

A Brief Loss of Sanity

A Radio Play in Verse and Prose

Souradeep Roy, Mohit Chattopadhyay and Badal Sircar

(Translations from the Bangla by Souradeep Roy)

(For the late Bengali playwright and actor Ramaprasad Banik)

Characters: MAN, WOMAN, NARRATOR. The NARRATOR should be a woman. The DOCTOR should be played by the NARRATOR. The CHORUS comprising AMAL, BIMAL and KAMAL.



I

(Exposition)

1.

NARRATOR:

This doesn't always happen, or, let me probably say,
has not been happening at all, at least for the last few months;
but on some nights, when the wall clock ticks louder --
maybe not louder, but definitely clearer,
the lines come back, and he mutters.

The lines came out almost a decade ago,
in a proscenium stage in Calcutta,
and he tells me he acted in front of a god --
the god of darkness; sorry the god called darkness.
(or the god called emptiness? – he isn't sure.)
He could see the eyes from the first four rows,
but those eyes were not of people, or even, indeed, human-like;
they belonged to animals. Eyes of feline creatures. In fact,
he is quite sure they were cat-eyes: green, sublime;
their gaze sharp as an arrow. When he was an actor
he could see cats, and, as he tells me, all of his co-actors
could see them too. The gods, in this part of the world,
or at least, in the place where he performed
were feline.

2.

This was the moment when they became someone else;
they would be beside themselves (a phrase he learnt from Wren & Martin),
and allow themselves to be possessed
by their characters.



I wish I could describe for you how a bunch of Bengalis became Macbeths of Henry IVs, but you'll have to come to this city to know how it happens, dear readers. These things, like many other things, can't be contained in one poem, or understood in one reading. It requires multiple visits.

I have a nice title for your travel story --

How a bunch of middle class men and women spend their lifetimes without pay and transform into worshippers of cats every evening at the Academy of Fine Arts¹.

¹ The Academy of Fine Arts houses the Lady Ranu Mukherjee Mancha, one of the most frequented proscenium stages in central Calcutta.



II

(All lines spoken by the MAN, unless otherwise indicated)

1.

When the lines come back
they come back like the sea.
I try to remain normal,
not let my mania take over me.
I think of snow,
 not the sea,
 snow.

NARRATOR:

If you see him now, you'll be surprised to see
what a fucking monk he's become.

2.

Two years ago, when the bout came,
followed by months of mania,
I realised what I was.

I was

“beside myself”.

3.

It's okay, the lines have left.



I have stopped mumbling.
Writing this poem has calmed me down.
The clock ticks. It's eleven fifteen.
Good night.

4.

I'm dreaming of cats,
and their eyes.
Cats all over my body.

[Chants of "Hail, Macbeth", followed by "Amal, Bimal, Kamal, Ebong Indrajit"]

5.

The problem – I will tell his therapist later --
is that I have no control over sleep,
or dreams.

6.

Is there a way you can put me to sleep?

He nods. That's what our doctors do.
They never say a word.

7.

[The same voices chant]

Amal. Bimal. Kamal.
Ebong Indrajit.
Amal. Bimal. Kamal.
Ebong Indrajit.
Indrajit.



Indrajit.
Indrajit.

8.

If I kill myself,
give me a stage.
Let me perform
in front of those cats
once again.

This is my prayer.
I pray to thee.



III

[Pause. The MAN suddenly barks.]

MAN: When did a dog bark? I heard a dog bark, where is it?

[The MAN suddenly barks again.]

MAN: Strange. I was looking for myself. Maybe it was a search for the self. *Lastly a dog realised – aantosondhan biddhi². Then I am a great metaphysical dog. I am to preach dog philosophy. We have to preach a dog philosophy, a philosophy of greed, a philosophy of indifference, a philosophy of greed.*

[Sound of MAN sitting on a chair. WOMAN and DOCTOR enter.]

DOCTOR: So how are you?

MAN: Quite good, actually. *Dogs are the best creations under the sun.* But I have too much greed, too much of it.

DOCTOR: But what are you greedy for?

