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Storytelling with Saris: Empowering women in Bangladesh

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Photo by Wanda Jackson. At Brentwood's art gallery, floor-to-ceiling saris bear witness to women's literacy and empowerment in the remote island of Katakhal, Bangladesh.

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By Wanda Jackson

An exhibition at Brentwood Arts Exchange through Oct. 12, chronicles how women in Katakhal, Bangladesh, are rebuilding their lives after devastating cyclones hit the remote island in 2008 and 2009.

The women, many of whom could not read, have empowered themselves through literacy and farming classes.

In "Layer by Layer: Storytelling with Saris," 12 of these women woodblock printed words, designs and images about their experience onto 18-foot-long saris.

One woman, Hawa, whose name means "wind," was born to a family of eight children. Because of poverty, she could not attend school as a child; instead she worked to provide for herself and her siblings. Like many of the women in her village, she was married at age 11.

But, after surviving the devastation of the cyclones, Hawa enrolled in literacy classes at a cooperative for women and learned to read. She also learned to grow vegetables and fruits, and now owns four cows.

Like Hawa, the women in Katakhal are proud of their achievements, as reflected in the sari exhibition. Their designs, images and words are expressive with vibrant colors and lines. Red, gold and deep blues spell enlightenment, self-confidence and empowerment. "Eyes" symbolize "the inner eye" and "vision." Some use "drops of water" to symbolize tears or the "flow of life." Bangladesh words translate into "fear," "water" and storm.

A direct quote from a leading women's magazine in Bangladesh says, "The village is changing from the inside."

"Layer by Layer: Storytelling with Saris" is a collaborative printmaking and story project led by artist Monica Jahan Bose, a self-described Bangladeshi-American artist, lawyer and activist in Washington, D.C., and Samhati, a Maryland-based non-profit that participates in eco-projects that empower women.

Several of Bose's prints and drawings that address cultural and universal women's issues, and filmmaker Nandita Ahmed's video and photo documentation about the women are featured in conjunction with the exhibition.

"We have a lot to learn from these women," Bose said. "And, they have a lot to learn from us and the issues that affect us all."

In her work, Bose uses the sari, sari blouse and other garments as metaphors for the female body and spirit, investigating gender, identity, desire and women's role as carriers of tradition. She also



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