

Mahathir's Call for More Use of English and How His Prescription Applies to Bangladesh; and Tribute to Caribbean Writers

Portrait of a Teacher

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

PAIYING tribute to a highly respected person during his or her lifetime has indeed been rare in this poor country. It is as if our poverty-ridden life has eaten up even our sense of regard for any personality in spite of his/her remarkable contribution to our society. In our mad race for name and fame, we engage ourselves in various groupings and rather enjoy vilifying the gambling of one against the other.



Barring the angels and the prophets or apostles of God almighty, the rest of the ephemeral human beings in our country can ill afford to digest each other's notable achievements. Unfortunately, here too, political polarisation of the intellectuals has been the deciding factor in the selection of national awards. Such being the yardstick to determine individual's extra-average efficiency of performance in his/her field of activities, the process of selection of the 'nation's best' has appeared somewhat queer to me as an ordinary citizen. I do not, however, claim that some of the selected ones have not been justified. There are of course exceptions. But such recipients are very often posthumous awardees. The recognition after death would be certainly different from the recognition during one's life time. To me this is not only a tragedy but also an indirect and insidious onslaught on the bereaved family members who are ceremonially invited to receive the decorations for their dead loved ones.

Against such a paradoxical situation we can still talk about many more illustrious sons of the soil who made tremendous contribution to the society and yet went off the scene unknown and unsung. Paul Guda, my teacher in the school, was perhaps one of those apparently inconsequential but incomparably potential persons, whom his countless students like me, would like to remember for years. Students of our time, even after four and a half decades now, will hopefully bear me out that my reminiscence fringing on a serene nostalgia, is born of an unfaithful degree of deference we have had for all our teachers.

Barisal Zilla School, perhaps one of the oldest institutions in the sub-continent that could most legitimately claim to have

an enviable reputation, for it had all the time until the partition of British India, sets of teachers marvelling in their respective subject of teaching. In the course of giving lessons they could leave indelible imprints in the minds of the students.

Mr Guda joined our school quite unnoticed in late forties. That tiny, little gentleman, perhaps conscious of physical stature, developed within himself a rare personality that even his heavily built fellow teachers did not have. He wore a grim face, both in and out of the classroom, and was likely to be often misunderstood. Surprisingly, however, he was not. The apparently hard countenance without was largely neutralized by the intermittent flashes of his inner mind.

Born on July 27, 1914 at Bahal under erstwhile Gournadi police station in Barisal district, little Paul lost his father at the age of seven when his only sister Elizabeth was a 9-month old baby. Literally rendered destitute, their mother scarcely knew what to do in such an hour of crisis. Paul's paternal uncles took advantage of the situation and in order to grab the small property and so made life miserable for his mother. However, despite all odds, Paul got his early education in a local church-run school, later at Bandura, Dhaka. The Roman Catholic missionaries picked him up and placed him in Chittagong's famous St Placid School where he read up to Class-VIII. It soon transpired that they intended Paul to take to priesthood on completion of his studies. In fact, this was obligatory for a free student to be priest but Paul did not consider himself fit for taking a priest's job.

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It can be a little disconcerting for a speaker if, at the end of his talk, he is not asked any questions. More often than not, he assumes that whatever he has said has evoked the minimum interest among his audience.

This writer has faced this situation a few times. Now, when his routine call for questions at the end of his talk produces no result, he thanks the audience, promptly returns to his seat, whispers to the chairman about being late for his next appointment and leaves the meeting room with a sigh of relief.

This was not the case a few years ago when I had given a talk on problems in journalism training in Southeast Asia to students of the Faculty of Mass Communication at one of three universities in Kuala Lumpur. As if my job depended on my performance, I asked for questions at the end of my 30-minute lecture and remained standing before the microphone, virtually pleading with the students, with my sad mournful eyes, to start a discussion.

A long one minute passed. No response. Then, there were three questions. It did not take me long to realise that they were all from junior lecturers of the department, not from students.

As I was leaving the university, a young teacher confided to me that since the decline in the use of English, following the introduction of Bhasa Malaysia, the national language as the medium of instruction, students felt too shy to ask a question in English and, what was worse, some might not have fully followed my lecture at all.

