

REFLECTIONS

The French of the East

SADYA AFREEN MALLICK

HE noted linguistic, Professor Abdul Hye, once famously remarked that Bengali was akin to being the "French language of the East". He was referring to not only the sweetness of the language, but also the profound use of connotation, pronunciation and the subtlety of our mother tongue. An Indo-Aryan language spoken by roughly 230 million people and ranking amongst the top spoken languages in the world on the scale of four to six, Bengali has a long tradition of absorbing the best of the "foreign" influences over the centuries and intermingling with the local dialects.

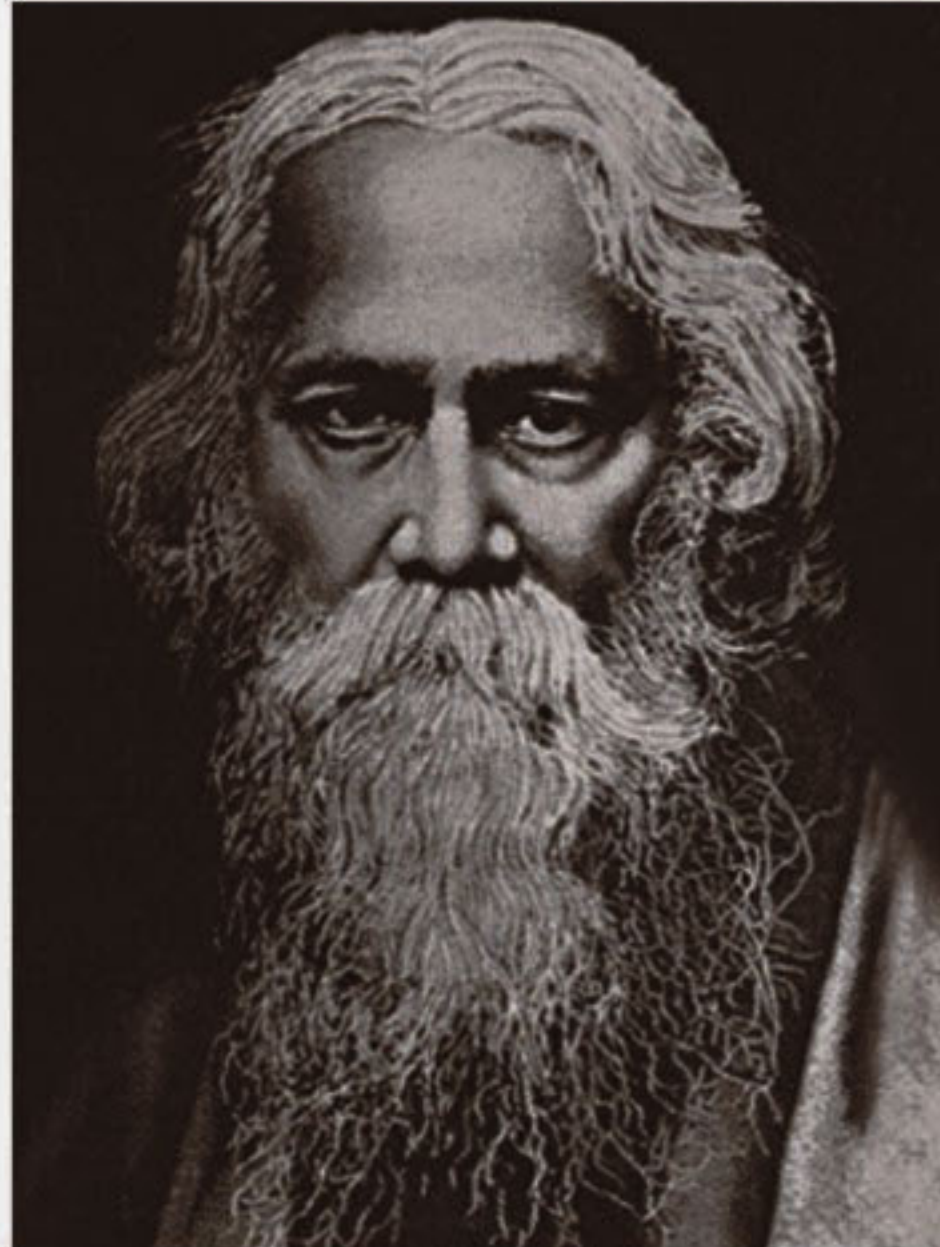
Our culture being a melting pot and a conglomeration of Portuguese, English, French, Turkish and Iranian culture, there are 31 dialects in Bangladesh. In fact (according to Wikipedia) the first written Bengali dictionary/grammar, *Vocabolario em idioma Bengalla, e Portuguez dividido em duas partes*, was written by the Portuguese missionary Manoel da Assumpcam between 1734 and 1742 while he was serving in Bhawal.

