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The Store of Your Mother is Full of Jewels: The Idea of the Nation for Michael Madhusudan Dutt

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Abstract

The utterance of the name Michael Madhusudan Dutt calls forth the myth of a prodigal son who “returned” to his home turf after some spectacularly failed attempts of being a part of the great literary canon of English literature. However, a closer probe in his life and works suggest that he had a complex inner as well as outward journey all through his life which did not indicate clear cut phases of antinationalism-nationalism or prodigality-return. His life and works displayed a curious mixture of contradictory purposes at the same time. This paper is an attempt to establish, with a close inspection of his major literary works, letters, and some biographical details taken side by side, how his nationalism did not subscribe to a particular dominant idea, but rather operated at different levels. His rebellious ideas about life and literary creativity did not permeate into his idea of the nation, which, in his mind, was indispensable from his idea of women. Although he experimented with various literary forms and attempted to interpret the Hindu myths and epics from a novel perspective, at the core he held a rather conventional idea of a nation centred on a feminized geo-body: the country as the archetypal, nurturing mother.

Keywords- Nation, Nationalism, Mother India, geo-body, Bengali drama

Introduction

The biographical details of Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873) are abundant and fairly authenticated, but his life is largely remembered in excesses that create a mythical figure out of a human. This sort of interpretation does not consider the transitional phases of one’s mind and, instead, tends to create a series of melodramatic events leading into a quick, one dimensional conclusion. Madhusudan’s conversion to Christianity at an early age in spite of strong oppositions from his family and friends is, thus, interpreted as a sign of his opportunism. His long standing hope of going to

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England to taste worldly success is seen as some sort of treachery to his country. In addition, he was the first native Indian to marry an Englishwoman and cohabit with another which alienated him from both his own family and the English community in India. His practice of writing exclusively in English for the first few years of his life, and attempts to provide his children a thorough European education in the face of dire economic instability were seen as signs of his rejection of the traditional, and hence, national. He initiated many remarkable improvements in Bengali poetry and drama, and was a prominent literary figure of Bengal in the nineteenth century. Still, his name calls forth the myth of a 'prodigal son' who returned to his home turf after some spectacularly failed attempts of being a part of the great literary canon of the English literature.

However, a closer probe in his life and works suggest that he had a complex inner as well as outward journey all through his life which did not indicate clear cut phases of antinationalism-nationalism or prodigality-return. His life and works are a curious mixture of contradictory purposes at the same time. This paper is an attempt to establish, with a close inspection of his major literary works, letters, and some biographical details taken side by side, how his nationalism did not subscribe to a particular dominant idea, but rather operated at different levels. His rebellious ideas about life and literary creativity did not permeate into his idea of the nation, which, in his mind, was indispensable from his idea of women. Although he experimented with various literary forms and attempted to interpret the Hindu myths and epics from a novel perspective, at the core he held a rather conventional idea of a nation centred on a feminized geo-body: the country as the archetypal, nurturing mother.

The literary journey of an Anglophile

Dutt was born at a time when the urban elites of Bengal were gradually awakening to the fact that the new language of administration henceforth would be English, as Persian had lost its relevance with the switch of administrative power from the Muslim rulers to the British. Rajnarain Dutta, father of Madhusudan and a successful practitioner of law at the Calcutta courts, took a prudent decision to bring his family permanently to Calcutta from a remote village in Jessore, now in Bangladesh. He got his son admitted in an English medium school. Madhusudan enrolled in the Hindu College in 1837, six years after Derozio had resigned from the institution, but his impact on the students, former as well as present, was still fresh. Two years earlier, in 1835, Thomas Babington Macaulay had issued his Minute on Education. The question, whether English or one of the South Asian languages should become the sanctioned medium of instruction, was at the centre of that ongoing Orientalist-Anglicist controversy. Macaulay put an end to it by vehemently arguing for English in all the educational institutions as the primary medium of instruction. He had a clearly chalked-out plan for the future of these young men being educated in these institutions. He promoted English in higher education in order to "form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class

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of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect". (Wolpert, 315)

Clinton B. Seely observes that Michael Madhusudan Dutt epitomized the perfect Macaulayan product, acculturated to English tastes, notably in literature (12). It was only to be expected that Dutt would begin his literary career by writing in English. In the Hindu College, he was an ardent student of English literature, and his primary interest lay with the works of the Romantic poets, especially Byron. Dutt began writing English poems from his early days in the college, and a few essays were also published. His poems from this period show the obvious impact of the Romantics, and a sense of loyalty to his own country is found in some of these poems. For example we can quote these lines from the poem without a title and simply "*Dedicated to G.D.B. by his loving friend, the author*": (Gupta 434)