Later the same year, I faced the same situation during my lecture at the Dhaka University. Again, a couple of questions put to me came, not from students, but from teachers. Finally, as I was leaving the Department of Mass Communication which had arranged my talk, one teacher apologetically admitted that some of the students might not have followed my lecture in English.

There is a particular reason — not just the similarity between the two situations — which prompts me to join the growing campaign to give back to English the place it once had in our educational institutions.

It is in Malaysia that the movement in favour of the use of English has received a new welcome boost, and that too from none other than the Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

By now, Mahathir has earned an international reputation for taking up even unpopular causes and fighting his battles, often all by himself, with doggedness, obstinacy and even a touch of arrogance. In the process, he would not mind being abrasive, refusing to win cheap popularity, a bit like Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, a quality rare among our politicians.

A couple of months ago, the Malaysian Prime Minister criticised a move by Malay-language press to limit the use of English to selected media advertisements. Then, the PM went on making his case for greater use of English in national life, which he said was

necessary for his people to compete commercially and continue to attract foreign investment. Without mincing words, Mahathir even went to the extent of saying that Malaysians calling for the use of more Malay language at the expense of English were 'fanatics' who undermined national development efforts.

One theory is, he was impressed by the use of English among Indonesians whose national language is also Malay, during the Non-Aligned Summit in Jakarta. It is said that he was apparently surprised and then delighted when a private Indonesian TV station interviewed him in English.

The matter is, by no means, settled. While

MY WORLD

S. M. Ali



Malaysian leader, Dr Mahathir has called upon his people to pay increased attention to English to help the country move on in the field of trade, commerce and investment. This would present no threat to the national language. Would the prescription by the tough doctor also apply to Bangladesh?

What made Mahathir who has come under severe attack from powerful Malay press for his latest pronouncements on this issue take up such a strong position in favour of English?

the orthodox press is up against Mahathir on the language issue, the tough doctor — the Prime Minister is an established medical practitioner, not an academic with a doctorate from Oxford — will not give up until his patient follows his prescription without mumbling any objection.

DURING our stay in Kuala Lumpur, far-sighted local friends would bring up the sensitive language issue and offer stimulating arguments in favour of the increased use of English in national life. Many of these arguments apply very well to the situation in Bangladesh, as I have discovered on our return to Dhaka.

One argument focused on an element of hypocrisy among the ardent opponents to the use of English. While they rejected the need for bilingualism, with the use of Bhasa Malaysia and English, on the ground that it would weaken the use of the national language, they send their children to the West and Australia for learning English even at the school level. They know very well that whatever they said on the language issue in public, their children, with their command over English, from school to the university stage, would have a better chance than those who had not gone abroad, in securing the best jobs with the multinational companies, the diplomatic service and even in various ministries. But in the end, this would mean the widening of disparities in job opportunities and incomes between Malaysians studying at home, with Bhasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction, and their compatriots who have had their education in the West, under the medium of English. As a friend in Kuala Lumpur once put it, this is a deliberate elitist attempt to give the children of the affluent class the best chance in life and leave the majority where they are. In Malaysia, this would also place the majority, especially the Malays, at a serious disadvantage in regional trade and commerce, against Singaporeans, Thais, Indonesians and Filipinos who are

If we can keep the races together in reasonable harmony and provide the necessary impetus for a sense of togetherness of religions, cultures and languages, we may well create a society that thrives on superb music, literature, fiction and poetry. This can happen even if the country remains poor and underdeveloped, with politicians playing their little games in power politics and corruption.

This was said to me years ago by a former colleague of mine from Guyana, long before Derek Walcott, his fellow-Caribbean from Trinidad, got the Nobel Prize for Literature. At that time, the talk was about V S Naipaul, also from Trinidad, winning the award, although some thought his younger brother, Shiv Naipaul who died prematurely a few years ago, was a better writer of the two brothers.

From a public library in London, I once borrowed two anthologies of writings from the Caribbean islands, mostly short stories, travel pieces and long journalistic essays. In quality, they would match collection of writings from any part of the English-speaking world.

