

exhibition

Mamoon's Myth, Memory and Reality

by Navine Murshid and Ekram Kabir

LIKE everybody and everything on earth, Dhali Al-Mamoon has also garrisoned himself with newer inspirations during the last couple of years that are quite telling on his canvasses on display at the ongoing (June 12-22) painting exhibition at Dhanmondi's Gallery 21. Mamoon's own judgment about his existence is a combination of myth, memory and reality which, he claims, has been reflected in his works.

The depiction of theme — *Fuzziness And Clarity* — is so, so contradictory that it evokes miscellaneous feelings among the onlookers. And talking to him is like "squeezing a modern-day complex man out of him", because as a social thinker and an announcer of the 'unraveled good, evil and ugly' Mamoon revolves around in a trajectory — forcing his audience to think — which seems to have no destination at all.

In the past — for example in his 1994 etching exhibition at the Arial Art Gallery on Behula series in which he approached with softer shades of colour putting humanity in a divine light — there was little misconception in understanding the artist entirely. Difference in using colour is noteworthy this time. As far as the use of colour is concerned, it is apparent that Mamoon is



ONE DECIDED TO FLY-2 110x190 cm. Oil on Canvas 1997



ONE DECIDED TO FLY-3 120x220 cm. Oil on Canvas 1998

angered and aggravated; the mood is really aggressive and frustrated. More so, the colour contrasts reflected the two contradicting thoughts in his mind and in life. Says Mamoon: "This is my language of expression and this how I let go of my pent-up frustrations."

Now, unlike before, the Chittagong University Assistant Professor doesn't plan; he starts from a dot, and in the process of his conscious and subcon-

scious efforts, ends up to a self-satisfactory expression. But still, Mamoon remains emphatically geometrical: typical him.

That was a time, as he said while speaking about the past, he was painting with a definite sentiment in mind. As time passed, with the same set of values, Mamoon's rally of inner thoughts has multiplied leaving him a complex man — a man who is now a

timepiece of both the past and present society, an observer of his surrounding which is in essence overburdened with all the ugly events taking place unabatedly. And these haunt him as he finds an astounding resemblance of present-day social thesis with that of the War of Liberation in 1971: apart from violence, rape, murder etc., Mamoon is hurt by the hypocrisy and greed for power in today's statecraft, still predominant.

Here he seems to be a mariner who can see the shore but never wants to reach it for obvious reasons: he wants to make things more clear pointing at the society, saying "Land, Ho!". Prophetic, indeed! *Journey by Boat*, a diptych, *Images Reconsidered* series (one triptych) and *Once Decided to Fly* series are best examples in this way of thinking.

But, as a 'diptych' is a picture (or relief) consisting of two parts, usually

hinged together like the pages of a book, a polyptych in two parts, and a 'triptych' is a tripartite polyptych, the central panel being twice the width of the wings so that they can be folded over the centre-piece to protect it, Mamoon should have pasted notes of explanation beside his huge works for the easy understanding of those who are less-frequenters at art galleries.

When the reality strikes hard, the painter's inner being aches by observing the religion-based politics and the way the clerics induce superstition among the rural illiterate who ultimately are the hunchbacks of can't-be-narrated poverty. Here, in two large pieces titled *Khain (Time)*, he doesn't spare even those who preach the tall-talks of secularism. And again, if the viewers take a close look at *Seven Women and Borak*, they should find, on the one hand, a plenty of optimism regarding women, and on the other, a bottled up agony which causes premature spiritual deaths of women by the male-dominated society in Bangladesh.

Complex or simple in his interpretations, which can always vary from onlooker to onlooker, Dhali Al-Mamoon seems to have attained a height of his own in which he plays with his creations with love — and only love.

This, again, is one of his contradicting characteristics.

awards

The Goncourt, A Highly Sought-after Literary Award

by Pierre Albert Lambert

THE story of the Goncourt literary prize goes back to the last century. Two brothers, Jules and Edmond de Goncourt, who were the sons of one of Napoleon's officers, were extremely keen on literature. They were part of the naturalist movement which had come into being around the figure of Emile Zola and they signed their works jointly. The work which retains the greatest interest is their *Journal* which, in a biting tone, depicts the literary personalities of the time.

The Goncourts dreamt of going down in history but, as they were not sure of succeeding in this endeavour through their talent alone, they had the idea of devoting a small family inheritance to the creation of a literary award which would perpetuate their name.

According to the brothers' wishes, the Goncourt prize, which was to be awarded by a society composed of ten writers, was to recompense a "bold, innovative work" written by a young author. This wish has not, however, always been respected. Far from it.

The first members of the Goncourt Academy, of whom there were ten, had been selected from among the great lit-

An important event in the literary year is the award of the Goncourt prize which takes place every year in Paris a few weeks before Christmas. It is an occasion which causes a considerable stir in the world of literature and publishing.



The Goncourt Jury 1996

erary figures of the period and included Alphonse Daudet (*Le Petit Chose*) and *Lettres de mon Moulin* (Letters from my Mill), Octave Mirbeau (*Le Journal d'une Femme de Chambre* (Journal of a Lady's Maid) and J K Huysmans (*A Rebours*) (Against the Grain). Their first prize, which was awarded in 1903, went to a certain John-Antoine Naud for his novel *Force Ennemie*. This winner, who was, in fact, explorer by profession, was never to be heard of again.

