

OBSERVATIONS

Surrealism: From French to Bangla literature

ABID ANWAR

SURREALISM has been a widely-used and often misused element in art and literature of the modern era. The misuse can solely be attributed to half-literacy of the users about what it is and how to apply it. Although the misconception is widespread on a global scale, a single example may confirm the low level of understanding about surrealism among our writers. In 2000, a national institution like Bangla Academy published an English version of the *Lekhok Ovidhan* with a noisy title 'Dictionary of Writers' (to mean directory of writers) in which the Bangla term *porabastob* (meaning surrealism) was ridiculously translated as 'supernatural' in delin-eating the rhetorical features in the works of a poet. However, the Academy stopped circulation of the book immediately after its publication, this being a 'dictionary of errors'!

However ridiculous the translation was, this evoked in me the idea of an operational definition of surrealism so our young writers in all walks of literature, including poetry, short stories, novels and drama, can use it with a full conceptualization of the meaning of the term and of the correct mode of application.

Surrealism emerged as a movement in art and literature in the 1920s and was largely drawn upon the concepts of Dadaism, a short-lived (1916-1922) preceding movement. Every human baby, irrespective of its mother tongue, initiates the process of talking with the same set of words: da...da, dad...dad, from which the name Dadaism was derived [For close proximity of a baby to its grandfather in the extended family structure in our culture, we take it for 'Dada'. Existence of grandfathers in the western nuclear families is rare, and they take this babyish delirium for 'Dad']. A group of disgusted young writers and artists, stricken by the intellectual storms during and after the First World War, initiated Dadaism as a movement, out of frustration and dislike over then existing art and literary works of the romantic era. The group led by a Romanian poet and artist Tristan Tzara, took to the babyish nonsense expressions in poetry and artwork. Although originating in Zurich, the Dadaist poets, including Tristan Tzara himself, mostly wrote in French, and the movement rapidly spread to the English-speaking world. Despite being considered a sensational move, the large majority of critics denounced these works and argued that if these incoherent delirious diction were accepted as poems, there would remain no difference between madness and literary pursuit. This heralded an early death for Dadaism but led to the founding of surrealism that emphasizes the use of any bizarre imagery for artful but meaningful expression of reality.

French poet Andre Breton is acclaimed to be the founding father of surrealism. Poet Evan Gall of Germany became simultaneously associated with the movement since he wrote both in German and French. This new movement had the residual effects of Dadaism at its rehearsing early stage of development, and it was Evan Gall's advocacy of meaningfulness that gave surrealism a strong footing as an acceptable element in the art of rhetoric. What Evan Gall had

emphasized was a clear meaning of the expression, no matter what bizarre and fantastical imageries are created from the subconscious state of mind of a poet or an artist. From then on, surrealism often began to be termed 'super realism', which implies that surrealistic imagery can be used in poetry and artwork only when these relate to the realism in spite of being bizarre and absurd.

In Bangla poetry, Jibanananda Das used surrealistic imagery for the first time. He could have a good start because surrealism by then had become the bloodstream of poesy among the most talented poets in the English-speaking world, with simultaneous exercises in Spanish, Greek and other languages. We, as inhabitants of a British colony, were readily exposed to



surrealism used in English poetry. Other important poets of the Thirties, including Buddhadev Bose, who wrote a lot about the Thirties in prose, hardly used surrealistic imagery in their poetry. In the limited scope of this small write-up, it's not my intention to present a detailed path analysis of the usage of surrealism in Bangla poetry (which I have done elsewhere in Bangla) but to help our young writers fully understand how surrealistic imagery is used to depict a realistic sequence in poetry. What I considered an operational definition in a preceding paragraph is based upon the concept of understanding an abstract ideation from appropriate examples. In a descriptive definition, it may often be difficult to differentiate even a concrete thing like a carrot from a coloured radish and the

same tint of yellow-ochre! The following citations from the works of poet Jibanananda Das and Shamsur Rahman are evidence that surrealism is not just an assemblage of incoherent bizarre images and imagery but is an art element that enriches the composition of a poem with meaningful expressions:

