Musharraf will probably go down in Pakistan's history as the head of state who has been most vocal on women's rights and female empowerment. But he has also set another record of sorts. The gap between his words and actions - what they term as the *qaul* and *fail* in Urdu - of a leader has never been wider in the context of women's development. If the president's statements in support of women's rights were to be put together, one could produce a hefty tome. But set against the backdrop of the sharply rising graph of violence against women in the years that Musharraf has been in office, the president's claims have a hollow ring and lose their credibility.

Take the speech he made at the International Women's Day function organized by the Ministry of Women's Development in Islamabad last month. He said all the right things about violence against women. He condemned (dis)honour killings and *Wani* as "intolerable" (though I personally wish he had found a stronger adjective). He added that no "civilized" society could "allow" such practices. That is why his government was taking every possible measure to curb these social evils. What step has he taken?

He set up an autonomous National Commission on the Status of Women and gave it sufficient powers to identify the evils which are undermining the status of women. He reserved a third of the seats in the local bodies for women and thus facilitated the election of 40,000 women in the local government as councillors and even *nazims* in some cases. He re-introduced and increased the reserved seats in the National Assembly, the provincial assemblies and the Senate. Today there are 229 women parliamentarians in Pakistan - and this is the highest number the country has ever had.

But is this enough? The president also tells us that he has declared honour killing to be murder. But wasn't that murder in any case without being so declared?

If Musharraf has in all earnest acted to improve the status of women in Pakistan and make our society safer for women, then why are the results not showing? The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan's recently released report, *The State of Human Rights in 2003*, records some horrendous figures in respect of violence against women.

It notes, "There was evidence during the year that more women were reporting domestic violence of various kinds, including rape, molestation and other crimes, there was no indication that the rates of such crimes was on the decline. Indeed the continued expansion of the *jirga* system, under which tribal gatherings delivered verdicts, once more led to crimes being committed against women."

The Human Rights Watch estimated that a woman in Pakistan was raped every two hours while up to 90 per cent of the women suffered from some form of domestic violence. According to the Karachi-based Lawyers for Human Rights and Legal Aid, in 2000-2003, 973 women were raped, 1,065 were gang-raped,

2,866 murdered, 1,511 became victims of *karo kari*, 3,273 injured, 530 burnt to death, and 4,478 were kidnapped.

If the situation continues to be as bad as before for women, the simple reason is that the president may have done much to create the infrastructure for the empowerment of women. But he hasn't done enough to change the social environment and the legal framework which encourage violence against women. In his Women's Day speech the president said that women have been empowered through the seats that have been reserved for them in the assemblies and it is up to them

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to use their new found role for the uplift of their compatriots.

Inarguably, that is very sound advice. But as we generally know, and as the president would also be knowing, what this empowerment can achieve has serious limitations. Without the government's total commitment to the uplift of women and to a policy of providing them a level playing field at par with their male counterparts, the women councillors and legislators can do very little to improve the situation.

Take only the case of violence against women which is a major and depressing manifestation of the malaise in the society's approach to the gender issue. With women regarded as lesser beings, it is inevitable that they do not receive equal rights in every walk of life – be it in family matters, marriage, employment, economic security, education, health care, physical safety and human dignity. Although all these issues need to be addressed, violence calls for immediate attention since it can be a matter of life and death.

To tackle violence against women, it is not enough to empower women politically and leave it to them to eliminate the problem. By the time the women legislators and councillors can create an impact socially and politically, many decades would have passed and innumerable lives would have been lost in the interregnum.

Hence it is the government's responsibility to play a meaningful and proactive role in the matter. It must first of all create a system to provide physical safety to

women. This calls for a tightening of the police discipline and reorienting its working, especially vis-à-vis women, to ensure that crimes against women are checked effectively. Violence can only be stopped by countering it with coercion which the state alone is empowered to do.