The Big Omissions
Is the Goncourt prize always awarded to the best writers? This is absolutely not the case and the jury is often reproached for this. It is true that the jury awarded literary greats such as Andre Malraux, Maurice Genevoix, Henri Troyat, Romain Gary and Julien Gracq (who was against winners and awards and turned down the prize), but they omitted Colette, Gide, Mauriac, Giono, Montherlant and Aragon.

Although Proust received the award, it was belatedly and they preferred the novelist Guy Mazeline, whose name is quite unfamiliar today, to Louis-Ferdinand Celine.

Today, the jury consists of writers who are appreciated by the public and some of whom are former winners of the award themselves such as Francois Nourissier, Michel Tournier, Françoise Mallet-Joris, Edmonde Charles-Roux and Robert Sabatier.

The authors who are awarded the Goncourt prize do not have the fantastic publication figures of the past when certain winners managed to sell over a million copies of their work, compared with 600,000 for the most highly rated today. However, with 10 to 15 francs (2 to 3 dollars) in royalties per copy sold, the winner still amasses a small fortune.

There is sometimes a drawback to the windfall. The winners have to be able to cope with the sudden fame which comes with this highly sought-after prize. Not all of them can manage. "It took me twenty years to get over it," one of them admits. "I sat looking at my blank page for hours, haunted by the fear of not living up to my reputation."

Another one speaks of the torture that his life had become as a star of the literary world. His editor forced him to

make public appearances all over the place and to act as a performing ape at a new fable every day, constantly hounded by the media and by autograph hunters, with a nervous breakdown, divorce, a disgust for writing and loneliness as a result.

Every year, as the time for the awards draws near, the polemic about the integrity of the members of the jury, comes up again and again. The question raised is whether the members of the jury, who are writers themselves, do not tend to privilege their own publishers.

This suspicion is further reinforced by the fact that it is nearly always the same Paris publishers who win the award. The writers of these publishing houses just happen to occupy most of the ten seats around the table in the Paris restaurant where, traditionally, the winner of the year is chosen.

"There is nothing surprising in that," the author of *Le Roi des Aulnes* and an influential member of the jury, Michel Tournier, retorts. "After all, these publishers bring out two thirds of the French production in novels."

This polemic will no doubt last as long as the Goncourt prize itself which is now in its nineties and is striding along in a sprightly way towards its centenary.

fiction

The Abandonment

by Saeif Morshed

Continued from last week

Asharp left after leaving the bedroom would lead into her parents haven where she could confess her wrong doing and be hastily lead to hospital by her half-dressed father. But what about the shame bestowed on them by this night of sheer licentiousness as played by the cherished daughter? Doctors of Saturday night fatigue-due to dealing with Saturday night alcoholics-giving their nods of disapproval at parents who should have taken more care while on a more embarrassing note, bestowing pamphlets illustrating the effects of these pernicious substances with photos of teenagers looking as though they had been hooked up to heroin with their cadaverous faces and jutting eyes.

A multiple choice scenario had now come into Susan's thoughts:

(a) Should she make haste to her presents

(b) Should she wait another ten minutes

(c) Should she jump out of the window and end this night of terror.

Almost immediately she latched onto as the only sane decision leading to her make a dash for their bedroom, the dash though being more like a drunken sprawl than an athletic sprint. As the bodily form reached the creaking corridor, instead of making a brisk left, an even swifter right was made to the bathroom where the door was shut and the toilet seat perched upon to enter another void from the outer world. This act of cowardice was made in a vain attempt to alert her parents that their precious daughter was still awake at four o'clock in the morning. Alas no voices were transmitted within Susan's earshot. Employment stresses of the day had left them debilitated to the point of closing their shutters and entering their own voids.

How was she now to get them to notice that she was still awake. The most obvious thought was to flash the toilet and let its cascades of noise resound across the corridor. With this thought



she lunged for the toilet handle. But alas, something was holding her back. The paranoia of what would be the aftermath of her confessions arose again. With this distressing vision she let go of the handle in the same hesitant manner as leaving a lover in her hour of need.

All of a sudden this abandoned girl could feel the sensation of her legs submerging into the toilet seat, hallucinating that they had now blended in with the avocado coloured scheme of the bathroom. Immediately Susan arose, lurching over to place her hands on the bathroom sink, while her breakable face with transfixed heroin eyes stared at the mirror above it with muscles clenched and skin seemingly translucent. The nostrils of this shattered portrait seemed to tighten the skin on the bridge of the nose making its profile more Roman in shape. From these enlarged nostrils, misty smoke seemed to be filtering out, not like a dragon exhausted of flame, but more like the mist that was exhaled by a person's mouth in the freezing cold. Susan upon this observation began to blow frantically. What was now coming out was not this

mist but instead waves of smoke that matched the fumes of a cigar.

Unable to cope with this repulsive vision she buried her head with her hands, shaking it in anger against her palms at the stupidity of what she had done.

Soon this rage would turn into grief and bewilderment, making her eyes close their shutters to let stream the tears of regret. During this sobbing process, Susan lifted her fragile head and once again gazed at the bathroom mirror expecting to see a face dampened with wetness. However, all she was able to witness were eyes of sorrow but without its eventual discharge. No visible weeping was apparent. Dehydration had occurred and thus there was no evidence to support this acquittal of guilt. The ashes of the sexually active penguin had denied her of this relief.

Susan turned to stare at the frosted bathroom window where the morning sun was coming through in a sleepy manner. The acid tab was still in her heart and mind and showed no sign of leaving that Sunday morning.