

Dhaka, Friday, November 17, 1995

Booker '95

Bookmakers' Favourite Rushdie loses to Pat Barker

ENGLISH novelist Pat Barker, writer of a haunting trilogy about World War one, fought off a fierce challenge from Indian born Salman Rushdie on November 7 win Britain's top literary prize.

Barker a 52-year-old former teacher from northern England whose first novel was not published until she was 39 landed the 20,000 pound (31,650 dollar) Booker Prize for "The Ghost Road."

It intermingled fact with fiction in the tale of a working class lieutenant battling the horrors of the trenches alongside poet Wilfred Owen.

Recalling the psychological scars of the conflict, she told reporters Shell Shock was misunderstood as a failure of manliness. This was part of the torment the men suffered.

Barker, facing the literary equivalent of Hollywood Oscar night said she was sick of hearing her own voice and thanked her competitors for their friendly attitude, and for writing such wonderful books.

Rushdie, under threat of death from Iran for blasphemy had been the hottest favourite in the 27-year-history of the prestigious prize. Bookmakers considered him a certainty to win with *The Moor's Last Sigh*.

But Barker, the first woman to land the Booker since A S Byatt in 1990 emerged the winner after hours of heated debate by the

judges. She said the lesson of World War one shouldn't be forgotten. I wanted to get people not just to think about the horrors of it but to actually think quite deeply about why it happened and the effects it had on society.

Barker was a teacher who "lived on a diet of rejection slips before her first novel *Union Street*'s was published in 1982. It was later made into a film *Stanley and Iris* starring Jane Fonda and Robert de Niro — not a happy adaptation for her.

But she really won literary acclaim with her three books on World War one, culminating in *The Ghost Road*, published by Viking Press at 15 pounds (23.69 dollars).

Barker who drew much inspiration from her grandfather's tales of the trenches, said the somme is like the holocaust. It revealed things about mankind that we cannot come to terms with and cannot forget. It can never become the past.

Under the media spotlight after her win she said "I didn't think about the critics when I was writing it. If I had I would have been paralysed."

Others on the Booker shortlist were Briton Barry Unsworth, South African Justin Cartwright and Australian Tim Winton.

The judges read 141 books by writers from 50 Commonwealth countries and Ireland before picking their shortlist. — Reuter



Author Pat Barker holds her novel, *The Ghost Road*, at London's Guildhall on November 7 after the 52-year-old mother-of-two from Durham won the 20,000 Booker Prize ahead of the favourite, Salman Rushdie. — AFP/UNB

Unacknowledged Debts

Waheedul Haque

DHAKA before World War 2 was quite a town. Mofassil it was perhaps but not in the sense of a straggler trying to catch up with times. For, if anything, it was abreast of the best of intellectual things and of the world and the bravest of the subcontinent's anti-colonial fights had its origin here. Dhaka was still carrying on the Shaista Khan tradition being the cheapest place to live, with food and housing and environment, guaranteed. And although one had even to go to Bhattashali's Nimtoli museum to see a piece of true Muslim fabric, Dhaka was still then carrying on gloriously with the tradi-

tion of producing the best sarees and white Mulmul best of jewellery specially silver filigree artefacts.

The intellectual brilliance of the place topped this as does a De Beers diamond to a bracelet. No need to hark back to hoary past and ex-hume Atish Dipankar et al. The nineteenth century galaxy of thinkers writers and artists ending up with Sir Jagadish, Bhai Girish Sen and Atul Prasad who rose from around Dhaka, reads like a Bengali Who's Who. And the mantle was borne with no mean merit by Satyen Bose, Buddadev Bose, Jibananda and a host of others in the 20th century.

By the end of the second decade of the new century a new thing came into Dhaka's life. A new dimension opened. And who could guess. This academic outfit was going to affect most forcefully the social cultural and political life of the region and its people. The Dhaka University materialised in 1921 as a consolation for the assorted Muslim feudal aristocrats — most of them not quite Bengalees — who had realised their dream of East Bengal only to lose it in the sixth year of the 1905 vivisection of a very much living Bengal. The university was to act as the catalytic agent for the social development of a backward and illiterate Bengali Muslim community.

