

## Oh Dear

**Geeta doctor** Posted online: Sun Mar 22 2009, 15:23 hrs

### **Four travellers, their midnight confessions**

#### **and that old thing called love**

There is a delicious sense of nostalgia in picking up the book. It is like chancing upon a well-loved bottle of perfume and uncorking the stopper. The genie of memory suddenly wafts out of its crystalline depths and teases you with the fleeting fragrance of delicate desires and longings of times past. Just to look at the book, beautifully bound in a textured type of silken finish with a dull rose tint of scrolled flowers, the edges of the light cream-coloured pages still lightly glued together in gold leaf, so that you have to reach for your onyx-handled paper knife, should you have one handy, is to be transported to an earlier era when books were valued as pieces of art.

One can well imagine a Satyajit Ray heroine sitting in the deep recesses of a verandah reading such a book, maybe even swaying gently on a swing. There is something wonderfully decadent about the whole experience. Of course, it is only because Ray placed such a visual imprint on our recollection of the Bengali upper class that we forget that the great Bengali writers did it with the same consummate mastery.

Buddhadeva Bose is one of them. As the note at the back of the book reminds the reader, Bose (1908-1974) was not just one of the writers who ushered a period of renaissance in modern Bengali writing, but was a significant translator of writers as diverse as Baudelaire, Holderlin and Rilke.

It is perhaps in Rilke and his romanticism that this particular novella finds an echo. The stories reflect the many facets of that impulse we call love, in a way that might seem absurd in today's world. We are so accustomed to an aggressive, muscular manifestation of love that the understated nuances of a Bose is lost upon us. Bose's characters reflect upon a Rilke state of mind when he said: "For one being to love another: that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof to work for, which all other work is but a preparation."

In translating the book to English, Arunava Sinha has produced a gem of delight. It's not exactly the genteel world of aristocracy that Bose's characters inhabit and that is what makes the difference here. It is the newly emergent middle class of the mid-20th century that he brings together in a tale set in a railway waiting room on a cold, wintry night. He uses the time-honoured storyteller's technique of throwing together four disparate travellers in the classic setting of an inn, as in a Kurosawa movie, forced to entertain each other through the night by recounting a fragment of memory that revolves around the elusive figure of the woman of their dreams.

The men are a thickset and hairy-chested furnituremaker, a doctor who gets to marry the woman he loves, a civil servant and the catalyst for these midnight confessions, a writer, whom one presumes must be Bose. There's a lovely moment when the door to the waiting room in this remote station flies open in the cold night air and a young couple, newly married, appears for the fraction of an instant before these middle-aged men. Never mind that women like these don't exist anymore. It is Bose's triumph that with this fragment of magical delight, he stokes the embers of the story alive till the last page.