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The Walter Mitty Factor : The Fantastical Narratives Of The Bengali Dada

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Abstract: The mid-Forties witnessed in Bangla young adult fiction, the rise of the Dada-figure; an effectively oddball amalgamation of the 'Mittyesque' and the classic club-storyteller, that adopted an inharmonious mode of narration and went on adding layers of historical, geographical, socio-political and cultural idiosyncrasies unto itself, until it became an entirely exclusive entity of Bengal. Trying to grapple with the experiential void of the Bengali commoner, the Dada became that subversive manifestation of the shaman who 'healed' the third-world miseries of postcolonial Bengal through his broad strokes of outlandish fantasy**.**

Keywords: Daydreamer, Storyteller, Hunger, *Adda*, Escape.

"All right, have it your way- you heard a seal bark", says Mrs Mitty in James Thurber's 1939 short story *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*. Walter Mitty, the maladaptive daydreamer as medics would oblige to state about his identity, ushered in the phrase 'the Mittyesque' into the domain of modern English, denoting an ineffectual individual who spends more time in heroic daydreams than paying attention to the reality and the designs of the real world, and more often than not, one who intentionally attempts to mislead or convince others into him being something that he, by any stretch of imagination, is not. Apart from a Broadway musical in the early-Sixties, the short story has spawned two significant large-screen adaptations- the 1947 Norman Z. McLeod directorial, starring Danny Kaye, and the 2013 Ben Stiller starrer helmed by Stiller himself- both films having the same title as that of Thurber's tale. Now, much like the 1989 - 1990 Indian television series, Prakash Jha's *Mungerilal Ke Haseen Sapne*- a North Indian adaptation of Thurber- what also went unnoticed is the peculiar tryst that Walter Mitty has had with young adult fiction in Bangla during the mid-Forties to the late-Sixties. Premendra Mitra's Ghawna-da debuted in 1945 with the short story *Mawsha* and Narayan Gangopadhyaya's Teni-da made his first appearance in 1946, in the short story titled *Mawtshyo-Pooraan*. The two aforementioned characters led to the rise of the Dada-figure; an effectively oddball amalgamation of the 'Mittyesque' and the classic storyteller, that went on adding layers and layers of historical, geographical, socio-political and cultural idiosyncrasies unto itself, until it became an entirely exclusive entity of Bengal. This paper will attempt to chart the various influences from across the world that might have been instrumental to the Dada's making, and will analyse how, in spite of sharing his roots with global literary canons, the Dada developed himself into a pop-culture persona belonging strictly to Bengal.

I. Shehrazad had recited a thousand-and-one stories to survive for another night. Vetala had narrated twenty-five stories to assess the acumen of an emperor. One wonders what motivation could the Dada have had to churn out countless tales for his peers. To infer historically, the quintessential storyteller was ever present in both traditions- the European and the Eastern- of children's literature; an elderly man or a woman, sometimes a grandfather narrating stories to kids so that they are kept engrossed or are lulled to sleep. With the passage of time, we had several incarnations of the storyteller in the West, replete with considerable deviations from the original. Rudolf Erich Raspe in his 1785 work *Baron Munchausen's Narrative of his Marvellous Travels*

and Campaigns in Russia, or simply *Baron Munchausen,* commenced the birth to the unabashed liar-storyteller. The fictional Baron's exploits were narrated in the first person, on his impossible achievements as a sportsman, soldier, and traveller; for instance: riding on a cannonball, fighting a forty-foot crocodile, and travelling to the Moon. Intentionally comedic, the stories played on the absurdity and inconsistency of Munchausen's claims, and contained an undercurrent of social satire. After a hiatus of almost one-fifty years, *Baron Munchausen* inspired Lord Dunsany to generate the genre called the club-tale, with Mr Joseph Jorkens as the lead. The publication of *The Travel Tales of Mr. Joseph Jorkens* (1931), *Jorkens Remembers Africa* (1934), *Jorkens Has a Large Whiskey* (1940) canonized the club-tale which typically featured one particular anecdotist-cum-magsman notorious for his colourful history and unbelievable reminiscences, who related memoirs of his life to initially incredulous fellow club-members. By the end of the story the latter were usually at least half taken-in by the unlikely tale, and would count the expense well worth it.