MAN: Everything. I want to get everything clearly; have everything in both my hands. I need to see a *stupa³* of food in front of my eyes. I can't sleep otherwise. It seems a bedbug has entered my bloodstream. Mosquitoes are hovering over my thoughts, they irritate me. Not just moonlight; I want to snatch the moon away from the sky like I've snatched a ball of flesh, hold it my four limbs tightly and each it with my teeth and nails. Droplets of moonlight will streak through my body. I know you don't like imagining a dog playing with the moon as if it's a ball, and then quietly eating it.

WOMAN: Why do you think you're a dog for no rhyme or reason?

MAN: I did not in the beginning, but then the whole world thought of me in that way, I have noticed it.

² *Biddhi* means an increment. The phrase means "an increment in the search for the self".

³ A minar



DOCTOR: So you're quite an *ok* person. You just remember you have a sun stuck inside your throat, isn't it?

MAN: Yes, I remember it very well. Just a while ago I have coughed a lot. The whole room was filled with *ping pong* balls. Now I am scared to cough. I feel the whole world will be filled with *ping pong* balls. We will lose space to even stand still. Just imagine how dreadful would that be.

WOMAN: Don't worry. You will be fine. You won't be irritated by anything anymore.

DOCTOR: Tell me, don't you have trouble carrying the weight of that enormous thing in your throat?

MAN: Not at all. Humans have been carrying the weight of love -- which, by the way, is heavier than the sun -- for so many years. And they're not merely moving with that weight. They carry that weight in their chest and run, bathe, swim, jump -- do they have any trouble doing any of these things? But pulling it out is difficult -- it is quite heavy.

DOCTOR: Oh, don't worry about that. I will pull that out. I haven't found that Australian bird that could pull out the sun but I have ordered a huge crane. When the sun does come out the larynx, what a wonderful scene it will be, isn't it?

MAN: Oh! I feel good even when I'm imagining it. [To the WOMAN] Isn't it?

WOMAN: But where will you keep the sun after it's taken out.

DOCTOR: Simple -- we'll cut it up with an axe and stack up the different parts like a pile of wood.

MAN: [Agitated.] Impossible! It can't be cut into pieces. It's a *totality*; can you cut an eye and stack up the parts?

DOCTOR: Then we can throw it on the water.

MAN: But if it is heavier than water it will drown.

WOMAN: That's good, isn't it? We will eat all the fish in the world for millions of years; it'll be quite fun.



MAN: But who will pick them up? It'll be too hot.

DOCTOR: The sun can be thrown into the water by the crane itself.

MAN: If the white, bright sun gets drenched and becomes dull grey like coal, I'll be very sad. I can't imagine such a massacre of light in front of my eyes.

WOMAN: Then you can do something else. You can roll it. It can go whichever way it wants.

MAN: But how can the sun, which is larger than the Earth, find enough space to roll?

DOCTOR: Then?

WOMAN: This will be a huge problem indeed.

MAN: Why will there there any problem? If such a situation comes I will swallow the sun again. All our problems will be solved.

WOMAN: O dear, you'll swallow it again?

DOCTOR: The same medical procedure will begin!

MAN: Yes, the same -- medical procedure, swallowing it once again, more medical procedures.



IV

[All words spoken by the MAN unless otherwise indicated.]

1.

Insomnia, I know; my bones know; most importantly, my nerves know,
will strike again.

But now, the experience of pain helps me preempt its symptoms, the way
farmers predict drought in my country, and commit suicide. Unlike them,
I am more prepared, the fort is set to fight this siege.

Let the army arrive.
I have a pack of Trika under my pillow.

2.

I am still of the same height,
but my hair has grown, and my face is scared;

my gaze, my lover says, has changed.

We tried to pick lilies from an empty street at night.
She tried looking for remnants from last winter's pain.

The task for this winter is all set:

join the riddles, complete the puzzle,
try and enter the skull.

Stand right at the centre of the brain.

Better still, at the edge of the nerve,
like the word 'nerve' in the previous line, at the edge of the page.

Then fall. Commit to flight.

[Sound of air rushing past as if someone is falling. Cut short to voice of MAN.]

Google.



[Sound of Google voice assistant. She says “Search”. MAN’s voice]

Is Trika a sleeping pill or an antidepressant?

3.

NARRATOR:

Let’s be frank: we need to do more tests; blood tests, thyroid tests, or tests of other kinds: like, say, the Arnoldian touchstone. They say Indianness is a valid test for an English poem. Do you write English, or Indo-Anglican, or Indian-English, or English India... ?