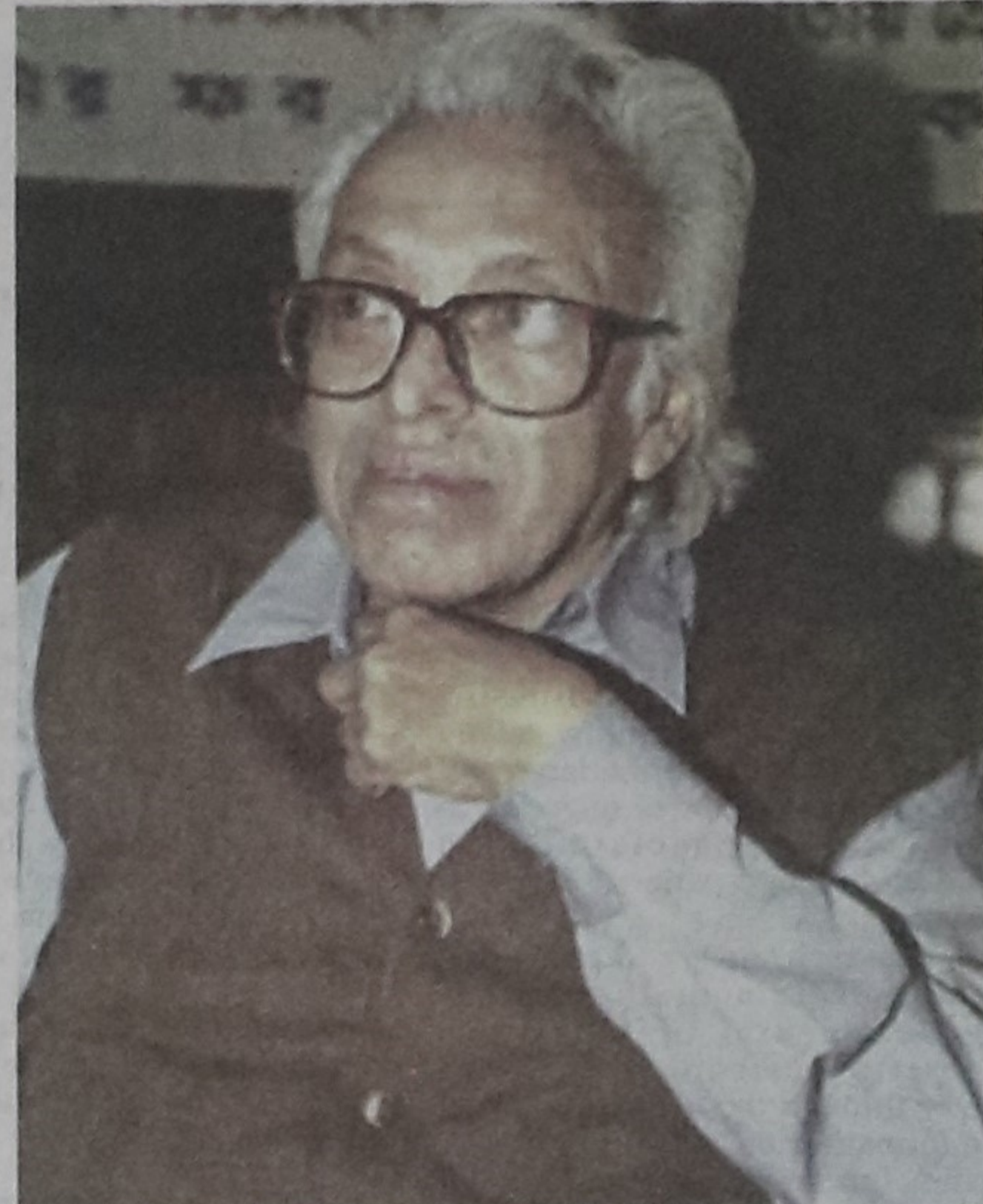
With a slight surrealistic flavour in two imageries in the poem *Porospor* (Mutuality) and *Pakhira* (The Birds) in his first book titled *Dhusor Pandulipi* (Grey Manuscript), Jibanananda aptly used surrealism in *Haowar Raat* (Windy Night), *Birhal* (The Cat), *Horinera* (The Deer), and a few other poems in *Banalata Sen*; *Srabonraat* (Rainy Night), *Niralok* (Darkness), *Shob* (Dead Body), *Ajker Ek Muhurto* (A Moment Today), and *Porichayok* (Identifier) in *Mohaprithibi* (Greater Earth); *Ghorha* (Horse), *Sheishob Shialera* (Those Jackals), and *Hansh* (Duck) in a later collection of poems *Darkness of the Seven Stars*. For my purpose, I like to quote a single imagery of Jibanananda from his *Horinera* that sounds:

