

sayantika mandal

MOTHER TONGUE

I AM WRITING A BOOK THAT MY MOTHER WILL NEVER READ.

When it gets published, she will trace her fingers along my name. She will flip through the pages and beam. She will boast about it to neighbors and distant relatives when she meets them at tuberose-scented Bengali weddings. But she will never read it, because the language in which it is going to be, the same language that she ensured I master, is one she does not speak. I am writing my novel in English.

On a hot day in March 1992, my mother held my hand as I entered the classroom for my admission test to an English-medium school in my neighborhood. I was four, wearing a white pinafore with red and green polka dots, about to be interviewed by three ladies positioned around a table on which sat a jar of candies. I looked at the ladies with wonder.

They asked me to come in and sit on a blue chair. My mother loosened her hand from my palm and left the room. Something drew me towards the ladies; they were pretty and neat in their carefully pleated saris, their foreheads adorned with bindis matching the color of the fabric. Their lips were immaculately outlined in red lipstick, and their hairs were tied in tidy buns without a single flyaway. They were so unlike my mother.

They asked me questions in basic English that my parents had made me rote learn the last few days. What is your name? What is your father's name? What is your mother's name? What is the color of the door? What comes between nine and eleven? When it was over, I thanked them in English and took the four candies that one of them scooped out from the jar. They asked me to leave, but I didn't until my mother came to call me. I was mesmerized watching these ladies, like a wandering devotee who had stumbled upon a newfound faith.

My mother was a teacher, too. She taught at a government-aided high school in a village miles away from our town. The school stood along a red dust road,

stripped down the middle by potholed asphalt. Elephants were often sighted in the surrounding forests of broad-leaved sal trees. She taught biology to girls, many of whom would soon drop out of school. She woke early in the morning, showered, and ate a rustled-up meal of rice, lentils and fish curry, checking her watch every few minutes. When it was 8:30 am, she draped a sari around herself, combed her wet hair and braided it, or, when pressed for time, made a little bun, grabbed her bag and an umbrella, and rushed out of the house to catch the only bus that went to that village. She never had time for makeup. And here were these ladies so prim and proper. Also, they spoke English.

It was my mother who insisted that I go to an English-medium school. Her aspiration was no different than the average middle-class parent of the nineties, when India had just begun to embrace neoliberal policies and globalization was beginning to trickle in. She did not want me to harbor the insecurities she had about not being fluent in English in an Anglo-centric world. Despite her basic English skills, she went through college and teacher training, and her sheer determination to be independent enabled her to get a job in a Bengali-medium government school. And yet, her innate confidence, fully on display when she is reciting long Bengali poems or rebuking someone for smoking on a bus, crumbles when she is told to answer in English by a visa officer. She did not want me to suffer the same ignominy.

The colonizer's language, however, was a double-edged sword. As I learned to prattle nursery rhymes about children with chubby cheeks and rosy lips and blue eyes, my ego was engorged with the fact that I knew English — the idea that I was better than my mother. My school added to this feeling of superiority. I marveled at things my teachers knew but my mother had never imagined before, like writing in cursive or pasting pictures of flowers on scrapbooks. Soon, I came to believe that my teachers knew about the world much more than my mother. I began to look up to my teachers as goddesses and dismiss my mother. Once, when I performed dismally in my half-yearly exams and my mother wanted to check on my studies, I replied to her with gall that befits a six-year-old, "How can you teach me? You teach in a Bengali-medium school."

My mother lost no time deflating my pride. She was annoyed with the fuss my teachers made, especially over kindergarten kids. We were told to bring scrapbooks,

charts, stickers, or a specific pencil at a day or two's notice — things that were rarely available in our local small-town market but that we were punished for neglecting to bring. She often had to run to the markets at ungodly hours to get me supplies. She felt that in government schools, students and teachers wrestled with real issues, and in my school, we made a fuss about trivial stuff. My teachers had a set of privileged middle-class urban students whose parents could buy supplies at the drop of a hat. She and her colleagues often spent their own money to buy textbooks for students; their concerns were about clean toilets in the school and how to deal with parents who wanted to fudge their daughters' birthdates on school-leaving certificates to show that they had attained adulthood and could be married off. It irked my mother all the more to see that I appreciated my teachers more than her, to see that I looked up to them as all-knowing divinities.

She set out to show me that she could, in fact, teach me, even if she didn't know English well. She made me sit with my books and practice spellings: names of five flowers, five animals, five vegetables. She told me how to remember the spelling of "onion": two "on"s with an "i" in between. I remember writing "on" and "on" and putting the "i" in the middle on my exam sheet. I never forgot how my comment angered her. She felt judged in the public realm for not knowing English, and now her own child judged her too.

