

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

A modern love story in translation

Review of the Bangla translation of 'Amrita-Imroz: A Love Story' (Penguin, 2006) by Uma Trilok

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ALAM KHORSHED

I became an ardent admirer of Amrita Pritam, the maverick Punjabi author, an outspoken critic of the Indian patriarchy and discriminating social practices, three decades back in New York when I was putting together an anthology of world feminist poems in Bangla translation. While translating one of her fiercely feminist poems for my collection, I came to know more about her exceptionally eventful life, particularly her much-talked-about love life.

Though not a Bangali herself, Amrita Pritam is quite known and, to some extent, popular in contemporary Bangladeshi society, mainly among the intelligentsia. This is mostly because of her bold, beautiful, and multifaceted body of literary oeuvre, and partly because of her rather unconventional yet everlasting relationship with artist Imroz. But only recently, I was fortunate to find a full-fledged book on Amrita, Imroz, and their rather unprecedented relationship, thanks to my translator friend Dilwar Hasan, who took the time and trouble to render the book titled *Amrita Imroz: A Love Story* by Uma Trilok into Bangla titled *Amrita Imroz: Ekti Premkahini* (Baatighar, 2023).

Dilwar Hasan, a longtime Pritam aficionado had been following her for almost four decades, and read many of her own books and books written on her, including the ones by Uma Trilok herself. In his sizeable and informative introduction, Hasan stated that his latest read on Amrita—the book by Uma Trilok—blew him away by its spontaneity, simplicity, and authenticity. Hasan then decided to translate it for the benefit of the wider Bangali readership.

Uma Trilok, an educationist by profession and a poet, painter, singer, and classical dancer by passion, was a great admirer of Amrita Pritam. Since her childhood, Trilok used to recite and sing Amrita's songs and poems. Even after growing up, she harboured a deep fascination for Amrita's literature and lifestyle. She

