



Confrontation of east and west in Mircea eliade's *la nuit bengali* and maitreyi devi's *na hanyate*

Saborni Biswas

Assistant Professor, French, Amity School of Languages, Amity University Chhattisgarh, India

Abstract

La Nuit Bengali (Bengal Nights) by Mircea Eliade and *Na Hanyate* (It Does Not Die) by Maitreyi Devi are expressions of the two different people of a same emotion. These two novels, the first published in 1933 and the other more than forty years later in 1973, in response to the first by two distinguished literati retell the tales of their love affair from two broadly conflicting viewpoints. The two novels as a remarkably poignant story of young love incapable to succeed against an adversary whose strength was disastrously reinforced by the uncertainties of a cultural rift. They are moved in a different way; one being written as a captivating and unusual love-story by a young European explorer. The other is the expression of a strong Indian woman recalling and discovering her own past in response to the ardent tale. Both novels attempt to narrate the identical history of a romance set in the colonial past of India. This paper traces the confrontation of east and west, its consequences and impact on an actual, cross-cultural romance that unfolds in the pre-independent period of India.

Keywords: colonialism, patriarchy, cross-culture, romance

Introduction

La Nuit Bengali (Bengal Nights) by Mircea Eliade and *Na Hanyate* (It Does Not Die) by Maitreyi are described as the extraordinarily touching story of young love unable to prevail against an opposition whose strength was dreadfully reinforced by the uncertainties of a cultural divide. They are moved in a different way; one being written as an interesting and exotic love-story by a young European explorer, the other a mature Indian woman remembering and discovering her own past in response to the ardent tale. Although having similarity in events, both these narratives, remarkably, have a different development where various discourses force to their separate points of views. The subsequent meeting of the two protagonists, their coming together, and departure in the context of their cultural, racial, gender, familial, and regional differences lead to their play of life. Yet among all these differences, love continues to remain the common factor without which the last meeting between them more than four decades later would not have been possible.

These two novels, one published in 1933, and the other more than 40 years later in 1973. *Na Hanyate* (It Does Not Die) by Maitreyi was written in response to the *La Nuit Bengali* (Bengal Nights) by Mircea Eliade. The renowned intellectuals recap the story of their love affair from two widely conflicting viewpoints. These divergent points of views work as a spur to their separation. Eliade was a theologian, who tells his version of the romance with Maitreyi Devi in a delicately veiled autobiographical novel. Eliade's novel was written when he was young around thirty whereas, Maitreyi's, on the other hand, comes around her sixty, at a very prudent and mature stage of life. It is vividly apparent in *La Nuit Bengali* that Eliade sees in Maitreyi Devi what the West has hackneyed seen in the East. It can be called as a mysterious pool of holiness, craziness and voluptuous.

Maitreyi in her riposte *Na Hanyate* (It Does Not Die) goes in contrast to Eliade negating his claim of bodily bond primarily and his misinterpretation of Indian culture, decorum, and generosity. Maitreyi Devi perhaps tries to contradict the notion of sexual intercourse initiated by Eliade's text because of the negative career and social consequences such an indictment could have. She splits down the West's clichéd perception about the East and highlights the emotional and moral union rather than the corporal. Furthermore, a sort of self-restriction is also seen in her tale as well which is implied in her writings. Gopal Bhowmik's opinion about *It Does Not Die* is, "I do not know how to classify the book. In a sense it is a novel...It is also a book of reminiscence...History and fiction have been deftly mingled...A strange amalgam but fully fascinating..." (The Indian PEN Journal, July 1975)

To theorize any ideas regarding the kind of the historical Maitreyi -Eliade rapport based on their two texts is difficult if one is pursuing what really happened. Direct complaints may be raised up regarding an assessment of Maitreyi Devi and Eliade's texts on their own respective levels. The truth cannot be revealed because whatever the truth is said to be, will just happen to be a compromise, which does not essentially reveal the truth. The only truth that can be taken from these two books is as Bhabha says, "... there is no knowledge - political or otherwise - outside representation" (23). Moreover, it should be kept in mind that both the texts have the autobiographical traits and hart says:

The auto biographer has always had to consider how to manage, and whether to dramatize, the discontinuities inherent in autobiographical recreation. The most basic discontinuities are the intermittences of memory. Autobiographies are always what Morris calls 'first of all exercises in recollection - recollection in its simplest conception, as the tactic the mind employs to mitigate the destructive powers of time.' But recollection in autobiography is never simple, always the process Berdyaev describes: 'such a cognitive process is not a mere remembering or recapitulation of the past: it is a creative act performed at the present moment.' And the first question is whether to dramatize the act. Some do not. (Hart 234)

