



Modernism as a Shared Emotional Structure Across Cultures: Convergences between W.H. Auden and Buddhadeva Bose

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Abstract

The mid-twentieth century, marked by significant changes in political, social, and cultural spheres, witnessed modernist response across culture. During this time, Europe found itself disoriented by political upheaval, the rise of fascism, and the looming threat of World War II, while in Bengal, the modernist response was rooted in colonial subjugation, communal distrust, and cultural conflicts. Hence, the modernist approach was not bound by boundaries but by the sensibilities that guided its transcending from one continent to another. Poetry can be scrutinized under three aspects: its theme, the poet's approach, and the applied structure. Despite not having any prominent interaction, contemporary mid-twentieth-century poetry across continental boundaries witnessed something that expanded the scope of discussions and study: that contemporary poets from completely different cultures were driven by the same kinds of themes, approaches, and poetic structures to shape their poetry in the modern world. In this regard, this paper analyzes two contemporary poets, W.H. Auden of Britain and Buddhadeva Bose of Bengal. It examines instances from their poems to show how their approaches overlapped and complemented one another, eventually signalling the rise of a shared transnational poetic sensibility. Both Auden and Bose sought to secularize poetry. Both poets responded to the demands of their age, moving away from the lofty, spiritualized language of their predecessors to embrace a more disillusioned, intellectually sharp, and urban-focused response. This paper, therefore, deals with a comparative study where the poetry of Auden and Bose that reflects the flow and the genuine appeal of modernist poetry in a disintegrated time does not wait for the boundaries to be erased, but its spontaneous plea gives birth to the same kind of poetic sensibility across distinct cultural contexts.



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Introduction

The rise of modernist poetry in Bengal indicates a transformation in socio-cultural assimilation. The shift marks its beginning in the last two decades of Tagore, from which it has since transcended into the later poets like Jibanananda Das, Sudhindranath Dutta, Amiya Chakraborty, Bishnu Dey, Achintya Kumar Sengupta, Ajit Dutta, Buddhadeva Bose, and several others. These poets depart from traditional Bengali poetic forms, adopting a more fragmented and dynamic style. Among them, Buddhadeva Bose, who embraced *Kallol Era's* actual appeal, emerged as the central figure in reshaping Bengali poetry, as his modernism represented a radical shift in Bengali poetic consciousness. Though belonging to different socio-political contexts and adopting different writing approaches, it was widely accepted that Tagore's poetic legacy lay with him. When W.H. Auden began to flourish with his modernist sensibilities and to establish a versatile and unique craftsmanship widely termed 'Audenesque', in Bengal, a similar impulse was found in Buddhadeva Bose, who attempted to shift poetry toward social, psychological, and clinical precision. Therefore, this article draws on comparative modernist scholarship that considers modernism a literary spontaneity of time that is independent of culture and not entirely Western. The synchronous rapid move toward modernist technique, often ignored as a parallel stream of modernist response, was a unique move toward a fit with the appeal of the modern world.

Convergence between Auden and Bose

Both Auden and Bose rejected the pastoral as a site of truth. They were able to shape their poetry "...as a hygiene, a knowledge and practice, based on brilliantly prejudiced analysis of contemporary disorders" (Thomas, 1937). For Bose, who finds lyricism in urban chaos, in routine, noise, and fragmentation, the image of a modern city is a dynamic embodiment of modern existence itself. In his poem, *Brishti Ar Jhor* (Rain and Wind), he writes, "*Bodyless skeletonless Calcutta, filled with shadows; like dreams, / autocratic, irresponsible. I, too, am a shadow, quivering on the wall/ behind the curtain at the touch of the wind; in my heart sway/ rain and wind, rain and wind, night and day.*" He suggests a city defined by shadows and internal weather, aligned perfectly with the high modernist movement's obsession with urban alienation. The city exists much in the mind as in reality, as it is unreal, elusive, and psychologically constructed, and "*Filled with shadows, like dreams.*" Again, when Auden writes, "Where blind skyscrapers use/ their full height to proclaim/ The strength of Collective Man" (September 1, 1939), he dehumanizes the 'city'. The city's most visible structures are paradoxically unseen. Instead of representing the urban structures as mere