The birth of the Dada occurs when the classic mode of club-storytelling drastically changes contours, along with the purpose being shifted to denser stakes. Akin to the club-storyteller's set-up, the Dada functions within a set of specific 'markers' (unmistakably third-world) - the surrounding, being the first one. Teni-da delivers his tall-tales from *Chattujey-de'r rowaak* while Ghawna-da sits comfortably in a dingy, North Calcutta *mess-barri* or simply, a *mess*. The italics over the word 'mess' indicates the fact that in spite of being an English word, its usage has turned essentially Bangla, with meanings that a Western audience will never exactly be able to grasp. A *rowaak* is not equal to a verandah, definitely not a courtyard, nor can it simply be termed as a large slab- it's an exterior portion jutting out of Bengali lower-middle-class houses in British India; a common architectural sight in the residential bylanes abounding North Calcutta. A *mess-barri* or *mess* on the other hand, meant a humble, two-storeyed motel with the utterly shoestring facilities of basic food and lodging, mostly congested with young to middle-aged bachelors of the clerical working-class. It is this *rowaak* or *mess* where the Dada existed in all his glory. 'World famous' in his limited locality or *parra*, the Dada had assimilated his familiar surroundings into his very identity (*Pawtoldanga'r Teni-da*) and had little else to adorn or even support his origin with. Teni-*da* is Bhawjohori Mukhujjey (and not Mukherjee), and Ghawna-*da* is Ghanashyam Doss (Das) and this is where it ends. Apart from an occasional aged aunt (*burri pishi-ma*), we do not get the tiniest detail about the Dada's parents, relatives or family members. And on episodes when a variety of Teni-da's maternal/paternal uncles pop up from nowhere, for instance the loony Kutti-mama, we somehow know at the very outset, that the 'honest account' about to follow, is an instant concoction of 'personal myth making.' It would here be apt to speak of Brojo-*da*, another Dada from Bengal, created by Gour Kishore Ghosh alias Roopodorshee in his one-volume Dada annals *Brojoda'r Goolpo-Shawmogro* (1967). Though a later entrant and a relatively underrated associate of the Dada bandwagon, the introduction to *Brojo-da'r Goolpo-Shawmogro* presents us with an aphoristic 'equation' that goes- *"Goolpo = Gool + Gawlpo, awrthaat nirbhejaal shotyo ghawtona* (Ghosh 1)." [Goolpo = Gool (fib) + Gawlpo (fiction), which is, 'the unadulterated truth.'] Thus, the word *goolpo*, Ghosh's own coinage, (which can roughly be translated to hogwash) entails a lot of the premise on which the rhizomes of the Dada rest. It is this phenomenon of 'personal myth-making', much like Walter Mitty or Mungerilal that the Dada uses to transcend the 'collective myths' of modern life, which constantly seek to impose a series of otherwise impenetrable prison cells around his authentic perception of self-identity. The colonized skeleton of the Dada makes him depart from the wily Baron Munchausen or Joseph Jorkens and veers him towards the more vulnerable Walter Mitty. The "unreliable narrator" (Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 1961) in the Dada made him the darling of his 'followers' who could jolly well escape into the realms of *goolpo* where fact, fiction and fabrication made merry without announcing or even suggesting their arrival in the course of a narration.

"It is in their minds that the story really takes place; as they experience it, the reader experiences it. …those stories (are) narrated, whether in the first or third person, by a profoundly confused, basically self-deceived, or even wrongheaded or vicious reflector", argues Booth about "the unreliable narrator" being more of an all-pervasive idea than a stock-character. Somewhat validating this statement, Gangopadhyaya had at times brought in secondary narrators like Kutti-mama, Nengcha-*da*, Sindhu-Ghotak and Jhumurlal Chaubey Chakraborty- decidedly quirky characters who happen to tell a story within the larger story that Teni-*da* is narrating. And in a one-off occasion, we find a certain Maku-da (in *Honolulu'r Maku-da*) who turns the tables by foxing Teni-*da* himself through his own tall-tales. So, the good-for-nothing Bengali prattler or trickster (or both) often transcended the restraints of being the protagonist's characteristics, and became a template for other figures within the same universe, all of them equally unreliable as narrators. Gangopadhyaya "... creates and rejects one unreliable narrator, only to find himself creating another "I" who immediately becomes involved in the action so deeply that he produces the catastrophe" (Booth 344).

