

# Poetry in sediments of meaning

## Shivaji Sengupta is happy looking for meaning in verse

The very title of this anthology of poetry by Nazmun Nesa Piari attracts attention: "Prem-e-Aw-Prem-e". But then what is "Aw-prem-e"? Does it mean a state of non-love? I shall come to this question later in this review.

Nazmun Nesa's book has 34 poems, most of them less than a page long. Most of the themes are about love, but here, I need to pause at that word again. Yes, these poems are about love. But what kind of love? I guess it brings us back to the title!

I am a student of literature, not a poet. As such writers and poets might find my analysis a bit irritating. Living in a critical world of theories about literature, we are accustomed to the western binaries --- opposition between words. The western theorist --- and I am trained as one --- looks for tensions between opposing forces of words, concepts, culture, and is interested in how the writer resolves such contradictions, and how, in turn, these are aesthetically expressed. So a title like "Preme-e-Aw-Prem-e" would immediately draw them in, as it is drawing me in.

But I realize, reading the poems, that perhaps these words are not in binary opposition to each other. They describe states of being --- being in love (prem-e) and being in other states, not necessarily non-love in the romantic sense, but in the various states a human being finds oneself: returning home; a thought after a meaningful conversation; thinking about mother. These moments are "Aw-prem" that may not have anything to do with love. Nazmun Nesa Piari's poetry is about states of being in thought, beautifully expressed. And every single poem is about human beings in nature.

Ms. Nesa is a Bangladeshi immigrant in Germany: a journalist, poet, producer and participant in TV talk shows; a literary critic organizing and participating in literary discussions. She left Bangladesh many years ago, and, unlike most South Asians these days, chose to settle in a non-English speaking Western European country instead of, say, Canada, the USA or England. Perhaps because she speaks fluent German, her Bangla has been very subtly influenced by the nuances of the German language. Also, Ms. Nesa was trained in the sciences and not literature. These facts about her life have had an interesting influence on her writing. Compared to English, the German language is synthetic. Compound words, often consisting of two or more nouns, abound. Nesa, who writes in Bangla, does not synthesize several words into one, but diffuses words through eye catching and interesting juxtapositions. Just what I mean by this I will explain in the section on Nesa's poetic language.

Just read the poems' titles: room with golden rain; attracting attention; the Berlin Wall; rain; your words; this is the way it is- I am fine; how will they know? all love; in love and in other states of being (prem-e-aw-prem-e)... the list goes on.

Let me discuss some of the poems now. It is important to note that the poems in this anthology have been written over a period of time. The first one discussed here was written when the author was still living in Bangladesh, more than twenty years ago. According to her, she had practically given up poetry after she came to Germany. She was busy building a career. But, as John Lennon once said, "life is what happens to us when we are busy making other plans." Poetry happened to her, again.

The very first one, "Je Ghar-e Sonal-i Bristi,"

(Room with Golden Rain) caught my attention.

Let me translate a few lines:  
*I have wanted very little,  
Just a room with navy blue curtains,  
A red tape recorder,  
From which  
Green and yellow, blue music will flow,  
And in the mid-day heat, the mildly humming  
electric fan will sprinkle golden rain....  
My soul will sleep  
Silently, just  
As water sleeps on water,  
Forever....*

What attracts my attention, possibly everyone's attention, is the pairing of dissimilar adjectives with nouns: green, yellow music; the fan sprinkling golden rain. Someone once said, only the novelty attracts --- good speech is that which makes good contact. Nazmun Nesa's poems do precisely that. Reading this poem I realized that in many ways her poetry is abstractly cinematic.



Prem-e-Aw-Prem-e  
Nazmun Nesa Piari  
Ankur Prokashoni

Even as we ready the words on the page, as signifiers, the images signified exist in imagination, not in the real world: blue green music, fan sprinkling golden rain. Time after time, this poet will give you beautiful descriptions only to lure you away to a world of abstraction, imagination. In "Dristi Akarshan" (Visual Attraction), the first part is a vivid description of a man:

*In your carefully careless ways,  
Blue shirt, faded blue denim jeans,  
A scarf with delicate embroidery round your neck;*

*These are all your ways  
Of attracting attention....*

But then, read on;  
*Why do you dampen  
My enthusiasm by saying ---  
Vanish slowly away from the molecular center  
of the present?*