There is also the need to revamp the laws so that many of the excesses committed against women are treated as a violation of the law. At present many cases of domestic violence are perceived as being beyond the pale of law and something to be addressed at the social level. Then there are laws which actually promote violence against women. How else would one describe the Hudood Ordinances? It is a fact that they provide an opening to men to victimize women out of vindictiveness or spite. How these laws are exploited is proved by the fact that nearly 90 per cent of the women imprisoned under the Hudood laws are acquitted as enough evidence is not found against them.

If President Musharraf is sincere about improving the status of women, he should repeal the Hudood Ordinances as recommended by the National Commission on the Status of Women. To wait for the National Assembly to take this momentous decision will be like waiting for Godot. With so many MNAs and Senators owing allegiance to the religious parties, the required number of votes can never hope to be mustered. Hence the devise of promulgating an ordinance must be resorted to just as was done to usher in these laws in the first place. ♦

Issues (Continued from pg. 21)

constant references to men performing active and/or heroic roles and women engaged in passive, often frippery activities”.

This mindset is obvious in the Federal Curriculum Wing's recent refusal to incorporate the late journalist Najma Babar's article 'Madam Chairman, Sir', in a proposed Class Ten English textbook submitted by the Sindh Textbook Board. The article is about the young Najma going to work, while her husband got the children ready for school and looked after them, since she had a job and he didn't. The reason given for censoring this article from the proposed textbook, was that it goes against the values of Pakistani society!

Obviously, the Curriculum Wing officials don't believe in moving with the times, or allowing texts to include views that do not reflect the dominant ideologies and traditions. But how else are our children to learn that there are other ways of thinking and seeing?

The English course has not changed in over forty years. Many children struggle with English as a second language, which they know is still the language of power in this country. Accordingly, the senior English language teaching (ELT) experts, who were commissioned by Sindh Education Minister Prof. Anita Ghulam Ali to formulate new English language

textbooks for Classes 8-12, tried to include material in these new textbooks that would make English learning more interesting, accessible and student-friendly.

However, the Federal Curriculum Wing rejected much of the new material and provided a list of topics that the new English textbooks should include - like drug abuse, traffic rules, festivals of Pakistan and so on. Topics that are hardly likely to excite the imagination of most students...

But it is the material that was removed from these proposed English textbooks that is of particular concern. Besides Najma Babar's article, a poem by Khalil Gibran was also censored, apparently on the grounds that he is Jewish. Even if he was, should the religion of a great poet and philosopher be reason enough to remove his work?

Similarly, an essay by Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah's daughter Dina Wadia about her father was removed. The reason given was that he had disowned her, and in any case she is not a Muslim. Are these reasons valid? Dina Wadia was recently given the status of a State Guest when she visited Pakistan for the first time since her father's death. She has stayed away all these years because, as she has said, she didn't want to be appropriated by anybody for political purposes. One wonders how she would feel about being censored for political purposes. ♦

Weddings

SHE takes a look at the most happening weddings of the season.



Lawrence and Angeline Francis (SHE Magazine)



The bride and groom with their families



Bernice, daughter of Bosco and (late) Bernadette Rosario, weds Leonard, son of Lawrence and Angeline Francis.



Buhra, daughter of Mohammad Aslam married Naeem, son of Shaikh Mohammad Shamim

Mr & Mrs Kashif Humayun (owners of Fitness & Herbs) on their first wedding anniversary.