Oh! how my heart exulteth while I see
These future flow'rs, to deck my country's brow,
Thus kindly nurtured in this nursery!—

The "future flowers" are his fellow students in the Hindu College (the nursery), and in the poem he wishes a bright career for them, who will make their country proud. One cannot overlook its similarity to the famous poem of Derozio, *Sonnet to the Pupils of the Hindu College*:

Expanding like the petals of young flowers
I watch the gentle opening of your minds. (Duttgupta 35)

Derozio wrote a number of patriotic poems reminding his countrymen of the rich history and heritage of India. Although Madhusudan was not explicitly patriotic in his writings at this stage, the impact of Derozio, blended with his romantic imagination and a youthful spirit, gave his writings a flavour of national pride. In 1843 he published a longer poem, *King Porus*, illustrating the familiar tale of the bravery of an Indian king. He mourned the sad, vanquished state of the country in its lost glory and the lack of brave heroes in the poem —“the noble hearts that bled for freedom”:

Alas! Each conquering tyrant's lust
Hath robb'd thee of thy very dust!—
Thou stand'st like a lofty tree
Shorn of fruits—blossoms---leaves and all--- (Gupta 446)

Golam Murshid, the author of the most exhaustive biography of Dutt till date, remarks that the nationalism and patriotism of Dutt had been a very genuine trait all through his life. But, Murshid adds, at the time of the composition of *King Porus*, the time was yet not ripe for a full fledged political movement or a prominent nationalistic consciousness in the country. So, his language doesn't show a familiar nationalistic tone. (47)

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Like a few other nineteenth century Bengali poets writing in English including Derozio, Dutt inspired the Indians living in an abject and degraded present to wake up from their moral and spiritual slumber. Here we can recall what Romila Thapar says about a deliberate glorification of an undocumented past:

In claiming legitimacy from the past, that past itself is converted into an assemblage of what is most desired in the present. (23)

Madhusudan's next important literary work, *The Captive Ladie* (1849) largely reflected the same bend of mind, though it came after a considerable gap and in a very different context. In the intervening years, he had embraced Christianity which had resulted in an alienation from his family, friends and the Hindu communities of Calcutta. Moreover, he had been thrown out of the Hindu college. He had to enroll into Bishop's College and face racist antagonism. He had suddenly relocated himself to Madras, a strange city for him with even more hostilities coming from the Christian communities. He had married Rebecca McTavish, a woman of British origin against much antagonism from the British communities there, and was going through financial uncertainties. All these experiences had left a bitter taste and the only saving grace was his new-found conjugal bliss, about which he wrote explicitly in the *Introduction* to the poem:

Tho' ours the home of want,--I ne'er repine,

Art thou not there—e'en thou—a priceless gem and mine? (Gupta, 460)

The subtitle of the poem was "An Indian Tale in two cantos". Dutt took as its subject the elopement of Prithviraja, the king of the Delhi region, and the princess of Kanauj, who is the captive of the first canto. The second and final canto concludes with the defeat, toward the end of the 12th century, of Prithviraja at the hands of Muslim forces that had invaded Hindusthan from the west, led by Muhammad Ghuri. Dutt had used Indian material before in his poetry, but the prominence given here to the South Asian thematic matter hints at a comparative change of priorities taking place in Dutt himself, from aspiring to become a noted poet in English to that of devoting his creative energies to writing in his South Asian mother tongue. He was not giving up on English literature, but he was looking more favourably towards Bengali at this point in his life. In February of 1849, prior to the publication of "*Captive*," Datta wrote a letter to Gourdas Bysack, his most trusted friend for life, requesting copies of the Bengali retellings of both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

The poor reception of his ambitious poem had a considerable impact on his decisions that followed. Quite contrary to his hope that this work would establish him as a major young poet writing in English, his well wishers and friends were of the opinion that he should rather attempt to enrich his own mother tongue. J.E.D.Bethune, a law member in the Governor General's council stationed in

India, advised him to give up writing in English and put his talents to work in Bengali literature. In a letter to Gourdas Bysack, Bethune wrote:

“...he (Dutt) could render far greater service to his country and have a better chance of achieving a lasting reputation for himself, if he will employ his taste and talents, which he has cultivated by the study of English, in improving the standard and adding to the stock of poems of his own language...” (Bose, 1925.159-60)

Bysack also expressed a similar sentiment. Dutt took these suggestions quite seriously. Perhaps it was his revised career prospects that brought him back to Calcutta as abruptly as was his journey from Calcutta to Madras.

Homeward bound: Bengali compositions

After coming back to settle in Calcutta from Madras in 1856, his first literary work was a translation of the drama *Ratnabali* (1858) from Bengali into English. This was his first encounter with the Bengali drama prevalent at that time. However, he was quick to call those poor in the introductory song to *Sermista*:

Aleek kunatya ronge/ moje lok rarh e bonge... (Gupta 185)

(The public submerge themselves in unrealistic, distasteful dramas all around Bengal.)