Last winter, he was not prescribed Escitalopram.
Instead, he was prescribed Nexito 10 – its Indian brand name.

4.

Depression is actually a civil war in the central nervous system.
Depression is language on strike.
(Last winter, you see, I could not write a single line.)

Medication is curfew, the perfect punctuation is a long drawn out sentence.

Therapy, by the way, is bullshit.

5.

What is “mental illness”?

NARRATOR: Hear Adil whisper: “Kill that nonsense term, and kill it quickly”.

6.

I carry with me *The Savage Detectives*.
I carry with me *The Red and the Black*.
I carry with me *Jejuri*.
I carry with me *Arvind’s Collected*.
I carry with me lines, scissors, sounds, leaves, rooftops, squirrels, some boiled eggs.
I carry with me your naked lonely hand.
I carry with me the tall, lean frame of our memories.
I carry with me the shame of pain.



V

[DOCTOR and WOMAN again.]

DOCTOR: So how long has it been since he has swallowed the sun?

WOMAN: [Sarcastically] You are no less than him. What have you learnt after so many years of medical practice? Can someone really swallow the sun? He must be high -- talking gibberish.

DOCTOR: But if we don't take something out from him he will not be cured. [After some time] Have you read his notebook?

WOMAN: Haven't understood a word. Poems which I don't understand, scribbles which I can't read, sketches which we used to draw when we were children.

DOCTOR: The man is a poet -- we can say that for sure at least. Poets keep thinking of absurd things. Maybe he has swallowed some concept of the sun -- that's why he thinks like this. I mean something quite enormous is stuck inside him; something as large as the sun, as bright; yet he can't explain what it is. He feels irritated.

WOMAN: I don't understand anything about poetry. But if he in good spirits he can't be normal again. He says he has forgotten how to laugh or cry.

DOCTOR: Yet we have to make him laugh; we have to make him cry his lungs out. And this will be his first diagnosis.



VI

[The NARRATOR and the WRITER is played by the same woman.]

CHORUS:

Amal. Bimal. Kamal.

Ebong Indrajit.

Amal. Bimal. Kamal.

Ebong Indrajit.

Indrajit.

Indrajit.

Indrajit.

WOMAN: Dying?

MAN: Yes, dying. To be honest, dying is a true state of happiness. So many people die in peace. They have taken each and every tomorrow which were left with, mixed it with each and every yesterday they have lived, and are now dead, in peace, in a kind of happiness that is actually contentment. Almost. Even I have to die like that one day or another. Why not die right now?

WOMAN: Don't die. Stay.

MAN: If a human being wishes to live he needs something to believe in. Belief in a god. Believe in something without questioning it. Belief in work. Belief in other humans. Belief in a revolution. Belief in oneself. Belief in love, in love. Can you tell me which one of these things I believe in?

WOMAN: Belief in life?

MAN: Life! Where you get no answers to questions; where you have to spend so much time figuring out small, meagre nitty-gritties. A couple of meaningless, ordinary pretences and lies. Which you have no use of, but which you have to perform nonetheless. This is what we call life. Life of a human being. I am a human being. One among millions. The lie of my life is the lie of a million human lives.



WOMAN: What do you want to do?

MAN: What can I do? Get tired and then sleep? Or should I laugh off this life? Yes, perhaps I should laugh it off indeed. Life is such a laughable thing that there's no point in hiding our laughter.

[The MAN breaks into an ugly, terrible, loud guffaw. The chorus which was chanting AMAL, BIMAL and KAMAL joins in.]

NARRATOR: All of you, please don't laugh with him. Please, please, this is my request. I can't do it, but do you understand how difficult it is for me to write? Write a play? A play about Amal-Bimal-Kamal? And Indrajit?

WOMAN [to the NARRATOR]: Won't you write?

NARRATOR: No.

NARRATOR: How will I write? He's written three letters to me. All of them the same. He keeps saying the same thing.

WOMAN: What does he say?

NARRATOR: He's circling. Circling, circling. The stubborn dream just doesn't end. Can I make a play with a person who sees the reality of life as truth; thinks of it as a dream?

WOMAN: But plays are made of such people.