Seen with Faisal Qureshi, Shugafta, Aslam and Zeba Shehnaz

Forgotten Text

by

Amin Gulgee



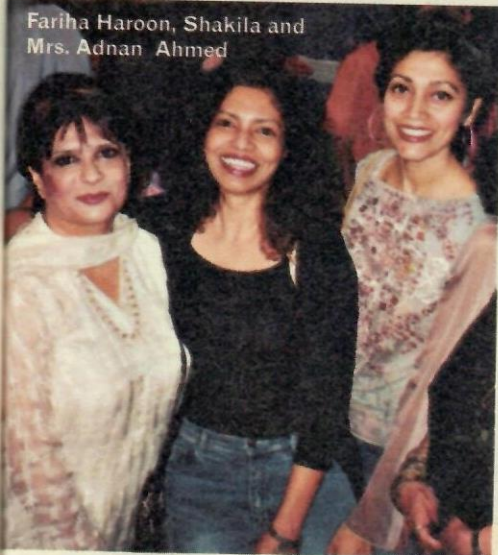
Amin Gulgee

Amin Gulgee invited a select gathering of art lovers, critics, diplomats and media personalities for the pre-launch of his sculpture 'Forgotten Text' Amin, the talented son of celebrated painter Ismail Gulgee, has designed his monumental sculpture bearing the mysterious text discovered from the lost civilization of Mohenjodaro. According to Amin, "Text is the inspiration for my monumental sculpture. The Text I have used for this sculpture is from Mohenjodaro. Mohenjodaro, like Karachi, was a vibrant centre for ideas and innovation and arose because of trade and commerce."

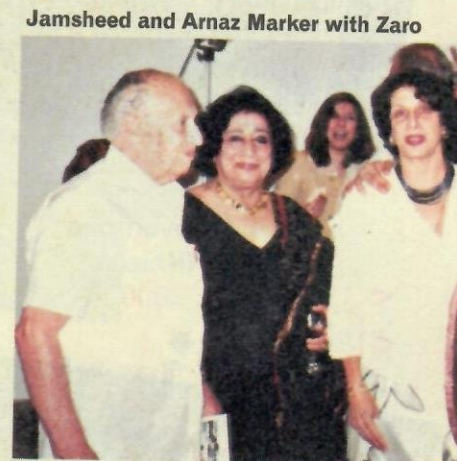
He further added that, Sindh is the link between our nation's most ancient past and our most immediate future. With this in mind, I have attempted to marry the past and the present through my use of materials. The forty-foot high sculpture is created out of copper, iron, steel, computer motherboards and glass, and it will be placed at a roundabout near BBQ Tonight in Clifton for public viewing. The huge structure will respond to the feeling of different segments of the society that the round about should not be just used for commercial activities but it should convey a message of creativity and support our local artistic talent. 'Forgotten Text', is made from three hieroglyphic symbols joined together to create a form suggestive of a chariot racer, and Amin hopes that it would have a cheerful, almost playful impact and inspire a sense of hope and happiness in the hearts of people who move about the roundabout.



The Sculpture



Fariha Haroon, Shakila and Mrs. Adnan Ahmed



Jamsheed and Arnaz Marker with Zaro



Sohail Siddiqui, two visitors from Islamabad, Mr. König, Mr. Dunand, the Swiss Ambassador, Amin, Zaro, Mrs. Dunand and the Swiss Consul General, Juluis F. Andregg

Gulgee and Zaro with Mr. & Mrs. Javed Iqbal, Imrana Ahmed, Fariha Haroon, Shehwar Rahim and Margery Hussain





KANDAHAR - AGS Film Club



Kandahar, a film by Mokhsen Makhmalbaf in Farsi with English subtitles, was shown at the Islamabad Serena Hotel recently, arranged by Asian Study Group Film Club. The new coordinator of the film club Viera Langerova, wife of the Czech Ambassador, welcomed the guests and gave an introduction to the film and filmmaker. Refreshments were served before the film began, allowing the guests an opportunity to mingle with the new coordinator of the film club and to inquire more about the film Kandahar as well as the club's

future activities.

Kandahar has gained exceptional importance after 9/11. It sheds light on the last days of the Taliban. Nafas, the main character, is a reporter who was born in Afghanistan, but fled with her family to Canada when she was a child. However, her sister was not so lucky, she lost her legs to a land mine while young and when Nafas and her family left the country her sister was accidentally left behind.

Nafas receives a letter from her sister who lives in Kandahar announcing that she has decided to commit suicide. Desperate to save her sister's life, Nafas sets off on a journey to Kandahar by getting herself smuggled from Iran to Afghanistan and travels back to the land where she was born.

Mokhsen Makhmalbaf and his cinematographer, Ebrahim Ghafouri, have captured the magnificent beauty of this remote and forbidding desert land.

