



On August 4 this year, the Department of English & Humanities of ULAB arranged a fun debate which they called, "The Battle of the Senses," and invited its professors, full-time and adjunct to speak on the six senses. We approached some of the presenters to share their speeches with The Daily Star Literature Page readers.

PHOTO: SOHANA MAZROOR



POETRY



CAPSULE

ROCHELLE POTKER

Our conversations end mid-sentence. Our stories hang on bones. The split-second splitting of eardrums. Tube-like lungs, iron rods, switchboards.

My spine is a high-voltage shock. All pawns standing have fallen down, crisscrossed. Some burnt, some charred. Someone's hand is on my shoulder, a stomach cushions my head. The exhaust fan is on my chest, a disembodied finger carries a briefcase yet.

A shoe has left its feet - the puce of near-death.

Mumbai '06, 11th July, 5:53 pm reeks in chorus of smoke, air filters in rose quartz. As the evening sun-wheels, death comes in pressure cookers, copper wires dangling.

Wreck, wreck, weathing - entrails of degrading silence in fire, nickel, gummetal.

Dissected battleship of RDX, ammonium nitrate. The ruptures of a cinerous breathing.

Italy, Lima, Madrid, London, Moscow, Istanbul, or Brussels. I could have been anywhere in ginsbro and platinum.

When I stumble upon the train station, ghosts walk up to me. I can see their screams and sirens.

My heart is a bomb. And we wait for it to explode.

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BATTLE OF THE SENSES?

KAISER HAQ

Battle? What does it mean? One sense against another? No, it's an intellectual tussle in which six professors of English literature deliver argumentative spools extolling their chosen sense: the sixth professor of course is all for the sixth sense. I am for taste. The assignment of senses to participants was something of a lottery, and I am quite happy with what the throw of the dice (conveniently six-sided) got me.

Yes, I know there is a hierarchy of the senses, with sight at the top, hearing in second place, and the rest - smell, touch, taste - lumped together as the lower senses. The sixth sense doesn't really count, does it? It's too ghostly. But are sight and hearing really the tops? Aren't there any blind deaf-mutes? Terribly disadvantaged, no doubt, but they can survive, with the necessary support: they can even have the most pleasurable experiences, eating gourmet food, drinking sherbet or lassi or vintage wines, sleeping with people they are attracted to. Can you imagine someone going through life without touching or smelling or tasting anything? No. The so-called lower senses are what I would call foundational senses. To put it in street-smart Americanese, you gotta have 'em, else you're a goner.

OK, but why am I for taste rather than the other two? Because taste encompasses the other two; indeed, the so-called top two as well. Let me explain. Unlike the other senses, taste does not depend on a single organ. The taste buds no doubt play a central role. There are 10,000 of them covering the human

tongue; and they recognize five different tastes: salty, sweet, bitter, sour and umami (or savory flavours). But taste buds by themselves wouldn't give us the total experience of taste that is so important a part of everyday life. Everyone knows that smell plays a dominant role in our experience of tasting food: how we salivate when our olfactory cells catch the bouquet of basmati or biryani or korma? Does it mean that the sense of taste is parasitical on smell? No way. In a parasitical relationship drugs sustainance entirely from another. In the relationship between taste and smell and the other senses we have something like synergy.

Let us see how taste relates to touch, hearing and sight. Touch is integral to taste, for whatever we taste must touch the taste buds on the tongue. The connection doesn't stop there. The feel of food contributes to the way we taste it. That is why chefs like texture, consistency, softness, hardness, crumbliness, sponginess feature in the spiel of gourmets. We say that a sweet dish is chewy, a dish of meats is squishy, and so on and so forth. To give a homely example from our dining room or *dastarban*, we often hear it said that to get the real taste of our cuisine one has to eat with the fingers. The way sight influences taste is common knowledge. Gourmet chefs presenting dishes pay great attention to their look, and will take pains to create attractive compositions and colour combinations on the table. Likewise the sound of cooking - sizzling, crackling, burbling --

can be appetizing. Clearly, taste is a composite sense and hence can be regarded as a super-sense. So far we've been talking solely about taste as a physical phenomenon. It also has philosophical and psychological ramifications that are profound and complex. Our sense of selfhood owes much to our mouth, our sense of taste. Before we can see clearly or distinguish the precise nature of sounds bombarding consciousness, we find sustenance and suckle through our taste buds as we do.