materialistic layouts, they became symbols of abstraction and alienation. Calcutta has no 'body'; the skyscrapers of New York do not see: the city is dehumanized in both. Auden's urban imagery parallels Bose's deconstruction of the city. The poem's setting, "*a dive on the Fifty-second Street*" in the USA, is not rendered as a concrete, mimetic space. Rather, it becomes a symbolic and psychological landscape populated by abstractions: "*the clear hopes expire*", "*the low dishonest decade*", "*waves of anger and fear*." The city here, like Buddhadeva Bose's "Calcutta", loses its material specificity and becomes a floating signifier for modern alienation and collective anxiety. Auden, in "As I Walked Out One Evening", places the narrator among "*The crowds upon the pavement*" and the whirring of the clock, like Bose's "*Crowds on the streets, bustling, fervent*." Bose's expression of *rain and wind* swaying in his heart echoes "*The glacier knocks in the cupboard, / The desert sighs in the bed*" in terms of describing a hollowed-out internal state by using physical and external imagery. The external environment and material things become inner conditions: restless, futile, and inescapable. Modernism is defined by the paradox of being psychologically surrounded by millions while remaining spiritually alone. The speaker, in Bose, becomes a '*shadow*', losing a solid sense of identity and becoming as insubstantial as the city itself. Similarly, Auden's poem ends with the lovers gone and the clocks silent, leaving only the '*deep river*' running on: a sense of individual dissolving into a vast, indifferent city.

Buddhadeva Bose's attempt to implement solitude amidst noise reflects the Bengali '*Manas*'- the interior mind, trying to find its footing in a rapidly industrializing Calcutta. He is prescriptive and rebellious. He warns against the false collective: "*Those who smile and chant in tune with tinkling tea-cups/ Become, when the night is late, and neighbours' lights are out, / Cockroaches...*" (Sonnets For 3 A.M.). This grotesque imagery exposes the dehumanization of conformity, something Auden, who takes a more satirical, Western approach to this, implies but does not visualize so viscerally. Auden's poem "The Unknown Citizen" describes a man who is identified only by his institution. In this regard, the man becomes a collection of mere facts. The state celebrates him because he conforms perfectly. He is the "*One against whom there was no official complaint*." Auden's citizen is perfectly recorded and well archived. This is the exact opposite of Bose, who offers an alternative: "*Leave no address./ Like spring in the blank December*" and "*Go far, to distant lands where nobody speaks your tongue,/ And you wander uncertain, anonymous*" (Sonnets for 3 A.M.). Auden, through his poem, exposes the tragedy of a man reduced to statistics in *bureaucratic modernity*, while Bose offers a counter vision in which the self withdraws from every social, institutional, or even linguistic system to preserve its inner sanctity. Auden discloses the invisibility of inner life when Bose considers the inner life to be the sole reality to be saved. In

short, both poets are responding to the same fundamental problem, which modernity tends to wipe out or alter- the true human individual form. Like Auden's poem, Bose begins with the same realization: "*Only the personal is holy.*" The only differences are in their tones and the ways they address their thematic concerns. This assertion by Buddhadeva Bose serves as a manifesto against the encroaching noise of the twentieth century. It marks a bold leap towards modernism, wherein meaning retreats from public forms to subjectivity. Buddhadeva Bose's imagery of "*The shaded lamp*", "*The yellowed page*", and the intimate act of writing "*to a distant friend*" constructs what may be called an interior cartography, where time coexists with permanence. Auden's declaration, "*All I have is a voice/ To undo the folded lie,*" (September 1, 1939) foregrounds individual conscience as the last site of resistance against collective falsehood. In this poem, Auden shifts the focus from external political events to the individual's inner moral state, paralleling Bose's movement toward the inexpressible beyond materiality. Thus, through both poets, the world becomes merely a surface, beneath which lies the search for transcendence that remains unresolved yet profoundly human.

