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## **Using Poems of Jibananda Das and Rabindranath Tagore in the Language Classrooms of Bangladesh**

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**Rabindranath Tagore**



**Jibananda Das**

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## **Abstract**

This paper underscores how the use of literature in a language classroom makes language learning easier and more entertaining. It focuses on the implications of using English literature for teaching English language and explores its advantages as well as challenges that both the language teacher and learners may come across. The paper specially shows how the areas of language learning can benefit when a literary text is used in a language classroom.

For classroom practice two English translated poems from Bengali origin are selected as texts for teaching the first-year university students English. The paper finally illustrates how a culturally common text that the learners already know in their mother tongue can enhance their linguistic skills mainly at a tertiary level.

## **Introduction**

First, we will focus on how literature can be mingled with language in the language classes in order to make the language acquisition easy in Bangladeshi context. The best way to aid the students in learning a language is to provide them with materials that they find enjoyable. Nothing can be more interesting than literary materials, which have stories and characters that the students can relate to their lives. In fact, “a good choice would be any text that encourages or invites interaction with the world of ideas, a text that ‘affirms, confirms, and expands the indispensable human capacity to read the real world.’” (McRae, 1991:126 in Ainy, 2008).

However, it is always noticed that anything related to literature seems very difficult to language learners. Literature or anything that surrounds it, works as a fear factor for them; nevertheless, it is only literature through which they can improve their vocabulary, and most importantly they can acquire an analytical power that most of them immensely lack. Once the learners start finding literary material used in language classes interesting, only then their analytical power in the English language

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will improve largely. Moreover, their vocabulary and pronunciation skills will further develop as the language of literary material is essentially context-oriented, comprehensive, authentic and real-life like apart from being figurative or ornamental.

According to Krashen (1987), “[t]he best methods are therefore those that supply ‘comprehensible input’ in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear.” In other words, students learn best when the material that is used is interesting and when they can exploit the material to improve their language further in terms of vocabulary, pronunciations and grammar.

The language learners as well the teachers, to some extent, find literary texts difficult; therefore, this paper use two poems by the poets that the students of this region are familiar with from their childhood. One of the prerequisites for learning language is students’ active and creative use of the language with their analytical ability. Krashen (1985,1993,1999) states, “the language experience needs to be contextualized and comprehensible” and the learners needs to be “motivated, relaxed, positive and engaged.”(Arnold 1999; Tomlinson in Abraham, 2010).

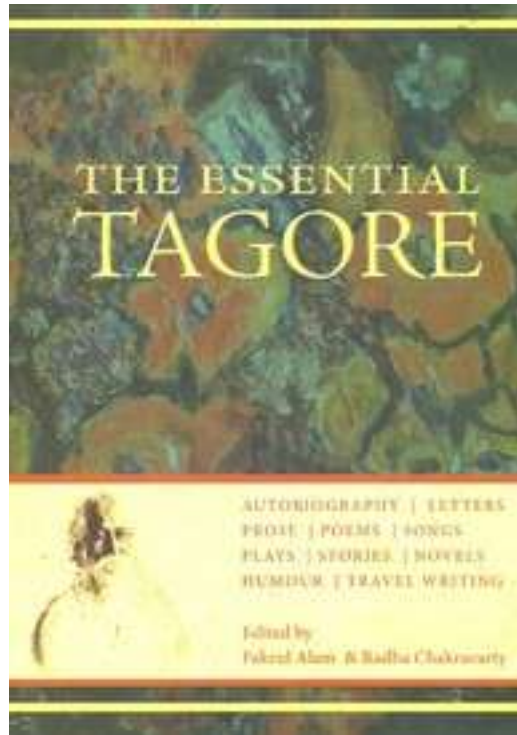
### **Poems under Study**

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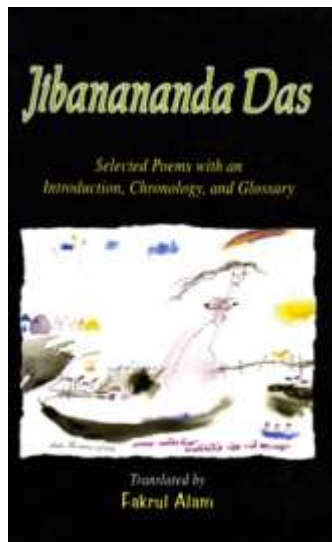
The paper uses the English translated poems of two great Bengali poets of all time - one by the Nobel laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore and another by the first modern Bengali poet Jibanananda Das. The reason for choosing the works of these two poets is that the students of Bangladesh have already heard of these two poets from their childhood and are familiar with their works.

