

poetry

Al-Mahmud — A Poet of Our Liberation War

by A Z M Haider

Continued from last week

AL-Mahmud's dreamy spall of love and romance was shattered and he woke up to cruel realities following crackdown on unarmed civilian population of Dhaka and elsewhere in the country by mechanised hordes of the military dictatorship presiding over our destiny during those stormy days of 1971. His vision of one Pakistan wherein Bengalees will live with self-respect and pursue their life, language, literature and culture without any impediment and coercion was dashed to the ground. After having watched brutal massacre of his compatriots, his mind revolted against the military rulers who ordered crackdown to kill Bengalees without compunction, demolish Central Shaheed Minar, a symbol of cultural autonomy they were struggling for and crush their spirit of resurgent nationalism.

The poet realised that it was not possible for the Bengalees to retain their separate cultural identity under the repressive regime of the then military dictatorship of Pakistan. Nor was it possible for them to achieve their socio-political rights and economic emancipation under that dispensation. He stood disillusioned when the realisation dawned in him that Bengalees were doomed to suffer remorseless exploitation within the framework of united Pakistan.

Disheartened and disenchanted, the



poet lost all faith in one Pakistan for which Bengalee Muslims once relentlessly fought and expressed his solidarity with the resurgent nationalism which formed the basis of today's sovereign Bangladesh. Lean, lank and physically frail, Al-Mahmud at that time turned into a live volcano oozing out blazing fire and torrid lava of indignation and hatred against the military dictatorship responsible for the repression and massacre in the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). No one could imagine at that time that the poet had so much fire in his fragile physical frame. Al-

Mahmud of those days could aptly be described in the words of rebel poet Nazrul Islam "Ek Hatey momo bahsher hanshari, ek hatey momo rono-turjo" (I have a flute in one hand and a war-bugle in another).

Impelled by rage, repulsion and hatred, the poet left Dhaka to participate in the liberation war. Along with his family he kept wandering about from one hideout to another until he reached his village home wherein he found a secure place for his family to stay in his absence. Leaving his wife and children there, he along with freedom fighters left for the war-front. He crossed over to the other side of the border through Agartala and joined the war of liberation.

None of his contemporaries crossed over to the other side of the border to contribute to the liberation war. Syed Ali Ahsan crossed over and joined the liberation war. But he is his senior, Fazal Shahabuddin, one of his contemporaries, went upto the border, but subsequently returned home. He preferred to stay home with his countrymen and share their trials and tribulations, sufferings and agony. Fazal cried out in excruciating pang of frustration for his inability to take part in the battle for national independence.

I could not go anywhere
I only managed to survive
In the blood-spattered warm close proximity
of my devastated mother
in my homeland.
Like an escaped frightened convict
with death sentence hanging over

me.
Made of sterner stuff, Al-Mahmud did not look back during those days of nightmarish nine months of the occupation period. He stayed at the front and contributed to war effort.

Al-Mahmud imbibed Nazrul's spirit of rebellion. But in expressing that fiery spirit he was far less forthright, bold and articulate. Nazrul's language, particularly in his poetry denouncing social injustices, political exploitations, repressions etc, has razor-sharp edge which sparkles and emits fire, stirring souls of his readers with unbounded courage and optimism. Al-Mahmud is basically a poet gifted with acute intellect. Hence, unlike Nazrul he was less exuberant in emotion. Despite fire of anger and indignation blazing in him the diction he deployed in his poetry on liberation war were highly restrained and subdued. He was fond of expressing his feelings of rage by subtle strokes and often by allegorical suggestions. In his famous poem camouflage the poet gave vent to his feelings adequately without being exuberantly emotional in expression.

If you want to survive, wear a yellow uniform
Wear green matching saree just as butterflies
mingle themselves with leaves
Place shrubs of yourself
You have to save your dazed children
Put shield of nature on your breast
So that killers think tree are undulating flowers,
Ceaseless beauty of flowers

Enemies wear green shirts
They have placed leaves on their helmets and guns
They have kept concealed their nails teeth and sex organs
Hatred, and barrels of gun.