With respect to the ancient Indian traditions of *Katha* and *Akhyayika*, it is difficult to locate the Dada's tall-tales in either of the two compartments with absolute singularity. Ghawna-da *claims* to have travelled to Sakhalin and Premendra Mitra retains the accuracy of its geographical details; we believe it's *Akhyayika*. It is when the story shifts gears to the Japanese scientist Nishimara's interaction with Ghawna-da and leaps beyond the domain of realism, that its fanciful treatment shoves it closer to *Katha*. Teni-da gives his own spin to *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* and even brings in the Turkish invader Chengiz Khan into the mix, thus creating a unique bricolage of history, folklore and camp. It can here be stated that this brand of *goolpo* blathered by the Dada has potent echoes of Troilokyanath Mukhopadhyay's picaresque anti-hero Damrudhar (*Damru-Charit,* 1923) narrating his colourful tales at a *mojlish* (a close cousin to *adda*) in colonial Bengal. Ipshita Chanda in her 2015 essay *Charit as a Genre* argues that being "the narrative of a character's life and/or exploits ... a strand of the *Charit* questions the differentiation between *kavya* and reality on the basis of representational modes -- while writing a story that is *kalpa* and not *prakhyat*" (Chanda 5). Chanda mentions Dandin's *Dashakumarcharit* having pioneered the tradition of coexistence between "extremely fantastic" and "totally realistic" elements in a work of fictional orature. Therefore, the Dada chronicles can roughly be labelled as a Twentieth Century iteration of the *Charit* narrative.

Nambi, from RK Narayan's *Under the Banyan Tree* (1941), is the archetypal Indian storyteller. He is the village-enchanter whose personal origins are lost in India's colonial history. Nambi represents the village's index of spiritual nourishment, providing the villagers with words of wisdom and knowledge from distant cultures. He is the village father and tutor, the primeval educator; the villagers perform an act of purification by gathering around Nambi under the banyan tree and partaking in the communion with his tale. The Dada is a thoroughly subverted avatar of Nambi. He bekens the collective idleness of a post-independence Bengali suburb and his version of nourishment is made up of unbridled lies. He attracts similar jobless individuals and with his cock-and-bull stories, provides them with some sort of purpose and a sense of fulfilment. As a digressing raconteur, he is closer to Jerome K Jerome's J from *Three Men in a Boat* (1889) and *Three Men on the Bummel* (1900). But he also flashes elements of the traditional trickster-storyteller found in North American Indian folklore known as the *wisakedjak*, and Anansi, the crafty spider-storyteller from the world of West African romances. While Anansi the spider has chiefly been delineated as a witty smooth-talker, the *wisakedjak* is a complex character type known not only for his trickery, buffoonery, and crude behaviour, but also as a creator, culture-hero, and teacher. The Dada, however, is by and large a more benign customer, as most of his misadventurous myth-making arises out of his sheer ineptitude to do something better.

Another of RK Narayan's protagonists, Iswaran from *Iswaran* (1942) had managed to pass his high-school examination as late as at the tenth attempt. Ashamed at his academic incompetence, Iswaran sought refuge in his world of stories that served as a path of delusive escape from reality into myth. Narayan, through Iswaran, used the strategy of mythopoesis, or myth-making, as it provides an authenticity that recreates the language of the Indian past. But Narayan focussed on the "petrifying effects of myth that continue being visible despite the balancing effects of realism", suggests Fawzia Afzal Khan in *Cultural Imperialism and the Indo-English Novel*, 1993. Iswaran's habit of compulsive myth-making forced the adolescent into stagnation and ultimately led him to his end on a sharply tragic note. The Dada, on the contrary, revels in his 'condition' of endless inactivity. An inherent essence of helplessness is discerned in his existence as well, but it is enveloped by his recitals of rich balderdash.

The core themes of success and failure is similarly examined through Mungerilal and Walter Mitty's inability to live a fulfilling external life, which causes them to retreat to an internal one full of heroic images of conquest and adulation; each of their daydreams stem out of their demanding wives, who exist to primarily assert how pathetic a loser their respective husbands are. The Dada on the other hand, is an unemployed bachelor- an exceptional dimwit, if represented as a highschool student- scorned upon by most family members, and is an overall individual not quite 'respectable', according to the hierarchical standards of society. Ghawna-*da* is an 'experienced' man in various offices of profession but nobody has seen him pursue any 'office' whatsoever. The ostensibly younger Teni-*da* is a whimsical slacker who has flunked the tenth standard for four years on the trot and is, unlike Iswaran, proud of his 'record'. Not being impressive visually either, the Dada is endowed with graphically exaggerated facial features, from his nostrils to his teeth, almost indicative of a lampoon. Ghawna-*da*'s forehead resembles that of a proboscis baboon and Teni-*da* is blessed with a giant nose that snarls like an engine. It is difficult to overlook that the Dada's frame is invariably lanky- we find sufficient paragraphs devoted to poking fun at his gangling anatomy- and his gait is laughably awkward. His voice is a caricaturish hyperbole of the ideal 'manly'