The two poems that are chosen as texts are “Krishnakali” (see Appendix-1) by Rabindranath Tagore and “Banalata Sen” (see Appendix-2) by Jibanananda Das. Banalata Sen in “Banalata Sen” is an imaginary character who is supposed to belong to Natore, a district in Bangladesh, and the character is so known to people of all ages in Bangladesh that many people still think Ms. Banalata actually exists in real life and one can meet her, once in Natore. It has become such a trend that if asked what Natore is famous for, people would readily add one name Banalata Sen. The poem “Krishnakali” is also very famous amongst the students of our subcontinent.

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According to Turker (1991: 304), “[t]he successes, of course, in using literature greatly depends on the selection of texts which will not be difficult on either linguistic or conceptual level.” Therefore, the language teacher should choose the text carefully, considering grammatical, linguistic and literary difficulties. Besides, literary texts should include the structures and vocabulary previously learned by the learners. (Turker, 1991: 304).

Krashen (1987), however, states in his Input Hypothesis that the materials that lead to real learning are those, which are a bit above the level of students. According to his Input Hypothesis, “if a learner is at a stage ‘I’, then acquisition takes place when he/she is exposed to ‘Comprehensible Input’ that belongs to level ‘i + 1’. Since not all of the learners can be at the same level of linguistic competence at the same time, Krashen suggests that natural communicative input is the key to designing a syllabus, ensuring in this way that each learner will receive some ‘i + 1’ input that is appropriate for his/her current stage of linguistic competence.” (in Schütz, 2007).

### **Kinds of Materials for Better Language Power**

As the students find literary texts more challenging it will be better to use these kinds of materials to improve their standard. Moreover, for the overall boost in the language Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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power, the students have to improve their reading skills, which today's students are reluctant to work on. So if a piece of poetry is used in the classroom as material for grammar and vocabulary, they will be tempted to read it.

Nevertheless, it has to be kept in mind that the materials cannot be too easy or too difficult. Therefore, the paper focuses on using poems in the EFL classrooms so that the i+1 theory works accordingly as poetry is considered "higher" form of literature and the select poems here are authentic, too as the students can easily relate the themes, places and symbols used in the poems to their cultures.

Because learners would learn a word better once it is in a context, the literary materials are said to be more effective. The words in the context would trigger their analytical ability to help them understand where they can apply those words acquired from the poems. The students need to be motivated to learn English as a second language, not a foreign language, for, the moment they start taking English as a foreign language, they are happy with comprehensive outputs only without paying much attention to the form of the language.

### **Teaching Language through Literature: Clarifying Concepts**

The paper needs documents relevant to the research findings, so here we refer to the documented findings of Ainy (2008), Abraham (2010), and Llach (2007) as secondary sources. Their findings can be summarized in the following manner:

Literature gives the language learners numerous amounts of chances to become critical users of language and they can make use of their shared experience that can stimulate further discussions in the classroom among their peers and the teacher, making the class very interactive.

Turker (1991: 303) argues, "a literary piece is not an end in itself but the means of beginning a creative process in the minds and emotions of the student. If we let the

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student place himself in that particular literary world and atmosphere, he can relate to the socio-psychological context.” He further elaborates that literature can motivate many students to read in English. Literature illustrates language use in contexts and introduces cultural assumptions.

In Moody’s (1971:7) opinion literature also helps in improving students’ listening skills. The various topics in literature encourage students to participate in the discussion that in turn improve their oral productions. Often literary pieces are read aloud by the teachers or the teacher uses record or tape to better explain the rhythm that improves the students’ listening skills (in Abraham, 2010).