NARRATOR: No, they're not. The more I try to hold him to some events, he moves away from them. He says, these events don't comprise reality. The more I try to make him speak, he moves away from speech. He says, these are not words that matter. He knows too much. He knows too much.

WOMAN: And yet he dreams.

NARRATOR: And that dream will run its course.

WOMAN: I know.



NARRATOR: Then?

WOMAN: Let it be.

NARRATOR: And after that?

WOMAN: Then he can't keep floating on the dregs of his dream.

NARRATOR: And drown?

WOMAN: Let him. Maybe he'll find some hard ground under his feet after he drowns. Maybe that's where life begins.

NARRATOR: How do you know?

WOMAN: I don't know. I'm too foolish. I don't know anything. I only believe.

[WOMAN leaves.]

NARRATOR: Belief? Belief in in the underworld?

[MAN enters]

MAN:

I stay afloat with the poverty of an *astik*⁴.
I scrape out all the weight of this life,
the other end has been erased in the long breath in the fog.
All the golden kingdoms are on the other side of the cloud,
all the heavens near the stars in the sky --
all of them are just untruths here, where I lie.
Leave all the hope that comes from the coastal air.
Grab all the blind bags of belief.
Drown. Measure how much below
your feet can find the ground.

⁴ A believer in the Vedas. Here, the word means a believer generally.



Humans move around.

Humans – crazy, crazy creatures;

On stones which have drowned, they build their kingdoms underground.

NARRATOR: Indrajit!

MAN: Tell me.

NARRATOR: You've come back?

MAN: Yes.

NARRATOR: When did you return?

MAN: It's been a while.

NARRATOR: Where are you now?

MAN: In Calcutta.

NARRATOR: What do you do?

MAN: I have a job.

NARRATOR: Married?

MAN: Yes.

NARRATOR: So you married Manasi after all?

MAN: No.

NARRATOR: Then?

MAN: Someone else. I married someone else.

NARRATOR: Someone else?



MAN: Yes.

NARRATOR: Who is she?

MAN: Someone... a woman.

NARRATOR: What's her name?

MAN: Manasi.

NARRATOR: How is that possible?

MAN: Isn't that the only possibility? So many Manasis come, so many Manasis go. You marry one of them. And then so many Manasi come, once again. Then they go. Manasi's sister – Manasi. Manasi's friend – Manasi. Manasi's daughter – Manasi.

NARRATOR: Like Amal-Bimal-Kamal?

MAN: Like Amal-Bimal-Kamal. Ebong Indrajit.

[The WOMAN enters.]

Let me introduce the two of you. My wife – Manasi. This is an old friend – she is a writer.

NARRATOR: Hello.

WOMAN: What do you write?

NARRATOR: Whatever I can.

WOMAN: What are you working on now?

NARRATOR: A play.

WOMAN: Will you read it out for me?

NARRATOR: I will, when I finish it.



WOMAN: How much is left of the play?

NARRATOR: Not much. I will start in a day or two.

WOMAN: Haven't you even begun yet?

NARRATOR: Wasn't able to.

WOMAN: But you just said that it's not long before you finish writing it?

NARRATOR: There isn't much of a difference in the beginning and the ending of the play. The play is a roundabout.

WOMAN: I can't understand what you're saying.

NARRATOR: How will you understand Manasi. Are words meant to be understood?

WOMAN: But words are meant to be understood.

NARRATOR: They were; now they are said because we're used to saying them.

WOMAN: Come on, you're speaking nonsense now.

NARRATOR: Of course it's nonsense. Look.

[Enter the CHORUS comprising AMAL, BIMAL, KAMAL.]

WOMAN: Who are they?

WRITER: They are Amal-Bimal-Kamal.

[A CHORUS of voices.]

Capitalism, monarchy, democracy --

Imperialism, Fascism, Marxism --

Economics, Political Science, Sociology --



Quotation, tender, statement --

Report, minutes, budget --

Meeting, committee, conference --

Civilisation, education, culture --

Literature, philosophy, history --

Brahma, nirban, bhooma --

Cinema, theatre, jatra --

Football, cricket, hockey --

Margot music, folk song, contemporary --

Doctor, homeopathy, kobiraj --

Tram, bus, train --

Heat, trash, mosquitoes --

Man, woman, wife --

Master, driver, cook --

Sister-in-law, nephew, father-in-law --

WOMAN: What are they saying?