The local dialects certainly add colour and vibrancy to the language. In a land stretching from Rangpur in the north and Chittagong to the south, the 31 dialects give a tangible identity to the local heritage although (often) they also form the source of much confusion! For instance in Rajshahi, "s" is pronounced "sh" so that "sir" is

pronounced "sher" (tiger) and vice versa! A common dialect in the northern belt of Rajshahi-Chapainawabganj may lead one to come up against the dialogue "*builley porey builbe honi je builley dio*". Likewise, in Khulna, we are more used to listening to the song "*nati khati bela gelo shutii parlaam na*". Many a person, outside Chittagong, finds it near impossible to follow the local dialect. Such can, of course, be said about the Sylhet accent also. Was it that long ago that an international airways had to open a separate "Sylhet" booth to cater to the proud locals who spoke in no other dialects?

In old Dhaka the mixture of Urdu and Bangla during the Nawabi era has created a niche by itself. My husband, while stationed in Barisal, representing an oil company sometime back was in a dilemma when people came and referred to some instance as "*ek ser taak*". He was much bemused later to know that "*taak*" meant cheat and not baldness.

Jokes aside, Bangla in its purest form was known as the French of the East, the language of the intelligentsia. The number of unique words to reflect human emotion, its subtle use to reflect personal relationships ("*apni, tumi, tui*") marks it as a true language of the people, a language that unlike any other language in world history has imbued so much pride that men and women have happily walked into a hail of bullets to preserve its identity. A language where a simple "*tumi*" can denote so much emotion, that poems are incomplete without it. No wonder it's often



said that poets are the unwritten guardians of a country's language.

Ironically, the divine songs of Tagore were initially not given due respect in our society, as he had 'introduced' new words to our vocabulary. His songs were not regarded as classics or refined by the connoisseurs of music who were mostly



fond of Indian classical music. At the musical conferences of the elites only Nidhubabu's tappa songs were rendered. Occasionally songs of Rajnikanta or Dwijendralal Roy could be heard but Tagore songs were not considered conventional or appropriate. Unlike Rabindranath, our national poet

Nazrul, being fiercely rebellious and anti-British, stood out amongst many of his peers who were not as confrontational as him. Naturally many of his songs reflected his brand of fiery emotion and patriotism, a far cry from the standard-formulaic commercially successful songs. In fact, even his romantic songs, his *ghazals*, bore his signature touches, the artful play of words and tone that set it apart from the rest.

Distressingly, nowadays Bengali sometimes seems to have taken yet another turn. Young people tend to mix the pure form and have started a new trend that they pick up from just about anywhere. Noted personalities like Abdullah Abu Sayeed have remarked that previously there was a trend to follow the electronic media to pick up the proper pronunciation and now people don't know what to follow.

If poets are the guardians, the media have to be the enforcer of the language. With their widespread reach, their massive popularity, it is essential that each of the media houses in print or electronic form take up the challenge of guiding the millions of Bengali speakers so that its true and beautiful nature is preserved and nurtured. How else would the wonderful dialects be the flag bearers of the proud local heritage? How else would we give birth to another Tagore and Nazrul? How else would we honour the martyrs whose life we have traded for our right to speak in our beloved tongue?

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NOSTALGIA

Through the world of books

TULIP CHOWDHURY

RECENTLY I visited a bookstore. While I was rummaging through the books my eyes fell on the Archie and Classic comics. I was immediately transformed into another world, the world of my earlier reading. Other than textbooks I have always read what I enjoyed very much in agreement with L.A.G. Strong, who says in his essay, *Reading for Pleasure*:

"To my mind the only sensible reason for reading anything is because we enjoy it or hope to enjoy it. Of course, pleasure covers a whole variety of feelings and shades of feeling. But it is my strongest belief about reading that one should read only what one likes, and because one likes it."