The have turned into mindless poisonous cactus. He composed this poem during his stay at Calcutta, away from close kins, comrades and compatriots. He had before his eyes Bengalee youths with guns in hand going to the war front to fight the enemy. The emotion welled up in his heart at the sight of freedom fighters and the war front found expression in this poem. The English rendering of another poem he wrote during those stirring days shows poets mental proximity to the war front and his deep emotional involvement in it.

Often heart bewails for war
It seems blood is the only solution
Cannon fodder, the ultimate satisfaction

I wake up from dream with cries of jehad
Having waked up I find myself surrounded by adolescence
This boy is unwilling to keep his head on a pillow
It appears he will blow of mosquito-net at one puff

My heart is again beating like war-trumpey
It looks blood will decide
Cannon-fodder is the only arbiter
I wake up from dream with cries of Jehad.

Al-Mahmud has written during and after the liberation war many such soul-stirring poems which testify to his deep commitment to liberation and national resurgence that culminated in the birth of sovereign Bangladesh on December 16, 1971.

Al-Mahmud's war poems, however, lacks verve and vigour which characterise those of Shamsur Rahman and Fazal Shahabuddin. Shamsur Rahman and Fazal's soul-stirring messages on our liberation war were very clear, pronounced and bold, while Al-Mahmud expressed himself subtly, often by metaphors and allegorical suggestions. Al-Mahmud chastened his dictions to express his emotion in a restrained way. That is why he appears less pronounced and forthright than Shamsur Rahman and Fazal Shahabuddin. In style of expression Al-Mahmud is greatly influenced by the American poet Walt Whitman. Whitman used to trammel his dictions to express his emotion. Al-Mahmud was perhaps influenced by Whitman's style of expression. His poem entitled "Shahasher Upama" is a typical example of restrained expression of his feelings about our gallant freedom fighters

There is darkness of night before them
Also there are flashes of hope
On the left of them there are deaths and despair of defeat
On the right of them lies vast vacant field
With unending green wherein lies eternal joy of hope.

book review

Arthur C Clarke's Odyssey Quartet

by Nameer Rahman

IN my opinion, one of man's most compelling inborn traits, is to establish a sense of order, in all that happens around him. Fear and curiosity are his greatest instincts. The curiosity to understand and explain everything around him and fearful of what he does not understand. That inability to understand coupled with fear prompted man to invent religion, the precursor of science and an illiterate persons way of rationalising what he cannot put in its proper place. Hence he invests a God to explain the irrationality, to somehow believe that order exists despite all evidence to the contrary.

Science was the replacement of religion, with logical answers for all that could not be explained before. What is lighting? What is fire? Why and how do we get sick? and a million more questions. Yet man's obsession with stability is even evident in his religions. Religion is the greatest organising factor of civilisation, setting down the codes of conduct and social structure and behaviour. All the primary laws were religious in nature. The seven sins, and the ten commandments are the most well known examples of this. It is no coincidence the earliest and most well known civilisations had rich and powerful religions particularly in terms of myths

and legends. A glance at the Egyptian, Sumerian, Roman, Greek and Chinese civilisations make this abundantly clear. Post Roman civilisation in Europe was built on Christianity, and in the Middle East and Africa, on Islam. The stronger the religion, the more powerful the civilisation.

Yet with the rise of commerce and science, religion is forced to take a backseat. The current burst of Islamic extremism may be one of two things (or possibly both): religion reasserting itself on a global scale after being relegated to a position of personal belief, or, Islam is following a natural cycle of evolution as it confronts a rapidly changing social and world structure. After all, Christianity itself was roughly 1400 years old, as old as Islam is today, when it went through its period of fundamentalism, in the form of the Inquisition.