baritone and his speech is a curious mix of ignorant rusticity, wannabe English bombast, laced with intermittent notes of sensibility. He speaks a ridiculous lingo that weaves together a range of language bars; from the then-contemporary Bangla slang to sudden pockets of *shaadhu-Bangla*, from misinformed Sanskrit to inflection-butchered Bengali Hindi, and some outrageously damaged English to even smidgens of broken French and German. The big-mouthed airhead with a heart of gold, the Dada, nevertheless, is the ever dependable, poor man's champion- at times landing himself into unforeseen debacles, and at most other times, gathering beggarly fleeces and spinning the postcolonial yarn on his rickety wheel of fancy.

The language of the Dada narrative germinates, and the characters within the framework of the story interact in the mode of an *adda.* And it is this *adda* that lends the Dada fiction, much of its indigenous profundity. The word *adda* (pronounced "uddah") is translated by the Bengali linguist Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay as "a place" for "careless talk with boon companions" or "the chats of intimate friends" (qtd. in Chakraborty 109). Simplistically, it is the practice of friends getting together for long, informal, and fluid conversations. Adda is often seen as something quintessentially *Bangla*; not to be confused with chit-chat or plain gossip, *adda* is regarded as an indispensable part of the Bengali character or as an integral part of such metaphysical notions as "life" and "vitality" for the Bengalis. The Bengali writer Nripendrakrishna Chattopadhyay observed in the 1970s in praise of the institution: "Bengalis enjoy a tremendous reputation in the world as the people best at practicing *adda*. No other race has been able to build up such an institution as *adda* which stands above all ideas of need or utility" (qtd. in Chakraborty 110).

Now, the Dada, having been born during the mid-Forties and having been continued till the late-Sixties, inadvertently carried on his skinny shoulders, a bagful of trinkets predominantly from the 1943 Bengal Famine. The Dada represented the gradual birth of a lower-middle-class, a section sandwiched somewhere between the upper-middle-class striving to touch the elite, and the hopeless poor at the very rock-bottom. With the advent of a capitalist market-structure rising from the debris of the British Raj, the free nation, in its infancy, was struggling to homogenize factors necessary to uplift the erstwhile Bengali population to the globally dictated social spheres of 'acceptance'. The Bangla-medium bred, unemployed Dada finds himself running after Mukherjee, the distant but attractive Anglicized bait he desperately wants to kiss. Mukhopadhyay, the dated Bengali enunciation is an attire that he has long abandoned and is reluctant to embrace. What he ends up with, is the stuck-in-between identity of Mukhujjey. He runs to his familiar *rowaak* and indulges in instantaneous *adda* with his neighbourhood lads, dishing out phantasmagorical 'accounts' of heroism and basking in the ephemeral sunshine of the same. His tales are his only swords to brandish and violently stir the air of stasis around; the paltry fame of being the leader of his rag-tag gang, is his only medal. Unlike the storyteller and his 'listeners', the *adda* as a form in itself, demolishes all walls of hierarchy. On top of that, adorned with the finest of insults in deliciously distorted English, and an inventive *guru-chawndaali* corpus of colloquial Bangla, coupled with fragments from other language matrices, the Dada turns the canonized, erudite sophistry of the Bengali *bhawdrolok* intelligentsia on its head when he chooses *adda* as his dominant mode of narration. The charmingly bizarre "De la grande` Mephistopheles yak yak" is the 'warcry' that breathes life into the hapless existence of Teni-da and his friends. From single-handedly preventing the outbreak of the Second World War to battling Pakistan, from scoring double centuries in international test-cricket to hanging out with tigers, yetis and mummies, and from nabbing disguised crooks to picnicking on Mars- the Dada fabricates the mundane and prevaricates the commonplace, consistently embellishing the tragicomic absurdity of the unsophisticated urban milieu of Bengal with fantasy and frolic. In his deliberate escape, is his resistance; in his spirited subculture adventures, his triumph. "A rather henpecked, ordinary man spends most of his life daydreaming about being far more extraordinary than he is. However, these daydreams amount to little change in his actual life, for by the end of the story, he remains the exact same quiet, henpecked dreamer. Strangely, this proves to be the one thing that makes him genuinely extraordinary: he does not change…" says Sarah C in *The Secret Moral of Walter Mitty*. Trying to grapple with the experiential void of the Bengali commoner, the Dada waged a similar, continuous battle; his endless *goolpo* were Walter Mitty's dreams put to words. The Dada became that subversive manifestation of the shaman who 'healed' the third-world miseries of postcolonial Bengal through his broad strokes of outlandish fantasy.