By now, books of poems and plays by Walcott must be on display in all the bookshops in London, New York and other cities in the West, or perhaps even in Tokyo where bookstores are well-stocked with the latest publications. However, here in Dhaka, we will be waiting to see the work by Walcott in any of our bookshops. Maybe we will wait until we learn about the winner of the next year's Nobel Prize for Literature. No wonder, we feel so cut off from the outside world, with a shrinking horizon that is seldom visible most of the time.

Derek Walcott: Burning, Breaking and Bridging

by Azfar Hussain

THE fact that Derek Walcott, the West Indian poet and playwright, has been awarded the Nobel Prize for literature this year may bring to one's mind the lines Walcott himself wrote, addressing the post-independence politicians: 'I sought more power than you, more fame than yours, / I was more hermetic, I knew the common weal...' The first line in this pronouncement is not, however, a craving in the narrow sense of the term, for the second line has something in it that makes Walcott a poet bent on his vocation, involved in a situation that demands critical self-awareness and the awareness of the 'Other'. Yes, in a way he sought fame but not certainly the Nobel Prize, for he knew that a prize is nothing more than a tiny material achievement. The Nobel Prize is only a sign, has its own charm and magic, power and evocation, politics and mysticism, but is also transient and slippery. What is important is art that remains.



Of course, Derek Walcott does not enjoy fame on a scale as extensive as that of a Marquez or a Borges, but his merit was certainly recognised in contemporary Caribbean poetry right from the beginning with the publication of his *Twenty Five Poems* in 1948 and *Eptaph for the Young* in 1949, and thus towards the end of the forties, West Indian poetry began to carry forward a new poetic experience hitherto unknown. Caribbean poetry anthropologists and editors like Andrew Salkey and John Figueroa convincingly put their fingers on a new poetic idiom, a new language Walcott was trying to evolve. Of course, Walcott had to wait till the sixties in order to capture an increasing circle of anthropologists, editors and readers who could take an unswerving look at his work for understanding and appreciation.

Derek Walcott was born on 23 January in 1930 in the town of Castries, St Lucia. He was educated at St Mary's College in St Lucia and then at the University of West Indies in Jamaica from where he took his B A degree. He was engaged in both teaching and journalism. He wrote for *Public Opinion* published from Kingston and also for *Trinidad Guardian* published from Port-of-Spain and earned considerable reputation as a feature

writer who could squarely face that contemporary issues and wield them with competence and creativity. He also taught at St Mary's College and Jamaica College, and is presently Professor at Boston University, USA. Though he took poetry seriously from the beginning, theatre is also his passion, and since 1989, Walcott worked as Founding Director for the Trinidad Theatre Workshop where he had space for gambling with various forms and styles of theatre finding expression in many plays he wrote since 1950.

Within a span of almost three decades and a half, he has been able to affect the West Indian poetry scenario seriously by producing his work remarkable in volume and intensity. His *Poems* appeared in 1953 and one could easily see in them a tone, tune and test bristling with the possibilities of a language that shakes off Anglo-American colonialism but involves and evokes essential 'West Indianness' which was carried further with force and gusto in Walcott's subsequent work in *A Green Night: Poems 1948-1960* appearing in 1962. In the sixties, Walcott's poetry took a turn in both stylistic and thematic terms, when he moved towards a new zone of consciousness characterized by unobtrusive, mild historicism tempered with gentle tonal lyricism and drama. His *Selected Poems* appearing in 1964 along with other books of verses such as *The Castaway and Other Poems* (1965), *The Gulf and Other Poems* (1969) and *Another Life* (1973) exhibit signs of that Borgesian motif of 'Mi destino es la lengua...' (my destiny is the lan-

guage), and the language is not obviously English, or for the matter, American, but tellingly West Indian, Walcottian. His *Another Life* is particularly remarkable for its quasi-introspective semantics that takes life seriously in its flux both interrupted and uninterrupted by the situations that can emerge only from a sense of rootedness and rootlessness. Walcott makes use of what may be called 'post-modernist paradoxes', somewhat feeble and at times mild in nature, to describe, or involve himself in, the situations that Walcott along with the people inhabiting his native island face. To face is to change slowly, and that's the realization one finds in Walcott, particularly in *Another Life* and also in his subsequent work *Sea Grapes* appearing in 1976. Walcott emphasizes intense living which can redeem the savagery and ravagery and ruins of the past, and this experience is particularly strong in Walcott's later poetry written particularly from the seventies to the nineties. Edward Baugh, in 1978, wrote a book on Walcott called *Walcott: Another Life* which sees Walcott as a poet discovering life not elsewhere but in intense living that takes energy and inspiration not from the search for the 'Other' or 'Another' in the Sartrean or existentialist sense of the term, but from the 'beauty' one can gain from immediate sorrows and pleasures in life.