A Mix of Media - Masood's Work on Display

Masood A. Khan's paintings exhibition started at the Nomad Art Gallery recently, showing a variety of moods expressed in various hues.

Masood has explored the limits of ink, charcoal and gouache in his multi-dimensional surfaces. His work appears like a loose grid with wire-like vertical lines through a horizontal mass.

The watercolours on paper displayed an attempt at recording immediate reality in an entirely different manner. Interior scenes, street views and landscapes are rendered in delicate lines and sensitive hues. It is his special way of treating the subject matter that renders him distinct from other landscape painters.

At first glance, his work appears realistic but reveals its imaginative features when observed carefully. Simple views are made different by overlapping forms and combining outside elements with inside spaces. For example, a few works depict carriages and women carrying umbrellas in a drawing room environment. This kind of contra-

diction enhances the imaginative quality of the work. It is complemented with deliberate distribution of light in a given area. The representation of light does not follow the natural course, and does not emanate from one point – both indoor and outdoor scenes.

The fascination with architectural substance and technique is evident in his panoramic street scenes. In his body of work, Masood incorporates multiple viewpoints in a single painting to fabricate a sense of reality, larger than the experience of everyday observation.

His work is a testimony of skill and creativity. The thick and thin lines denote his precise observation besides showing the expressive quality in handling the material. In the same way, the choice of delicate tones and luminous colours mark the development of the personal palette. In these Masood outlines the essence of his art by stating, "I love to look into the simplest beauty of nature illustrating that deep philosophy comes out of the intellect and, unfortunately, intellect has never produced good art."

Abro's Painting and Graphics at Nomad Gallery

An exhibition of Khuda Bux Abro's paintings and graphics were presented at the Nomad Art Gallery in Islamabad recently, showing solidarity with women's issues.

Abro has been painting with the rights of women in mind for a long time, telling the stories of confinement, discrimination, suffering, agony and anguish. Abro expresses his message through cages, bars and veils. He also manages to portray a ray of hope, and an urge to break free from societal boundaries. He shows all the torture and torment inflicted upon women in bold red and orange colours splashed heavily on the canvas giving the image of flames.

The series of paintings of *karo kari* aroused feelings of pity and compassion. His larger canvas entitled 'If she had a door' was very moving, striking at the roots of the Pakistani society. Another picture titled 'Three generations of womankind' also left a great impact.

Every new idea or representational medium in its early life stimulates a great deal of fear, hype and controversy. Time has proved again and again that these confusions are very temporary and always give way to diversity and variety.

Behbud Health Services

Kaneez is one of the thousands of beneficiaries, who have benefited from the *zakat* given to Behbud. She came to Behbud 5 years ago, from a village, at that time, she was expecting her 5th child. Her husband, a drug addict, had abandoned her after forcibly taking custody of her only son. She was ill weak and destitute. She had heard about Behbud from her relatives, who were beneficiaries of Behbud's various projects. So, she made her way to Behbud with hope in her heart. Behbud Health Services treated her immediately for TB and gave her medical assistance for the birth of her fifth child. She had basic skills of stitching and embroidery. In "Skill Training for Income Generation" Unit, trained her to be able to produce items which could be sold at Behbud Creations: at their shop Zamzama. It put her on her feet. Her children were admitted to Behbud School. The family continued to use Behbud Health Services. Recently Behbud Association held a presentation on the new development and progress in its health services. In a small gathering the association informed and updated its audience about the health care facilities being provided to the communities in Shirin Jinnah Colony and Mahmoodabad.

Behbud came into existence in 1976, barely a handful people were involved in the project. But now Behbud can rightly feel proud of its progress in this field.

The specialist clinics have been set up to provide quality services to the patients. The organisation has employed a supervisor to maintain record of Behbud donated equipments and to over see the staff.