Eliade's version of writing Maitreyi and *Bengal Nights* is like:.... little by little I found myself again in that fabulous time in Bhawanipore, and I realized that no longer was I writing a novel as I had intended, but a confession. Often, I copied whole pages from The Journal, and if that journal for the summer of 1930 had been more extensive, perhaps I would have transcribed it in its entirety... Sitting in front of those blank pages, writing about people and events that had played such a decisive role in my youth, it was impossible for me to "invent." I changed the names of the characters, of course, except for Maitreyi and her sister Chabu, but I let myself give correct dates, addresses, and telephone numbers. Likewise, I changed the occupations of Dasgupta and the narrator, and I drastically modified the conclusion, as if I wished to separate myself definitively from Maitreyi. (*Autobiography* 240)

Analysing the novel from Bhabha's concepts of mimicry, hybridity and ambivalence, it is proved that the text *Bengal Nights* is purely a colonial hybrid product in the history of British colonialism in India, as any notion or possibility of maintaining cultural purity is absent in the text in the wake of colonial encounters.

The stirring event for Maitreyi Devi's *It Does Not Die* is the arrival of Sergui, a student of the Romanian scholar Mircea Euclid, to Kolkata in 1972. Mircea Euclid was a student of Amrita's father and had stayed with Amrita's family in Bhowanipur, Kolkata from 1929 to 1930. Mircea and Amrita fell in love, but Amrita's father forbade their marriage on the grounds of racial and religious differences. So far, the story follows an obvious bend as the family members denote social influences that break star-crossed lovers. Maitreyi Devi says:

I kept no journal—I am writing something that happened forty-two years ago, neither from a diary nor from exact memory—so I do not know whether the sequence of events is correct—sequence, that means one after the other, that is, what was then before or after, as now it has no before 35 nor after. (Devi 75)

But as a troubled teenager, she had given Tagore some hint about her unsuccessful affair and her poignant turmoil. Tagore soothed her by writing heart-warming letters recommending her to bear difficulties with stoical composure. Their correspondence continued even after her marriage. For the girl, Tagore visited Mungpu a couple of times. The memorable visits were captured by Maitreyi Devi in her book titled *Mungpu Rabindranath (Tagore in Mungpu)*. The emotional outbursts through letters were shared by Maitreyi Devi with Tagore and she captures all her emotions, advises by Tagore and communication between her father and Tagore in the book titled *Swarger Kachhakachhi (Close to Paradise)*.

Various versions of this type of romance have been read before like Romeo and Juliet, Layla and Majnun, Heer and Ranjha. In these narratives, a family member, usually a patriarch, appears as the antihero for preventing the affair and surfacing the way for the disaster. But the plot of *It Does Not Die* takes an astonishing turning. Maitreyi Devi was sixteen in 1930 when Eliade was welcomed to live in her father's house. Her romance with Eliade continued a few months. When her parents grasped that the two were winding romantically, Eliade was asked to leave the Dasgupta house and instructed by Professor Dasgupta not ever to contact Maitreyi again. He could have been accepted as a legitimate suitor for marriage with Maitreyi. After Maitreyi's journey with Mircea comes to its sudden end, Maitreyi went through a period of depression. After her high school exams, her only thought was to leave the house as soon as possible. She wanted an escape desperately and marriage seemed to her the only possible way for freedom, and she takes it. Maitreyi's marital relationship with her husband was a good one but without incidents. But at the beginning of that married life she spent twenty years in pseudo-exile in the Darjeeling Hills where her husband was a forestry officer. Their married life was a peaceable one, but there it never had the romantic alchemy of her relationship with Mircea.

Dasgupta may have been educated and progressive, but he was still striding in lockstep with class, culture and society and their prospects. The promptness of his reaction exposed the superficiality of the surface. Yet again, that cursed *izzat* that makes the woman a prisoner of the men's sense of dignity. A woman may never be free because a man's disgrace or dignity resides in his capability to control her. A devastated Amrita came to face to face with her father's hypocrisy and double standards. The latter had seemed to be very fond of Mircea but would not countenance his daughter's marriage to the latter, a foreigner that he was. Narendranath was the typical patriarch who liked to hold the minds of his wife and daughters under strong restraint and control their lives while he himself indulged in an extra-marital relationship. Amrita suffered terribly within and even contemplated ending her life. She eventually entered an arranged marriage with a man who demanded very little attention, and Amrita continued to hanker for Mircea within.