Obediat (1997:32) holds that literature allows students to achieve native like competence in English as they can express their ideas in English, learn how linguistics forms are used, and learn various expressions needed for actual communications. (in Abraham, 2007).

In short, literary texts help not only to improve reading but listening, speaking and writing skills, as well. They help to realize the individual and societal developments and make the readers improve themselves culturally and educationally in accordance with their emotional features. They also remove mother tongue interferences, making the students acquire analyzing and criticizing skills. (Turker, 1991:304)

### **Poetic Language**

The pieces of poetry chosen here to use in the language classroom have unique poetic quality, which, if explored, gives immense satisfaction in the minds of the learners. Our aim is to present the text to the students so that it helps them become “language users”, rather giving them knowledge on the language (Van Lier, 1995:5 in Ainy, 2008). Poetry uses varied syntax, shows different uses of lexis, mixes registers and invents innovative punctuations (Ainy, 2008). Ainy adds that the argument that poetry breaks the conventional “rules” can itself be an opener to further possibilities as it

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provides the readers with language in a novel and fresh way. The existence of unconventional use of grammatical rules in poetry can be exploited by giving the students tasks to identify them and compare the more conventional forms of grammatical rules with the unconventional ones, which would thus facilitate them to have a better insight into the text (Ainy, 2008).

Collie and Slater (1989) observe literature as authentic materials that deal with the universal appeals and promote personal involvement. They further point out that the imageries of poems enable the learners to understand the lexis and written structures more than the straightforward writing forms. Poems often explore the themes of universal concern and incorporate personal experience, thus initiate a strong response from the readers. If the learners are given enough aid with linguistic resources they can be expected to enjoy a lot in interpreting the meaning as they will create their own meaning (in Ainy, 2008).

Widdowson (1989) states that poetry has poetic qualities, which help the learners use the language. He further argues that in the interpretation of poetry, there is a correlation between understanding the forms and recognition of a communicative effect (in Ainy 2008). Moreover, Maley and Duff (1989) argue that though poetry has not been regarded as ‘proper’ material for foreign language learning, the rhythm that has been tasted by us since childhood continues to echo in the deep of our heart.

### **Reading Poetry and Language Learning**

Poetry can inculcate more comprehensive inputs in the language learners than other forms of reading comprehensions can do. Maley and Duff (1989:7) suggest:

Poetry offers a rich resource for input to language learning. As such it is at least as relevant as the more commonly accepted types of input (e.g. contrived dialogues, isolated texts for reading comprehension, simulations, etc.). So, it should be given at least equal weight. (in Ainy, 2008)

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We know that reading is the raw material that triggers students' analytical ability and helps them improve spoken English, and poetry is a literary device that invokes or motivates further reading. Especially, poetry can lead to a desirable creative expression in the foreign language and usually provoke a strong response from the readers that motivate them to read further (Grellet, 1981:4-5 in Llach, 2007).

### **A Brief Glance at the Present ELT Scenario in Bangladesh**

Our students already know the rules of grammar but they do not know how to apply them in writing or speaking. All they do in the classes is to blindly memorize grammatical rules with an inductive reasoning. They do not get the opportunity to use grammatical rules in either written form or spoken form. In case of writing, no real writing takes place in the classrooms of the schools and colleges in Bangladesh. Whatever they write, they write out of their memorized or mugged up abilities. As the learners have very little scope to get involved in spoken activity, no question of using the grammatical rules comes while they speak. After 12 years of schooling when they step over to university level and have to use English as a medium of education, they find it difficult to cope with.

Hasan (2004), after reviewing English curriculum, English teaching materials, ELT classroom strategies, testing scheme and evaluation policy of ELT mainly at secondary level in Bangladesh, concludes that the overall ELT practice is alarmingly inadequate to ensure a sound environment of English language teaching and learning. The implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) introduced rather abruptly without proper planning and providing sufficient training to the ELT teachers at primary, secondary or higher secondary levels is deemed a failure in most cases in Bangladeshi context. Hasan (2004) states—“As deficiencies were found at all levels of development, students failed to achieve expected levels of proficiency.”