Seminar on Hudood Ordinance



On the occasion of the International Women's Day, 8th March, 2004, the Karachi Women's Peace Committee celebrated by holding a seminar, the third in its series on women's empowerment in Pakistan. Gracing the occasion as chief guest was the Pakistani born Princess Sarwath El Hassan bin Talal of Jordan. Justice (R) Sajjad Ali Shah, former chief Justice Supreme Court of Pakistan presided over the debate on the impact of the Hudood Ordinances on the empowerment of women. The panel speakers were an interesting mix of men and women, scholars, and parliamentarians.

Prof. S. H. M. Jaffri, head and chair of the

Islamic and Pakistan Studies

Department of the Aga Khan University, an eminent scholar, opened his research presentation with the works of the jurists of Islam, the paradoxes of their *fiqh* and the political exploitation and distortion, and why consensus was not arrived. Fazlur Rahman, former dean of Sunni Theology of the University of Aligarh, Professor at the University of Malaysia and Ryadh, contested that women were given major protection by the Islamic Hudood laws as well as

relief from jihad, prayers, and fasting during certain cycles, and no domestic economic responsibilities. He defended the Hudood ordinance stricture of the half witness status as a relief and not a restriction. The debate heated up when Zia Awan, President of LHRLA, outright rejected the legal and social justice relevance of rights of women: under the Hudood ordinance women were being victimized and jailed because they were affected by the *zina* ordinance. As a rebuttal, Raheel Qazi stated that the reason why women languish in jails was not the fault of the Hudood ordinance, but the law enforcing agencies—corruption and weakness in the police and the judiciary. Barrister Qazi Isa, quoting profusely from the Qur'an tried to illustrate that the Hudood ordinance was not in conformity with the laws of Islam as enunciated in the Qur'an. Hudood Ordinances were distortions — the hijab clad Dr. Nasreen vehemently disagreed, presenting her own experiences as a medical doctor and a social activist. As the debate was well-balanced, the last word and vote was given in the verdict of Sajjad Ali Shah, retired Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Pakistan. He felt that more injustices had been caused not just toward women but also toward men because of the Hudood ordinance. He added that the strict criteria of the Qur'anic injunctions could not be met by Pakistani society as it existed today (including himself). Princess Sarwath El Hassan's keynote address did full justice to the women's position throughout the first 1300 years of Islamic history detailing the services that had been rendered by the Prophet's daughters, wives, and other family members. She also referred to the Quaid-e-Azam's encouragement of women's participation to make Pakistan a genuine, independent and sovereign nation. Summing it up, Nargis Rahman, Chair of the Karachi Women's Peace Committee stated that man's creation in time and the recognition of the time factor in the Qur'an meant that the spirit of the Islamic laws and the value system was immutable, but specific laws had to be amended according to the needs of society. A jampacked audience gave an overwhelming ovation to the recipients of the Lifetime Service Awards.



An Ongoing Tradition - Art in the Punjab

Marjorie Husain

In 1952, Anna Molka Ahmed initiated the first of a series of annual art exhibitions that were held in the Fine Arts department of Punjab University. This tradition was taken up with zeal by the artists of Lahore who formed a lasting, highly successful artists association which flourishes to this day.

The latest in the series and the 18th Annual Exhibition organized by the Artist's Association of the Punjab was a welcome event which showcased the work of distinguished established artists, younger artists making their presence felt in the field and artists newly emerged from art institutes. AAP is the only artist's alliance that is able to consistently provide a platform for artist's from the Punjab and other provinces to exhibit their work. These exhibitions have introduced the work of numerous talented young artists to the public and allowed art enthusiasts the opportunity to observe the development of art in various areas of the country. Well known artists from Quetta, Islamabad, Rawalpindi and Karachi contributed to the display held at the impressive Alhambra Cultural Complex that is a popular feature of The Mall, Lahore. Each exhibition, and there have been six National events as well as the eighteen Punjab Association exhibitions, takes an enormous amount of time and effort spent in planning and implementing. The fact that the exhibitions have been mounted annually with regularity is largely due to the strong, well coordinated Executive Committee working in coordination with a dedicated General Secretary and Chairman.