As if there glitters the smile of Shefalika Bose, passing through the dim light of a diamond-lamp in her hand behind a *Hijal* tree on the endless sylvan sky

In a dim-light environment, the charming smile of the lovely Shefalika Bose is spread across the entire horizon on the sylvan sky apparently a bizarre imagery but is not incoherent with and detached from the central theme of the poem because metaphorically this is an extremely artful depiction of the beauty of a clear blue sky behind the canopy of a forest.

Following this kind of sporadic usage by Jibanananda Das, poet Shamsur Rahman used surrealism in his works with its various dimensions. Interestingly, his predecessor and contemporary poets of the Forties and Fifties rarely used surrealism in their works. Rahman's diction has always been an admixture of realistic and surrealistic images and imageries in his works from beginning to end. A unique feature of Rahman's poesy is a continuous and spontaneous shifting from the conscious to the subconscious state of mind and vice versa. As a result, we are exposed to surrealistic images and imagery even in poems that we consider adherent to extroverted political and social commitment, for example, *Bornomala Amar Dukhini Bornomala* (Alphabets My Afflicted Alphabets), *Asader Shirt* (Asad's Shirt), *Bangladesh Swapna Dekhe* (Bangladesh Does Dream). However, the poet, especially at the early phase, was mostly inclined to an introspective individualism. To exemplify how his surrealism turned into 'super realism' with direct coherence with the central theme of his poems, I would like to cite and explain two of his pieces both from introspective and extroverted categories: a. Who is that black horse, fluttering its long fur on neck, running across an obscure and distant field painted with fire, often shows up to take him away b. Like a flaming piece of cloud Asad's shirt does fly on air, across the sky

The imagery in (a) is quoted from the poem *Jonoiko Sohiser Chhele Bolchhe* (Monologue of a Horse-Trainer's Son), included in Rahman's third book of poems *Biddhuwasta*



Nilima (The Destructed Blue) and the one in (b) from *Asad's Shirt*, included in the fifth book *Nij Bashhumay* (In My Own Land).

The black horse in the first imagery is a symbol of death that often shows up in the subconscious state of mind of a horse-trainer, now old, sick, and bed-ridden for quite a long time. The use of the pronoun 'who' for a horse is an additional element of poesy for personification. The absurd flight of a bulletted, blood-tinted shirt of a martyr across the sky in the second imagery in (b) depicts the nationwide transmission of the feelings of the cause Asad died for during the political upheaval and mass upsurge in the Sixties against the Pakistan military junta.

Both imageries are apparently absurd and represent magical fantasy, an important component of surrealism but these are very closely connected to a meaning.

The article, as I said, is not intended for a detailed path analysis of surrealism in our poetry and artwork. It is rather an attempt to make it clear that surrealism is not an assemblage of bizarre and fantastical expressions segmented from the central theme of a poem or an artwork, as frequently observed nowadays in the works of those inclined to this trait.

