

Depicting 'crisis of survival'

By Hameed Zaman

NAZIA KHAN, a brilliant painter and printmaker is hooked on poetry and is exhibiting some sensational charcoal studies based on *Musaddus*, a poetic masterpiece of Maulana Hali, who wrote it at a time when the Muslims of this sub-continent were passing through a crisis of survival and political emancipation.

The exhibition of her charcoal studies, paintings and prints is opening on November 14 at Chawkandi Art.

In fact, Nazia Khan happened to listen to a recitation of the *Musaddus-i-Hali* at a private function and was so moved with the powerful poetry of the epic dimension that she reacted strongly and created four studies in charcoal without losing time, depicting inner tensions of the depressed nation.

"Reading poetry is very important part of my work, I always relate my art with what I am reading," says Nazia, who has graduated from the University of Oxford, (Somerville College) and later joined Ruskin School of Art, specialising in print-making with wood-cut and copper-carving. She has also cleared her Art Foundation Course from Wimbledon School of Art.

With the Western schooling and long stay in the West, it certainly came as a pleasant surprise—her devotion to classical Urdu poetry with such comprehension and reaction.

She uses charcoal sticks on the paper directly, lending most of her monochromatic studies an ambiance of mystery by defusing the smooth charcoal shades into fine tonal variations, from gloomy dark to light smoky smudges. This engages the viewer for their expressive contents. *Musaddus* certainly offers a suitable vehicle for her expressive studies.

Soon after the War of Independence (1857), the Urdu poets, in particular, started writing poetry with political overtones. Poetry became as much elegiac as it was igniting the flame of nationalism, high-

lighting a burning desire to regain the lost freedom and an urge for the revivalism of the past glory. Poet Hali felt the agony of the situation and exhorted the Muslims to rise to the occasion.

However, his poetry, all said and done, remained pessimistic, suggesting a kind of hopelessness and despair, contrary to Allama Iqbal's aggressive exhortations, who not only warned and analysed the situation, but offered solutions to the problems being faced by the



Ummah.

All this simmering resentment and discontent and a feeling of lull before storm have been ably captured in the charcoal studies of Nazia. I am touched with the sincerity and intensity of feeling with which she charges her portrayals. The cluster of figures, the audience, are keeping their backs towards the viewers, like dark epitomes of depression, all sitting enshrouded at a *Majlis* like gathering, awaiting the first shock of the impending doom, symbolised by a dark cloud which hangs overhead.

The shooting charcoal lines crisscrossing the vacant space emphasise the distance between the canopy and the sitting

figure, listening the recitation with rapt attention. The lines sustain the compositional structure, making the stage setting alive with a kind of lighting system. The hidden faces of the females create a sort of mystery of the unknown.

These studies are all the more significant because never before a national theme of such a crucial import was interpreted by any artist here in terms of modern medium with a Cubist vocabulary. In yet another charcoal study in the series, Nazia shows a single woman with her back perspective, a monumental figure rising upwards. This is in contrast with the passivity of her other charcoals. There is determination, an awakening and awareness, a hope for survival and a possibility change about this study.

In the same emotional continuity, Nazia's pen and ink studies show some tragic happenings of Bosnia, massacre of the Muslims. The pile of bones and skulls are turning into debris and dust, evoking the horrors of a genocidal expression of a systematic campaign for eliminating the Muslims from their homeland. The drawings are done in strong lines composing the remains of those killed in the fanatical rage in a form wood stacks, underlining the shock and revulsion. It is again a theme, which has moved Nazia, and her concern and involvement on the emotional plane have strongly been expressed.

Her paintings are strong in abstraction where she is concerned with the feminist theme of suppression and subjugation. The helplessness has amply been demonstrated with force and conviction.

In fact, Nazia is "using the figure as a point of departure, trying to get beyond the surface to grasp reality. Not by description, but through feeling the essentials. What is left after a lot of looking is the residue of vision in her search for reality behind reality" as Nazia puts it. She is showing much maturity before her age.