



Art and Liberation: The Perspective of Three Bangladeshi Women Artists

-Monica Jahan Bose

As Bangladesh celebrates forty years of its independence, there have been some wonderful achievements in regards to women's rights. Yet there remain great challenges to women's participation as equal partners with men at home, at work, and at school. As a result of Bangladesh's independence, students are able to receive instruction in their mother tongue and literacy has increased substantially in forty years. However, in many communities, female literacy still lags behind. The female artists of Bangladesh contribute unique perspectives on the position of women and the myriad barriers to women's liberation.

Bangladesh has a female prime minister as well as three female ministers in the cabinet, who are trying to revise laws and create programs that promote equality for men and women as guaranteed by the Constitution. The citizenship laws have been revised to allow women to give Bangladeshi citizenship to their children even if the father is not Bangladeshi. The One-Stop-Crisis Center program is being expanded for women surviving violence to provide all needed services in one place, including medical examination, counseling, legal assistance, and police assistance. Government needs to continue its support to ensure women's equal access to education and personal freedom, especially in rural areas.

Art that addresses social issues can serve as a tool for discussion and reflection, and lead to awareness, healing, and change. Several women artists – within the country and abroad as part of the Bangladeshi diaspora -- are directly addressing the everyday

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Preema Nazia Andalib, "Compromise,"
oil on canvas



Monica Jahan Bose, "Eye
Candy 2 (You and I)"
acrylic and pigment on
canvas



Atiya Islam Annie, two paintings, acrylic on
canvas



Monica Jahan Bose, "Elections
4," mixed media on canvas



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lives of women and questioning gender inequality. This short piece looks at the work of three Bangladeshi women artists whose work focuses on gender issues, Preema Nazia Andalib, Atiya Islam Anne, and the author of this article, Monica Jahan Bose.

Preema Nazia Andalib is an artist and curator whose performance, paintings and multi-media work critiques the traditional roles of women and the control of their bodies. Her performance, "Marry My Egg," shows the artist in her red wedding sari and gold jewelry, methodically using a knife and fork to cut and eat poached eggs, while the table is cluttered with egg shells. The performance raises questions about society's focus on women merely as vessels and carriers of children rather than individuals with other needs and desires. Andaleeb is one of the few Bangladeshi artists with the courage to deal directly with the question of gender and women's position in society.

Atiya Islam Anne's paintings focus on the precarious position of women and draw attention to such practices as acid burning and

the manner in which women considered mere objects. Her images are often unabashedly gory and have a surrealist quality reminiscent of Frida Kahlo. The act of painting these images seems to be an act of both anguish and empowerment. Many of her paintings feature high heeled shoes in an array of colors, an allusion to the way in which women must dress to please men. Some of her works also have art historical references, such as the Mona Lisa in one image juxtaposed with a veiled woman wearing high heels, all against a background of burning red. The artist appears to question society's continuing obsession with the "feminine mystique" and the need to change, control, or cover women's bodies.

As a Bangladeshi-American artist and activist, my own art looks at gender, power, language, and identity from a cross-cultural lens. The sari blouse is a recurring motif in my work, representing the female body and woman's place in society. I use Bengali script in my work as a political act, affirming multilingualism, universal literacy, and the mother language movement in Bangladesh resulting in independence. My "Eye Candy" series is about marriage, love, desire, and the objectification of women, the sari blouse and red boots becoming almost a self-portrait, showing my Eastern and Western sides. Like Anadaleeb and Islam, I am intrigued by society's obsession with marriage and the one-dimensional view of women as beautiful objects and mothers.

In the "Elections 4" painting, the red sari blouse against a green sari becomes a feminist flag of Bangladesh. My recent etchings continue this theme of female empowerment and freedom, with the red sari blouses flying away like birds.

I am interested in using my art to further the dialogue about gender, literacy, and empowerment. The role of the artist in society is changing, with many artists moving from a model of isolation to one of collaboration. For my next project, I will work with women from my ancestral village of Katakali in the southern coast of Bangladesh to create a collaborative series of hand-made prints on red and white saris, representing the different stages of a woman's life – from young bride to mature woman. These sari art pieces will be worn by the women who made them and displayed in Dhaka and Washington DC to enhance cross-border dialogue about the transformations that are taking place in Bangladesh and globally.

The role of women in Bangladesh is shifting. Art addressing gender can play a key role in stimulating discussion that leads to transformation of society. So far, artists in Bangladesh have generally been able to freely express their ideas about gender, whether through figurative or symbolic work. This open exchange of imagery and ideas is an important component of art, democracy, and social change.

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