Another significant area of convergence lies in the perception of love and desire. Traditional romantic poetry often glorifies love as eternal and transcendent. However, both Bose and Auden challenge this notion; instead, love in their poems appears temporary, contingent, and inevitably bound up with the intricacies of the modern self. The poem's conception of love is tender and ironic in nature, far away from romantic illusion. "Lullaby" dismantles the traditional ideal of eternal beauty. The beloved is "*mortal, guilty*", and subject to decay and death. Yet, paradoxically, "*The entirely beautiful.*" Hence, love is not blind idealization; it is a conscious act of acceptance. This juxtaposition of imperfection and affection reflects a modernist sensibility that defines love as not elevated into the realm of the divine but as firmly rooted in human fallibility. For Auden, love is sudden, intense, but ultimately momentary: "*But in my arms till the break of day.*" Similarly, in Bose's lines: "*Eyes meet eyes once.../ much delight and a touch of surprise, / a leap of wild hope:/ -Nothing more.*" (This Is All). Then Bose moves quickly from desire to finality: "*Pleasure and pain, a few words, desire and sorrow, / then death's night, it's darkness.*" This pairing reveals the dual nature of love as both fulfilling and distressing, reflecting Auden. Auden also echoes the inevitability: "*Time and fevers burn away/ Individual beauty*". The poets underscore that the value of love derives precisely from its impermanence and vulnerability. Bose expands a simple glance into a cosmic vision involving "*the faces of many stars*" and "*a slice of the moon*", only to collapse it back into nothing more. Auden follows a comparable trajectory, moving from the intimate embrace of lovers to a vision of "*universal love and hope*" before returning to constraints of time and

reality. This contraction reflects the modernist tendency to juxtapose the infinite with the finite, ultimately reaffirming human limitation.

Auden adopts an almost prosaic rhythm in his “September 1, 1939”, which meanders inconsistently, veering from introspective contemplation to objective observations: *“I sit in one of the dives/ On Fifty-second Street.”* The rhythm is not lyrical. It seems cautious and disjointed, an existence oppressed by the threat of war. Again, in “The Unknown Citizen”, the rhythm mimics bureaucratic language that is deliberately flat and monotonous: *“He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be/One against whom there was no official complaint.”* Does it sound like a poem or a lyric? No. Rather, it sounds like a plain statement or a straightforward report. This rhythmic dryness echoes the system-driven, mechanical modern world, where the rhythm is inconsistent—sometimes regular, sometimes irregular, and sometimes a mixture of both. Again Bose, in “Calcutta”, describes how *“despair has robbed...[his] breast of speech.”* His despairing state of mind forces him to shape his lines discontinuously, echoing the chaotic pulse of the modern city, which was *“matchless”* once. Rhythm here becomes an extension of experience. It no longer soothes but disturbs. Irregularity is not stylish but existential. In both Auden and Bose, the voice often oscillates. In Auden’s “In Memory of W.B. Yeats”, the voice shifts across sections: from elegiac mourning, *“He disappeared in the dead of winter:/ The books were frozen, the airports almost deserted,”* to philosophical reflection when he writes, *“For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives/ In the valley of its making where executives/ Would never want to temper.”* Then, when the readers read *“Follow, poet, follow right/ To the bottom of the night, / With your unconstraining voice/ Still persuade us to rejoice”*, they find the poet’s attempt to shift the voice to public exhortation to appeal to the poet’s role as a guide through the ‘night’ of human history. Similarly, in the poem “Calcutta” by Buddhadeva Bose, the voice oscillates between reminiscing about the city’s past aura and observing as a detached critic, which makes the poet eventually announce, *“Perhaps I’ll have to say goodbye to you one day. /No regrets either.”* Further, the voice shifts to appealing for a reshaping of the city as the poet cries, *“How much more must you be destroyed, to be born again?”* The voice is authentic and expressive of a coherent self. It does not assert authority, but it emerges as a necessary medium for expressing the occurrences, transformations, and crises of the modern world. This oscillation of the voice accompanies the rhythm that mimics the poet’s uneven tone to capture his overwhelmed yet fluctuating emotion associated with the city.