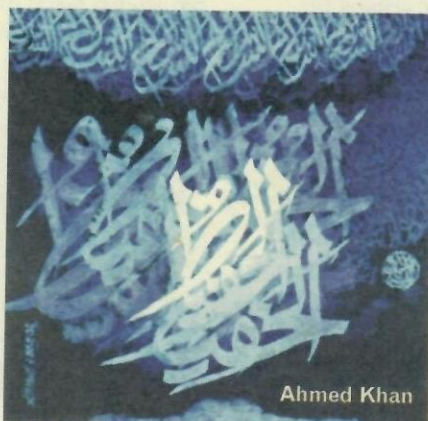
At the latest display over one hundred artists combined their diverse talents in a colourful kaleidoscope of viewpoints. The Punjab School of Landscape

Painting initiated by Khalid Iqbal in the 1950s opened the genre to myriad forms of expression as each artist searched for an individual interpretation of his surroundings. As environmental concerns grow, landscape painting has, in several instances, taken on significant social and political dimensions, while others are content to offer their work as a paean of homage to nature. There were wonderful studies in contrast from the superlative work of Mian Ijaz ul Hassan, an enchanted

forest of Serdar Aseff Ahmed Ali, a study of urban/rustic life by Ghulam Mustafa, an interpretation of the early evening by Mughees Riaz, dazzling fields of mustard painted by Ghulam Rasul, and the 'fauve' bright panorama of Maliha Azmi Aga.

A discreet introduction of colour in the monochrome signature style portrait study by Rahat Naveed Masud added warmth and dimension to the thoughtful work. Dr. Mussarat Hassan's study of a young man working on a computer captured his absorption in the angle of the head and shoulders. A tranquil mood was enhanced by the patterned teacups waiting to be filled in the foreground of the picture. Ali Azmat contributed a striking painting of a young woman whose presence added bright colouration to a somber scene.

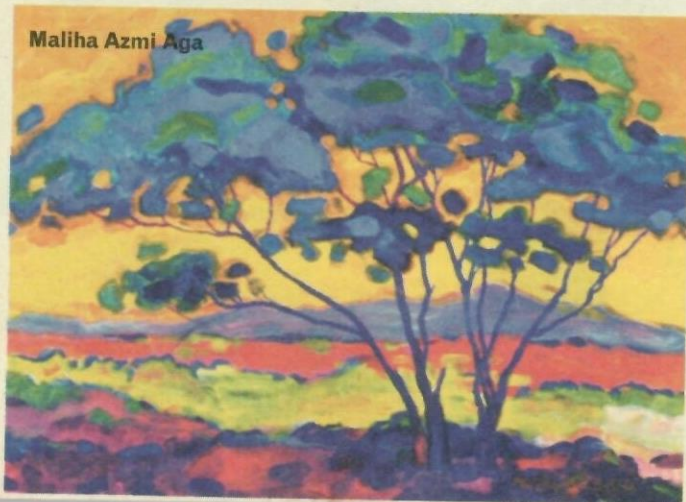
Among the more experienced artists one enjoyed the prancing horses of Dr. Khalid Mehmood. Straining at the bit, their rider's arms were stretched to hold onto the reins, one imagined a crisp early morning meet that would take the riders through dew damp grass in the fresh beginning of a day. A lovely composition by Ahmed Khan saw a script that took on the rhythm of swathes of sky blue satin streamers, so soft and subtle were the painted strokes. Of course there was much more to see and enjoy in the rare visual experience of catching up with old friends and making new ones.