As mentioned earlier, Walcott wrote a number of plays and some of the remarkable ones include *Henri Christophe: A Chronicle* produced in 1950, *Henri Darnier: A Play for Radio Production* (1951), *Sea at Dauphin* produced in 1954, *Ione: A Play with Music* produced in 1957, *Drums and Colours* produced in 1958, *In a Fine Castle* produced in 1970, *The Charlatan* produced in 1974, *The Joker of Seville*, and *O Babylon!* produced in 1978, etc. In fact, his most remarkable volume of plays is *The Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays* including *Ti Jean and His Brothers*, *Malcochon and Sea at Dauphin* and the essay 'What the Twilight Says'. This volume of plays appeared in 1971. In his plays, Walcott has deliberately and experimentally moved towards a theatrical dimension that he himself

calls 'music'. There is theatre in music and music in theatre, and this is the aesthetic dialectic that Walcott dramatizes in order to edge close to what may be called 'lyrical living', a metaphor for intense living. The islands are very much present in his plays, and they are not divested of landscapes that have inner meanings and implications, an underlying rhythm binding life with love, place with roots, though there is a constant search for a place, for a home, for roots, and this search, now and then dramatized by Walcott, serves as an apt metaphor for a voyage man cannot avoid taking in order to know and find himself. Both in Walcott's plays and poetry, the dramatic and the poetic go hand in hand to explore roots, home and love. His exploration and search are, however, not always explicit and not at all rhetorical, but they are very much real, for they are taken as a natural way of living which finds its synonym in war undeclared but present.

No doubt reading Walcott is a particular linguistic experience. When he says, 'The starved eye devours the sea-scapes for the morsel of sail/ The horizon threads it infinitely', we do not only get 'that sense of being alive and out-of-doors in the West Indies', as Ned Thomas rightly points out, with 'sand and salt on the skin, sunlight and space and the open beach, sea-grapes and sea-almonds, liners and islands', but we also have a feel of a language that has a polish and is not distant from what may be called 'classical English' and at the same time we begin to feel that this is not an Englishman or American speaking, but a West Indian trying to have his own right in the English language. In fact, it is not the English language that has possessed Derek Walcott, but it is Walcott who has possessed the English language, and this is the particular linguistic experience one cannot miss while reading Walcott, though initially he had to face a linguistic catch-22 situation as he says in his famous poem 'Postcard':

"Schizophrenic, wrenched by two styles
One a hack's prose, I earn
My exile. I trudge this
sickle beach for miles.
Tan, burn

To slough off
This love of landscape that's
self-love.

To change your language
you must change your life."

Indeed, the process of burning and sloughing off for finding language has been a constant one for Walcott who can never be away from the 'life' he leads within, and for that matter, from the language he gains from such style of living. It deserves mentioning here that Derek Walcott uses 'creole', the popular native language of the West Indies, in much of his poetry and more in his plays and thus evolves a new poetic idiom, essentially West Indian in nature, yet not distant from the English of the English Metaphysicals, Tennyson, Eliot, Dylan Thomas, and others whose echoes or lines one can, in

fact, detect easily in Walcott's poetry, thereby discovering Walcott's 'post-modernist intertextuality' where 'threading lines' is a constant phenomenon.

Walcott has a characteristic penchant for the landscape of his own island, but he does not end up portraying it, but wants to write of it, thereby making it part of what has been called 'linguistic experience'.

For no-one had yet written of this landscape that it was possible, though there were sounds given to its varieties of wood."