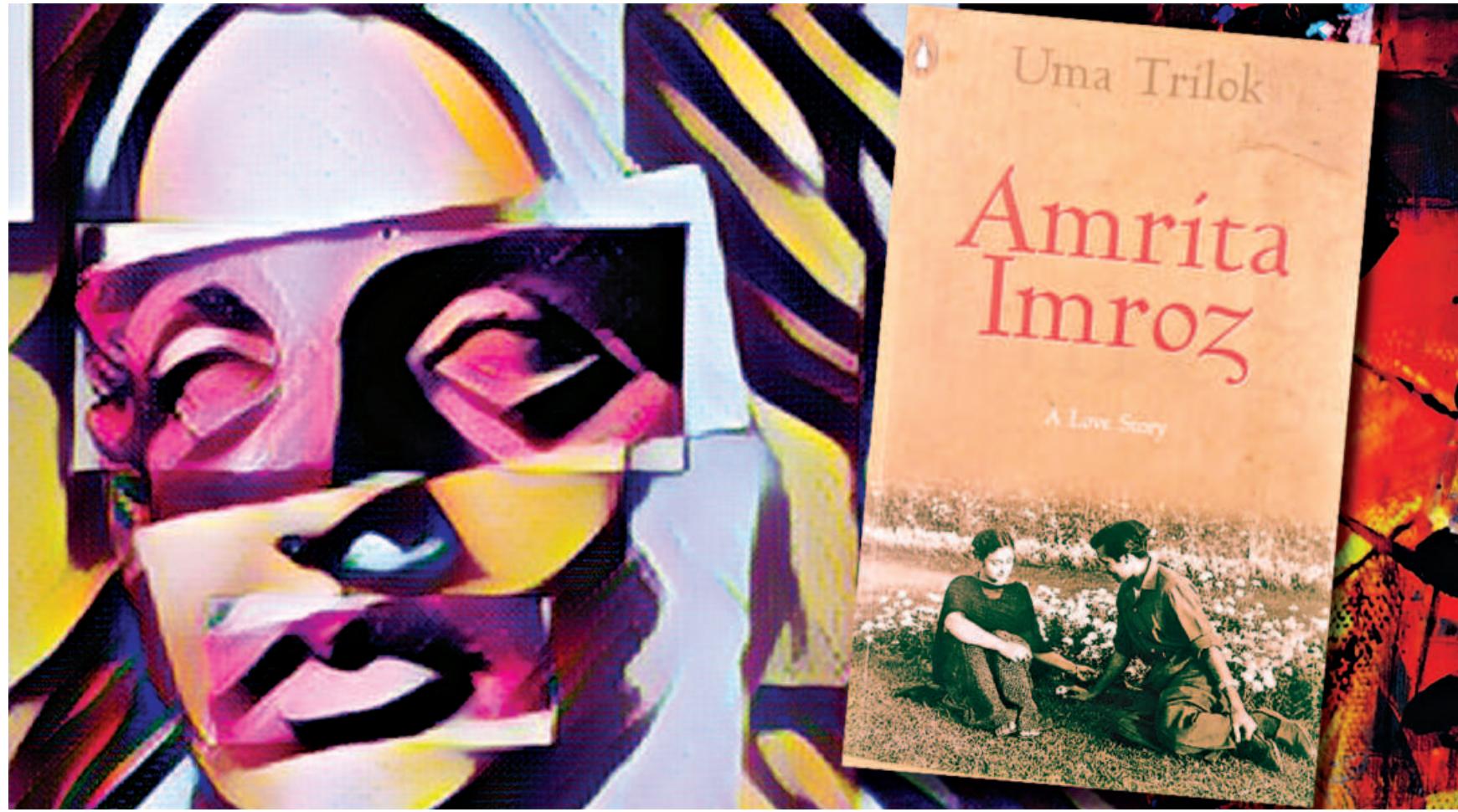


ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

mentions in the very first chapter of the book that in 1996, after reading Amrita's poetry collection in English translation, titled *Sometimes I Tell this Tale to the River* (Hind Pocket Books, 2003), she developed an intense urge to meet Amrita in person. The story takes off from their first meeting and ends with Amrita's demise in 2005. It was published in book format the following year with both popular and critical success.

Trilok discloses in her introduction to the book that this was based on her years of intimacy and close encounters with Amrita and Imroz, but it was not very clear exactly when their first meeting took place. However, we get a feeling that the memoir is only an account of the last few months

of Amrita's life and her beautiful friendship with Trilok.

As the story unfolds, we find Imroz, Amrita's soulmate, taking centre stage and becoming an integral part of the book. Structured into several small and loosely-connected chapters, the book goes beyond the boundary of the trio's personal relationship and sheds light on her childhood and youth—her early marriage with an elderly individual named Pritam Singh; their emigration to India after the bloody and brutal partition of the subcontinent in 1947; her becoming the mother of two children; her troubled and tormented married life and eventual divorce in 1960; her complex emotional relationship with poet Shahid Ludhianvi and Sazzad

Haider; and of course, the subsequent arrival of the painter Imroz in her life.

All these and much more of their lives and thoughts were eloquently captured in the Bangla rendition, painstakingly accomplished by Dilwar Hasan thanks to his absolute command of the languages and mastery of the tricky art of literary translation. Through Hasan's lucid and evocative translation, the readers are able to get easy access to the inner world of Amrita and Imroz, enabling them to understand the true nature and extent of the complexity of their phenomenal love and friendship. However, part memoir, part biography, and part commentary on Arts and Literature, this book never shies away from mentioning Amrita's bold statements

on family, gender, sexuality, society, power, politics, and world affairs.

In conclusion, I strongly recommend this book to those who are curious to know more about the extraordinary life of the writer par excellence Amrita Pritam and her deeply transcendental relationship with Imroz, as well as to those who are interested in understanding the inner workings of the human mind and emotion; the complex chemistry between man and woman; the true definition of love, marriage, and sexuality; and above all, the dynamics of art and creativity.

Alam Khorshed is an Engineer-turned-writer, and is predominantly a literary translator. Author of 25 books, Alam Khorshed received the Bangla Academy award for translation in the year 2022.

