

INTERVIEW

"I was fascinated by its wonderful, elevated classical style"

William Radice reflects on Michael Madhusudan Dutta

William Radice is an English poet with nine volumes of poems to his credit. To readers of Bengali literature, however, he is best known as a translator of Rabindranath Tagore. Interestingly though, it was Madhusudan Dutta that he first took a keen interest in, what with the epic poet's masterly as well as creative combination of west and east. Ever since he studied the canonical Bengali epic as part of his post-graduate studies, he nurtured the hope of translating it so that the whole world could know that what a Bengali poet in the nineteenth century had accomplished in the form of an epic is no less creative, temperate and masterly than any other internationally acclaimed epic. Gradually he finished his translation, which was published by Penguin India in 2010. Radice paid a visit to Bangladesh in February 2012 to celebrate the 150th birth anniversary of Tagore. During his visit, he along with a panel of artistes gave a reading of selected extracts from both the epic's original Bengali and his translated versions, which altogether assumed the shape of more a performance than a reading. Rifat Munim spent time talking with Radice about different aspects of the epic.

Rifat Munim: Not only in the Bengali literary world, but also internationally you are well recognized as a Tagore translator. But very recently you have finished the Herculean task of translating Madhusudan Dutta's voluminous epic *Meghnadhbodh Kabya*? What exactly took you to translating Madhusudan's magnum opus?

William Radice: I've always loved it! I first discovered it when I began to learn Bengali in the early 1970s. I discovered his letters first which are in English. But his personality just leaps off the page. They were such wonderful literary letters. Then as part of the diploma course that I was doing as a post-graduate student, I read a little bit of *Meghnadhbodh Kabya*, with my teacher Tarapado Mukhapadhya. And I was fascinated by its wonderful, elevated classical style and all these different influences. So, my doctoral research later on at Oxford University was on Michael, not on Tagore. Not only because I was very interested in Michael, but also because he was in a way more manageable. Tagore's creations are just endless whereas at least with Madhusudan, I could read all his works, which I could never do with Tagore. So, I was able to read everything Madhusudan wrote and I tried to write a thesis on his entire life and works. That was over-ambitious. I didn't actually finish the thesis. I got the degree, but I didn't really do what I had planned. The structure of the thesis was based on the remarkable emblem found in the original Bengali text, which no Bengali critic before had ever attached any significance to.

RM: Would you please elaborate on the emblem a little more?

WR: This emblem appeared in the earlier editions of *Meghnadhbodh*. It seems to have been designed by the poet himself. And an explanation of it has survived in the biographical record. The elephant in it is India, the lion is Europe and the sun is his genius or his personality. The *shatadal* (lily) is the works that are the products of all three. And there is a Sanskrit *shloka* here, which roughly means I pursue my ambition even at the cost of my life. I mean this is an extremely explicit statement of what he was trying to do: to create something, which will be a product of these three things --- India, Europe and his own personality. So I constructed the thesis round this. I dealt with the sun of his own personality and own life, the lion of Europe, but I couldn't really deal with the elephant of India because I didn't have enough knowledge and I wasn't trained as a classical anthologist. But gradually I learnt more. The introduction of



PHOTO: COURTESY WILLIAM RADICE

my translation is almost like a thesis, more concisely. The last part of the thesis on the elephant of India that I couldn't write at that time is here now. I finished writing it at last. So now, apart from a full translation of the epic, there are many important notes. At the end of the book, there are also notes on the sources. So, in a way it's about three books in one, because this section that uses the sources is like writing a book in itself, bringing together the works that had been done by various scholars, both Indian and Western, and adding things of my own.

RM: It is quite understandable that you had to spend a great deal of time to put the works of three books in one. So how long actually did it take? How many years?

WR: Yes, it took me a lot of time. I was working on him on and off for years. For quite a long time I wasn't working on him because I was working on Tagore. But I got back to him, I suppose, in 2002. Since then I was working on him pretty solidly until I finished and then it came out in 2010. First of all, I had to complete the translation. I had done bits of it before. But in 2002 I sat down and did a complete translation gradually. Then I had to do all these notes. Each part --- the footnotes, the source notes and the introduction, each one of those took at least a year.