How far was that goal attained? As an institution of higher education and a seat of learning both deep and lofty the Dhaka University left no room for improvement. Its faculties were staffed by the very best scholars and teachers of the day and during the able leadership of Herzog and Langley, the small family did left to be desired by way of administration. Professor Abdur Razzak's taking the university for an unending ride was possible because of the plus points of the place and not otherwise.

But establishing a well-appointed and well-serviced university is one thing and for an institution to grow into a great university is quite another. This residential university modelled on Oxford could not come close to that — eight century old beacon of light because there was no inner growth in it. But there was a more important reason for the university's failing to realise its potential. As far as the Bengali Muslim community — amidst them the university was situated and for the benefit primarily of them — the set-up was a kind of fish out of water. Mere opening of such a glorified school doesn't mean piebets — The penurious Muslim farmer and weaver, mason and tailor, syce and babarchi-khansama would come rushing to the place crossing its threshold to transform into a new class. In the absence of a desired response from the target clientele, DU had no way but to become a shrivelled Calcutta University.

Strangely enough well into the new century Bengali Muslim surplus farmers preferred sending their scions

to far off Aligarh rather than to Dhaka. The attraction lay in that university's endeavours to live up to a part of its name — Aligarh Muslim University. A culturally starved, almost suppressed community was then catching at anything allowing them to assert their identity and existed Mohammedan Sporting club and Abbasuddin's songs. Dhaka University in contrast offered at best a secular image with a predominant non-Muslim presence among both alumni and the Teaching staff.

By the thirties many more Muslim students were thronging village schools. And most of their parents had no opening but the DU to send their wards to — only the rich could afford Aligarh and the charm of the place was wearing off fast in the eye of a Muslim literati finding in Fazlul Huq and Suhrawardy their models rather than anachronistic Islamic zealots. After all the fast overtaking Pakistani separatist movement was a political campaign to land the backward and impoverished Bengali Muslim on a materially as well as socially superior ground — very very far from having any religious or revivalistic or Pan-Islamist elements in it. Sons of Muslim peasants and weavers started to cross the lither to forbidding portals of DU. Salimullah Muslim Hall, to whose creation the much celebrated British titled merchant — Nawab did not contribute anything compared to what Kishorilal Jubilee of Balati did for Jagannath Hall — was made into a little Aligarh by the enthusiasm of the early Muslim throngs to the DU.

But SM Hall was expensive

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for the size of the peasant pockets. Not all parents could afford Hall hostelry for their sons. And this residential hall for Muslim students was specially expensive because of imported Aligarh dandyism. That streak of upstart foppishness has by and blossomed into a main characteristic of the hedonist-consumerist ideals of Bangladesh of the nineties.

Where did then the ambitious sons of the soil go? Well for two full generations most Muslim undergraduates of DU stayed and ate at the house of who they have been derisively calling kuttis or small people — the local Dhakaites. The members of this pidgin-urdu speaking sub-culture have many sterling qualities — some of which have long been celebrated by people not belonging to the fold — such as their wit. But possibly the best in them was brought out in their interaction with the so-called lodging master in the home. They loved and respected the follow from the villages — the *mutsaal* or Mr Master — to a point of absurdity. The hosts were all indeed small people — earn-

ing little and spending much and living in very incommensurate ancestral houses. But with the biggest heart in all the world.

Such adulation not infrequently ended in unending lifelong ties between the scholar and his benefactor's family, and there are instances galore of this being consecrated by betrothal. Thus the lodging master and his worshipping hosts started an intercourse yielding most wholesome cultural, social and, yes, political results.

The Language movement of 1952, the anti-Ayub movement of 1962, the mass upsurge of 1969 were all hand-crafted by DU students. All



Old Dhaka — 1952, Watercolour

All this could not come to be if at the hub of it all wasn't that wonderful thing cemented by the tie of love and respected between the *kutti* householder and his *mutsaal* when in 1948 the students first moved for Bangla as a state language it simply fizzled. The aborted movement failed to evince local Dhakkaya support. By '52 the *mutsaals* had broken down the resistance simply through telling the Urdu-speaking locals that it was they who demanded a fair deal for Bangla. The students can do no wrong, believed the general run of Dhakkaya population.

The continuing success of the Language Movements and its many spin-offs enmeshed the mixed-culture populace more and more with the living magic of Bengali literature and the Bengali way of life in general.