But despite the apparent incompatibility, science intertwines with religion at its highest and most complex level. Who can forget Einstein's statement "God does not play dice with the universe", and Stephen Hawking's references to God in his books like "Black Holes and Baby Universes" are numerous. On a separate note, could it be divine irony, that the fate of something as mind numbingly large as the universe, will be decided on a subatomic level?

So if religion gives us a sense of order, where none may actually exist, and science explains why things happen, even if they are chaotic in nature (let us not forget the Chaos and Complexity theory), what vocalises our desire to control our surroundings and destiny: Science Fiction.

Science Fiction has always been about control. And it is precisely the element of control that makes Arthur C Clarke's Odyssey Quartet so fascinating to read. All four books deal with man's encounters with objects dubbed the "Monolith". Mysterious in nature, the first monolith was uncovered on the moon and is noted to have radiated a signal in the direction of Jupiter and it is a subsequent voyage to Jupiter that is the premise for 2001 A Space Odyssey, where a second Monolith is discovered. Although deceptively straightforward, both 2001 and 2010 are, at a subtler level, very complex, pulling several threads together, to weave a rich story of emotions, yet enormously vast in its scope.

The emotions are always present, the characters are all believable. From the chat between Dr Chandra and his computer SAL in 2010, to the desperate edge in HAL (the psychotic computer of 2001, who will always be remembered for that understated "Good Morning, Dave") as

Bowman takes HAL offline, and his final, yet strangely thought provoking statement, "Dave — I am afraid". David Bowman's loss of humanity, Heywood Floyd's quest to understand the Monolith, Dr Chandra's love for HAL, the camaraderie between the US and Russian crews, Frank Poole's adjustment to an era he should never have seen, all play on emotions.

On a larger level, the element of control (as mentioned earlier) is striking. David Bowman struggles for the control of the Discovery from HAL, who, for mysterious reasons, kills everyone on board. HAL, trying to find compromise between conflicting mission objectives starts lying, and finally murdering to ensure none of the objectives are compromised. The quest to find what happened to David Bowman, and what he meant by his final statement "My God, it full of stars" as he investigated the Monolith. Everything is about rationalisation, the effort to understand and put in its proper place what cannot be understood or controlled.

It is precisely the loss of control, however, that makes the Odyssey quartet stand out from "classic" science fiction. Whereas Micheal Crichton's Jurassic Park and The Lost World give reasons why thing go out of control and Mary Shelley's Frankenstein may be looked upon as a warning against con-

trolling nature, 2010 quite bluntly puts across the idea, that man is not in control of his surroundings and events. Reasons are not given. It is almost as if a fact is stated through the act of the Monolith going ahead with its plans for Jupiter and Europa (one of Jupiters moons). This realisation leaves one frustrated to the point of anger, yet flabbergasted and exhilarated at the boldness of the idea.

2061 and 3001 are mere footnotes in comparison with the earlier two books. 2001 and 2010 are comfortable in their portrayal of the future. Based somewhat on the current events of the day (the Cold War) and almost expected technological breakthroughs, the reader does not feel out of place. But starting with 2061, set in a much more distant future, a sense of unfamiliarity begins to set in, and is completely ingrained in 3001. Although used as a platform to look at future societies, one gets the feeling that Mr Clarke himself is unsure of his perceived future and makes sweeping and somewhat unrealistic statements regarding the future. For example, organic food is phased out after the outbreak of Mad Cow disease.

But the two books are used to explore an extension of his theory of no control over surroundings, a more profound, no control over destiny. Yet, uncontrolled

destiny would have been acceptable if randomness and chaos was present. The underlying theme through the entire quartet is the idea that man has no control, not because of the chaotic nature of the universe, but that his destiny has already been charted out for him by an ancient spacefaring race called the Firstborn. The Monoliths are a powerful tool left behind to guide and map out mankind's fate. Man has no say in his future and once he comes of age, by becoming a spacefaring race, the Monoliths turn their attention elsewhere.