RM: I'm sure now we have a complete translation which can very properly introduce Madhusudan to the international arena. However, before you, Professor Clinton B. Seely, the American scholar, had done a translation of the epic as well. You have also written about his translation.

How do you think your approach differs from his?

WR: Yes, I have written about his approach to translating Madhusudan, which is different from mine. He's a very good friend and I'm very indebted to him. He's written excellent articles on Madhusudan. I've made use of those articles. I met him last October and spent three days with him in Chicago. We talked a lot about Madhusudan and we spent a very happy time. I understand better now what he was trying to do in his translation and why he chose the form of verse that he did.

RM: So what exactly was his form of verse?

WR: There is a very interesting difference. He chose syllabic verse. Each of his lines has fourteen syllables. And the discipline is that the paragraph has to end with the end of a line. Now his reason for doing that is, he thinks that when Michael created his *amitraksar* (a Bengali equivalent of blank verse), Bengali poetry was in a transitional stage, on the cusp, so to speak. And the medieval tradition of the *payar* line (a form of medieval verse in Bengali poetry) was still there. So underlying Michael's *amitraksar* is the *payar* line. And he believes that when Michael himself constructed the verse, he would have heard the *payar* underneath it. But I find it very difficult to agree with. Consider the opening lines I'm about to read out.

*Shamukho Shomore pori beer churamoni
beerbahu choli jobe gelo jobo pori akale
koho hey Devi amritabashini
kon beer pore bori shenapati pode.*

Now, Professor Seely hears it as *payar*,

payar without *ontomil* (rhythm), without end rhyme and of course with punctuation marks. But I wouldn't read it like that. There of course are fourteen *matras* (Bengali prosody depends on the number of *matras* in each line which is divided into *porbos*). But, what's happened is first of all, the short 'a' or what we call the inherent vowel is often not pronounced in Bengali. You don't say *Meghnadho*, you say *Meghnadh*. You don't say *beero churamoni*, it must be *beer churamoni*. Secondly, and this is a very important development in Bengali metrics, if you look at the medieval *payar*, it doesn't make any difference between a single *aksar* (a letter) or *juktaksar* (combined letter). So, in terms of the *matras*, it would just be "Shamukho". Now, if you read Rabindranth's essay on *chhanda* (prosody), he points out that actually the *juktaksars* have a different weight and they really count as two *matras*. So, you would say "Shammukkh", you don't pronounce the o at the end. It's "Shammukh Shamore pori". Now, the sheer fact actually is that, while writing the word "kon", Michael has used a *biram* (a punctuation mark) sign to indicate that you don't say "kono". It's "kon beer pore", and "kon" means which. So he's actually putting the *biram* sign to indicate that not all the *matras* are pronounced.

So, in my view, *matra* is not the same as syllable. There may be 14 *matras* in each line, but there can be fewer syllables because of dropping *matras* in pronunciation. Secondly, Michael himself said repeatedly that if you want to understand how his verse works, you have to let your ear be guided by the "pause", the "punctuation marks". It's rather the phrasing which is the crucial thing in my view. And therefore, in my translation, I've written a kind of 'phrasal verse'. So, Professor Seely's translation is 'syllabic verse' and mine is 'phrasal verse'. In phrasal verse, each line has three phrases.

So, to me the phrasal verse seems to retain the movement of the original Bengali. Now, I had a long discussion with Professor Seely about this. He said, "What is your rationale? Why three phrases?" When I wrote my thesis, I had a rationale. I said that when I looked at Michael's *amitraksar*, I felt often that the sentences were divided into three phrases. They tended to come in groups of three. That was one of my impressions. That's why I decided that I would translate it that way.

RM: So what you did is that you stepped away from the strict metric pattern. You rather focused on the movement and power of his language, and the power of his plot

construction.