I have loved reading and from an early age have been a bookworm. This fiery passion for reading was put into flame by Dr. Sanjida Khatun, the heart of Bangla literature and Tagore songs. When I was a little girl she lived in Dhaka and I lived in Sylhet. She used to send me huge parcels of books. From those books I entered the world of *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*, *Little Red Riding Hood* and other fairy tales. There were fairy tales from different countries of the world. I liked Russian fairy tales a lot. My world of innocent imagination darted between lands of giants,

fairies, unicorns, kings and queens. And there were detective stories in which I spent pass long hours totally wrapped in them. There were stories of getting lost in mysterious mountains. The mountains around my own home on the hill stood like living proof of the stories. There was one book, *Bijoy*, where the protagonist, a spy, journeyed to different countries. The names of different countries would awake in me the dreams to travel.

As I was just stepping into the early teenage I was lost in the world of *Nancy Drew* and *Hardy Boys*. That was while I was studying in Belgrade, in then Yugoslavia. I still recall the exciting 'bookish' smell of the library. My English teacher, Mr. McCollough, had shown me the way to the library and introduced me to the books. At home, almost every night after Mom had put me to bed, I would wait till she had retired and then put the bedside lamp on and go back to reading. My teachers never fell short in encouraging me to read. From time to time they would give me project works that had me looking up Encyclopedia Britannica. As I climbed the stairs to higher grades, I moved on to *Great Expectations*, *Little House on the Prairie*, *Heidi* and other classics. This winter I remember how I used to trudge through deep snow with my bag full of story books. But I never thought that the weight was heavy for I was too

engrossed with expectations of new books from the library.

From Belgrade I went to Islamabad in Pakistan. Here Islamabad Model School for Girls was there with its invaluable library of books. We were allowed to take out two books every week. There were Bangla books too. I soon started reading them, starting off with *Er Nam Shongshar* by Bimal Mitra and going on to Rabindranath Tagore, Nihar Ranjan Gupta and others. And at this stage my friends and I started pouring into Mills and Boons and Georgette Heyer. We would smuggle in these books to school in our school bags and exchange them. The Archie comics made free rides in bundles for the teachers never punished us for carrying them to school. Betty and Veronica were always drawn on the back pages of our exercise copies. Jughead and Archie were there in stickers on the pencil boxes. The first introductions to great classics like *Lord Jim*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and others came through Classic comics.

We came back to Bangladesh soon after Liberation and thus started another chapter of my reading cycle. As the days passed into late teenage, college life commenced with introductions to *Srikanto* by Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyaya's *Srikanto* and Tagore's

Golgopuchcho. Sharat Chandra's comment, "Boro prem shudhu kachhei tanena, dureo thelia dei..." has stayed with me as a great teaching in real life.

For a period I was totally engrossed with *Shanchyeeta*, the poetry collection of Tagore. Among other poems I found *Rahur Prem* and *Morichika* absolutely mind captivating. I would recite in the late hours of the night. My youth, the late hours and the poems --- all would be a complete symphony. The British Council Library became my favourite place to spend the Saturdays. Reading magazines in the library for long hours and then borrowing books was the treat of the week.

Though constant inspiration for reading came from outside, all along there was a good supply of books at home too. My parents were keen readers and they were regular in bringing home supplies of books. I started reading books by Nevil Shute after reading his *A Town Like Alice*, a story of World War II. Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth* also came to me through my mother. Agatha Christie's detective stories were part of everyday life at home. Men with curved moustaches would always remind me of Hercule Poirot. Harold Robins, Irving Stone, Victoria Holt and many other writers graced our book shelf at home.

As family life began and children entered the scene I kept up with my reading. The good thing

about my reading was that my three children, when toddlers would find their Mom hidden behind books and would start a war with demands like, "amio ekta boi chai..." (I want a book too!)

And I kept my house well stocked with books. My maternal uncle Waheedul Haque had advised me to keep books near at hand to make the children grow into good readers. The advice worked like magic and my children grew up passing long solitary hours with books of their own choice. My children do not miss a chance to give me supplies of books by contemporary writers like Paulo Coelho, Maeve Binchey, Jhumpa Lahiri and others.

Even now I am looking forward to going back to *The Painted House* by John Grisham. And so I continue to read for pleasure and firmly believe that we cannot force ourselves to read what we do not enjoy. Just as it is difficult to eat and digest the food you dislike, it is difficult to hold the mind on to something you do not like to read. And so read on in the sea of pleasure! I still enjoy reading the old familiar books. Those e-books still have not caught my fancy and, who knows, maybe one day I will start reading those too!

Tulip Chowdhury writes short stories and poetry and is a teacher.

