

obituary

The Voyage is Over

by Audrey Woods

DAME Iris Murdoch, whose macabre yet comic sensibility made her one of Britain's most admired modern novelists, died Monday at age 79.

She was diagnosed in 1996 as suffering from Alzheimer's disease, a condition she described in its early stage as "a very, very bad, quiet place."

Murdoch died at Vale House in Oxford, said Patricia O'Leary, administrator at the home for Alzheimer's disease patients. John Bayley, who had cared for his wife through her last years, was with her when she died.

Bayley, the academic, critic and writer who had shared Murdoch's life for more than 40 years, wrote of the life and the progression of her disease in *Iris: A Memoir of Iris Murdoch*, published in 1998.

"The voyage is over," Bayley wrote, "and under the dark escort of Alzheimer's she has arrived somewhere. So have I."

"The average survival time is seven to 10 years after diagnosis so she did have quite a gruelling form of the disease," said John Hodges, the consultant neurologist who diagnosed Murdoch's ailment.

"It was tragic seeing someone who had been a literary giant not remember

ing the details of the books she had written — it was heart rending," Hodges said.

Philosophical speculation, religion, magic and metaphysics run through many of her 26 novels. One of her most famous — "A Severed Head" in 1961 — was a black farce about infidelity, incest and violence.

Fellow author Rachel Billington once wrote that Murdoch's characters "seem to walk a tightrope, with only darkness below and no particular end in view; yet sustained by the very act of staying on and, as Miss Murdoch says, constrained to be always in movement."

Fellow novelist Malcolm Bradbury rated her "amongst the four or five great novelists of the second half of this century to come out of Britain."

"There have not been all that many, but she was a major figure alongside William Golding and Anthony Burgess," Bradbury said Monday.

Born into an Anglo-Irish family in Dulin on July 15, 1919, Jean Iris Murdoch was educated in England at Badminton School, at Somerville College, Oxford, and at Newnham College, Cambridge University.

Before beginning to teach at Oxford, Murdoch spent a year at Cambridge



Iris Murdoch

studying with disciples of the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Her first book was nonfiction — "Sartre: Romantic Rationalist" in 1953 — and she wrote on philosophy throughout her career. "Existentialists and Mystics," a collection of her essays and articles was published in 1997.

Murdoch's first published novel was "Under the Net" in 1954, and it won immediate praise. She wrote prolifically.

"I invent the whole thing before I start writing," she once explained. "Even the conversations are my head. I don't start writing the thing until I've got the whole of it absolutely."

One of her most admired novels was 1973's "The Black Prince," about a middle-aged would-be writer and the young daughter of his professional rival. It won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize.

In 1978, "The Sea, The Sea," about a retired film director trying to win back his first love, won the Booker Prize, widely considered Britain's highest literary honour.

In 1987, she was made a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire, the equivalent of a knighthood for women.

Her last novel, "Jackson's Dilemma," was published in 1995.

Murdoch didn't put up with editing, not even allowing punctuation changes — an attitude that some critics blamed for the length of some of her less successful novels.

Yet she could be a severe critic of her own work.

"My problem is not being great," she said in a 1988 interview. "I'm in the second league, not among the gods like Jane Austen, and Henry James and Tolstoy. My characters are not as memorable as theirs."

In a 1994 interview, she said two of the most important things in her life were her parents and her work. "But above all else, the most important thing in my life is my husband," she said. "To have had a happy marriage is a very good thing."

Married in 1956, they kept a famously chaotic household — for many years in the village of Steeple Ashton, 100 miles (160 kms) west of London; then in a vine-covered house in north Oxford. Books were stacked on the floors in pyramids, and sacks overflowing with papers and manuscripts shared space with a collection of stones.

She is survived by her husband. They had no children. Funeral arrangements were not immediately announced.

criticism

Novels of Mahmudul Haque: An Overview

by Subrata Kumar Das

IT is true that Mahmudul Haque (b. 1940) is not one of the popular novelists of Bangla literature though everyone would admit his permanent place as a sincere and artistic novel writer in the world of present Bangla novel. Someone may not term him as a prolific author but a total six is no negligible achievement. And in each of them Mahmudul Haque proved his genius — from presentation of language and diction to all the details of story-telling, characterization.