WR: I focused on what I feel to be the essential movement of the verse: on the phrasing. It is the placing of the punctuation mark, which is so important. And the way the lines run on. It is something he learnt from reading English blank verse, particularly Milton. When we read Milton, we are aware of the foot structure, five feet and the blank verse line. But in Milton again, it's the absolute mastery of phrasing, the balancing of phrases, and how the sentences run on from one line to the next is crucial to the way it works. This is why I've done it this way.

I'm prepared to accept that when Michael introduced the *amitraksar*, basically he took the *payar* line. But he removed the line and let the punctuation marks move. I'm prepared to accept that the underlying *payar* line was perhaps more there than it is now. But poetry is a living, changing tradition. So when the Bengalis hear the verse today, I don't think they hear the *payar* now at all. It's simply just not there. I don't think so.

Then there's the construction. Michael said that the construction of his epic would satisfy even the strictest French critic! And true, it is brilliantly constructed, and that brilliance was there from the beginning: in the verse structure, in the paragraph structure and in the structure of the entire epic. It's brilliantly constructed; it's brilliantly balanced. The power of this sort in construction wasn't there in Bengali literature before. He learnt it especially from Milton. Homer, Virgil, Dante and the Sanskrit epics had a great deal of influence on him, but in terms of construction of his epic, it was Milton who influenced him most.

RM: It's a great pleasure to see that you have developed an emotional bond with this epic.

WR: Yes, I love it! Before wrapping up, I must say that I'm very indebted to Professor Seely. He'd been so helpful and generous. Sometimes I slipped up in maintaining the three-phrase line because I had to give so much attention to the notes. But he's been through every line of my translation and kindly pointed out whenever I made a mistake.

RM: Thank you very much for your time. I think you and Professor Seely together have done an excellent job in introducing the greatest Bengali poet to the world.

WR: I hope so. Thank you too.

RIFAT MUNIM IS SENIOR EDITORIAL ASSISTANT, THE DAILY STAR

FICTION

A glimpse of magnolia

AINON N.

Not once did Payam take his eyes off the manuscript while reading. And then his ocean blue eyes looked into Theia's brown gaze holding the quiet moment steady. Putting the papers aside, he said, "Do you realize you are narrating the story in present tense?"

"Yes, yes I do. I relive it again and again", Theia replied. "Fascinating", he mused.

During which she retorted, "What? The fact that it is I, who during first ten years of my relationship, had never shed a tear because I wanted to grow up? Or the fact that it is I who during the next ten years grew up immersed in anger. Challenging and achieving everything I thought I possibly could; shutting off dreams and going with the flow. Or the fact that it is I who with progressive years vowed adamantly to unlearn what I had learned to be beautiful."

Payam was bewildered by her reaction. He held her face in his hands and whispered, "I need to hold a pretty face, look at it long, and love it long. Do I make much sense?"

Then he drew her in his arms with gentle care close to his heart and asked, "Tell me what these writings mean to you." Without giving her thoughts a voice, silently she reflected: one day the simple act of seeing my words in print, noticed by none other than me, produced a pleasure so profound that I felt the falcon of horizon had opened the gates to life. I rediscovered the verve in living. The words whispered to my soul, saying they miss me. It allowed me to converse with myself, and laugh with others. Oh... I am aware that life cannot be captured within the literary parameters. Yet tucked away in that autumn landscape was a small space of serene comfort selfishly mine, where I go often to meet these words. I feel my songbird take to the sky. Unfettered. The stranglehold of empty space is now filled with a fistful of sunshine; and I

stumbled upon it by chance. It has transported me to worlds unknown. Writing and I have become travellers together, laughing, conversing, and brooding. For me, the pleasure of connecting thus is a partnership with living.

A loud she asked, "Can you really give me a day of your life? Can you? ... You cannot, but these writings can!"