The door was opened for a meaningful and fetching integration. It was left to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to transform this cradle of Muslim League, bulwark sectarian communal reaction into the citadel of the politics of Bengali nationalism. All through winning over the true Dhaka people. General Pershing, on liberating Paris from German occupation at the end of World War I, said, we come to pay our debts, Lafayette. When will all Bangladesh know and acknowledge its debts to the small men of Dhaka — the Dhakkaya.

The paintings, used in this article, are by our leading artist Abdur Razzak who early this year put up an exhibition of his watercolour paintings and pencil sketches on Dhaka, the city he has seen over the past 40 years and felt its changes.

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Rampura in 1966, where the present TV Bhaban is situated, Goash

FASHION

Bangladeshi Fashion : Ready to Take off

AN upwardly mobile and brand-conscious middle-class is encouraging the growth of a fashion industry in Bangladesh. Fashion shows in Dhaka are not, however, a '90s phenomenon; in 1987 a group of women, mostly from the upper classes organised a fashion show.

In the '90s, professionally

organised fashion shows have enjoyed considerable success. Maheen Khan, Bibi Russel and a few others seem to be really dedicated to promote the concept of "looking-nice" at all levels of the society. With such professionals working hard, the fashion industry appears ready to take off.

Maheen Khan — design manager of Aarong — was the creative inspiration behind Aarong's glitzy, first-ever professional designer-wears show at Sonargaon Hotel late last month. Twenty high-heeled models, most of them new faces, catwalked down the bamboo-made stage draped in the latest creations of Maheen.

Although Maheen Khan said that she primarily listens to what Aarong's patrons, want, the stamp of the designers' brain and imagination was much noticeable

The October 26 fanfare was not just one of those leggy shows, but was meant for two purposes: to make dress-making more professional and to raise funds for artisans who can no longer perform or work. "It was also a sort of preparation for Aarong's Eid collections," said the Aarong designer.

About 400 nicely-dressed people gathered to witness the show. Unlike catwalk displays in western countries — there were no oohs and aahs from the audience.

"I was very excited and tense because this was the first-ever show that I designed and presented on behalf of Aarong. I had to make sure nothing went wrong during show-time, and of course, the Bandwagon was there to support me," Maheen told The Daily Star during a brief dialogue two days after the show.

Moushumi Nasser and Saeed Ahmed choreographed the orchestrated display. Bandwagon seemed very much at ease. "During the show, we were mostly marking how the Bandwagon-trained models were performing," said Mou and Saeed.

Since there is no defined boundary in the field of fashion, it's a sort of stream changing its direction all the time; and sometimes, it

works as an upstream phenomenon. For example, the fashion of the '50s or the '60s is not the same as what it is today. Times have changed, tastes are different, and above all, the people are not the same.

But again, there's no guarantee that the fashion of yesteryears may not come back with a sudden change in people's taste. "It won't be surprising to see the women of our country wearing what Suchitra Sen once wore and men following Uttam Kumar," said Mou who used to be a leading model on Dhaka catwalk stage.

Explaining this cyclic aspect of fashion, Maheen said, "Yes, it can happen quite frequently." Maheen often makes foreign tours to sit before the catwalk footlights in order to enhance her vision with newer blends.

In Maheen's opinion, fashion shows are necessary for the product-oriented approach. For instance, displays as such are organised all over the world to introduce new designs and styles which reflect not only a country's culture, but also the taste of different social groups within that country. "In this way, interested people can know what is and are coming in the future," said Maheen. The Aarong designer graduated in Fashion Design from Brooks

College, LA, California and received a Diploma in Textile Design from the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising also in California.

After completion of these certificate courses, she attended the Parsons School of Design and got her Bachelor degree in Textile and Surface Pattern Design. This was a school specialising in fashion and interior design. There must be a concept behind every work, not just in fashion, but in all as such," said Maheen, adding: "And that's the reason why we set forth a couple of themes to display our collections." *The Future '96*, therefore, focused on ten different themes with four of them being the portrayal of world's deteriorating environment.

Maheen started working on her concept since May this year: step by step, the fabrics and jewellery were added to match the garments. The concept contained the idea that every single thing — from hairpin to shoes — should be local and matched with the designed-wears. The theatrical-manner display was full of such materials. For example: in *Seven Seas, Sahara, Atr and Amazon*, she wanted a global focus, and for that matter, the matching materials had to be able to convey the

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