

## DYLAN AND NOBEL ... TAALIS OR GAALIS??

*{MONOJIT LAHIRI examines the furore exploding in the world of letters and music!}*

“Akil Bilgrami, Philosopher of language of the mind, is the distinguished author of several books including the celebrated *Moral Psychology of Identity*. He specialises in current politics in their relation to broader social and cultural issues. A revered Professor at Columbia University, he was a young lecturer at Mumbai’s Elphinstone College in 1971, where I had just enrolled as a first year fresher in the English Literature department. I remember his very first dramatic sentence that startled us all! He instructed us to put aside all our academic thinking and curriculum – recommended books & respond to one simple question: Were any of us familiar with the lyrics of an iconic song, which went ... How many roads must a man walk down, before you can call him a man ... ending with ... the answer my friend is blowin’ in the wind, the answer is blowin’ in the wind? While some of us were vaguely familiar, we were more into Keats and Shelley, Byron, Dickens & Shakespeare, Tennyson & Browning. Listening to the deafening silence, he invited us to engage and absorb the work of this sublime lyric writer, poet & musician named Bob Dylan whose words, lacerated & caressed, informed & empowered, in equal measure.” That was Art & Culture Critic & Curator, Kolkata based Ratnatomma Sengupta, kicking off her intro to Dylan and this debate in style, concluding with “for my generation, Bob Dylan’s award is a no-brainer, an open & shut case!” Poet & Creative Professor Biswamit Dwivedi hits a similar track. “I already teach Beyonce Knowles’ songs as a part of my curriculum. It relates to the under-represented minority community, very appropriately. Dylan does the same.”

As can be gathered, the subject on view is iconic songster-poet-musician Bob Dylan receiving the 2016 Nobel Prize for Literature. Art, culture & literary commentators have generally acknowledged the fact that the veteran Rock Star has remained a mythical force in the musical space for ages, his nasal, gravelly twang and poetic lyrics musing over war, heartbreak, betrayal, death, joy & moral faithlessness offering rare, powerful, incandescent beauty & resonance to tragic tales. This prestigious mother & father of all awards & the highest literary honour on Planet Earth is “for having created new, poetic expression within the great American song tradition and the selection was not a

difficult decision at all.” This was stated by the permanent secretary of the Academy, Ms. Sara Danius, who compared his work to “the works of Homer & Sappho!”

Not everyone is doing cartwheels with this purple prose and the two corners are clearly demarcated. On one side are oldies Salman Rushdie, Joyce Carol Oates and Tom Morrison, who have welcomed this move effusively, with Rushdie declaring “From Orpheus to Faiz, song and poetry continue to be closely linked. Dylan is the brilliant inheritor of this bardic tradition. Splendid choice!” Back home, Bangalore-based Theatre person and the Founder-President of India’s first indigenous Rock Band, Ranjon Ghosal is on cloud nine too. “He is a poet, a passionate chronicler of the life and times we live in, with word-pictures that are moving, romantic, pulsating & cathartic, startlingly describing the agonies & ecstasy of the human condition. He maybe a Rock n’ Roll poet, more Vegas than Stockholm, but for over half a century he continues to re-invent himself creating new, exciting identities, all forever throbbingly relevant. His stock-in-trade is not the pen but guitar & harmonica and words scripted from the space between his heart.” The other group however remain unmoved and acidly recall the time when the Nigerian Wole Soyinka was awarded the Nobel for Lit, prompting the great V.S. Naipaul to observe that the committee was “pissing on literature ... from a great