CRITICISM

Eliotism . . . enigma in poetry

BINOY BARMAN

SAMUEL Beckett crossed the limits of decency when he compared TS Eliot to 'toilet', insisting that the reverse order of the letters of 'T Eliot' was what he wrote. The poet was thus an unfortunate victim of anagram. Eliot also received flak from other critics. He was accused of intentional complexity in poetry for perplexing his readers. Some even condemned him as unoriginal and plagiaristic. FW Bateson criticised his poetry as a manifestation of pseudo-learning. CS Lewis trashed his poetry as 'superficial and unscholarly', terming him a great evil. Ideologically, he was also charged with anti-Semitism.

Despite all poisonous arrows hurled at him, TS Eliot is one of the finest poets the world has ever seen. He is the guru of all modern poets. He initiated a modernist movement in the twentieth century, making poetry an object of serious academic study. He made it mystic and mythical, abstruse and ambiguous, with stultifying novelty in diction and phrasing, blurred with elliptical syntax. Now any course in modern or twentieth century poetry is incomplete and ineffective without Eliot. A poetry reader aspires to see the world through the eyes of Eliot. With his sublime verses Eliot set the stylistic criteria which might aptly be termed 'Eliotism'. Eliotism is justified by the poetic style that Eliot had -- allusive and illusive, factual as well as fictional, holistic amid fragments, with a mix of order and chaos, promising both to tradition and innovation, in the confluence of imagination and reality. Eliot's poetry is difficult because it demands a lot of linguistic, philosophical, theological, mythological, historical and geographical knowledge as well as a good measure of skill in literary technicality. That difficulty is essentially the triumph of Eliotism.

Eliotism is synonymous with elitism in poetry, which was strengthened by other modern poets like Ezra Pound, James Joyce and WB Yeats. The epithet *Eliotism* in fact implies a craze which works in the minds of the young generation, suspicious of their entities in an ailing time, living in an 'unreal city', sterile and depraved, dull and ugly. No poet among his contemporaries and after Eliot could surpass his popularity. He reigned in the twentieth century and will be reigning in the twenty-first century and onwards, I suppose, with even greater acceptance.

The first mark of Eliotism was imprinted by *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock*, a milestone in modern poetry. Eliot created the character of Prufrock to make a mockery of the modern mind manifest in uncertainty, indecision, shallowness, timidity, fear and loneliness. The poet in a pensive mood observes the evening which 'is spread out against the sky ... like a patient etherised upon a table' as there is no healing available. He goes on observing until the last catastrophe: 'We have lingered in the chambers of the sea / By sea-girls wreathed with



seaweed red and brown / Till human voices wake us, and we drown.'

Eliotism electrified the whole world when *The Waste Land*, a modern classic in poetry --- a compressed epic, as it has been sometimes called --- was published in 1922. Eliot laid bare the barrenness of western society and expressed his dissatisfaction with modern life. The poem, enwrapped in a glaring opacity, holds out the symptoms of modern failures. It depicts a world which is replete with 'a heap of broken images', where there is only 'dry stone' with 'no sound of water', and where dry grass sings in an empty voice.

Eliotism was fortified by such later creations as *The Hollow Men*, *Ash Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*. *The Hollow Men* hit the nadir of despair and desolation of a modern man: 'This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper'. More notes of despair: "Between the desire / And the spasm / Between the potency / And the existence / Between the essence / And the descent / Falls the Shadow". The poet in vain tries to figure out 'shape without form, shade without colour / Paralyzed force, gesture without motion.' He finds everything hollow, including the vision: "There are no eyes here / In this valley of dying stars / In this hollow valley / The broken jaw of our lost kingdoms." Richly and ambiguously allusive, *Ash Wednesday* moves from spiritual barrenness to hope for human salvation. The poet struggles with 'the devil of the stairs who wears the deceitful face of hope and of

despair'. Life gets stuck in an eternal vacillation between two opposite forces. On the one hand he discovers: 'The stair was dark / Damp, jagged, like an old man's mouth drivelling, beyond repair / Or the toothed gullet of an aged shark.' On the other hand, he discerns the light of salvation in the emergence of 'blessed sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain, spirit of the garden.' At last he discerns: 'The single Rose / Is now the Garden / Where all loves end / Terminate torment.'