### **A Recent Proposal**

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In a recent article (18 August 2012) Fakrul Alam, a member of Education Policy Implementation Committee constituted recently by the Government of Bangladesh, expresses his deep concerns about the downfall of English language learning and teaching and poor English skills of school and college graduates in Bangladesh. The graduates schools and colleges in Bangladesh produced through CLT, are, in his words, “supposedly equipped with English language “communicative” skills propagated through the “teaching” of English for Today, the textbook created by ELT “experts” mostly created and promoted by the British Council/DFID scheme, . . .” (Alam, 2012).

Alam (2012) proposes that English be announced officially as the second language of the country, and suggests that along with Bengali “English be cultivated assiduously at all levels of education as the second language.” He emphasizes the necessity of getting rid of “the bunkum of so-called “Communicative English” and reject all short-term, quick-fix solutions to teach the language”, for in Bangladeshi context through CLT “the skeleton of the language was being taught to . . . [the students] by their trainers and that too through rote learning in most places.” He proposes to “go back to traditional ways of teaching that had worked well in our part of the world for generations and that is still working well in our neighboring country, incorporating, of course, the best of ELT pedagogy that prescribes drills and teaching methodology appropriate for large classrooms.”

In this paper we would echo with him that “more reading, more writing, more grammar and translation work and an attempt to make classrooms participatory must be the solutions to our English woes.” In this regard we can also refer to Hasan’s research and findings (2004) with respect to the contents of English language textbooks—

- a. Textbook content should be authentic.
- b. It should include original and retold work of creative writers.
- c. Lessons should be lively.

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- d. Language should be presented as discourse. Opportunities should be provided for oral interaction. There should be sufficient scope of practising listening skills

### **Lessons from Our Experience**

From our experience of teaching Bangladeshi students English at university level, we can assume that students like materials that are “authentic”, “lucid” and “enjoyable.” They get very bored and disconnected if the materials for teaching language are out of context and monotonous. However, most materials used in the language classes are out of context, thus the learners fail to relate them to their own experience and culture. In the context of language learning and teaching culture plays a crucial role as Powell and Andersen (1994: 322) state, “culture provides us with a heritage and a set of expectations about educational settings.”

Though many scholars of Bangladesh have already rightly identified that literature, most importantly “poetry” can play an essential role in eliciting responses from the learners as there is a vast scope in elaborating the themes of the poems, the poems that they generally use in their findings are all western and none are based on the culture and tradition of this particular South Asian Subcontinent.

### **Using Poems in the Language Classes of Bangladesh**

The poems “Krishnakali” and “Banalata Sen” chosen as materials are well-known to the language learners of Bangladesh. The learners are already aware of the themes prevalent in “Krishnakali” and “Banalata Sen” and that could be the focal point of interest for them to notice how the writers play with the lexis and meanings in the English translations, the Bengali origins of which are already known to them.

However, the assumption that the students would like the English translated poems that are already available in Bengali was just a hypothesis. In order to substantiate and

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authenticate the assumption the paper puts together short findings on the students' reaction to using English translated poems in language classes as a source of materials for English language learning to take place.

### **Preparation for the Experiment**

Before doing the short experiment the class was divided into small groups based on the levels of students and it was made sure that every group had equal level of students. Two classes were allocated each containing 100 minutes to divide all the four skills of language— listening, reading, writing and speaking each for 25 minutes.

### **Methodology**

At first the teacher gives the students the Bengali copies of the poem “Banalata Sen” and asks them to have a glance at it, and takes away the poems and tells them that they are now going to go through the poem in English. The teacher then reads the poem aloud for the class and asks the students to recite the poem after the teacher. So the teacher says a line and the students in chorus repeat with the teacher. The teacher then randomly picks some students to appear in front of the class and recite the poem. The teacher then gives the second poem “Krishnakali” and follows the same technique as followed in the context of the previous poem. This drilling process goes on for 30 minutes and the teacher moves on to focus on the writing skills of the students.