Its affects are further explored in 3001, where the consequences directly change what man first used to rationalise the unknown; religion. A full circle is woven. But 3001 is disappointing because apart from the fact that Arthur C Clarke's predictions of scientific advancements have been overstated by at least five hundred years, he abandons the unique concept of predetermined destiny. Man breaks free from the "shackles" of the Monolith. It almost becomes just another science fiction story. Almost. It ends at the beginning of an era of hope. Man is now responsible for himself, ready for interstellar flight. And you can't help but ask, what happens next?

What does happen next?
Something wonderful, I hope.

museum

The Pompidou Centre Turns 20

by Claudine Canetti

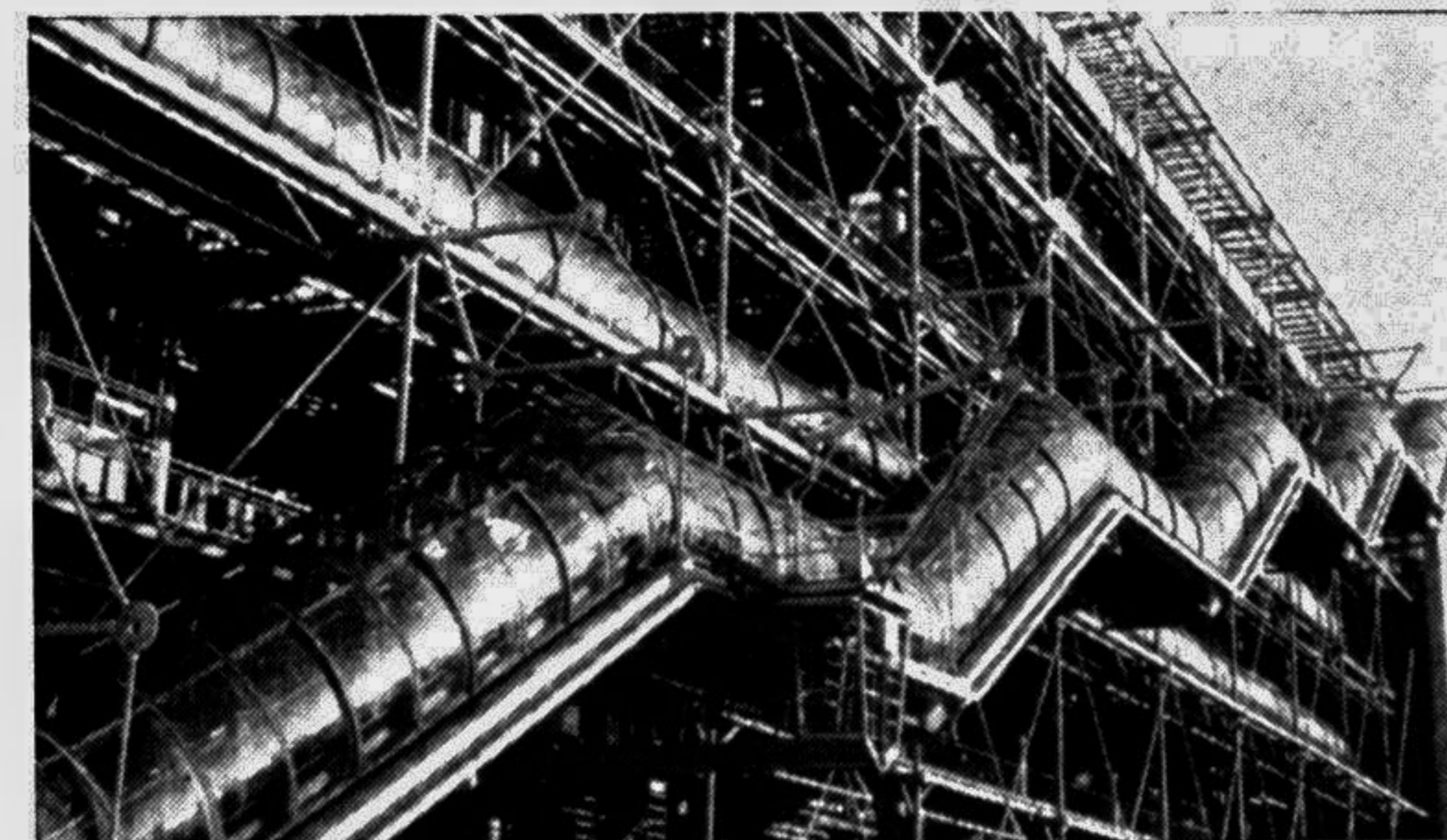
THE Pompidou Centre, which is familiarly known as *Beaubourg* from the name of the district in Paris where it is located, was created in 1976, following the wishes of President Georges Pompidou to see Paris endowed with a cultural centre "which would be both a museum and a centre of creation, and where the plastic arts would be found together with music, cinema, books and audiovisual research." It was designed by the Italian architect Renzo Piano and the British architect Richard Rogers and immediately gave rise to sarcastic comments but also keen interest owing to its glass and metal architecture with all the pipes on the outside. Very quickly the "refinery" became the most visited "monument" in France. 5,000 visitors a day were