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NON-FICTION

A morning walk in distant Irvine

TANVEERUL HAQUE

WE arrived at our son Salman's one bedroom apartment in Irvine last Tuesday. It was bright and sunny but quite cold for us - just come to LA from Bangladesh. Temperatures of 16 max. and 6 min. Celsius. Irvine is in Orange County, reputedly the richest or one of the richest counties in the U.S. It's one of 90 cities that form the conurbation of what is known as Los Angeles. For us neophytes it is a bit difficult to comprehend that LA is not really a city in itself but a vast area comprised of so many satellite cities. Yes and why not? To put it in perspective Salman's home in Irvine is 80 miles distant from our daughter Tina's home up north, in Santa Clarita. That's the distance from Dhaka to Comilla!

I consider myself a dedicated jogger. Hence after settling into the apartment, Salman and I drove over (yeah in California you drive - even to buy a soft drink, generically referred to as 'a soda' - our rickshaws just won't do here - the distances are too vast) to buy myself a pair of sneakers a.k.a. trainers/runners and appropriate socks. The next morning was bright and sunny, with azure blue skies but when I went out at ten past seven in my track suit, the cold took my breath away, so I ducked in for a woolen scarf and a woolen cap. I walked briskly within the gated compound with winding cement footpaths but felt shy to break into a jog. A few others were walking too - mostly with their dogs. I did five laps in my designated 50 minutes and worked up a mild sweat by the time I returned.

When I was told by Allia, (Salman's fiancée) that there was a specific trail that went around the compound outside its walled perimeter, my curiosity got the better of me. Next morning I borrowed the keys of the compound gate from Salman and hesitantly let myself out of the compound. The day was overcast - hence the temperature was up. I didn't need the

woolen scarf but the cap was de rigueur. As I was in uncharted territory I was a bit apprehensive; but I pride myself in my sense of direction and felt confident that I wouldn't get lost. I could always retrace my steps and find my way back! Soon I was enjoying myself walking briskly along the perimeter walkway - little knowing what delightful vistas awaited me! First the freeway - where cars were whizzing past at mind boggling speeds - on at least 6 lanes each way. It was then I noticed the high wall that protected the gated compound from the constant din of the freeway. Back in the apartment one hardly noticed the sound of the traffic that roared by so very close. I watched the traffic for a while, mesmerized. Since our last visit to LA in 2007, on the occasion of Salman's graduation the number of SUVs (that's Sports Utility Vehicles - a euphemism for gas guzzlers) on the freeways, had dropped remarkably. A clear indicator of the sorry state of the economy. In its place the freeways were dotted with teeny weenie cars - subcompacts, my son tells me, but even so with a minimum engine capacity of 1.6 liters! They looked out of place alongside the regular automobiles and the occasional SUVs. I felt they could be blown away in the wake of the bigger vehicles!

As I turned the bend, away from the freeway I came across a bunch of Mexican workers tending the shrubbery around and outside the property. Beautiful bougainvilleas were blooming in their typical magenta splendor. The bushes were neatly trimmed and sculpted into wonderful natural fences. The grass was a thick carpet well tended and freshly mowed. I breathed in the scents and aromas of the recently cut grass. Yes, I reflected such luxuries of well tended lawns and gardens even outside of human habitat were only possible in such rich communities. Well, recession in the U.S. and California being close to bankruptcy seemed a distant reminiscence!

Another bend and I come upon a river! Actually a narrow stream, running through the middle of a dry riverbed. The river however, was trained with boulders lining both the banks and to my pleasant surprise - a cycling track, properly

cemented, winding down on both sides of the river bank. The clearly posted notice to cyclists to beware of flooding made me aware that indeed on rare occasions the dried out riverbed would be replete with the waters of flash floods. Walking briskly along I focused on the rivulet that zigzagged on the dry bed and to my surprise noticed a flock of moorhen, majestically wading in the muddy waters; their iridescent feathers shimmering in the diffused morning light. Looking carefully I found some wild ducks, then herons and spoonbills too. Small flocks of shrieking snipes were zooming along the sandbanks. What a veritable paradise and so close to human habitat. I found this amazing. Back home in the middle of November, a few friends and I had made a trip to the Hyler River, a reasonably large water body in Sreemongor, and had traversed mile upon mile of the haor in paddle boats but come across very few waterfowl - mostly small herons, a few snipes, some black cormorants but hardly any ducks. I surmised the population density of humans in Bangladesh had had an irreversible toll on the wildlife there.