The teacher then asks the groups divided earlier to discuss the similarities and dissimilarities between the two poems and write the points. The teacher also provides them with some short questions, which they are to answer in groups. The questions are as follows:

1. What are the themes of the poems?
2. How is “Banalata Sen” different from that of “Krishnakali”?
3. What are the imageries that the poets use to compare the two characters?

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4. Which poem do you like more and why?
5. How do the poets play with the lexis?
6. How do you see the use of punctuations in the two poems?
7. What are some new vocabularies that you come across in the poem?
8. Can you make one sentence with each of the newly learnt vocabularies?
9. What are the different grammatical elements used in the two poems?

After the groups finish their work, the teacher then asks the group members to answer the questions set previously by the teacher and corrects the answers. At the end of the class the teacher informs the students that the next class would be based on spoken English in which the groups would either debate on the “racial issues” traced in the poem “Krishnakali” (as it is about an adorable “dark” girl) or how beauty is “perceived” by the society.

### **Topic for Discussions**

The racial issues are not forgone and forgotten, rather rampant worldwide and the learners of this subcontinent seem to be aware of the discriminations enacted by the issues of race, color, gender and so on. In Bangladesh, most discrimination towards girls occurs due to predetermined notions of race and color. Furthermore, one should not ignore other aspects of racism. In today’s world, it is not merely associated to skin colors; rather it has spread its wings over all forms of discriminations devised on the basis of color, age, gender, religion, and education.

It is especially an appropriate topic for Bangladeshi EFL learners since two modes or mediums of education exist in Bangladesh—one in the native language (Bengali) and another in English. Moreover, in a developing country like Bangladesh students come to tertiary level from all strata of society. The students who come from villages or Bengali Medium background are by and large discriminated. Therefore, this is a topic that students can easily identify with. They can take this topic and make presentations, do debates etc. which will give them plenty of practice in spoken English.

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Another topic for discussion would be the theme of ‘love’ in both “Banalata Sen” and “Krishnakali”. The theme of love can be extended to discussing students’ personal story of “love” etc.

## **Findings**

After the methodology was applied in the class, the reaction of the students was noted down. They were asked few questions (see Appendix-3) based on the classes in which two poems were used as materials and invited to express their opinion on them. Most of the students’ reaction was positive, which is categorized and summarized below:

### ***Childhood***

Most of the students said they liked both the poems because they had heard of these two poems in Bengali from their childhood and they could have revisited and reminisced about their long lost childhood days. “I got a feelings of nostalgia”, said a student. Also the imageries in the poems are very much closer to the soil, especially in “Krishnakali” where the setting is “village”, so words like ‘huts’, ‘cows’, ‘rice plants’ “are all images that we had in our minds when we were children”, said another student.

### ***Personal Experience***

“I loved the personal touch of the poet that is found in “Krishnakali”, said a student. “I think Krishnakali in the poem is so much known to the poet, she is the poet’s eternal lover and I can imagine Krishnakali as my own lover”, added the student. “I can literally see Banalata Sen in front of my own eyes”, said another student.

### ***Prestige Issue***

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Since the students have known the poems “Banalata Sen” and “Krishnakali” from their childhood in Bengali, finding the poems in English gives them a sense of prestige and confidence, for they can now share their ideas in English amongst friends. “I was so excited to know some new vocabularies in English that I knew in Bengali.” “Dark gazelle eyes”, “cloud-laden day”, “braided hair”, “dumb delight”, “bird’s nest like”, and “ship-wrecked mariner” are the words that I was excited to know in English and I am looking forward to sharing these with my friends” the students added.’

### **Pedagogic Implications**

No matter how interesting the use of poetry may be in the EFL class, the pedagogic implication of it is problematic. The students cannot be taught academic English through poetry. Academic English needs to be taught to the students in a formal way. Poetry can be used only in few classes to remove the boredom of the students and to make the language learning enjoyable. It will also help to trigger the students’ language learning device as it works as a good input. However, poetry cannot be used always to teach the other formal aspects of the English language.