Modernist poetry often thrives on ambiguity, revealing a world where certainty is no longer possible. In “The Secret Agent”, one of Auden’s unrhymed sonnets, the conventions of

setting up an argument or context are followed in the first two quartets. Nevertheless, the sestet provides anything but a solution. Two entirely opposed settings, *“the street music”* and *“the desert/the dark”*, and themes, namely the desired lover and the expected death, remain in a state of suspension. Auden’s famous line from “September 1, 1939”, *“We must love one another or die”*, appears to offer a stark, almost apocalyptic moral binary. Yet the tone is deeply ambiguous. It hovers between sincerity and irony. “Love” is an ethical choice, and death can be regarded as a consequence of moral failure. Therefore, the line can be interpreted as both a desperate choice and a critique of simplistic moral solutions. In the later editions, Auden replaces ‘or’ with ‘and’, adding a nihilistic tone to the statement. Further ambiguity is found in the previous lines: *“There is no such thing as the State/ And no one exists alone;/ Hunger allows no choice/ To the citizen or the police.”* This points out that opposing ideas can coexist and operate simultaneously. This ambiguity reflects the ethical confusion of modernity, where romantic impulse is constantly undercut by modern cynicism. Similarly, Bose’s ambiguity operates at multiple levels. His poetic voice creates resistant fixed meanings and instead creates a fluid space of suggestion, sensory richness, and intellectual uncertainty. His poem “This is All” from “Kanakabati” is divided into two stanzas that depict two parallel movements, each ending with the refrain *“Nothing more”*. The first movement depicts a moment of encounter: *“Eyes meet eyes once in an open window-/ much delight and a touch of surprise, / a leap of wild hope.”* The language is delicate and evocative, capturing the spontaneity of human emotion. However, when it feels like the beginning of love, it is immediately dismissed. The day *“waned, burnt by the fierce sun”*, and *“mists of dream gather in the mind’s skies.”* The shift from clarity to vagueness indicates how quickly reality dissolves into illusion. Then comes the refrain *“Nothing more,”* which abruptly cuts off the emotional buildup. On one hand, this suggests disillusionment, reducing the emotional intensity of the encounter to a trivial incident.

On the other hand, it indicates a kind of philosophical acceptance, where the poet recognizes the transient nature of human experiences without necessarily devaluing them. The second movement captures life as a whole: *“The faces of many stars, a slice of the moon, / time to sleep when one has one’s chores-/ the dew of peace.”* This evokes a quiet sense of completion and rest. This apparent serenity is soon complicated by the inclusion of *“pleasure and pain, a few words, desire and sorrow”*. Life is presented as a blending of constructing emotions, none of which are given priority or resolution. The accumulation of these elements creates a sense of fullness but also an incompleteness, as life in the modern world cannot be neatly summarized. The final line, *“then death’s night, its darkness”*, introduces what Auden comes up with a very desperate conclusion

about. Just as the moment of a romantic encounter fades into insignificance, so too does the entirety of human life culminate in darkness. Like Auden, Bose also takes a nihilistic tone through the repetition of “nothing more”. However, Bose offers no explicit answer to whether it is a minimalist recognition of life’s natural limits or not. It is this openness that defines Bose’s modernist engagement with ambiguity.

“Hilsa” by Buddhadeva Bose reflects a structural ambiguity that is central to its modernist aesthetics. The poem shifts in time and space: from monsoon landscape to a dangerous midnight fishing tour in Calcutta, where the “*smell of frying hilsa*” rises in the “*clerk’s wife’s kitchen*.” There is no smooth transition. It hovers between the aesthetic beauty of nature and harsh economic reality. “*Those who are half-naked*” appear contrasting on Padma’s bank that “*stands like a painted scene*.” While the movement from rural production to urban consumption reflects modern socio-economic realities, the poem does not resolve whether it celebrates or critiques the system behind it. For Auden, the varied use of poetic unexpectedness or incongruity appears to be at the very core of his mature tendency to make serious statements lightly and helps Auden to achieve his unique structural ambiguity. “The Shield of Achilles” alternates structurally between two contrasting worlds. One is the expected mythic, heroic vision: “*She looked over his shoulder/ For vineyards and olive trees*.” The other reflects the stark modern reality: “*A plain without a feature, bare and brown.../ An unintelligible multitude*.” This back-and-forth structure creates a structural ambiguity; the poem hovers between classical idealism and modern desolation, never fully committing to either, just like the structural tension we find in Bose’s several poems, including “Hilsa”, despite having thematic differences. In both Auden and Bose, form mirrors content. The breakdown of traditional structures reflects the disintegrated nature of modern life, reinforcing the connection between technique, theme, and the appeal of modern poetry.