His first emergence as a creative short-story writer was acknowledged in the sixties, though his first novel came out in 1973. Since then after long gaps a total of six novels he has authored, among which the last *Matir Jahaz* was published in 1996. From that point of view it may seem very usual that in twenty three years six books credited to him is quite wholesome. But there is an untold story about his writing. If we serialize the years of his writings it will give us an interesting picture. The years are: 1967 for *Anur Pathshala*, *Nirpad Tandra* of 1974 (published in the same year), *Jiban Amar Bone* in 1976 (published in the same year), *Kalo Baraf* in 1977 (published in 1992), *Matir Jahaz* in 1977 (published in 1996) and *Khelaghar* in 1978 (published in 1988).

The foremost aspect of all his novels is his sincerity to creation — he never tells a story for the sake of story-telling, rather he always accommodates something behind the veil of the story. He is not accustomed to use the cliché language rather he always plays with the beauty of his language and thus creates a piece of artistic flavour. Mahmudul Haque always keeps himself aloof from the easy access which most of the writers chase to attain fame.

A close observation of the list exposes that after 1978 Mahmudul Haque actually wrote no novels at all and thus we can come to the conclusion that from 1967 to 1978 was the period in which he first appeared, got acclamation and gave up writing.

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Anur Pathshala (Anu in His School) deals with a minor boy named under the title who passes his days through much new experiences. The son of a mysteri-

ous couple, Anu at one time reaches the company of some urchins. All the behaviours and utterances of these kids convey unacquainted novelties of life to Anu. Another of them Sorudasi presents herself as a great puzzle — as an acute beauty she unfolds the simplicity denoting all about the lives of matured people. Though this episode ends in a quarrel with Anu and Sarudasi, it accumulates a new parallel incident of that of Anu's parents. Their irritable conduct produces such words that may be necessarily compared to the slanging match of Anu and Sarudasi. The last chapter of the book shows Anu searching eagerly for Sarudasi in her village.

In *Anur Pathshala*, like other novels also, Mahmudul Haque delineates a story, though the thinner story-line does not take the upperhand. In *Nirpad Tandra* (Undisturbed Sleep) we

meet Hiran whose whole life is full of pangs and sufferings. A village girl Hiran sets out from her father's house to respond the call of her fiancé but at the end her mission ends unsuccessfully, she only changes the male laps and bleeds and bleeds. From this point of view *Jiban Amar Bone* (Life is My Sister) is a different effort. Set at the pre-liberation time the novel illustrates the inner and outer periphery of a young man Khoka. Khoka criticizes the enthusiastic behaviour of Bangalee people, yet his friends all march forward for an unknown future. Other features of the then society do not go untouched. Activities of the hard-liners, upliftment of the Bangalee bourgeoisie people take an appropriate explanation in the novel. *Kalo Baraf* (The Black Show) tells of a two-fold story of Poka alias professor Abdul Khalek of a mofussil college. In a first person narrative Poka

tells about his child and boyhood happenings while in a third person narrative the author relates Khalek's tale. In alternative chapters these two stories of the same man proceeds and thus we get into the conjugal conflict of Khalek's family having distant relationship with the nostalgic thoughts. Conversely Jainal is the protagonist of *Matir Jahaz* (A Claymade Ship). The ignoble trade of Jainal is related with women-folk. He goes to Betka in search of a fair village woman Kusum, where his assisting hand is Monohar Ali. They unitedly make numerous endeavours and last one is a fortunate trap with Kusum. The hateful story receives that excellence from Mahmudul Haque's hand which brushes the whole characterization and story with human love. Love of divinity is also a focal element of *Khelaghar* (The House for Games). In the very beginning chapter when Rehana comes to

a close contact with Yakub and the reader meets them, none could guess the tragic mishap occurred previously. Yakub and Rehana alias Zhumil alias Anna alias Gabbu alias Tenpi alias Lata stay and pass some days together at the skirt of the village and thus they make a bridge between them. But in the last but one chapter when Tunu returns from the burning Dhaka and reveals the ravishment of Rehana by the Pakistani army, a tense milieu gets created. After Rehana's departure with Tunu Yakub's desire to sleep by the foot-prints of Rehana in the verandah exposes a vacuum in his mind.

All these may arise a question of the lack of lofty ideas and thought in Mahmudul Haque's novels. But we should not forget that a great novel is not always necessarily a book comprising elevated view, rather its presentation poses the best factor for making a novel great. The perfect assimilation of plot with the coinage of rural vocabulary and symbolization from nature Mahmudul Haque has substantiated each and every one of his six novels. Twenty years have already passed after his last novel. Can't we expect a more voluminous and more spacious novel with more lofty ideas from this apparently speechless author in future?

poetry

Moniruzzaman — a Poet of Language Movement and Liberation War

By A Z M Haider

Continued from last week

THE poet in a paroxysm of rage and righteous indignation cried out—

Is it very easy to set fire to homesteads and burn down villages? It is very easy to rain down bullets on students and teachers peasants, merchants and shopkeepers and factory workers

and kill them en masse

because it is easy people die in Bangladesh Because it is easy fire rages in Bangladesh.