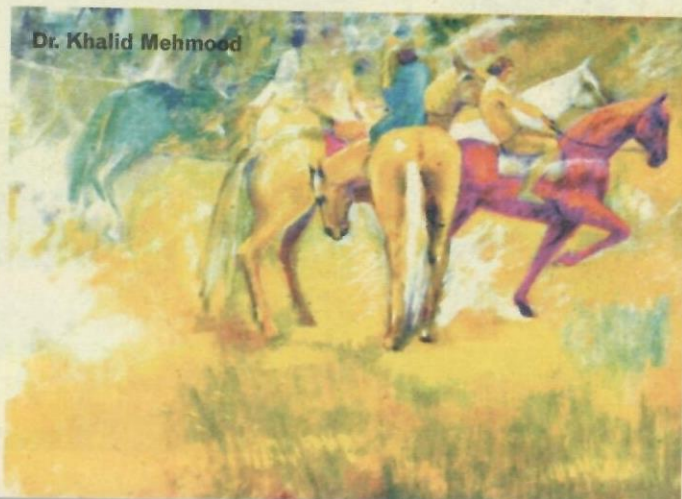
Ahmed Khan



Rahat Naveed Masud



Maliha Azmi Aga



Dr. Khalid Mehmood

Meeting of the minds...

10th SAARC Writer's Conference

Nyla Daud

They came on the wings of jet planes.
They came riding motor vehicles.
They came walking across the Wahgah divide...in twos or threes and fours for a meeting of the minds, bringing with them messages of peace and goodwill packaged in an intellectualism peculiar to the SAARC identity alone. So when Shoaib Hashmi, who was at his witty best at the inaugural session of the 10th SAARC Writer's Conference, read Faiz the strains of *Hum Kay Thehray Ajnabee* expressed the essence of the meet much more seriously than the gaudily dressed up folk dancers and drummers who had been commandeered to entertain the guests before they entered the hall. Possibly the collective brainwave of hosts, Kishwar Naheed of Hawwa, Dr. Fauzia Saeed of Action Aid, the Foundation of SAARC Writers and the Pakistan Academy of Letters, the initial merriment to the literary meet however went the extra mile to prove that all work and no plays makes Jack a dull boy!

Inside the Alhamra hall, things took on a decidedly intellectual turn with Shoaib Hashmi and a young lady alternately reading and rendering vocally from Faiz *Intisab*, followed by a recorded message from literary doyen Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi whose absence hung over the proceedings. Markedly absent too were literary seniors Ishfaq Ahmed and wife Bano Qudsia.

With Federal Education Minister Ms. Zobeida Jalal in the chair, the 10th SAARC Writer's Conference following up on the recent peace initiatives, opened on a decidedly intellectual mood. Nevertheless the political undertones were as vibrant as vibrant can be. No wonder then that the greater stress came to be upon a collective identity whereby the SAARC nations could emerge with stronger individual identities in a fast changing world where war appears to be looming larger than life at every corner. And of course neighbours India and Pakistan shone out as the

senior siblings with Bangladesh following as a close second. Which is not to say that the Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka or Maldives shied in the shadows. Representations of each member country's literary contributions in every sphere of life from the political to the cultural to the technological and the historical gelled together in a near perfect composite with big boss Kishwar Naheed fully in control whenever the situation threatened to take an uncharted course: like when during poetess Yasmeen Hameed's comparing session four instead of the expected initial two speakers turned up. Or when Abdullah Hussein instead of dwelling on the Mystique and Roots of SAARC Region and how it is reflected in literature, took up a case of wrong spellings on the invitation! Or when it became more than obvious that guest speaker Dr. Abid Hussein changed the topic from the sessions designed program to a political deluge.

Which is not to say that the conference missed the point all the time. On the contrary it was certainly a remarkable feat in that it stole the show around a lot of coffee tables, even though it had no state patronage oiling its wheels. Commented Intezar Hussain, whose presence throughout the three days gave a decided authenticity to the conference, "Such meetings infuse a new zeal amongst the literary community as members get to have concentrated exchanges of developments in the different South Asian zones, representatives from which bring in writings reflective of individual cultures. Of course, as a writer I do not really concede to the overall political overtones that contemporary literature seems to be getting entangled with, but I am also aware that one cannot afford to be cut off from the mainstream. The fact is that peace is the over ruling ambience today. So if we have talked of peace at this conference, then we have moved with the times."



Participants at the opening session



Peace play by IRC performed at the opening session of the SAARC Writers Conference



Noor Jehan



Mumtaz Mahal

The Mughal Queens

The three exceptional queens who have left lasting impressions in the Moghul era.