What followed was an amazing phase of creativity in an unusually short time. To present a better model of drama in Bengali literature, Dutt wrote a play, *Sermista* (1858) which combined the structure of the classical Greek tragedies with the rhetoric of the Sanskrit literature in Bengali. *Tilottama Sambhab Kavya* (1860) became the first Bengali poem written in blank verse to great critical acclaim. A few other Bengali plays including two social satires followed, which exhibited his skill in using the colloquial Bengali dialogues. These experimentations, mostly successful, improved the quality of Bengali poetry and plays to a great extent. The comment of Amit Chaudhuri is relevant here:

Although nationalism was still a few decades away from finding a political programme and party, it had already, apparently, become, for Dutt, part of an artistic programme; for he goes on: "I began the poem ['Tilottama'] in a joke, and I see I have actually done something that ought to give our national Poetry a good lift..."(41)

The consecutive success of all these works finally helped Dutt in concentrating his effort and talents into *Meghnad Badh Kavya*, an epic written in Bengali blank verse. *Meghnad Badh Kavya* reflects the sentiments and major trends of the Bengal renaissance nationalism in its adherence as well as in departures from the original Sanskrit text, *The Ramayana* by Valmiki. He selected a particular

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episode from the epic that described the death of Meghnad, prince of Lanka in the hands of Lakshmana in an unethical combat. Dutt inverted the point of view of the narrator as seen in the original Sanskrit text, and told the tale from the side of the vanquished, *the Rakshashas*, rather than the victor, the Aryans. In a letter to his friend, Rajnarayan Bose, Dutt said:

I despise Ram and his rabble, but the idea of Ravan elevates and kindles my imagination; he was a grand fellow. (Gupta 489)

This proud proclamation indicated how this text was going to be very different from a typical Aryan text like *The Ramayana* of Valmiki. The Rama in Valmiki was no less than the human incarnation of Vishnu himself, arriving in the mortal world to relieve the earth of its sins, while Ravana was the evil incarnate. But in *Meghnad Badh Kavya*, the traits of humanism are visible more in the *Rakshasas* than in the humans represented by Rama and his army. Meghnad is an epic hero with noble qualities who takes pride in his *Rakshasha* origin, loves his wife, trusts in the heroic codes of valour and has a striking sense of duty for his nation:

...Shastre bole, gunaban jodi/ porojon, gunoheen swojon, tathapi/ nirgun swajan sreyo, poroh poroh sada! (Canto VI, ll 584-86.)

(The scriptures tell us that, even when all the other people are worthier than our own people, we should side with our own ignorant people rather than the others.)

Interestingly, these lines also indicated how the *Rakshashas* have their own written scriptures and firm moral codes of a civilized nation, quite unlike the idea generated from the Sanskrit text that the *Rakshashas* were a lecherous, immoral clan. In this context, one is reminded of the opinions of the Anglicist educationists that there was nothing worthy in the Indian civilization as a whole in comparison to those of Europe, as India was conceived as a country full of ignorance and superstitions. When Madhusudan endowed his *Rakshasas* with the noble, heroic qualities fit for a culturally progressive, well structured nation, we cannot miss his subtle but extended allegory of a civilized country fighting against the bigger power, and the latter's colonial hegemony. William Radice observes:

We have, in short, in Book VI of Madhusudan's masterpiece, an intense and impassioned projection of the shameful and humiliating defeat of the champion of the 'insiders' by the dastardly and immoral tactics of the 'outsiders'.

Is it too far-fetched to suggest that this reflects the shameful subjugation of Hindu India by the alien, outcaste British? (163)

It is not too far-fetched to guess that, although Madhusudan remained completely silent about the sepoy Mutiny of 1857 much like the other Bengali urban intellectuals, he had an acute sense of history which found its expression in his literary works.

Idea of the nation as the Mother

Madhusudan did not, however, conceive the image of the country solely as a land of rich heritage, heroic codes and valour. His idea of the nation was gradually taking a more definitive shape. *Chaturdashpadi Kabitabali* (1866), the collection of one hundred sonnets that he wrote during his stay in England and France and sent back to Calcutta for publication, showed the emergence of a nation in his mind as a feminized geo-body, the Mother. She was an all-powerful goddess, capable of protecting and nurturing her children as well as guiding them into a better life. Madhusudan was reflecting the sentiments of some of his contemporaries in this regard. To nationalist thinkers like Bipin Chandra Pal, the Mother in what had come to be called Motherland by modern Western-educated Indians was in origin—