It is true that Walcott, being first a painter before becoming a poet, wanted to put the landscape of his native island on canvas, but has finally turned to words and metaphor. Yet as

Ned Thomas rightly points out, 'Walcott has kept his painter's eye, and is especially aware of effects of light. He often compares life with art: 'Tables in the trees, like entering Derek'. But it is not light that Derek Walcott exhibits a consistent flair for, but he also draws darkness, slowly and gently. Lyrically and at times squarely and also in dream-atmosphere, particularly in *Another Life* and generally in his later poetry including some of his plays written in the seventies.

Walcott, as a poet and playwright, is socially committed and historically conscious. His commitment is essentially part of his living which is simply there, and so is his historical consciousness which certainly makes him look at the past of 'slavery, cultural deprivation and colonial dependency', but does never make him dig rhetoric out of this past. In an interview published in *New Yorker* on June

26, 1971, Walcott said: 'The problem is to recognise our African origins but not to romanticise them', though romanticism appears at least as a bubble of the moment in his famous play *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, for example, where Makak 'the charcoal-burner lives in utter degradation, dreams he is king of a United Africa, yet he has to go on living in the everyday world'.

In this essay, only a few characteristics of Walcott's stylistic disposition and thematic gravitation have been roughly identified. Given the scale and scope of experience and styles, Walcott exhibits in his poetry and plays, he certainly deserves and demands concentrated critical inquiry and intervention, and more so in Bangladesh where Derek Walcott is almost unknown.

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WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,

My husband has a drinking problem, I have tried my best to get him out of it but nothing has worked. I remember long time ago you printed a similar letter but do not remember the advice you gave. What should I do? He makes a nuisance of himself and embarrasses me and the children. Otherwise he is a nice and considerate person. I am also worried about his health, but he insists that at least he does not smoke which is supposedly worse than drinking. Please advise.

Lucky, Motijheel, Dhaka

Dear Lucky,

Drinking is a habit and like all other habits is very difficult to get rid of. What you may do is help him try to curtail it as much as possible, be he will probably never give it up completely. Try to talk to him when he is in a sober mood and discuss the problems his drinking is causing to the family, but please do not do it in an accusing and confrontational manner because you will make him defensive which will not help the situation. Regarding his health, it is true that drinking is not as bad as smoking but it does have its health hazards. If you have any doubts than please take him to a doctor for a complete checkup.

Dear Mita,

I have lived in a loveless marriage for 10 years and, finally, two months ago I left my husband and our two children aged 8 and 6. The reason I had to leave the children is because I cannot support them with the salary I earn and I refuse to take money from my husband even for the children. Every one, including my friends and relatives, have condemned this action of mine. I have been accused of being a heartless, selfish mother. Only God knows the pain and suffering I go through without my children but I don't see any other alternative. Please give me some advice before I go crazy. I desperately need help.

Anonymous

Dear Anonymous,

Being a woman and mother myself, I can only imagine your suffering. Please don't be too upset about people criticising your action, the only important thing to do is what is best for you and your children. If, in your judgement, you believe that the children will be better off with the father then your action could be justified. But if you have any doubt about that then please rethink your action. We often have to swallow our pride for the sake of our children. Moreover, your husband is obliged to support them till they become independent. Accepting child support does not make you dependent on him if you make sure the money is for them and not for you. If necessary, keep a separate account of expenses for the children. Whatever you do, remember, don't make children suffer unnecessarily for your actions because it is they who have gone through enough trauma.

Dear Mita,

I would like to congratulate you for your matured and sensible answers. I do however have a small complaint. You are too pro-women. In order to be a truly professional counsellor, you should be neutral and not take sides. I have noticed, in a marital conflict you tend to side with the women which I think is sometimes unfair. What do you have to say to that?

Kamrul, Lalmitia, Dhaka.

Dear Kamrul,

This is not the first time that I have been accused of having a gender bias. To my knowledge, I have never been purposefully unfair to men. However, in our culture, the man-woman relationship is so one-sided that I try to balance it out a little bit. Since a majority of our women are financially dependent, they are not often equipped to take decision which is best for them. In such a situation, I try to assist them and offer them options which they could probably take. If I seemed too biased then please excuse me. I certainly did not mean to.