Our ontological integrity depends on how well we are breastfed. Our psychic health is determined by the relationship of our mouths to the bounty of the maternal breast. Our psycho-sexual development, as any Freudian will tell you, begins with orally. If things go wrong here we may grow up with incurable neurosis, or worse. Our mouths are an indispensable epistemological device as well. A child puts everything into its mouth, and learns to relate to reality in the process. If something is unpleasant, and hence potentially harmful, it spits it out, and henceforth avoids it. And something tasty is gobbled up.

Taken figuratively, taste becomes a weighty concept with ramifications in aesthetics and morals. In fact modern western aesthetics begins with theorizing on taste in the eighteenth century. This was a reaction to the Cartesian rationalism that dominated early modern philosophy. It was argued that the perception of beauty or aesthetic value was not the end result of a rational

process but a direct apprehension. What enabled the apprehension was taste. Aesthetic education could refine one's taste. Ever since, taste has become an indispensable part of our conceptual currency. An art connoisseur is a person of taste, or good taste. We may say that a person has no taste if he goes for kitsch. From aesthetics taste can move to the realm of morals; we may say of someone's immoral or amoral behavior that it is bad taste. Let us not forget politics as well. If anyone supports a socio-economic system that creates increasing disparity between classes and groups, it's shockingly bad taste, isn't it?

We in this subcontinent have been theorizing about taste for much longer; for a couple of millennia, if not longer. Central to our aesthetics are the concepts of *bhava* (mood or emotion) and the corresponding *rasa* (essence or taste). When the emotion is realized through the devices of an art form, the audience relishes its essence or taste. A person of taste is a *rasika*. The cultivation of taste (*rasabodhi*) is one of the prime aims of a liberal education.

Can there be any doubt that taste is not only the most significant of the senses; it is also the basis of good sense, the essence of sophistication and civilization. To deny this would be quite tasteless.

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Romancing the Senses-Hearing

FAKRUL ALAM

Wikipedia lists the 5 senses thus: taste, sight, touch, smell and hearing, and they are all important, but it's sight that dominates the imagination. The world looks beautiful as do young people, especially women—by the day—as one gets older. Taste surely is next and that must be why with all its cateries from here in ULAB Satsmaji Road looks to be the most important road of the world.

Touch is of course highly rated. After all, who can overlook the sensation of being touched by the special one? Smell is what gets you in Dhaka too—good as well as bad ones—I hasten to add. And who can ignore beautiful fragrances anywhere—in flowers or people? I for one loves colognes, perfumes and aftershaves and would like everyone who can afford it to never go out without deodorants. But hearing always seems to be underrated—and the order in wiki's list no doubt reflects public opinion. But I must thank Shamsad for making it first here and letting me speak first as well!

No doubt in Dhaka streets, or even in Dhaka homes, at times, hearing will strike one as the most overpowering and bothersome sense. Starting with home sounds, let me focus on snoring—I'm told by the one who should really know—that yours truly snores on and on in sleep. My dad did so while watching TV and said he didn't and so once we recorded his snoring. I have his genes I guess and Baba must be laughing at me from up above now! But what is irritating for me is the prospect of sharing a room with someone other than my spouse, who, after all, can always take off her hearing aid when with me to sleep soundly. On a couple of occasions I had to share a room with someone else in one of them it was I who suffered because I went to sleep late and the other person started snoring as soon as he went to sleep! On another one, my roommate for the night was an old and dear friend and colleague and so sharing and devising a

strategy for the night to avoid disturbing each other was easy. We took the two beds to the two corners of the room and then went to sleep. Thankfully, none bothered me and next morning we both concluded that our reputation for snoring was a wily tale!

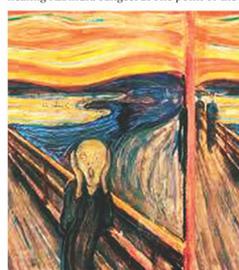
In Dhaka—as we all know—unwanted sounds will bother you a lot of the time. The call to prayer, for example, sound so beautiful when you switch on the radio and hear it wafting out of the grand central mosque of Mecca. But what if you are unlucky enough to live next door to places where they use multiple mikes all the time and the callers are all more or less out of tune? And what if you are unlucky enough to be living close to where would-be leaders give loud and obnoxious speeches? I live in the 9th floor of a building opposite British Council and sometimes get disturbed by student leaders trying to impress everyone miles away by praising their leaders and parties or shouting slogans in the middle of night. But on the other hand I will forever miss the crowded Dhaka University corridors and the excited chattering of students going inside classes or coming out of them now that I have retired.