*Why give up artistry?*  
I am not even sure I've understood this poem; so I will refrain from interpreting, lest Nazmun Nesa says, like T.S. Eliot in mild frustration, "That is not it at all, that is not what I meant at all...!" But that's okay. That is why poetry is so intriguing. I've loved many poems in my life that I've

never understood (Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" is a good example) just because of their sounds and the images they create in my mind. To me, what the poet is playing with is attraction/abstraction juxtapositions. We attract one another but to make someone mean something to you, efface yourself, retreat, create a space. Is this what Nazmun Nesa is saying? I'm not sure. But I am with Archibald MacLeish on this:  
*A poem should not mean,  
But be.*

"Hurry" is quintessentially Nazmun Nesa:  
*Shall I see you again today, you asked ---  
I said, no.*

*I'm in a trance, enveloped by you,  
As the moonlit night  
Is veiled in the sweet smell of flowers...  
You rush to embrace me,  
Like a gust of a sudden wind on a quiet afternoon,  
On the brink of surrender,  
I control myself...*

Those two lines, controlling oneself from surrender's precipice, says it all about Nazmun Nesa's poetics. Her poems are packed with intense emotions, but her expressions are artistic, controlled.

"Berlin-er prachir" (The Berlin Wall) is another very intriguing poem because, for me, the meaning changes as I read it.

The first eight lines are a serene and graphic description of what the poet sees now that the Berlin Wall is broken: the moon hanging low, silver fish on the Neisse, way beyond the mountain cliffs, forests of deep green. You and I are side by side; this trembling moment; the air we breathe trembles too. Will you give me your hand, in love, in pain, in anxiety?

But who are these lines about? Two lovers watching silently way beyond the broken wall? But what if it is the two Germanies, finally back together? Nazmun's professional background makes this interpretation extremely possible. She is a poet, activist, was once married to a famous nationalist Bangladeshi poet. In Germany, she has been involved with the media on many levels: radio, TV, print journalism. She has interviewed people from public life and the artistic world; gone to and fro, from Bangladesh to Europe and America. So, keeping all this in main, why can't we interpret these lines as the witnessing of the two Germanies back together, just as once over a quarter century ago this poet had witnessed the independence of Bangladesh, or, a little later, her own independence from controlling men?

I was elated at the thought, as wrong as I could be about the possibility. After all, who benefited from the fall of the wall? Surely the people of a united Berlin! But Nazmun doesn't give us a didactic poem about that momentous event. She gives us a tender love poem, metonymically (a part standing for the whole) about Berlin.

A famous American literary critic, William Wimsatt, once said that when an author's work is published, it belongs minimally to the author. It belongs to the world. Interpretation of literature is not an author's responsibility. It's ours, those of us who are not as talented as poets or novelists. I take refuge in this concept. Nazmun Nesa Piari has given me a wonderful opportunity to absorb her poems into my consciousness. They create in me sediments of meaning, sinking slowly into me at deeper and deeper levels. I have read her poetry so many times that I do not know any more whose poems they are: hers or mine.

I suppose that is the ultimate success of a poet.

Shivaji Sengupta is a writer and scholar.

# Swathes of tradition

## A new work charms Syed Badrul Ahsan

You judge the place of a nation in history by the culture that has deepened its roots. And when the matter is one of Bangladesh, the idea of it that is, you need to go back a pretty long way in time. There are those who will inform you that in a very proper sense, it is a time frame of a thousand years within which you can place the evolution of Bengali culture. And, of course, everything else --- politics, governance, poetry, music --- comes within it. But how does that culture begin? Where does it begin? These are some of the questions you could push Saymon Zakaria's way. And he, for his part, appears ready to come forth with the answers.