...not a mere idea of fancy, but a distinct personality. The woman who bore them and nursed them, and brought them up with her own life and substance was no more real a personality in their thought and idea than the land which bore and reared, and gave food and shelter to all their race.(102)

Madhusudan was among the first Bengali poets who incorporated this idea of *Bangabhoomi* (mother Bengal) in literature. In the sonnet called "*Bangabhasha*" (the Bengali language), he addressed the Mother-nation, more particularly defined as *Banga*, as the ultimate refuge of his distressed life:

*"ore bachha, matri koshe ratan er raji,
E bhikhari-dasha tobe keno tor aji?"*

(O my dear son, the store of your mother is full of jewels, why are you begging from door to door?" (Gupta, 161)

In another poem titled "*Bangabhoomir Proti*" (To the land of Bengal) he addressed his native land as the mother and asks her to remember him, if by the chance of fate, he died in a foreign land. The Mother figure was his last hope, he said, on his path to immortalisation. He had travelled a long way by now, from the bright eyed student of Hindu college who dressed as European and dreamt of achieving immortality through his English compositions, to a man seeking refuge in his own national identity. About this image of an all-forgiving, sustaining mother projected on the cartographic map of a country, Sumathi Ramaswamy wrote:

Although the palimpsestic figure of Mother India retains traces of the ferocious warrior and vengeful combatant,...she is largely shaped, especially in her verbal accounts but also to some extent in her pictures, in the image of the "new" woman of the Indian home. As such she is a domestic paragon who is modest, chaste, virtuous,

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largely passive and content with arming her sons to do battle on her behalf rather than forging into the fray of her own...(114).

A close study of the female characters of Michael's literary works would emphasise the reflection of this image of an Indian woman.

The woman question

Madhusudan wrote an essay for a competition on the subject "women's education" as a student in Hindu college. This essay which won him a gold medal is remarkable for a very different reason now. Reflected here is a very functional idea of women, an entity solely surviving for the benefit of the male kind and their future generations. In his argument for female education, he emphasises how an "educated nurse" and an "enlightened partner" help benefit the humankind:

It is needless to dwell upon the numerous benefits a child may derive from an educated nurse....The happiness of a man who has an enlightened partner is quite complete. The very idea of so sweet a possession awakens even in the most prosaic bosoms feelings truly poetical. (Gupta 595)

This very functional idea of a species called woman, a "sweet possession" remains largely unchanged throughout his life, and these sentiments find their way in his activities as well as in his literary compositions. It is a fact that his mother was an educated woman who introduced Madhusudan to the Hindu epics of India, the knowledge base that had been resource for the most fertile part of his literary creativity. It is also a fact that the dream he cherished for long, to fall in love with and marry a blue-eyed maiden, was in no way beneficial to the maidens themselves. Instead, Rebecca and Henrietta, the two partners of his tumultuous life bore the brunt of all the idiosyncrasies and impulsive acts of a man who trusted the ever-forgiving, ever-sustaining nature of the archetypal females to nurture him.

The women of his life were reflected in the female characters of his literary works. His women, though quite articulate or independent, upheld the traditional values of a Hindu India. In *Birangana Kavya*, a series of women characters who belonged to the great Indian epics wrote letters to their husbands or lovers. These women had different issues in their mind to complain to their men, but ultimately they did not seek an independent identity for themselves. Pramila, the wife of Meghnad who took a heroic journey through the enemy camps can only introduce herself in the relational terms of the big men in her life. Sita, Sarama, Krishnakumari, Tilottama received acclaim and almost the status of a goddess for their adherence to the gender-assigned roleplaying while Surpanakha was severely scolded by Ravana, for taking liberty in her choice of a mate and thereby bringing in a disaster to her country. In Madhusudan's imagination, the idea of the nation was indispensable from his idea of women –sacred, female, and maternal.

The return of the Prodigal?

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An essay that Dutt wrote while he entered his thirties makes evident his intense admiration that he developed for English during his college days:

I acknowledge to you, and I need not blush to do so — that I love the language of the Anglo-Saxon. Yes — I *love* the language — the glorious language of the Anglo-Saxon. My imagination visions forth before me the language of the Anglo-Saxon in all its radiant beauty; and I feel silenced and abashed. (Gupta 595)

This essay, *The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu* has been severely criticised by several commentators including William Radice as being self –contradictory and confused. Madhusudan lived his life in these contradictions, which became apparent in his writings. However, there was no linear movement of a “progress” or an apparent “return” in the sphere of his ideas of a nation. In his creative imagination, while the home was under the custodianship of the woman as the mother, the nation as the extended home was presided by her archetype, the Motherland. In a way he paved the pathway for the iconic pronunciation “vande mataram” that fitted so naturally in the collective consciousness of the people of India, several years later.

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