Usually 'jati' or caste or 'endogamous grouping' is the basis of the Indian arranged marriage system, at least as it was. In Maitreyi Devi's time, people would only marry someone from their own jati. But here Maitreyi is talking about something more subtle, 'one's own kind.' The comfort of the marriage came from that, even though she and her husband really had nothing in common. From the very beginning of their marriage, they would barely talk. Each did their own thing. There was ease in their bond, a certain amount of personal freedom was kept for individuals. Devi never discussed about the conjugal relationship of her life. She, who lived in a poetic world of images, and he who was kind of an easy-moneymaking personality, living their distinct, closed, set woman or

man lives. When Maitreyi's children had grown up, married, and raised families of their own, in 1972, Maitreyi was 58 years old and by that year she had relocated to Kolkata. She expressed her contented mind to Sergei as she said that she had led a full life and it is true. Due to her talents and upbringing, she became an exceptional person, which led to authorship and social service. Had she gone with Mircea she would perhaps never have done those things, so 'Fate' must be appreciated as it had another purpose to carry out.

Mircea leaves India after separated from Amrita and Eliade leaves Dasgupta's and takes "*sannyas*," leaving for Rishikesh, where he spends a year in a cave up near Sivananda Swami's ashram. He spends two years over there and returned to Romania. In 1933, he publishes a Romanian novel about his relationship with her known as *Bengal Nights*. Devi was astounded to learn that Eliade in Maitreyi: La Nuit Bengali, had given elaborate details on their passionate affair, highlighting her sexual exploits. Though Amrita came to know about the novel from her father in the 1930s itself, but she was not interested to read it until she met Sergui. From Sergui, Amrita came to know that Mircea had intermixed truth with fiction in the novel to illustrate how she would visit him every night to accomplish their love in the Bhowanipur house. Amrita objected and protested the fact that Mircea Euclid described her naked body without ever having seen her in the nude or making love to her. Deeply hurt and wounded, she determined to give a fitting reply and expose the truth about her first love before the entire world. The hero of her innocent love, Mircea Euclid, in that way becomes the antihero intimidating to destroy her reputation and distract the stability of her marital life. Her anguish is expressed in the novel in this way: "If he (Eliade) really was so much in love, why did he run away at one snubbing from my father? Had he no duty towards me? Have you ever known of such cowardice?" (Devi 10) In 1973, Devi was invited by the University of Chicago to address on Tagore and showed up at Eliade's office impromptu. She had a few meetings with him over the duration of two months. Amrita then decides to write her version of the story as well as encounter Mircea Euclid. About Eliade's novel, Ginu Kamani says:

It appeared to be blatant colonial-era prejudice and appropriation veiled as romance and seemed to have been published in North America to capitalize on the fame of "the world-renowned scholar." Eliade had perhaps come to India to transcend the Judeo-Christian sexual repression in himself, which experience he could only attempt to describe in fiction, rendering his object Maitreyi into a caricature of a tantric goddess, transforming her inexplicably from virgin to sex queen in his own unrealistic, self-indulgent fantasy. (Toronto Review, 1996)

The conflict of East and West is visible in both the novels, and both attempt to describe the indistinguishable history of a romance set in the colonial past of India. Both the novels tell the tales of an authentic, cross-cultural love affair that progresses in the pre-independent era of India. Curiously, these two textually interconnected texts acquire a significant disparity in the perceptions of the authors. Statements are argued here most remarkably whether the romance involved physical unification or something beyond that connection. In Maitreyi Devi's narrative it is clear that love is not only and merely the physical associations; rather love has greater involvement with mindset, extended family, acquaintances, families, and culture. Ginu Kamani's observation for Devi's novel is like:

An Indian woman had written a book with a very sure voice -- a book filled with accounts of her life, her desires, her interests, her biases -- without embarrassment, without regrets, and without any harm having befallen her. I was riveted by the boundary-less form of her narrative, dipping in and out of poetic prose and historical reminiscence. I was amazed by the frankness with which she described her passionate feelings, her critique of her father and family, and her strong sense of self. I was exhilarated by her single-minded goal of going halfway across the world to confront a European man she hadn't seen or heard from in forty-two years, then just as passionately putting pen to paper and thoroughly discrediting his version of their relationship, without fearing the disparity in their "status." I was struck by her honesty in maintaining that she still loved the young Eliade whom she had once known, and whom she would love always. *Na Hanyate*, the original title of the Bengali version of Devi's book, is a spiritual reference, alluding to the immortality of the soul, which does not die even when the body dies. I have never read such a book written by an Indian woman from India, and especially by one of her generations. I was deeply moved and troubled. More than a "counter to Eliade's fantasies," *It Does Not Die* delineates a complex character who embraced a complex experience without posturing, without apologies or excuses, and who, unlike Eliade, had the courage to contact an old friend after scores of years. (Toronto Review, 1996)

Certain facts make the readers to think about the gap of cultures and perceptions of east and west. Devi had a romance at the age of sixteen with a foreign man is extraordinary enough for that age. She may have had voluptuous association with him or man before marriage is audacious, to take such a risk in the face of the kinds of shocks family and society regularly had in store for women folk who resisted. The primary permission to discover must have been entrenched in the same verdict that led her, forty years later, to face the man who alleged to have shattered her reputation.