MAN: They're speaking. Uttering words.

WOMAN: What kind of words?

MAN: I don't know; ask the writer.



WOMAN: Are there any other words apart from these?

MAN: Maybe there are. There must be. Aren't there words apart from these? None? How will I write my play then? With these words? Who will produce such a play? Who will see such a play? [Sound of MAN and WOMAN leaving.] Indrajit, please don't leave.

[WOMAN exits. MAN stays.]

Tell me.

MAN: What?

NARRATOR: Where is Manasi?

MAN: You just met her.

NARRATOR: Not this Manasi. The Manasi of Hazaribagh. Where is she?

MAN: In Hazaribagh.

NARRATOR: Don't you write letters to her?

MAN: I do.

NARRATOR: Don't you meet her?

MAN: Sometimes, yes.

NARRATOR: Where do you meet her?

MAN: On that field. Below that frizzy tree.

NARRATOR: Do you two talk?

MAN: Yes, we do.

NARRATOR: What do you say?



MAN: All that I used to tell her. Things about me. Things about her.

NARRATOR: Are those words too like Amal-Bimal-Kamal's? [Pause.] Tell me.

[WOMAN enters.]

WOMAN: Tell me.

MAN: What?

WOMAN: Whatever you were telling me?

MAN: What was I telling you?

WOMAN: About your life.

MAN: Yes, right. My wife looks after the family, mostly. I go out to work. My wife likes to go to the theatres. I accompany her. She goes to her in-laws. I mostly eat outside. She comes back. I go out and buy vegetables.

WOMAN: What are you telling me?

MAN: About my life. YOU wanted to know...

WOMAN: I did not want to hear about this.

MAN: Then what did you want to hear?

WOMAN: Something about you.

MAN: [Sound of a train approaching, but the rain is far away] Something about me? I walk along the rail line. It's a straight line. I look back -- the two lines meet at one point far away, into the horizon. I look ahead -- the two lines meet at one point far away, into the horizon. The more I walk, that point, that circle, moves away from me. Whether I walk back, or I walk ahead. What was yesterday, is tomorrow.

WOMAN: Then?



MAN: I was hoping a train would come. Maybe from behind or from the front.

WOMAN: What would you have done if the train came?

MAN: Just jumped away, perhaps. Or maybe, maybe, I would have stood there. Something would have happened. But that wouldn't happen. There are no trains in this line, I've come to know of this. That's why I'm wondering... [He stops.]

WOMAN: What?

MAN: I'm wondering if I should walk on these lines any more. There's nothing to gain. I should probably sleep over here.

WOMAN: [After a small pause] But that doesn't happen Indrajit!

MAN: Why not?

WOMAN: When there's a path you have to keep walking.

MAN: But I've walked so much.

WOMAN: You have to walk more.

MAN: I'm tired.

WOMAN: You have to walk. Still.

MAN: Why? Why? Why? That same road; I'm walking and walking and walking. And yet there's no release?

WOMAN: No, there is no release.



VII

[The NEWS ANCHOR and the NARRATOR is played by the same person. Sound of a news show jingle]

NARRATOR: Let's hear it from the writer, Leith Taylor herself.

LEITH TAYLOR: Research over many years has acknowledged that those drawn to working in the arts tend to be highly vulnerable to depression and anxiety. However, there are contributing factors to the strikingly high levels of anxiety and stress specific to the acting community. These include the deep emotions they are often required to access and express when playing a role and the strong identification they can form with their characters.

I recently conducted research into the stresses incurred by acting students at the country's leading drama schools. Most of the acting teachers I interviewed acknowledged that their students did not take the time and space to separate themselves from their roles. This resulted in emotional hangovers, which often caused extreme moods and difficulties in their personal lives.

NEWS ANCHOR: Thank you Miss Taylor. If you wish to read more, please click on the link here:

<https://theconversation.com/out-of-character-how-acting-puts-a-mental-strain-on-performers-86212>



VIII

[Sound of the Dhakuria flyover. All lines spoken by the MAN, unless otherwise indicated]

1.