### **Conclusion**

We are not here proposing or opposing any ELT methods such as Grammar Translation Method (GTM) or CLT for teaching English to Bangladeshi language learners. We posit that a language classroom would be more interacting and interesting if we could use authentic and contextualized materials. Our teachers would do their best to select and use materials, not culturally alienating or shocking, in the classroom where the learners would keep their anxiety level normal and not be engaged in rote learning. We would like to repeat with Oka (2004) that “some of the so-called “universal” aspects in ELT are not compatible with the Asian context, for linguistic but also cultural and historical reasons.” Therefore, we have to devise and

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revise our materials while teaching Bangladeshi learners English, applying eclectic methods at our discretion. We are well aware that selecting and using literary texts for language teaching is not an easy job to accomplish. However, if selected sensibly and used pragmatically, considering linguistic, cultural and pedagogical implications, it would be a great experience in the context of language learning and teaching for both the learners and the teachers.

To conclude we can state that using poems in the language class can be entertaining and engaging if the learners find interest in the texts and are able to relate them to their personal experience, cultural orientations, and social backgrounds. In fact, a culturally common text that has literary qualities and that the learners are familiar with in their mother tongue can enhance their linguistic skills.

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## Appendix-1

### **Krishnakali**

—**Rabindranath Tagore**

I CALL HER MY Krishna flower  
though they call her dark in the village.  
I remember a cloud-laden day  
and a glance from her eyes,  
her veil trailing down at her feet  
her braided hair loose on her back.  
Ah, you call her dark; let that be,  
her black gazelle eyes I have seen.  
Her cows were lowing in the meadow,  
when the fading light grew grey.  
With hurried steps she came out  
from her hut near the bamboo grove.  
She raised her quick eyes to the sky,  
where the clouds were heavy with rain.  
Ah, you call her dark! let that be,  
her black gazelle eyes I have seen.  
The East wind in fitful gusts  
ruffled the young shoots of rice.  
I stood at the boundary hedge  
with none else in the lonely land.  
If she espied me in secret or not  
She only knows and know 1.  
Ah, you call her dark! let that be,  
her black gazelle eyes I have seen.

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She is the surprise of cloud  
in the burning heart of May,  
a tender shadow on the forest  
in the stillness of sunset hour,  
a mystery of dumb delight  
in the rain-loud night of June.  
Ah, you call her dark! let that be,  
her black gazelle eyes I have seen.  
I call her my Krishna flower,  
let all others say what they like.  
In the rice-field of Maina village  
I felt the first glance of her eyes.  
She had not a veil on her face,  
not a moment of leisure for shyness.  
Ah, you call her dark! let that be,  
her black gazelle eyes I have seen.

(Translated from Bengali into English by the poet himself)

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## Appendix-2

**Banalata Sen**

—**Jibanananda Das**

For a thousand years I have walked the ways of the world,  
From Sinhala's Sea to Malaya's in night's darkness,  
Far did I roam. In Vimbisar and Ashok's ash-grey world  
Was I present; farther off, in distant Vidarba city's darkness,  
I, a tired soul, around me, life's turbulent, foaming ocean,  
Finally found some bliss with Natore's Banalata Sen.

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Her hair was full of the darkness of a distant Vidisha night,  
Her face was filigreed with Sravasti's artwork. As in a far-off sea,  
The ship-wrecked mariner, lonely, and no relief in sight,  
Sees in a cinnamon isle sings of a lush grass-green valley,  
Did I see her in darkness; said she, "Where had you been?"  
Raising her eyes, so bird's nest like, Natore's Banalata Sen.

At the end of the day, with the soft sound of dew,  
Night falls; the kite wipes the sun's smells from its wings;  
The world's colors fade; fireflies light up the world anew;  
Time to wrap up work and get set for the telling of tales;  
All birds home — rivers too — life's mart close again;  
What remains is darkness and facing me — Banalata Sen!

(Translated from Bengali into English by Fakrul Alam)

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### **Appendix-3**

#### **Interview Questions:**

1. Which poem did you like more out of the two?
2. Give reasons for your choice
3. Did you like the idea of using poetry in language classrooms?
4. Do you think it is helpful to use poetry in language classes?

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5. Did you like the methodology of using poems in the classrooms?
6. Who do you like more— Banalata or Krishnakali?
7. Comment on the use of lexis.

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