As a child, I wanted a stay-at-home mom. Few women in our town worked; most of them gave up their jobs after childbirth. My father, a doctor, had night shifts in the hospital and spent every Saturday to Monday attending to patients in our ancestral village, and I hardly questioned his absence. But when Maa left for work on days I did not go to school, I cried, clutching her sari with my tiny fists, refusing to let go. Many times she sneaked out from the back door while I was distracted, playing.

But when her tricks failed, I accompanied Maa to her school. The bus took us to a spot in the middle of the forest where there was nothing but a tea-stall. A narrow road from there led to the school. It was about five miles from the main road, and there was no means of transport. The road had huge potholes which brimmed with muddy water during monsoons, and Maa often came home with her cotton saris splayed in mud. If she was lucky, she hired a rickshaw. If she wasn't, she walked. Sometimes, she hitchhiked on trucks and manually pulled cycle carts, called "vans"

by the locals, along with her colleagues. It was a party, all those teachers, middle-class small-town Bengali women clad in saris, vanity bags dangling from their shoulders, climbing on trucks, most of them having surmounted enormous societal pressures to work in this remote place. The truck drivers, regarded from the typical middle-class perspective as “uneducated” men who drank and slept at brothels, helped these women on to their trucks, stretching their sweaty arms out to hold their banged hands, warning them to look out for their saris getting stuck on a nail jutting out. For that five-mile stretch, the teachers and the drivers chatted and laughed together, people from two very different worlds who would not have met in any other circumstance.

The girls in Maa’s school loved me. Whatever I wanted — little-known flowers, freshly plucked guavas, golden and red beetles in a matchbox — I merely had to name it and there it was. With their oily hair and white and blue ribbons, they competed over who got to cuddle me, who got to take me on a bicycle ride. I sat with them on the worn wooden benches of their classroom, drawing village scenes or writing the *ABCs* while Maa taught them photosynthesis. I called each of them *didi* or *elder sister*. I grew fond of one especially, and she often sat me on the front of her bicycle and took me to her house during the lunch break, where her mother gave me sweets and guavas. This freedom was unimaginable in my school, where students remained in the campus enclosed by barbed wires until the last bell rang.

Many girls in Maa’s school cycled across forests and rivers to come to school; during monsoon, they came to the staff room with pleading eyes, asking for permission to leave before the last two classes. “We won’t be able to cross the river,” they would say. Most of them were married off as soon as they passed tenth grade. Some dropped out before. The daring ones eloped with their boyfriends. Maa was often taken by surprise to see the same girls, once dressed in blue and white uniforms, now in saris and bangles, the parting of their hair smeared with vermilion, the mark of married Bengali Hindu women, holding toddlers on the bus.

Only a handful would go on to pursue college, but quite a few would become schoolteachers and nurses. It makes my mother especially proud to see her former students out of their homes, working. When she heard that one of her students was moving to the US to pursue a doctorate in chemistry and become a researcher, I could see her joy — the joy of being part of the chain of opportunities that allowed

a girl to reach the heights of education. My mother often held up that student as an example to aspire to.

In my Christian missionary English-medium school, discipline was the word. The day began and ended with the Lord's Prayer, something we didn't learn to pronounce correctly for the first two years. I repeated "power and glory" as "power and lorry," wondering if the Father in the heaven drove one. Our navy blue skirts had to be exactly knee-length, and the boys had to wear shorts even in winter. Our white shirts had to be starched and ironed, our shoes polished black, our hairs tied in black or white ribbons or held with black bobby pins, and our nails clipped in perfect half-moons. When we failed to meet these expectations, we were made to kneel for the entire length of the class or smacked on our palms with a wooden ruler. We were told we go to a good school, unlike the students at the local government school, whom we often saw loitering in the streets before school was over. Because they also wore white and navy blue uniforms, our school introduced striped neckties and belts to distinguish us from them.

As soon as we were in first grade, we were forced to speak English in every class except the vernacular language class, where we learned Bangla and Hindi. We communicated in broken sentences peppered with Bangla words we did not know how to translate. We spoke in pidgin "Benglish" with ethnically Bengali teachers and fellow students, most of whom who spoke Bangla at home. We feared our strict English teacher, who somehow caught us every time we uttered a Bangla sentence. "Your curry is very *jhaal*," a friend of mine said as she tasted the potato curry another girl had brought for lunch. *Jhaal* means spicy, but "spicy" was absent from our lexicon because in our Enid Blyton books, children ate apple tarts and scones. I used to dream of those foods only to realize, years later, how bland they were.

Blyton's characters were not just eating exotic foods; they were living dream lives around islands and lighthouses, moors and caves, lush countryside and haunted castles. All the characters in our school library books were from Britain. Everything that we loved in our pre-teen years stemmed from there, be it cricket or adventure story books. That was the life we yearned for, not the one we lived in our dusty industrial town riddled with school and homework, and code-switching between two languages.