Associated with four classical elements -- air, earth, water and fire -- *Four Quartets* (1946) deals with Christian spiritualism in a subtle way. The four parts are titled 'Burnt Norton', 'East Coker', 'The Dry Salvages' and 'Little Gidding'. It earned Eliot the 1948 Nobel Prize in literature. In the poem the poet is on a mission of 'Turning shadow into transient beauty / With slow rotation suggesting permanence.' He is aware of human frailty, though. He realises 'human kind / Cannot bear very much reality.' Therefore he takes shelter in the eternity of time but not with much comfort: 'Time present and time past / And both perhaps present in time future / And time future contained in time past. / If time is eternally present / all time is unredeemable.' He flies to a land where the demarcation between beginning and end disappears: 'What we call the beginning is often the end / And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.' And of himself he asserts: 'In my beginning is my end.'

The aesthetics of Eliotism is also evident in drama. He revived the tradition of verse drama through *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) and *The Cocktail Party* (1949) with much success. Readers can hardly forget the famous words in *The Cocktail Party*: "What is hell? / Hell is oneself / Hell is alone, the other figures in it / Merely projections." His other plays are: *The Rock* (1934), *The Family Reunion* (1939), *The Confidential Clerk* (1953) and *The Elder Statesman* (1959).

Eliotism was bolstered up by the poet's significant body of literary criticism. His *Tradition and the Individual Talent* is regarded as the most influential critical work in the twentieth century. It gave a new direction to New Criticism, claiming that the value of an art work must be viewed in the context of all previous works. He said: "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists." He elaborated his poetic vision in it: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things." He believed that poetry might make us occasionally a little more aware of the deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely

penetrate; for our life is mostly a constant "evasion of ourselves." He wrote superb critical essays on the metaphysical poets Donne and Marvell, as well as Dante, Blake, Swinburne, Marlow, Johnson, and on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. His concepts of the 'impersonality of the poet' and the 'objective correlative' have been part of the critical currency ever since.

The wave of Eliotism was worldwide. Not even Bangla literature could evade its impact. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the Bengali poet crowned with the Nobel Prize, somehow kept out of the rippling effect in fashion, strictly adhering to the Romantic tradition. Tagore was such a dazzling star that anyone who composed poetry during his time could not but be overwhelmed by his beaming influence. Only a small group of poets called *Panchapandav* --- Jibanananda Das, Buddhadev Bose, Sudhindranath Dutta, Bishnu Dey and Amiya Chakravarty --- during the thirties and forties of the twentieth century could come out of the halo of Tagore by way of adopting innovative styles. They could do it as they derived inspiration from Eliot, a poetic powerhouse. In modern Bangladesh, all major poets, including Shamsur Rahman, Syed Shamsul Huq, Asad Chowdhury and Nirmalendu Goon, have demonstrative the Eliotic influence. Eliotism has nourished and nurtured the modern poetic mind in Bangladesh and elsewhere.

Eliotism is the other name of supreme artistry, egoistically esoteric, with a mark of unbeaten sophistication. Eliot was not unaware of his strength. He wrote of himself, wittily: "How unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot! With his features of clerical cut, And his brow so grim And his mouth so prim And his conversation so nicely Restricted to What Precisely And If and Perhaps and But." (*Five-Finger Exercises*) Eliotism is pleasantly unpleasant with its formidably difficult features. In the poet's own terms, it is characterised by grimness, primness, nicety, preciseness and uncertainty. Eliotism is the epitome of twentieth century enigma in poetry.

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SORRY!
In last week's Literature section, two photographs clearly got mixed up. We are deeply sorry about it.
Literary Editor

POETRY



... from SHAMIM AZAD

Potion
Allotments,
an interesting setting for a painting.
Allotments - full of unexpected characters
growing fruits and vegetables
redesigning the canvas for more growing spaces of mind...
And when it rains likes Wales
waterproofed sheds soak like memories...
The great thing is sharing the produce
drinking cups of frothy coffee
then try and complete the painting of your displacement
using the colours of tomatoes
and trauma
from your neighbor's allotments.

Slit
Though it felt achingly cool
I blew my guard clearly
Slashed my confidence in pieces
The desire went meandering
around the melancholic
stomach of mine
and at last defined . . .

It rained
Luxuriated and moisturised my mind
with a peculiar precious smile
So dry,
like a dubious dust-bow
and I was the forgotten arrow.

Now the ground feels like polished marble
and my loose hair starts bouncing back to life
lips are singing like lute.
Shamim Azad is a poet, teacher and journalist.