You died so easily in that hospital at Dhakuria.
After the news arrived at the hospital lobby
I walked out. I walked onto the flyover.
When I reached the highest point
I looked at the city below.
I wanted to throw a bomb,
kill that bloody beggar with his shabby bed below the flyover.

Instead,
I left.
I left the city.

2.

Seven years, seven years since you passed away.
How long does it take to unburden grief?
How much does it weigh?

3.

When the mania comes
I wish to kill everybody,
fuck every woman in my sight.

4.

[Chants: *Om shanti, om shanti, om shanti*⁵]

Seven years ago, when I came back from the crematorium,

⁵ A Sanskrit mantra.



I still smelt of ghee. This was the first time I had seen fire,
smelt fire, touched fire. This was the first time I had understood
that skin, like paper, burns into ash.

We went out to throw your unburnt remains in the Ganga.
This is probably at Outram Ghat.
The sky was a clear blue. There were no birds.

When I die, dear Durga, take me to the blue.
Take me to a clear, clearer blue.

5.

NARRATOR:

Let us go then,
 you and I,
 tonight,
 to a clear, clearer blue,
 still as snow, dark as night.



IX

[Sound of an ad jingle meant to abruptly change the mood]

NARRATOR [She begins in a playful, mock-serious tone]:

Last winter, he had begun to dream. It was cold, and like the first winter in this city, he tried to conjure a sense of some home from the yellow street lamps which, then, during his first winter that is, came rushing past the hostel window.

It was perhaps
the failure of association that led to this, the dissociation of parole to language:
the confusion of dreams with insomnia, language betraying the word, a sense of
rootlessness:
the meaning of the colour yellow began coming closer to homelessness, closer to the street,
where it originally belonged, where *he* originally belongs?

MAN [pondering deeply]: Where I originally belong?

NARRATOR: [In a playful, mock-serious tone]

To put it briefly, last winter,
he began to feel scared.

[Sudden change of tone; she is very serious now]

Scared, to be more specific, of sleep. Is there a word for it?
Maybe some kind of phobia? It's been a year, and he is still looking for that word which can
complete this poem, the kind of word that can explain, most perfectly, the kind of fear he
felt,
a word as weighty as the weight of insomnia. Really, a search for that poem led him
to *these* words which you now read.

MAN: Or hear.

NARRATOR:

This poem (he is still trying to convince me this is a radio play)
is not that word.



X

MAN:

The room is a strange blue. It seems that everything outside is blue. I will leave. The tennis ball is floating like a huge ship; it'll come and take me. I can hear the sound of a ship. I will leave.

[Sound of him getting up. There is no doorbell.]

Who's knocking on the door? Yes, I'll answer the door. I am ready. Just a minute. Just a minute.



NOTE ON THE TEXT

Parts III, V and X are translated excerpts of Mohit Chattopadhyay's play *Kanthanalite Surjo* (Sun Inside the Larynx). The original characters in this play were MAN, MILU and DOCTOR. In this version, MILU is the WOMAN. The DOCTOR, as the instructions say, must be played by the NARRATOR.

Part VI is a translated excerpt from Badal Sircar's play *Ebong Indrajit* (And Indrajit). The original characters in this play were MANASI, WRITER, INDRAJIT, and AMAL, BIMAL, KAMAL. In this version, MANASI is the WOMAN; WRITER is the NARRATOR and INDRAJIT the MAN. AMAL, BIMAL, KAMAL is the CHORUS in this text.

Both the plays were written in 1963 and mark the experimental phase of playwriting in modern Bengali theatre.

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Souradeep Roy is a writer and translator based in Delhi. His most recent publications are an earlier version of this play, also called "A Brief Loss of Sanity" in the anthology *New Writing in India Volume VI* (Helter Skelter Press, Bombay, India), edited by Eunice de Souza and Meena Kandasamy; in the latest issue of *Pratik* (Kathmandu, Nepal) in the feature on "Fourteen New Indian Poets"; and in *Best Indian Poetry 2018*. As a journalist he has bylines in *Scroll*, *The Wire*, *Newslick*, *Raiot*, *Wande*, *Kashmir Dispatch*, besides the two aforementioned sites.



In another life he was an actor, working in both theatre groups and films. He finished his M Phil (English) in 2017 from University of Delhi, and is currently pursuing research in Theatre and Performance Studies in Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi.

Photo: Soumyadeep Mondol