Mughal. A word that conjures up refinement and sophistication. A cultural, political and social revolution of enormous proportions. It was during the Mughal reign that a phenomenal change took place in the very ethos of society.

The Mughal monarchs were patrons of the arts in all its forms. Architecture, writing, poetry, painting, dance, singing, cuisine and dressing - everything went through a metamorphosis to evolve into the Mughal school of thought.

Like the kings, the Mughal queens and princesses spearheaded this revolution. The illustrious Mughal women were renowned for their superior aesthetic inclinations.

The most famous of all the Mughal queens were: Noor Jehan, the Persian wife of Jehangir (the fourth emperor in the Mughal dynasty). Mumtaz Mahal, the wife of Shah Jehan (the fifth emperor); and Jodha Bai, the Rajput wife of Akbar (the third emperor).

The common trait amongst these three women was that their husbands were completely besotted by them. So much so that Shah Jehan's love for Mumtaz Mahal seems to be the very stuff that fairy tales are made of.

But this is about as far as similarity goes. Each had made enormous contribution to the Mughal lifestyle. Jodha for instance was a great influence on her husband Akbar's religious philosophy that he enforced upon the region. The emperor's Din-e-Illahi was an eclectic mixture

Water and Disaster

Mismanagement and poor governance in the water sector has led to a man made disaster in the Indus River basin areas.

Since 1993, the UN-Sponsored World Day for Water is observed with the belief that efforts toward water conservation and sustainable management require public awareness at local, national, regional and international levels.

The United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution A/RES/47/193 on 22nd December 1992, by which March 22nd of every following year was declared 'World Day for Water'. Every year, the day is marked by a particular theme. This year, the theme is 'Water and Disaster'. Water-related disasters might include droughts, avalanches, floods, cyclones, storms, landslides and mudslides. All these hazards pose serious risks to millions of people who inhabit the globe. According to experts, if the total prevention is not within the reach of human beings then the catastrophic effects of these natural hazards can be curtailed or at least minimized through prevention and mitigation. Besides natural disasters related to water, its availability and access is one of the most important issues facing humanity.

According to a UN study, while the world population continues to surge, the availability of fresh water is on the decline and in the next two decades, many of the countries in South Asia, Middle East and Africa would face a crunch. Water contaminated with faecal, bacteria, parasites and other microbes causes about 6,000 deaths every day. The deaths so far include 1.4 million children under the age of five.

Asia has the lowest per capita water availability when compared with other continents. However, in Pakistan the previous spell of rain and floods in Pakistan has slightly improved the surfaced water availability situation in the country. But quarters in Sindh are still not satisfied with the discharge of the Indus River in the deltic region. The reduced quantity of out-

flow and discharge of the nutrient-rich sediment, load of the Indus River has caused an intrusion of sea water towards up-land areas under the phenomenon of sea-water-fresh-water interactive imbalance.

At present, almost all the fresh water distributaries have no link to the Indus River as revealed from satellite imagery. Consequently, the sea water has invaded and replaced the disconnected older distributaries as creeks of the Arabian Sea. This change literally diminished livestock and vegetation on land and fish and other edible marine varieties and rich mangrove forests in the sea.

In Pakistan, the government is very keen to address water related issues. With regard to water supply and sanitation, the most critical step, taken recently, is that the operations of the provincial Public Health Engineering Departments, previously administered at provincial level, are managed by district and local bodies. Serious efforts like the formation of two committees - parliamentary and technical - are underway to increase the water storage capacity within the country. This would not only help a lot in increasing the availability of water for agriculture but would also be helpful in mitigating the

effects of floods and drought, which the country has often experienced in the past.

There is now greater need to observe the World Water Day in Pakistan, in its true spirit, especially when public awareness on water issues is lacking. An awareness campaign can highlight the issues, both through print and electronic media, in a more convincing way.

This would help build a consensus among the masses and supplement the efforts of government and civil society organizations to take vital steps towards water related issues and development.

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