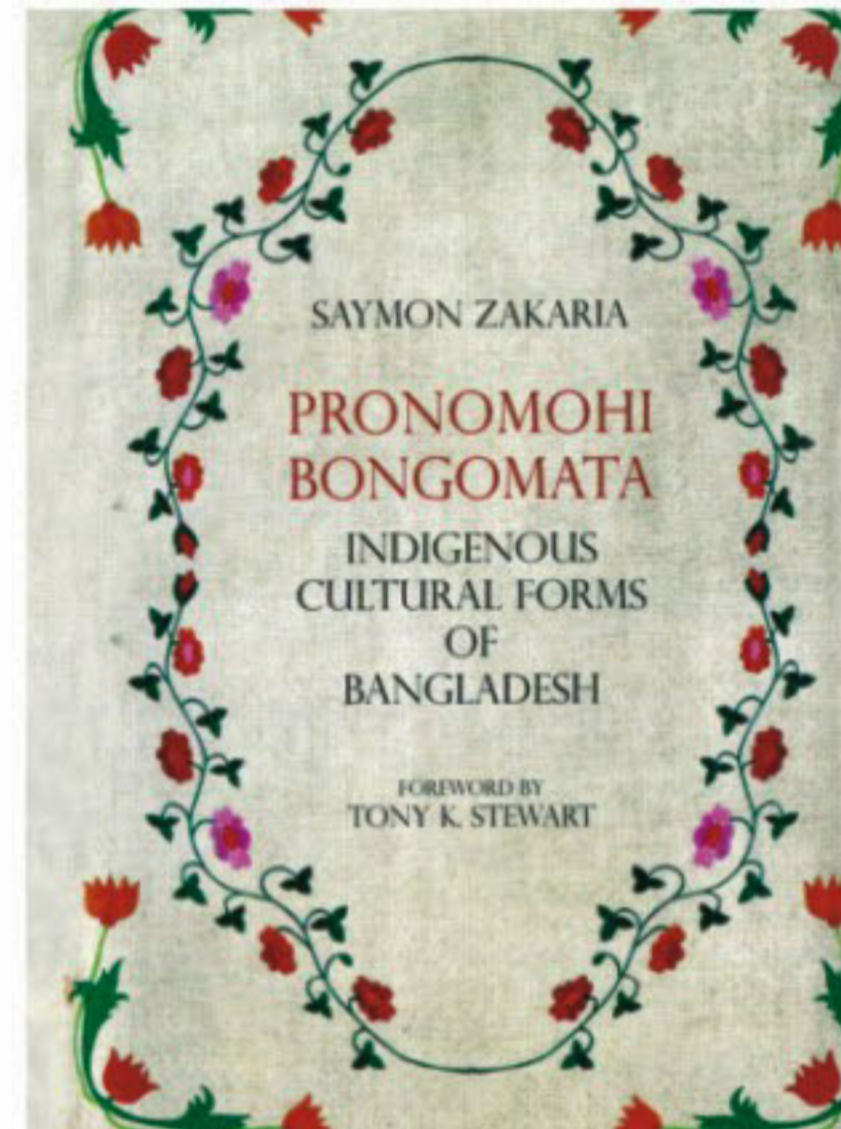
Those answers are, in a sense, this work under review. It is the very variety of the subjects the writer covers which goes into the business of fortifying our understanding of our culture. The subjects are local. All culture springs from a local ambience and that precisely is what Zakaria emphasizes through his segmentation of the themes he brings into play. Overall, as he would like to put it, it is indigenous culture that constitutes the Bengali legacy or, more properly, the heritage Bangladesh is heir to. Such indigenous culture, again, is fundamentally culture as it has shaped itself in the diverse regions of the country, in a local manner of speaking. Together, these variants of local culture become the sum leading to a whole. Take, as an instance, the Nathjugi, people who practise a certain cultural tradition in remote regions of northern Bangladesh. It happens to be a tradition which comes close, as the writer points out, to Buddhism and meditation. The practitioners of this tradition, we are informed, spent a lifetime, or a very large part of it, in searching for 'answers to spiritual and metaphysical questions.'

Once the background of the Nathjugi is made clear, it becomes easier for you to comprehend the message emanating from the play that comes associated with this aspect of Bangladesh's culture. You move on, with Zakaria, to an understanding of jari songs. When you do that, you will likely feel that you have travelled quite a distance from aspects of Buddhist tradition to an area where Islamic history comes to the fore. In jari songs --- jari gaan in Bengali --- what you have is a fundamental premise of folk culture in this country. The background is the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, grandson of the Prophet of Islam, in Karbala. The tale, despite all those hundreds of years having gone by since the hostilities drew to an end and left Islamic history pursuing a course not foreseen before the battle, continues to exercise a strong hold on the rural imagination in Bangladesh. Interestingly, the jari songs draw extensively from Mir Mosharrif Hossain's seminal literary work Bishadh-Shindhu. The story, set on a simple scale, involves two boyatis questioning each other on the stories related in the work and then coming forth with the answers on their own through what is known as singing the disha.