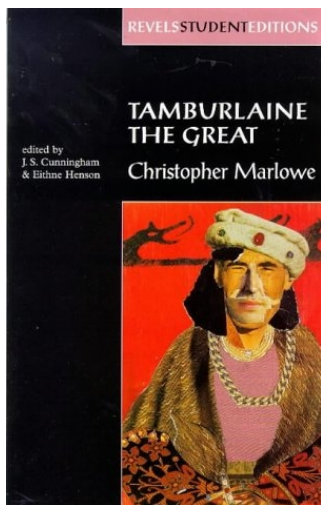


height!" This lot also fears that Dylan's Nobel could spark off a conflict between hi-brow & low-brow and this could mark one of those tragic moments when hi-brow kicks off his shoes, lets down his hair & signals a concession from exclusivity to egalitarian; from quality to equality; an elevation of kitch to the rarefied high table of Art & Culture. Hari Kunzu disdainfully insists "it's the lamest Nobel since they gave it to Obama for not being Bush!" Irvine Welsh adds that despite being a Dylan fan "this is an ill conceived nostalgia award wrenched from the rancid prostrates of glibbering hippies!" Bangalore-based Ad person and popular author Anuja Chauhan may not be as destructive, sardonic or dismissive but believes that "there are more talented song-writers around – Jim Morrison, Paul Simon, Leonard Cohen – who are more worthy of the award than Dylan. I frankly think it's a **popular** choice with an eye to **sex-up** the award, to make it appear cool as opposed to fuddy-duddy." Research scholar Ayesha Sen agrees. The 38 year old believes that playing the counter-culture card would make it look hot n' happening! "It's **uncool** to suggest that a musical genius, an inspirational balladeer of the poetry of protest can **never** hope to come near the pure aura that suffuses the literary space. It's **cool** to remember that while Dylan can't match the stuff that his literary, heavy-weight predecessors did, they too can't ever write a **Blowin' in the Wind, Tamburlaine Man, Times, they are a changin' or Homesick Blues**, right?" Media commentator Saibal Chatterjee joins the party with all

cylinders firing. States the respected Delhi-based analyst "Dylan's award has totally de-valued the entire honour, prestige and aura that the great Nobel represents. Sure, he is a gifted song-writer & celebrated musician mirroring social change & protest for decades, winning fans and influencing people along the way. BUT Nobel for Literature is in a different stratosphere. Don't trivialise it. It's not the **Oscars or Grammys** for chrissake! It celebrates remarkable men/women of letters who, through their work, add value to the world, gives it a richer understanding of itself and helps see it in a new way. The importance of songs & lyrics as a new avenue for story-telling is interesting as is all categories becoming liquid-but the Nobel, from its inception, remains special, unique and exclusive. I suspect, in these populist & consumerist times, Dylan's **Showbiz & razzmatazz** clout kicked in, making it a **popular choice** ablaze with colour & drama replicating a **Woodstock or Bangladesh concert** event. So, from the sublime to the ridiculous has happened, class has clearly been replaced by mass!" By the way, contrary to popular belief, Bob Dylan is not the first musician/poet/lyricist ever to win this award for literature. A certain **Mr. Rabindranath Tagore** preceded him over a century [1913] ago with his sublime book of poems, entitled **Gitanjali**. The Nobel citation was given to the musical colossus "because of his profoundly sensitive, fresh and beautiful verse by which, with consummate skill, he has made his poetic thoughts expressed in his own English words, a part of the literature of the West." History appears to have repeated itself after a century! Also, it is interesting to note that had Dylan not been considered for the Nobel, he would be in esteemed company – illustrious names like Brecht, Conrad, Lorca, Joyce, Proust & Nobokov are only some luminaries who were ignored, overlooked, side tracked of this worthy honour!

In this exclusive face-off, analysts, commentators & academics fear that dumbing-down the Nobel could inevitably lead to every Tom, Dick & Harry racing towards pen, paper & guitar with wannabees hitting the romance, detective, sci-fi, horror button – even Ad-jingles – since the system and template has been tweaked to be less elitist. Incidentally, the 75 year old music titan was busy when the announcement was made doing concerts in Vegas as a part of the Desert Trip Festival. One of them was commended by the legendary Rolling Stones who performed after him. "I want to thank Bob Dylan for an amazing set. We have never shared the stage with a Nobel winner before. He is our very own Walt Whitman of music" eulogised Sir Mick Jagger. Dylan – characteristically and in keeping with his erratic history with awards & award ceremonies – ignored this fulsome praise and refused to either acknowledge it or react to this momentous **BREAKING NEWS**. The Swedish Academy in the meantime has confessed that it has given up trying to contact him. The times sure are-a-changin' but clearly Bob Dylan ain't!

Concludes the local wit "Since this great award is no longer all that noble and a popular songster with a huge fan base has entered the once-hallowed-space – **Justin Beiber haazir ho!!**"



## BLOWIN' IN THE WIND BOB DYLAN

