

## T.S. Eliot in Dhaka

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### Abstract

*Through a narrative centering on discovery of a volume of T.S. Eliot poetry in a small bookstore in Bangladesh, a dialogue on poverty and discrimination is initiated. The literary environment of Dhaka emerges as a fertile background for a poet. Using excerpts from T.S. Eliot poems such as 'Gerontian,' and 'Ash Wednesday,' new poems develop including 'In Gulshan,' 'Texts of our Time,' and 'The Brass Man.' A perspective on being an American in Bangladesh emerges through reflection on the chaos of the street and the role of poetry as an actor in the social consequences of a stratified society.*

I was a poet, newly lauded as a finalist for the Robert Frost Award, having made a commitment, through thick and thin, to continue to write over the years, although my forays into publishing had been thin. A successful painter all these years, I had opened the door to my writing wider, recently, while also opening the door to the world. And we were moving to Dhaka, Bangladesh to take up a position my partner really wanted. I agreed – it was a chance to do things differently, to have a chance to work uninterrupted for a period of time without the several part time jobs artists have, and to give our son get a taste of the world, and international living.

After we'd arrived at a stone house on a dirt street surrounded by people speaking Bangla, I eventually managed to find the one English language bookstore nearby, a small narrow shop filled with piles of books and stationary supplies, in no apparent order. To my relief, I found a book of T.S. Eliot's poetry, mostly commentary, but with a satisfying swath of poems at the front. This was when the pace and chaos of the street still felt unbearable and strange, the heat was uninterrupted and intense, the air dusty, and my role increasingly unclear in this tiny, but massively populated south Asian city. How the Eliot book came to be in this small shop I have no idea – the selection of books was random and patchy, there were many more airport thrillers and textbooks than literary texts, and books sat in ragged stacks on fold up tables. This volume looked as if it had been printed in India – with its rippling inside cover pages and simplified cover design.

Yet it was here, in my hand, and I was completely thrilled. I remember standing outside the shop after buying it, by the large, dirty plate glass window – next to a Bata shoe store – clutching this book. The feeling was that I could, after all, go on, in this marginal, unacknowledged existence – if I could just read T.S. Eliot's poetry. There were other literary surprises – like the articles in the Star, the main Dhaka paper, where well versed critics compared Eastern and Western poetry and made references to Yeats and Pound. I perceived Western educations filtering through this writing, and was selfishly glad to have access to this erudite stream.

Meanwhile I bought books of Tagore poetry in the local handicraft shop and made plans to visit Calcutta.....

I didn't realize that the Eliot poetry – one of my only poetry books, it turned out, until I began ordering books using the Embassy 'pouch,' mail system, and before anthrax scares baked and blistered packages beyond recognition, and delayed them for months – would speak so clearly and deeply to the experience I was having in Bangladesh. Here are some of the excerpts I used to introduce poems about poverty, loss, hunger and tragedy, all of which unfolded as the norm in Dhaka, as my experience proceeded, day by day. The beggars in the street, as in India, tapped on the windows of the car; women raised babies to the glass; cripples leaned on young children, holding out their hands.

*'After such knowledge, what forgiveness?' (T.S. Eliot, 'Gerontian')*

And I asked,

*how do you eat maple walnut  
ice cream when someone is staring  
at you with outstretched palm –  
how do you make sense of this life –  
...here we are faced  
with a whole nation  
wanting something –  
something we cannot wholly give*

and concluded,

*we will return to American,  
soon,  
and then, will we remember?* (Sutro, 'In Gulshan')

I sought Eliot again, in 'Ash Wednesday,'  
*'Rose of memory,  
rose of forgetting  
Teach us to care and not to care.....'*

His injunction led me to:

*Teach me to care and yet  
not get pulled under  
the wave that rills over me as I contemplate the crowd at Newmarket,  
begging, their open faces, their voices, their bodies pressed up against the car.  
Teach me not to care so much, lost in the roiling sense of senselessness, the poverty that  
extends from one end of Dhaka to the other, the countryside devoid of opportunity.  
everyone comes to the city.*

and moreover,

*not to care too much, but still to care.  
I'm filtering out some of what I see now, out of necessity  
naked man walking down the street, child moving into traffic,  
I cannot bear to look into each face in the throngs of people in the streets  
when I park the car, in the market, asking,  
'baksheesh.'*

And,

*now I care, but it is more  
painful  
than forgetting.* (Sutro, 'Texts of Our Time')

T.S. Eliot was a handle, something I could hold onto in the teeming streets of Dhaka and in this life – which was new, disorganized, disorienting. My official status was 'accompanying' a salaried worker. No one yet in the community, city or country. Eventually I found other artists, writers: Bangladeshi, Indian, American, European; and made a life for two years, showing and publishing my work.

I never closed the gap, though, of wonder, awe or shock that first came to me on entering a third world Muslim country. There, in Dhaka, T.S. Eliot was my companion, an unlikely poet whose hand and words I would hold. Although castigated for his racial biases, still, his deeper voice came through, inspiring me to write, in 'Race,'

*the brass man came to the gate,  
he is white,  
he tells me, and his brother is black.  
this is in reference  
to my trying to find him,  
should I want to buy the  
old brass oil lamp he is selling.  
he has no phone. I can leave a message  
at the shop where his brother works, D.I.T. II, upper level,  
right hand corner next to the leather store.  
I study the rough surface of the brass objects,  
some are polished, some not. The lamp  
is light yellow. The carved vase is  
dark.  
all the same family,  
the lamp considered more valuable  
by many.* (Sutro, 'The Brass Man')