The next couple of days the weather turned foul. I did my morning jogs in the drizzle but could not spare time to observe my feathered friends as I was getting quite wet. The local TV channels reported on the welcome but unusual rains over southern California reminding me of that famous song "It never rains over southern California.....". The rains were quite heavy during the late afternoon. In the evening we saw footage of landslides in Hollywood, some homes deluged in rainwater, an articulated truck skidding and crashing into the road divider and traffic jams caused by slow moving vehicles on slippery freeways. I despaired that the next morning I might even miss my jog if the rains persisted!

I almost overslept in the comfort of the silky down comforter and awoke with a start to see the clock on the dresser showing twenty past seven. Finishing my Fajr prayers and tilawat in the low natural light, I drew aside the blinds on the large bedroom windows and was glad to see that the sun was breaking through the clouds and that patches of azure blue sky were growing in size. Letting my wife Eva and Salman continue with their morning sleep, I dressed rather lightly in a fleece turtleneck and microfibre pants, put on my trainers and let myself out. The morning held promise; the cold was biting though not unbearable. The sky was opening up and I was sure more and more sunshine would be greeting me as my jog progressed.

I continued with anticipation of finding more waterfowl in the rivulet that I was hoping would be having a larger volume of water than the previous days. Boy! was I rewarded the rivulet was substantially gorged and the water was rushing along at some speed. I despaired for the birds; maybe they had been driven away by the rushing waters or the rain! As I approached the river the slanting rays of the rising sun cast my long shadow on the rushing waters and startled a flock of snipe. They took to the air in unison, screeching their utter dislike at being molested by an interloper in their territory. As I looked around I saw the waters teeming with birds - the variety today was amazing, no wonder the raging waters had attracted them. There were large herons - some standing 3 feet tall catching fish with gay abandon and gulping them down. What a sight! I was spellbound. Flocks of ducks, in a rainbow of colors and there was my family of moorhen! I counted the same seven sedately wading in the waters in contrast to the impatient snipe, that were constantly scurrying on the sandbars pecking at insects, worms and marine life. I was one with nature, reveling in the joy of the birds, their carefree abandon. Reluctantly, I tore myself away from the idyllic vista and made my way back home to find Eva and Salman dozing on in deepest slumber, blissfully unaware of the dazzling show that nature was unfolding every morning just a few hundred yards away from their bedroom!

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POETRY



That beautiful butterfly

PARVEZ BABUL

The butterfly used to fly in our garden
With her strong wings of leadership;
She beautifies the lives of neglected flowers
But has gone too far recently leaving us!

We were happy to get her among us
Saw her moving from Teknaf to Tetulia,
Rupsha to Pathuria;
She visited the vegetable gardens
Of the Nurjahans of North Bengal
Houses of so many Alpona Chakmas
Of the Chittagong Hill Tracts
To feel the vulnerability, to observe the
Disadvantages in northern char areas
Coping with their tragic lives!

Thus the butterfly combats poverty
Empowers women, brings people with
disabilities
Into the mainstream of self-reliance
Inspires all with her optimism
She makes dreams true through
the ideals of Helen Keller.

Thus the butterfly moves the whole world
Shows light to the visually impaired
Removes disabilities
Helps overcome sorrows
Shares the joys of success
Loves and cares for HIV/AIDS affected
For innocent children to bloom like
flowers.

But, here, we feel and miss her every
moment
Because we love that beautiful butterfly
endlessly...

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