Zakaria's exposition of indigenous culture is, in a very significant sense, an involved examination of the spirituality or

the mysticism which has gone into the making of heritage. If he details the martyrdom of Hussain in Karbala or, in other words, the defence of faith that such martyrdom exemplifies, he also is in a proper mood to take you by the hand into a narration of the tale of the saint Gazi. It is in places like Dudhshar (literally meaning milk and cream), a village in Jhenaidah, that the story of the saint yet exercises a powerful hold on the popular imagination. Indeed, the very concept of a secular Bengali culture encompasses such practices as Krishna lila and such thoughts as those that deal with the personality of a sannyasi. Mind you, the sannyasi is no monk or even a properly definable spiritual being. He is, simply, one who wanders in search of the divine, all the while making known his unfettered devotion to the divine.

In a very important way, the sannyasi, especially in terms of looking for the gems which have provided credence and moral validity to Bangladesh's culture, is one who reads this work. It is through his intellectual wanderings along the Kali river flowing past Bashantapur that the reader will come squarely up against traditions he perhaps had not earlier been



Pronomohi Bongomata  
Saymon Zakaria  
Nymphaea Publication

aware of. Baleghat has its asto gaan. Take me across the river, as Zakaria puts it, is what the story is all about, the theme of it. You become one with the river; and the river is deep. The culture is therefore profound.

*Pronomohi Bongomata* is Mother Bengal as we have known through the generations. It is only natural or perhaps a happy coincidence that Saymon Zakaria has now taken us back along a trail many of us have rather faint ideas of. Zakaria's specialty is research into culture, into unlocking the innumerable secrets of tradition which have lain embedded in our collective consciousness. This work is one more instance of unlocking. And, after that, it is an opening of new windows to old tales for us. It is a narrative that should be in the libraries of educational institutions and in homes, the better to revive our interest in ourselves.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs and Book Reviews, The Daily Star.

# Peregrinations into the jungles

## Ainon N is on a pursuit of truth seekers

As I walk through bookstores typically authors known to me grab my attention. I also lack reserve when it comes to browsing book titles; an indulgence that I have not been able to overcome. On one such occasion while my eyes were scanning the shelves, the title *Storyteller* attracted my attention. Aren't all writers storytellers? To my pleasant surprise, the book by Mario Vargas Llosa had a different story to tell, not what one anticipates in a fiction. I marveled at the finesse with which the author committed his pen to bring us the tale of moral judgments that are tag-ons to laws of development. In this case, it is the story of integrating the Machiguenga tribe into the 'modern' world, the mainstream culture of Peru. The writer sensitizes us --- that the world views of people are social constructs which are subject to change inherent to time and place. Simultaneously he also leads us to the edge of questioning whether the principles of *right conduct* are a good framework to understand the logical world of *other people*.

The story begins with the narrator, a Peruvian scholar who walks into a quaint art gallery in Florence, only to find to his pleasant surprise a photo exhibition of the Amazonian tribe, the Machiguenga. Among the displays he also discovers the photograph of his college friend Saul Zuratus. Saul, nicknamed Mascaritus (Mask Face) is the central character of the story. His identity comes alive only through narratives of the events-teller. He describes Saul as having two anomalies: a facial birthmark which covers half his face and he is a *goy*, born of a Jewish mother and Christian father, a fallacy by the standards of religious fanatics. These are markers that isolate him from others and keep him away from social interaction. While at the University of San Marcos neither law nor liberal education catches Saul's fancy. Instead, he is driven by

ethnology. Only during sporadic interludes does the narrator discover Saul's compassion for the tribes he visited during his trips to the jungle. Primitive practices of the native Indians, their habits and customs, their ways of living in harmony with the natural world had a deep impact on Saul. His quiet evolution and the coming of being into their culture and religion were due to the fact of "human lack of conscience, irresponsibility, and cruelty, to which the men, the trees, the animals, and the rivers of the jungle had fallen prey..." Gradually, during the years at university, Saul becomes withdrawn, isolated, shielding himself from the 'intrusion of others' without letting anyone have a 'glimpse of his intentions.' His personal convictions ultimately lead him to disapprove of the processes of conducting ethnological studies as well. The two friends eventually move on to their own course of life. Such is the prologue Llosa sets up for his readers. In the story he embeds both Saul and the Indian tribe as "...aberration(s) that other people ridiculed or pitied without granting it the respect and dignity deserved by those whose physical appearance, customs and beliefs were not *normal*. Both he and they were anomalies in the eyes of other Peruvians. His birthmark aroused in them, in us, the same feelings, deep down, as those creatures living somewhere far away..."