I'll confess I can't stand any noise when I'm studying. My students will know I hate people talking in class. And I can't even start talking about the noise in Dhaka streets here—loud people and crazy honking drivers—enough to make one go mad when in our streets. So often you wish you had earplugs with you. And, yes, such sound can be so cacophonous sometimes you want to plug your ears permanently!

But think of the beautiful sounds that we hear without which we couldn't survive. Think of sounds like the one Neil Diamond sings about in his wonderful song "What a Beautiful Noise" which you'll read at the end of my presentation—everyday sounds coming from the streets—of street vendors, children playing in the streets, vehicles

accelerating smoothly. Such sounds can fill your ears reassuringly and if you don't hear them the world seems empty!

And think of music—the sound of music! The moment I heard Vivaldi's Four Seasons decades ago I fell in love with western classical music. And every time I hear Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and the ode to joy in its last movement I think—delusively no doubt— heaven is on earth. And I have to say I can't imagine my day going well without hearing Rabindra Sangeet at one point or the



other. For sure hearing music is something I treasure and will never be able to do without. As the Bard once put it, music is the food of love and to me one of the best ways to love life itself.

Think now though of the beautiful sounds great writers create and celebrate. Recall the opening stanza of Lawrence's lovely poem about his mother playing the piano and singing: "Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me; / Taking me back under the vista of years, till I see / A child sitting under

the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings / And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as she sings." And think then of the tragic implications of not ever hearing your mother singing when you read Shamsur Rahman's brilliant poem: "Kokhono amar make gan gaiti shuni ni" which always reminds me of my mother every time I read it because I too never heard my mother singing though she and my dad made sure that all of us got musical training in one form or the other when we were growing up.

Reflect too on Milton's divine harmonies. And think of the other blind giant of literature in English, Joyce and his brilliant chapter on Stephen Dedalus walking in the "Protes" chapter of *Ulysses*: "Stephen closed his eyes to hear his boots crack crackling crack and shells. You are walking through it hoversomever. I am, a stride at a time. A very short space of time through very short times of space. Five, six, the nacheinander. Exactly: and that is the ineluctable modality of the audible. Open your eyes. No, Jesus! If I fell over a cliff that beetles o'er his base, I fell through the nebeneinander ineluctably. I am getting on nicely in the dark. My ash sword hangs at my side. Tap with it they do. My two feet in his boots are at the end of his legs, nebeneinander. Sounds solid: made by the mallet of Los Demigueros. Am I walking into eternity along Sandymount strand? Crush, crush, crack, crack." Recall Keats's autumnal music in plow-filled lines such as, "While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day," or Ibbananda Das's equally spell-binding sibilant-shushed line in "Bonolata Sen" — "shishiter shobder moto shandhiya ashel"—"night descends with the soft sound of the dew"—or Dylan Thomas's sonorous admonitions to us all in "Do Not Go Gentle into the Good Night": "The sound of music and the sounds of great poetry—how can anyone exclude hearing from your list of important things to appreciate when you

have been anywhere close to literature departments!

But when we think of sound we must also try to tune in to its binary—silence—for the two are forever locked in Sausserian opposition. One can't talk about sound without talking of silence. "The sound of silence"—as the Simon and Garfunkel song so beautifully phrases it—must therefore conclude my presentation. There might be people like Shakespeare's Gratiano around who bark, "Silence is commendable in a neat tongue/dried/And a maid not vendible"—but they have no place for those with sensitivity and preternatural apprehensions! Also, if you come across someone really talkative or a loud mouth like Gratiano, remember Bassanio's comments on his friend—"Gratiano speaks a great deal of nothing!" And remember too that silence is proverbially golden. And know that we must all learn to hear silence as well as sounds. Think thus of Harold Pinter's use of silence in his plays—so menacing, so pregnant with meaning about human communication—or lack of it! For one am forever amazed by postmodern composers like John Cage and Steve Reich and the way they punctuate their music with silence.

But my sixth sense tells me my allotted ten minutes are up and so I'll end with that classic quote from the Bard, "The rest is silence" and ask you all to read the lyrics of Neil Diamond's song while listening to the song on YouTube to remind you a final time that we must value and learn to admire hearing, appreciate heard-melodies and even strain to hear unheard ones—in Dhaka or elsewhere!

Retired from the University of Dhaka, Fakrul Alam has just joined at the Pro-Vice Chancellor of East-West University. Currently he is the Consulting Editor of The Daily Star Literature and Review Pages.