originally expected, but 25,000 came. The Public Information Library, with its 450,000 freely accessible books and 2,600 periodicals, and the National Museum of Modern Art, which has the most important collection of modern art in the world and is constantly enriched by new acquisitions (18 million francs' worth in 1995) of contemporary works (plastic arts design, architecture, cinema and video) have been extremely popular.

The internal renovation of the Centre has been motivated by this unexpected success of an exceptional pluridisciplinary activity. It is expected to cost 440 million francs (88 million dollars). When it re-opens, the museum will have a further 4,000 m2 of exhibition space on two floors, whereas, at present, only some 800 to 900 of the 40,000 works of its permanent collection are on exhibition, plus a floor of

temporary exhibitions, which will make it possible to hold two exhibitions simultaneously, and a photo gallery. The conditions of access, circulation and comfort of the Public Information Library will be improved.

Meanwhile, let us hurry to *Beaubourg* to celebrate its 20th anniversary. Already the area around the Centre has been redone (at a cost of 150 million francs, 30 million dollars). The star renovation concerns the reconstruction of the studio of the French sculptor, of Romanian origin, Constantin Brancusi who, on his death in 1957, had bequeathed it to France with its magnificent contents: a collection, which is unique in the world, of 137 sculptures, 87 bases (one of Brancusi's specialties), 41 drawings, two paintings and some 1,600 glass photographic plates and original prints, all by the artist, as well as his tools and workbenches, his doc-



Georges Pompidou Centre

uments and his collection of books. The studio will remain open during the years when the Centre is closed and the same applies to the IRCAM (*Institut de Recherche et de Coordination Acoustique/Musique* (the Acoustics/Music Research and Coordination Institute) which has also been renovated and has

a new media-library.
The anniversary year is rich in exhibitions. "Face a l'Histoire" (Facing history), with its sub-title "commitment, testimony, vision", shows the relationship between the artist and his time through more than 400 works made by 200 artists from all over the

world between 1933 and 1996. The present nightmare and apocalyptic visions when they are inspired by the rise in all forms of totalitarianism, the horrors of war, of extermination camps, of Hiroshima, of mass graves, of torture and of the most recent massacres in Africa, and less tragic visions when the artists of the 80s-90s ironise on the way the media portray contemporary history.

1997 also marks the 50th anniversary of the National Museum of Modern Art and a new display of the permanent collections, exclusively reserved for creations in this half-century. "Made in France: 1947-1997" recalls the richness and diversity of these collections and the part that France continues to play as an international melting pot of artistic creation.

The last exhibitions of the year will be devoted to Fernand Leger and to the "Time of the Engineers". Then part of the collections will go on tour to Japan, the United States, Spain and Mexico. The Public Information Library will temporarily move to premises near the centre. However, it will still be possible to go up on the terrace to enjoy the magnificent view of Paris.

— L'ACTUALITE EN FRANCE