ESSAY

RRReading

QAZI ARKA RAHMAN

Even if you are not a film enthusiast, chances are high that you have watched the 2022 Telugu blockbuster *RRR*. At the very least, you should have heard about it. But this piece is neither about that "Naatu Naatu" movie nor films in general. However, it will make use of the title of S S Rajamouli's flick to write about another activity—reading. An oft-ignored trivia is that reading is not a single R activity. Reading should be understood as an amalgamation of RRR—reading, reflection, and re-reading—where the first acts as the umbrella term for all three.

A case can be made about how reading without reflection—and ideally re-reading to ruminate on that reflection—does not do much about intellectual growth. In this case, readers get caught up in the numbers game. The goal becomes reading, and just reading, more and more words, which in turn nudges readers towards short and shorter pieces. Not a surprising thing given that the current entertainment landscape is dominated by reels, tiktoks, tweets, and flash fictions. These bite-sized materials make for tasty treats that can be swallowed in large numbers. But it is not exactly good for your body if you keep on swallowing stuff like a gluttonous gargoyle, right? You need time to digest. After reading, reflection is essential to squeeze out the nutrition from the text you are munching on. Reflection allows you to make your reading useful in more ways than simply swallowing words and being mentally obese.

We have all encountered people who continuously preach about books that have blown them away. If someone is blown away by a book, you would want to know what exactly they have found fascinating about the said book. How many times has this happened that when you ask them, as



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

to why they love a certain book, they try to justify their "blown" mind by saying how the book is *zush*, *josh*, *joss*, or my personal favorite *jussssssssssss*! These Rogan Josh-esque reactions blur any distinctions between books in a brutish manner. What do you think about Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*? It is *zush!* Why do you like Humayun Ahmed's *Nondito Noroke*? He writes *josh!* Why are you blown away by *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens? It is because this Dicky guy tells it *joss!* Any thoughts on Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*? Never heard about it, but is it any *jussssssssssss*? The economy is in crisis, man! How are these people affording

these many S's?

These are the people who would brand anything that they have newly read, as the greatest since their last reading—which they also, unsurprisingly, considered to be the greatest literary achievement of all time! Their obsession with hierarchy does not allow them to understand the beauty/merit of anything unless you attach a placeholder signifier to it. Regarding any book that they have read, they will declare, "It is the best! The best. It is!" First, even literary prizes do not claim that they are awarding it to the 'best book'. The prizes are to acknowledge great works but in no way do they mean that the award-winning

books are the G.O.A.Ts! Second, and this is just to cue in a Seinfeld reference, how is it possible that whatever you are reading is the best? They cannot all be the best. There cannot be these many bests!

Do not get me wrong now. The argument here is not about reading less. I am in favor of reading more and more. My point here is that readers should try to reflect on anything that they have read. Period. Wondering about the meaning of what is written. Questioning the writer's intent and agency. Contemplating on finding connections between written words and readers' lives. Ask yourself: can I remember the basic content of my readings? Did

anything stand out—any interesting information or exciting ways of using language? Was there anything relatable to my life? Could I infer or interpret something to re-use or remix? Thinking anything, really, about the choice of reading. Then, if the need be, re-reading the piece at hand for better conceptualisation and clarity. Now, this might seem like an arduous task. I can hear exasperated readers shouting "Ain't got no time for that!" I can hear myself muttering it as I am penning this piece! It is a valid concern. We are already short-strapped for time as it is. So, why and how do we find time to approach reading as a triple R activity?

The answer to the why has already been answered, I hope. As for how, the solution is pretty basic. The expectation of us reflecting on and re-reading everything is both unrealistic and unsustainable. We cannot RRR everything we read. We chose what reading pieces deserve the triple R treatment. Even then, we probably will not be able to R3 everything that we want to. We might have to settle with R1 (reading) for most, R2 (reading and reflection) for some, and R3 (reading, reflection, and re-reading) for the selected few—the ones that are worthy of our sustained attention. We have to allow ourselves to try and fall short. It is alright. What matters is that we will succeed with some. Then we will have materials that can be retained in our reservoir of knowledge in a way that is nutritious for us. That is how we get any kind of intellectual growth. The next time you read a book, just pause and ponder about the number of R's you need to wonder about what you have read. Trust me. That will pay off. Happy RRReading, folks!

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