Llosa's writing style parallels the sayings of now (accounts of the narrator) and the past (tribe's worldview; folktales and myths of their animistic belief system), intertwining plots in a manner that holds the reader's attention. Even though it may seem that certain sections of the book stand apart from the story or the characters, in fact Llosa sets it up as parables of modernization. A pleasant read is the segment on how the world was in the eyes of the Machiguengas; their gods, retributions,



The Storyteller  
Mario Vargas Llosa  
Penguin Books

dealings of the tribe, their communion with nature, their method of handling external threats. The *habladores* --- storytellers --- educate these people on how the world in the beginning was abundant, 'in peace and quiet'. The sun held the earth together, and then one day it started 'falling'. At that point Machiguenga people became *walkers*, which was their survival strategy against threat from nature, exploitation from other tribes, and outside people. They became nomads. As 'truth seekers' they always walked away to live in harmony with the natural world, always adjusting to changing circumstances and thus surviving long.

The story continues. The narrator, whose

name is never revealed, ventures on an expedition to Alto Maranon, supported by the Institute of Linguistics. As he experiences the forces of discrepancies introduced by the *civilized* people, he re-engages in silent colloquy with his absent friend Saul, finally understanding his fascination for this untamed world. He discovers that the Machiguenga are a small tribe of approximately five thousand who are 'split apart.' Few were exposed to the white and mestizo world, who thus become entrenched in a hybrid culture; while others were almost totally insulated from outside world. While visiting Pucallpa the narrator learns from his hosts about the discreet presence of the *hablador* a storyteller who goes around among the disunited Machiguenga tribes telling them the stories of their gods and the world, weaving them into one society! Twenty-three years later, after his first peregrinations into the jungles of Amazonia, the narrator, who is now a producer of television documentaries, once again is invited by the Institute to travel there and film the lesser-known tribes. His choice: to discover the evanescent story teller among the Machiguenga. Over the years, through the sporadic writings of anthropologists, ethnologists and the missionaries, he read accounts of the tribe's kinship structure, work methods, symbolism, sense of time, myths and songs, customs and beliefs, but never did he come across any reference to story tellers.

The Machiguenga are a real Peruvian tribe. The story, of course, is cast as fiction. However, the unfolding of the story at attempts to 'modernize' the Machiguenga by creating the so-called enabling environment through permanent settlements, farming, development of trade relations, translation of the Bible into their language, study of their culture and

language --- all create a nexus of external contacts that impacts the integrity of small marginal communities. The paradox remains. Should or can they be left alone?

The ability of any author to insist on truth which others find challenging to debate, calls for moral courage. It is that courage which transforms blind beliefs of the modern person and the clichés of rights and wrongs. As a reader I honour those who remind us to define and hear our own stories, lest we forget. To enjoy this book the reader has to be one with the natives to listen to their mythologies, and understand their erudition in context of her/his own belief system. After all, we have our own theological doctrines which may seem bizarre to others --- take on the role of one who recognizes the necessity of *primitive* practices for their survival; be one in sync with the anguish of displaced population, as well be cognizant of development outcomes; and finally keep an open mind to acknowledge the finesse of an argument that has no definitive answer. The characters in the story also do not bring a closure on how *modern* people are supposed to relate to *natives* left on the sidelines of civilization. *The Storyteller*, of course, is none other than the mask-faced Saul Zuratus! Indeed, it is a beautifully written book, elegant in its message, a book worth reading and pondering on.

Finally, as I closed the book I could not but reflect on the sayings of W. Collins, "...story telling is common to all civilizations. Whether in the form of a sprawling epic or a pointed ballad, the story is our most ancient method of making sense out of experience and of preserving the past."

Ainon N. writes from Carbondale, Illinois, USA