In most of Auden’s early poems, frequent use of the conjunction ‘of’ creates unexpected and often illogical pairings, producing vignette-like images. These images derive their power from the absence of clear *signifieds*. Meanings remain elusive, shaped by overlapping signifiers and missing contexts. He shifts emphasis from the traditional ‘signifier-signified’ relationship as theorized by Ferdinand De Saussure toward a privileging of the signifier itself. Meaning is no longer anchored in stable concepts but emerges through the play of language. This anticipates Jacques Derrida’s idea that meaning is always deferred, never fully present. Bose also unsettles the idea that the linguistic sign is composed of a signifier and a signified, which rests on the assumption that, although arbitrary, their relationship is relatively stable within a system.

Words such as ‘rain’, ‘wind’, ‘night’, ‘city’, recur obsessively in “Rain and Wind”, but instead of pointing to definite concepts, they begin to drift across multiple psychological and emotional registers. The signifiers remain, but their signifieds become fluid and indeterminate. This instability becomes clearer when read through Derrida’s notion of ‘difference’, where meaning is not fixed but continuously and endlessly deferred through a chain of signifiers. “Rain” here does not resolve into a single meaning like sorrow or decay. Instead, it slides into other associations—sound, suffocation, monotony, urban alienation. “Night” is not merely temporal darkness but expands into existential and psychic emptiness. The repetition, “*Rain and wind, rain and wind*” and “nothing, nothing”, does not merely reinforce the meaning but rather endorses it, exposing the absence of any final transcendental signified. Meaning is constantly postponed but never fully present or complete. Again, if the readers consider “*Those to whom evil is done/ Do evil in return*” from Auden, we will find that the meaning of “evil” does not refer to a single category. Instead, it circulates across political, historical, and psychological dimensions, refusing to settle into a stable signified. The signifier “evil” floats across contexts without anchoring itself in a definitive meaning. The dissolution extends to the poetic subject itself. When Bose’s speaker declares himself a shadow, he signals the collapse of the self as a stable centre of meaning. In Saussure’s terms, the “I” would typically function as a relatively fixed signified, anchoring experience. However, here the self is indistinguishable and insubstantial from the surrounding shadows. Again, when Auden writes, “*I and the public know/ What all schoolchildren learn,*” it mirrors Bose’s “*I too am a shadow.*” The subject becomes dispersed, functioning not as a fixed signified but as a shifting position within language. Auden moves between the past, the present, and an uncertain future but never achieves temporal resolution. Time does not progress toward clarity. Rather, it loops and fragments much like the circulation of signifiers. Therefore, both contemporary poets attempt to defer meaning and operate language through ambiguity, suggestion, and dynamic interaction of signifiers rather than fixed reference.

The transformation of sensibility in both poets is inseparable from a transformation of a poetic form. The breakdown of historical continuity demands a corresponding break in literary techniques. In Bengal, the generation’s modernism emerges through a necessary negotiation with Tagore - a struggle to move beyond an overwhelming literary presence. It is not merely aesthetic rebellion but a response to a changing reality. Quite apart from any overshadowing by Tagore’s early romanticism, even some of his later works carry within them the seeds of modernist unrest. In the wake of Tagore, Jibanananda Das, and his counterparts, cut a new path in poetry. Detached from the colonial elite and the orthodox nationalist, they spoke about a generation,

