Great Books

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A news item in *The Daily Star* has thrilled me immensely. It is the declaration by the Italian ambassador that Grazia Deledda's *La Madre* is a master piece-which it is indeed. I went back to my 10th year in the mid forties in Kolkata. My father had a revolving shelf stacked with excellent Bengali periodicals in one of which I found this novel in a brilliant Bengali translation. I recognised the work as a classic, my young years notwithstanding. I read another serial, Manik Babu's *Poetry of Day and Night*. Even for us children reading was immensely rewarding. I read Vickie Baum, Victor Hugo, Alphonse Dendet, Andrei Malraux, Alexi Tolstoy in translation.

The Bengali classics were of course exhilarating. My first juvenile novel, *The Accursed* is a blatant imitation of Shorot and Bibhuti. My second novel *Toward the Rising Sun*, with its Russian characters Boris and Zenaida, is an imitation of Gorky. Only in *The Lost Home* written at 13, about a migrant family split apart by partition, did I come to my own. Premen, Promoth, Probodh all had influenced me.

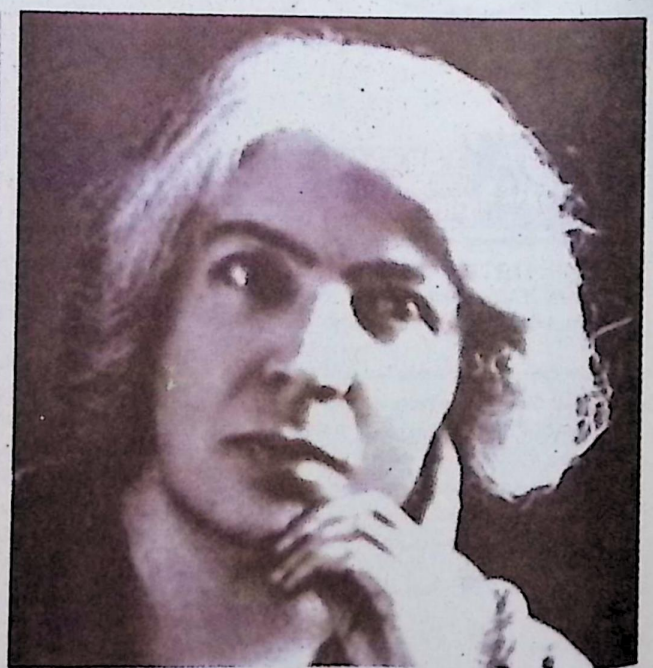
On my 16th birthday I got Ezra Pound's poetry from my late second sister. But her gift, which enticed me, was *The trials of Oscar Wilde*. I had just read his plays of De Profundis written in jail. So the *Trials* were a sequel to all these. Lord Alfred Douglas's picture in *The Trials* did not show the malice and ingratitude which he had plagued Wilde with.

Birthday gifts from my eldest sister were *The Storm* and *The Fall of Paris* by Alexi Tolstoy. The book that kept me enthralled throughout my teens was an entire volume of *The Forsythe Saga* given to me by Mr. SM Hashim. Then when I read the greater Tolstoy I knew here was the zenith of literary talents -- Turgenev, Gogol, Chekhov, Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, were engrossing but Tolstoy remained unparalleled.

Mayakovsky's works were difficult to come by but his fire and rebellion ignited my spirit. More than Flauburt, Balzace and Zola it was Marcel Proust who allured me. And the appeal of Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* still



Oscan Wilde



Grazia Deledda