As has been mentioned earlier, the Dada has perpetually been designed as a scrawny man-child. Qualifying this trait further, he has specifically been described as this glutton, capable of gobbling up an entire billy. Much of the humour and in quite a few instances, the core crisis around which the story has shaped up, has happened to be a cake or a roasted chicken or even a sack of mangoes! Teni-da is feared by his team-mates for being a habitual 'snack-snatcher' with a gargantuan appetite and a slap-happy pair of hands. The fact that food, and mostly simple variants of it, serve as the basis of much of the banter, and

frequently fuel the comedic madness, unleashes the tragic reality of hunger in a Bengal ravaged by a (British) State-sponsored famine. So, even the slightest bit of a fancy food-item that climbs an inch above the barest of the bare minimum plays the potential catalyst for elaborate mayhem. Therefore, it is understandable that the very crux of the Dada, replete with the rest of his nuances, turns completely indecipherable to the West. The Dada in his gawky posture, stands miles apart from any Western storyteller.

In the Bengali Dada's world, there are characters from the Eastern side of Bengal who speak in a thick accent; Habul Sen, at the very onset is described as a *Dhhakayi Bangaal* (one hailing from Dhaka, the capital of present-day Bangladesh). The sickly spleaned Pyala suffers from jaundice (*pala-jwor* in Bangla and hence his name) and thrives on *pawtol diye shingee maachh-er jhol* (cuttlefish curry with pointed-gourds). Kyabla (the colloquial Bangla word *kyabla* refers to a dork) is ironically, the brightest of the lot. Ghawna-*da*'s and Teni-*da*'s real names are Ghawnoshyam and Bhawjohori, respectively- names coined on the purposeful reference to Hindu deities so that the very outdatedness of it stands out and by virtue of it, a chuckle is invoked. *"Gawrr-er maathh'ey gora thhengiye bishwo-bikkhyato amader Teni-da"* has been translated by Aparna Chaudhuri into: "Our Teni-*da* is globally renowned for having thrashed a blonde in a popular playground (Chaudhuri 3)." Replacing *gora* with 'blonde' takes away all the racist jibe in it (which Gangopadhyaya had probably relished including) and 'thrashed', by a huge margin, misses the sadistic id of the colonized slave, implanted in the word '*thhengiye'.* And of course, *gawrr-er maathh* is nowhere to be found in "popular playground". So it's incontestable that the Dada fiction is too thickly drenched in its culture of origin, linguistically and thematically, to be comprehended by the West. Numerous attempts at translating Teni-*da* and Ghawna-*da* have thus failed and subsequently, have proven the fixity of the Dada firmly to the roots of a bygone Bengal.

Over the years, there has been an incursion of other Dada-figures as well; namely Bimal Kar's Tunu-*da*, Moti Nandy's Noni-*da*, Ahibhushan Mullick's Noley-*da* and Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay's Pindi-*da*, and they didn't in the least, receive limited readership. But again, they remained assembly line B-listers and were eclipsed under the enormous shadows of the two pioneer Dadas. Syed Mujtaba Ali's Chacha and Satyajit Ray's Taarini-khurro were two senior 'uncle-storytellers' who enjoyed widespread acclaim but since Chacha was a globetrotter having most of his *adda*s abroad, and Taarini-khurro was a professional appointed to babysit unruly children in a living room, they have intentionally been left out of the paper. That apart, the Dada has remained a unique model of defiance in the sphere of popular Bangla literature, weaving an alternate verisimilitude of personal myths that have leapt beyond the grubby bylanes of North Calcutta and have earned him a cult following. Even though it has been more than three decades that his relevance has been steadily diminishing, the Dada, by the dint of his ignis-fatuus of stories, continues compelling believers to cheer "De la grande` Mephistopheles, yak yak!"

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