And she walked out of the door. Payam picked up a few more pages and started reading:

"Fourteen years and a few months old, and they say I am getting married! There are no preparations in the conventional sense, no decorations, no *shenai*, no guests, no festivities, no *henna*. And yet my heart beats a bit faster! My mother had put coconut oil in my waist-long hair; parted it in the middle and made two braids. Then she pinned me up in a pink *karolin* sari, the color I dislike. I can hardly keep the *anchal* over my left shoulder and it keeps slipping off. I am not wearing any jewelry except my mother's gold bangles. It has pretty flower designs on it. And now I am sitting on our old family bed. This is a challenge for me. I can hardly sit still. It is my third visit to our village, and I wanted to do what a typical sheltered teenager wants to but not supposed to do, go out on a rickshaw ride and see the world! Instead here I am waiting for a young man who is to become my husband. Life is running ahead of me.

From my fleeting memories, because I did not think they were of much consequence or at least that is what I thought then, I now reconstruct events while waiting. This young man, Artay, who saw me whenever we visited, took a fancy to me and asked his and my parents if we could become engaged. In not so much of a commitment, but by subtle message he was given to understand by my parents that I needed to complete my studies. From his relatives' side the reaction, however, was a bit ambiguous. I was not his type but perhaps over time the union could happen.

None of this mattered to me. I who like to excel in studies; who is very selective in choosing friends; who loses imagination in books and who comprehends the world in ideal terms had plans, big plans! And recently, there has been one more addition to these elements. With each visit to my village I was increasingly enchanted by the innocence of people here. They are more engaging, more open, unlike city folks, unlike where I live. As I went for walks through the paddy fields, I relished the evening glow, the green fields, and this vision was invariably mixed with children running around bringing the cattle home. Colours connected together and each day I hungered for more. I was enamored. This created a surreal picture with which I simply fell in love. My world was and is beautiful.

Unknown to me, my parents were inundated with proposals of marriage for their daughter, whatever that meant! And thus my husband-to-be was successful in convincing them of my right age for this union. My mother reminisced. After all her father, my grandfather who has passed away, had at some point expressed the idea of his daughter's child (me) being betrothed to one she knew, so she would not miss me and be happy. As I am her only issue it made sense to keep the sage one's word. He had the goodness of his daughter at heart. However, as Artay's family thought otherwise, he was left with no alternative but to take matters in his hands. Along with a friend of his and a relative of my parents he arrived at the local marriage registrar's office. Under such odd circumstances my parents could not participate in the scheme of things but gave him a go ahead with their blessings. The elderly relative was to be my proxy. Well, approvals were taken care of. Nobody needed my consent, nor was I needed to be present. At home I simply had to wait for Artay to come back and claim me! How does this work? I am not in love I can only imagine through a vague feeling of lack of some

things; a strange sense of apprehension stirs in my soul. How do I work on happy times together, giving and taking in equal doses, companionship; shared ideas, understanding, unjudging; caressing tenderness...? Am I dreaming? Perhaps life will unfold gradually.

Then the worse news comes. The local registrar was bribed, by people, those who matter from Artay's side, and so the marriage registrar's office was closed. Ah...the chink! Now, this is a bad omen. I feel like a bystander on the sideline caught in this unfolding story. The script seems to be already written for me! Life was being imposed on me and now events seem to be scattered. My parents are worried and concerned. While I wait, a conference is held among elders and it is decided that the rickshaw that is to come back home with Artay and others should be diverted to a close by town where what was started could be finished. The only trouble is it is getting dark and the next registrar's office is approximately fourteen miles away. But because all plans were made for a good deed, the rickshaw-puller too wanted to see a happy ending. He agreed to take the three men to their new destination. The men are now gone for the whole night. Our home has no phone or electricity. In fact, my village is yet to be invaded by such modern amenities. That is what I love, cut off from the rest of the world, right or wrong the news travels by word of mouth. In my mind this is adventurous, perfectly unique! So now it is a waiting game. The clouds are heavy and the heavens are roaring. I am falling asleep."

Payam looked up and said to no one in particular, I see the magnolia in you. Let me sometimes sit by your side!

AINON N. --- POET, CRITIC, AESTHETE --- WRITES FROM CARBONDALE, ILLINOIS, USA.