imploringly drifting after famine, war, and dislocation. Their response to modernity was to deliberately introduce themes of gritty realism, unabashed eroticism, and psychological doubt that Tagore's humanist idealism avoided. The little magazines, 'Kallol', 'Pragati', and 'KaliKalam', to name a few, become sites of experimentation, where fragmentation, eroticism, and existentialism replace lyrical unity. Bose, still a student, co-edited 'Pragati', using it as a space to articulate a distinctly modernist voice. At a young age, he even provokes controversy. His works were criticized as "obscene", signalling a deliberate break from prevailing moral and aesthetic norms. While Tagore's stature remains unquestioned, young poets sought to free themselves from his overwhelming influence. This shift marked a transformation in thematic orientation. Mystical and devotional elements give way to more secular, rational, and psychologically complex ideas, which are frequently influenced by Freudian thought, almost during the time when Auden's position in Europe reflects a similar, yet differently configured, literary transition. By the time Auden began writing in the late 1920s, English poetry had already undergone the revolution of high modernism under figures like T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, W.B. Yeats, etc. However, for Auden's generation, even this modernism requires renewal. Auden was highly influenced by Eliot. Auden adopts Eliot's ideas about poetry, especially in the areas that poetry should relate to earlier works, be constructed consciously for an audience, and refuse to be emotional self-expression. Also, his works move beyond Eliot and other first-generation modernists. Eliot's dense classicism and metaphysical seriousness, and Yeats' symbolic and yet aristocratic vision, seemed insufficient to capture the immediacy of the contemporary political crisis. Modernity was a crisis of institutional bureaucratization and collapsing empire, and the cold logic of late capitalism, for Auden. Therefore, as the readers notice, his landscape is shaped by the rapid expansion of Western Civilization that includes suburbs, factories, asphalt, and the rise of the managerial state. His modernity is characterized by a loss of individuality to statistics, official forms, and consumer habits as one traces in his "The Unknown Citizen". His response is deeply informed by the dread of totalitarianism and the sterile nature of modern bureaucracy. In both transitions, the younger poets experience a similar pressure, an inevitable need – the need to move beyond a dominant predecessor without denying their influence.

In this regard, Bose is highly misunderstood. He had the opportunity to remain in Tagore's proximity for only about six years, yet the depth of that association left a lasting intellectual and emotional imprint on him. Even while abroad in America, surrounded by what he describes as the finest literary works of the world, Buddhadeva Bose confessed in a letter that he was consumed by a singular longing – a "*Rabindra-trishna*" (an emotional or intellectual craving

for Rabindranath Tagore's works). This portrays that he never rejects Tagore but attempts a strategic distancing. The contemporary flow of thought was to make Tagore 'usable' rather than all-encompassing.

Conclusion

This paper argues that rather than being confined to Europe, modernism emerges as a global response to shared historical conditions. While their emphases differ, their poetic methods reveal a striking unity. Both contemporary poets possess similar viewpoints, demonstrating that modernist concerns transcend cultural boundaries. Their poems do not merely depict modern alienation; those are formally enacted through a linguistic system where meaning is perpetually unstable and dispersed. The modernist linguistic strategy they adopt becomes a weapon to break traditional rhythm and form. Their structure resists closure, mirroring the reality they seek to represent.

The convergence is not accidental but symptomatic of a broader historical moment. As modernity deepens, literature inevitably evolves to capture its complexity, abandoning linearity and certainty for fragmentation and multiplicity. In such a world, poetry must dig deeper – into language, consciousness, and into the very limits of expression. Similarly, to get beyond these poets and their respective cultures, we can name William Carlos Williams, who, driven by the moral decay and stagnation of twentieth-century America, tried to create a distinctively American poetic style based on everyday life and ordinary people.

It was inevitable for the torchbearers of the respective literary community, Auden and Bose, to respond to this necessity, crafting works that are formally experimental yet thematically resonant with disillusionment and the search for meaning. Therefore, modernism emerges not as a localized literary movement but as a transnational sensibility that arose from the needs of the age, a shared artistic response to the pressures of the twentieth century. Buddhadeva Bose's near-synchronous engagement with his modernist poetic techniques alongside W.H. Auden demonstrates how the mindset transcended geography and made poetry feel the touch of the same kind of *adbunikata*, almost contemporaneously. Their works stand as a parallel articulation of global conditions, proving that the language of modern anxiety is, at its core, universal.

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