Nevertheless, for a fortunate European male such as Mircea Eliade traveling to India in 1929, the very structure of the culture that restricts carnal association for the people in India seems to have led to a surprising sensual journey with a minor Bengali girl in an upper-class Calcutta home in 1930. The plot offered inside of having sex with a sixteen-year-old Brahmo girl in her parents' house in Calcutta is unreasonably doubtful. The author's colonist attitude or the arrogance in the colonial era is plainly depicted in the novel. It seems that the elite European concluded the tragedy unharmed except for hurt feelings, while his Bengali lover girl is portrayed as being forced by her family and community and enforced into an unsolicited marital bond. The fact is that Mircea Eliade's novel *Bengal Nights* follows an anticipated composition as advocated by Western fictional formulation.

But the voyages noticed in *Bengal Night's* hero and Eliade's personal journey are indistinguishable in many ways. Their modes of reasoning also seem to coincide. Alain is fascinated with myths and is eager to know the lot and every person he confronts in India in harmony with descriptions and images from the Hindu doctrines he reads. *Bengal Nights* bears the characteristics of European modernist literature, comprehensive with the insight of eastern traditions as more ancient and therefore, nearer to the depths of the individual subliminal. Eliade narrates the story of his experience in the Dasgupta household in such a way that he blends his desires and feelings with his understanding, but every experience is reminisced in this way. Theorist Louis Mink writes:

Stories are not lived but told. Life has no beginnings, middles, or ends; there are meetings, but the start of an affair belongs to the story we tell ourselves later, and there are partings, but final partings only in the story. There are hopes, plans, battles, and ideas, but only in retrospective stories are hopes unfulfilled, plans miscarried, battles decisive, and ideas seminal. (123)

In Maitreyi Devi's *It Does Not Die*, Mircea is an inquisitive, self-humiliating man, and an envious lover. He is constantly looking for deep meanings of expressions and is keen to effortlessly categorize his encounters. When Amrita recites a poem about trees, he tries to make her as pantheistic. When he is enthralled by Uday Shankar's dance, he exclaims and praises India but at the same Alien says:

I would have been happy if Maitreyi's expression had betrayed her feelings for him - at a single blow, I would have been cut fire of my attachment. The instant I knew myself replaced by another; my love would have dissolved. If Maitreyi could not arm herself against Uday Shankar's power with her fidelity to me, she deserved to be abandoned, like the most wretched of women. (*Bengal Nights* 126)

He bothers about Maitreyi's fascination a seventy-year-old man, Rabindranath Tagore and is desired by her cousin at the same. Whensoever Amrita admonishes Mircea he imposes pain on himself. On her part, Amrita tries to make sense of Mircea's self-damaging emotion for her in terms of the dignified associated with 'sati', the ceremony in which windows were burnt to death on the funeral pyres with their husbands *It Does Not Die* concludes with a message which is far away from the issue of physical love. Amrita went to Chicago after forty-two years to meet him, he refused to face her. The heart-breaking part is told with a touch of humour—Amrita recurrently requested Mircea to turn, he persistently looks away, and when he turned, she realized he had lost his vision. They vowed to meet again in the cosmos. In this scene Mircea is not only just the 'European hunter' Amrita had pictured him to be and he recuperates his position as the hero of a mystical romance, which does not begin or end with mere sexuality what Amrita had primarily anticipated. However, Devi's novel continues to be concerned with 'purity', Devi is dedicated to determining the virginity of Amrita, the purity of her love. He still claims a spiritual connection with Maitreyi though he has completely forsaken her both physically and emotionally. He presumes to say, "What a pity your father spoils your life" (Devi 14). He attributes this to her father instead of Euclid is troubling, but since his whole point is inaccurate, there is little cause to battle over it. Amrita replies:

...how much do you know of life? Who can spoil my life? My life is rich. I have built up an ideal home. I live happily, surrounded by children and grandchildren. So many persons love and respect me. Granted the unbounded affection of my Master, about whom Mircea was so jealous, I have experienced ecstasy that is beyond the world of mind and words. (Devi 14)