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Our knowledge of English made us feel superior. We didn't realize this superiority complex went back more than a century. In 1835, Thomas Babington Macauley published his infamous "Minute on Education," which denied the validity of Indian languages in favor of English. Thus was dismissed a millennia-old literary history — the love poetry written by Bengali Vaishnav poets centuries before Shakespeare, the oral traditions of folklore, the rhythms and meter of long epics handed down across generations. In one stroke, a

thriving language was reduced to the babble of savages who burnt their widows on funeral pyres.

With Macauley's "Minute," White men in India discarded their Eastern attire and their penchant for Farsi, the court language of the subcontinent, and began to "educate" Indians to be obedient clerks — to be men who were brown in skin but white in taste, who would not flinch to call their own culture and language inferior. Bengal became a fertile ground for that new class of Indians, called "bhadralok" or gentry. Now, after almost two hundred years of colonization, we Bengalis are born into that tradition of shame — the shame that affected my mother, the shame that makes many Bengalis take pride in the fact that their children are weak in their mother tongue, even more than seventy-five years after the official end of colonization.

But my mother also grew up in turbulent times post-independence, when the other erstwhile part of Bengal, now Bangladesh, was fighting for their language, and, eventually, their freedom. Her shame about not knowing English didn't preclude her from taking pride in her own language, and she has never believed her students to be inferior for speaking only their mother tongue. I, in turn, was not allowed to bask in the glory of English alone. She rigorously made me read and write Bangla. Our bookshelves were filled with Bangla books, and she subscribed to a Bangla children's

magazine. When I showed my fascination with all things English, she showed me a film based on the life of the nineteenth-century Bengali writer Michael Madhusudan Dutta. Determined to be an English poet, Dutta converted to Christianity and moved to Europe, but he failed to gain acclaim. Later, he returned to Bengal and wrote a trailblazing series of epic poems in Bengali, marking the dawn of a new era in Bengal's literary history. In one of his sonnets, Dutta expresses regret for his neglect of his mother tongue. My mother read out this poem often. A pride in my own language began to root within me.

The cadences of Dutta's poem express a deep longing, one that is echoed in poems I hear today by immigrant writers, African American writers, and Indigenous writers who express loss of a language. The pain of not having words, the unbearable trauma of stolen ways of expression. And yet, I see Bengalis choosing not to learn Bangla these days, because it is not needed. I see Bengali immigrants in the US talking to their children in English, and I wonder if we are on the verge of losing something precious by sheer neglect.

As I grew up, I saw many of my classmates fumble over Bangla sentences and complain about how difficult the language was. But I felt at ease reading Bangla and was fascinated to study its literary history in the final years of school. A regional language is a doorway, and this one opened me to not only the rich literature of Bengal, but also a cornucopia of cultural references, of proverbs, idioms, and riddles, of connections forged with lives other than my own. When my father read out to me from *Pather Panchali* by Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, I was collecting mangoes and braving hailstorms in palm-shaded riverine villages, a space no less adventurous than Blyton's world of moors and islands. I began to read both English and Bangla in tandem, slipping in and out of tongues without even thinking twice about it. My mother made me understand in those early years that there was no need to privilege one language over the other. I needed both.

When I began to write at the age of six, it was in Bangla. I never knew when I switched to English. Even today, when I write, I often think in Bangla and translate as I write, following the old habit of code-switching. As I choose to follow the path of numerous Indian writers who write in English, I wonder if this is a betrayal. But thanks to my mother, English is a choice, rather than an imposition. The day she

bought me the colorful alphabet books, sat with me, and made me read the Bengali alphabet, she began her crusade to decolonize my mind. She began her work to make sure I didn't lose anything.

A decade after I completed my undergraduate degree in English and committed myself to be a writer, I was at my MFA graduation, behind the microphone, reading. My mother sat in the audience, having flown halfway across the world to attend the event. She nodded and smiled when my American professor greeted her, careful to say only "hello" or "thank you."

She has been preserving all my bylines, the news features I wrote as a journalist in India, and every other piece I publish. She cherishes seeing my name in English script, out there in the world, a testament that I have moved past the circle of shame she lived in throughout her life.

As we drove home after the reading, I could hear pride welling in her voice as she said, "So who taught you to spell 'onion'?"

Once my book is out, she will jokingly remind me again that she was the one who taught me to spell in kindergarten, but I owe her for much more than that — for giving me the gift of her language, alongside English. For shattering my complacency and leading me into worlds beyond my own, beyond hers.

Perhaps that is why it is called mother tongue. 🇧🇩