

Eliot invoked to explore anxiety

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Homi K. Bhabha, the Anne F. Rothenberg Professor of the Humanities at Harvard University, shared “some of the formative thoughts and experiences” he had “in learning English literature at Elphinstone College, Bombay” in his first public address in the city recently.

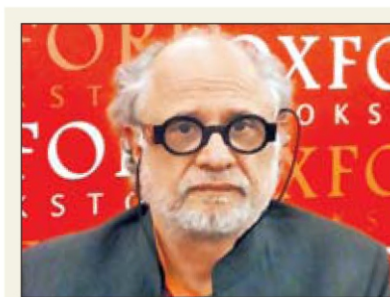
Bhabha was speaking at the first Surrendra Paul Memorial Lecture at Milan Mela, as part of the Calcutta Book Fair’s Kolkata Language and Literature Festival 2014.

“T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* raises a number of issues that we associate with the whole question of world literature,” said the professor. “The poem is deeply involved in the anxiety of the inter-war period — it was published in 1922 — and yet is a work of such great cultural and historical fluency.”

Bhabha recalled his childhood inability to swim. “Common knowledge would suggest that the fear of water — or swimming — is associated with the idea of drowning and the primal anxiety of death. And at that point in my life, I was obsessed by a childhood fear of death. I was seriously convinced that I was going to die afresh every night.”

When Bhabha was taken to a psychiatrist, he was diagnosed with “floating anxiety, a psychiatric term describing a state in which the effect of anxiety so overwhelms the ego that a person is left in a state of total paralysis.”

But it was when his mother told the young Bhabha that al-



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though she could not promise him that he would not die that night, if he did it would be as peculiar as a tsunami destroying Cuffe Parade in Colaba, that he felt that he had been given “a narrative in which to place [him]self and [his] fear”.

“My fear of death, or drowning, was really a fear of floating, a fear of survival. It was the kind of experience that we often have when we are faced with insurmountable odds, and are disoriented by our sense of fear. At that point we just need something to slow us down, still us, and give us what literature often does, which is the possibility of a narrative.”

“Most people thought that truth and beauty in the Romantic, Keatsian tradition were the central aspects of literature, but I began to think that one of the equally important sources of literary creativity and genius was anxiety — the kind of anxiety that emerges from what we call the poetics of impersonality, whether it be modernist or post-

modernist, and both descriptions are true to Eliot,” said Bhabha.

“The symptoms of anxiety show us the struggle associated in literature with finding a language of expression that allows the work of literature or art to explain the sense of feeling that exceeds its meaning. That doesn’t mean that you don’t get the sense of anxiety through the meaning of the line, but the feeling it brings with it outlines the sense-space of the line. *The Waste Land* is precisely constructed in this way.”

Bhabha recalled the monsoon morning when he “encountered this poem that unsparingly announced its spiritual and cultural anxiety, and did so predominantly through the symbolic presence or absence of water as a symbol and a symptom towards the end of the poem”.

“Its dominant theme is the profound desire for the relief and succour of water as a symbol of the spirit of regeneration and renewal,” said the professor.

“There was a continual stress that water is part of a representation of an idea that is both there and not there. One of the most important psychoanalytic readings of what happens in a state of anxiety is that you always feel as though something is missing, which is why it keeps on recurring. According to psychoanalysis and myth analysis, this insecurity of the missing is due to the fact that the sense of missing repeats in its own way through time the loss of the security of the mother. Here we are talking about maternalness, as a way in which, for the mind, a certain sense of security is created. It is the loss of this maternality, and the misrepresentation that occurs in the life of the human being through this sense of loss, that creates the sense of anxiety. In language, this is very easily and beautifully done by Eliot, particularly when he is talking about water as the thing we need to regenerate the spiritual self,” said Bhabha.

The professor went back

to *The Waste Land* to illustrate “the missing sense of security required for the feeling of being at home at a time when Europe feels least at home”.

Speaking of the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, he said that poetry as a form was more in demand than any other kind of literary form. “So there is a deep relationship between the experience of even political anxiety and the way in which it lets you get in touch with some of our most primal anxieties.... The simple truth of my swimming lessons came back to me,” said Bhabha. “I recalled that the fear of swimming was in reality the desire to float, not to drown. Once floating anxiety embeds itself in the elusive poetics of water; the act of reading by swimming must become performative. It is through the process of the enactment of the verses that we can hear the elusive emotions that outline the sense-space of the line.”

Bhabha ended his lecture with a very pertinent point. “Today I feel a profound anxiety for the fate of the humanities the world over. It would not be possible to do a reading of this kind, or for those of you who are kindly listening, to have the habit of listening or reading slowly or reflecting, without a certain kind of humanistic education. There is nowhere that the crisis in education hits harder than in the heart of the humanities. Without being parochial, I have to say that no other discipline has been so bereft of the ethic of care at the institutional and governmental levels than the humanities.”

Clarification

■ Professor Homi K. Bhabha’s first public address in the city (Eliot invoked to explore anxiety, February 21) was at the first Apeejay Jit Paul Memorial Lecture.