The bard concludes the poem with a note of optimism on the success of our gallant freedom fighters when he says,

But at last in Bangladesh the tyrannous enemy dies by the dead bodies of the dear ones of their burnt down homes armed Bangalees will fiercely resist their marauding foe

And after the blood bath of a million martyrs the sun rises over the backdrop of green Bangladesh (Translated by Kabir Chowdhury)

Fired by unquenchable flame of deep love for the motherland, Moniruzzaman kept writing patriotic songs and poems with lingering shadow of death on his head during those stormy days. Enraged by his patriotic songs and poems, the occupation army at one stage raided his residential apartment on the university campus to kill him. It was sheer freak of Providence that the ma-

raiders knocked the wrong door and forced their way into the house of Professor Moniruzzaman of the Statistics Department and killed him. Thus the life of the poet Moniruzzaman of the Bengali Department, who was their target, was saved. But despite death looming large on him he kept writing patriotic poems in his hideout to inspire the freedom fighters. His poem captioned "In Memory of the Martyrs" he declared with his characteristic courage:

The dreams and longings of seventy million Bangalees have blossomed into a fra-

grant flower enriched by the holy blood of the martyrs from the ruins of cities, ports, markets and Sixty-two thousand villages of Bangladesh Seventy million flowers have opened up their petals I see nowhere a nobler and a more vibrant poem than this All the timid word-devouring Bengali verse-merchants sought in the garden of this epic fresh wonders Along with pens in the invincible hands of poets shone unmistakable sten-guns

What's more can I write in verse when with the blood of my heart I have scribbled a name Bangladesh.

To sum up, Moniruzzaman's songs and poems, written on the language movement or the liberation war, have one perceptible note which supersedes everything else. The underlying note of his poetry is reflected in his deep and passionate attachment to Bengali language, literature and culture. may in Bengali milieu and ethos. In this regard there is a striking resemblance between Moniruzzaman and Jibanananda Das.

exhibition

Romantic and Feminine

by Nadine Murshid

DIPALI Bhattacharya, the artist from Calcutta, held an exhibition at Gallery 21, which started on the 25th of January and continued till the 8th of February.

There were 25 paintings of 'mixed media' arraying the walls of the gallery, five of which were of the 'Calcutta' series, ten were of the 'Contemplation' series and the rest were of the 'Dialogue' series. Her paintings are basically about women. 'Women are my favorite', she

says, 'which is why I portray them, their feelings and their environment in my paintings'. She sure has a special place for them. Dipali depicts the female as lonely, somewhat solitary and even desolate figures. Her women seem to have confidence in one hand and fragility on the other: lively and vivacious and yet distant and lonesome. The 'Dialogue' series presents women at home with their spouses, sharing a cup of tea or coffee together, or just sitting in bed, deep in conversation. Here Di-

pali represents women as romantic and feminine. Even in the paintings of the 'Contemplation' series, where a single body of a dame adorns the canvas, the woman is seen to be in a romantic mood, silent and lonely with a flower in one and a lamp in another or any object to emphasize the loneliness and desolation. In the 'Calcutta' series, Dipali depicts life in Calcutta, as the title suggests. Here again, the female plays a significant role. In a busy, crowded street of Calcutta, she seems confident

and self-sufficient, yet the expression she wears portrays her loneliness, even in a crowd.

Bhattacharya prefers working in mixed media using oil, acrylic, pencil, pen, gold dust and gold foil. Though, some of them have been appropriately put in ornaments like earrings and necklaces and in the lighted lamp of one of the paintings of the 'Contemplation' series, the gold foil and dust seems a little conspicuous in a few of them. The colors maroon, red, dark pink and ma-

genta seems to be her favorite - she uses them in abundance in different shades.

Dipali, in these few paintings, put the women in perspective, and portrays them in such a way that they seem to be old-fashioned as well as neoteric. Their saris and blouses are the same as they used to be, even their loneliness is characteristic of the olden times, but their presence in a busy Calcuttan street and their conversation with their spouses over a cup of beverage is hardly of the 'ancient times'.

Dipali graduated from the Government College of Art in Calcutta in 1974 and after that was a National scholar for two years. She, at present, is a teacher of Calcutta College of Art, a social worker and a very serious, dedicated painter.

The exhibition was a rare treat for all art lovers, a good opportunity to get acquainted with Indian art and a scope for enlightenment in our otherwise dreary lives.