Attributes such as purity and cultural dominance continue to be noticed with the heroes in both the novels. Mamun Abdullah Al says:

Apart from the familial and cultural conflicts, there are some gender and racial clashes which are also found in Eliade's description as if he were rediscovering Indian women and race. Firdous Azim identifies this as the typical western observer positioning himself as an explorer who seems to ascertain the secrets of the "other" world. The woman is seen to be the repository of those secrets, made to open the secret to the explorer. (Daily Star 2022)

Devi is scandalized Eliade's misrepresentation, the dominant mood of the book *Bengal Night* is the experience of love's thriller. She is affected by an almost extensive immobility that overcomes her when the memory of her teenage love for Eliade deluges into her consciousness. She is amazed by an appreciation of the eternal and immortal aspect of that love. As her narrative progresses, she becomes more and more contemplative about this and comes to think of it as something of a religious experience and the proof of an existence beyond the body.

In 1976, *Na Hanyate* was translated from the Bengali as *It Does Not Die*, whereas Eliade's *Bengal Nights*, translated from French, appeared as late as 1993, significantly, after the death of both writers. Later the writings were published by the University of Chicago in a common edition in 1994, the novels have been projected in a spatial temporal context that certainly complicates the specificity of their different cultural conditions. The misrepresentation, perplexity, and conflict of two cultures that start in a colonial setting are finally resolved in a postcolonial world. Both the novels *It Does Not Die* and *Bengal Nights* reveal how the underlying conflicts between the Occident and Orient, colonizers and the colonized, West and East informing the relationship of the ruling and the working classes, racial majorities, and the racial minorities in postcolonial India. Desai writes, "Eliade's novel is a disturbing mixture of the racial and colonial attitudes of the day and a lush romanticism." (43) In viewing Eliade's and Devi's texts together, the dichotomies of love/hate and past/present show a clear difference between the two accounts. Eliade's text remains strongly rooted in the past. The story is told as someone reminiscing her or his past, nothing of the time during which he tells the story is revealed. Emotion like love is beyond the reach of time. As Devi characterizes her view of time in her autobiography in this way:

No, I am not talking of another life it is not past life it happened only the other day-only forty-two years ago. I have stepped forty-two years backwards. For us human beings it is a long period, but how small it is in eternity! Time is not anchored anywhere... Time wipes away all that was once precious. It is a destroyer; it shatters and wears out everything old? Does it not also make anything new? Yes, my body is old, but my mind? The mind that's eager for news of Mercea Euclid now is young. It too is a creation of time... what was old could become new, or that the conception of old and new itself is an illusion. (*It Does Not Die* 10-11)

Maitreyi Devi's, *It Does Not Die* with a Sanskrit title *Na Hanyate* (The title is taken from a verse in *Katha Upanishad*, the Sanskrit phrase "*na hanyate*" roughly means "indestructible") is an endeavour to prove that no lust or sexual passion was involved in her childhood and teenaged relationship with Eliade. Devi claims that their love was blameless. Though the readers wonder how an elderly lady could reveal such details about an happening that took place in the past but Maitreyi Devi's candour, faithfulness, and audacity of conviction, simply augmented their admiration for her. Specific feelings and thoughts are revealed, it is true, but nothing that can be attached for a time being. The Indian philosophical thought process is reflected in Maitreyi Devi's text when she says, "Love is deathless. My soul, held by him in that Bhowanipur house, still remains fixed" (Devi 218).

References

1. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1997.
2. Eliade, Mircea. *Bengal Nights*, Trans. Catherine Spencer, Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1994.
3. ---. *Autobiography, Journey East, Journey West*. Trans. Mac Linscott Ricketts. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990:1:1907-1937.
Desai, Anita. "O Calcutta!" *New Republic* 211, 1994, 43-45.
4. Devi, Maitreyi. *It Does Not Die*, Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1994.
5. Gopal Bhowmik, the *Indian PEN Journal*, 1975.
6. Hart, Francis R. "Notes for an Anatomy of Modern Autobiography." *New Directions in Literary History*. Ed. Ralph Cohen. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1974.
7. Kamani, Ginu. "A Terrible Hurt: The Untold Story behind the Publishing of Maitreyi Devi." Online. [Http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/143651.html](http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/143651.html), 2000.
8. Mink, Louis O. "History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension." *New Directions in Literary History*. Ed. Ralph Cohen. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1974.
9. Mamun Abdullah Al. "Distance and Togetherness: A Reading of *La Nuit Bengali* and *Na Han-yate*", *The Daily Star*, 2022.