

# **Literary Discourse as Site of Colonial Encounter in Nineteenth-Century Bengal**

Himalaya Jana

## **Abstract**

My contention in this essay is that the colonial encounter in nineteenth-century Bengal was to a certain extent negotiated through the study of English literature and that a creative engagement with English literature opened up for Bengalis a discursive terrain where not only did they come to terms with an alien culture but reconstituted their subjectivity in relation to it. This paper is an attempt to locate the emergence of this new subjectivity—fraught with innumerable contradictions—within a discursive terrain where notions of literariness were being shaped and contested.

**Keywords:** colonial, Bengal, nineteenth century, English literature.

In 1890, Rabindranath Tagore addressed a huge gathering at the Emerald Theatre protesting against the Indian Councils' Bill brought before the House of Lords by Richard Assheton Cross. The bill, which was received with dismay by the Bengali intelligentsia, proposed to increase the number of Indian members in the central and provincial legislative councils but denied Indians the right to elect their own representatives (Pal 143-44). In the course of his lecture, Tagore accuses the British of hypocrisy, of being double-faced:

On the one hand, we can see the lofty ideals of the British character *in English literature* and on the other we experience a complete lack of such ideals in our actual relationship with the British in India. Thus, doubts have been brewing up among us regarding the worth of European civilization. Faith in the achievements of the proud civilization of nineteenth-century England has grown feebler and feebler among the educated class of our countrymen in recent times.

Everything seems to be a big hoax. (15: 132)<sup>1</sup>

Tagore here speaks of a fault-line between the educated Bengali's perception of England and their actual experience of colonial rule at home. An anguished awareness of this incongruence is at the heart of the Bengali intelligentsia's ambivalent response to the alien culture they imbibed and yet were at pains to distance themselves from. The disillusionment about the British among educated Bengalis, as it seems from Tagore's argument, stems from their inability to reconcile the 'lofty ideals' found in 'English literature' with the treatment meted out by the British rulers to their Indian subjects. In the same lecture, Tagore devices a dichotomy of the 'great' and the 'little' Englishman to further explain the sense of disillusionment the English-educated Bengali intelligentsia had been experiencing: "One Englishman looks furiously at us while another from above him hails us towards his noble self" (Tagore 15: 130).<sup>2</sup> Tagore associates the 'great' Englishman particularly with English literature: it is a figure born out of a subject people's reading of their master's literature. The 'little' Englishman is the one whom they face in reality, who withholds from them promises made by the 'great' Englishman and who, contrary to all professed ideals of the civilizing

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<sup>1</sup> “এদিকেইংরাজিসাহিত্যেআমরাইংরাজিচরিত্রেরউচ্চআদর্শদেখিতেপাইঅথচসাম্প্রায়সম্পর্কেইংরাজেরমধ্যেতাহারপরিচয়পাইনা— এইরূপেইউরোপীয়সভ্যতারউপরআমাদেরঅবিশ্বাসক্রমশবদ্ধমূলহইয়াআসিতেছিল।আমাদেরশিক্ষিতলোকদেরমনেঅল্পদিনহইলইংরাজেরঊনবিংশশতাব্দীরস্পর্ধিতসভ্যতারউপরএইরূপএকটাঘোরতরসংশয়জন্মিয়াছে।সমস্তফাঁকিবলিয়েমনেহইতেছে।” All translations from Bengali, if not otherwise mentioned, are mine.

<sup>2</sup> “একইংরাজআমাদেরপ্রতিকটমটকরিয়াতাকায়া।আরএকইংরাজউপরহইতেআপনমহত্বেরপ্রতিআমাদিগকেআহ্বানকরে।” Tagore explained this dichotomy at greater length in his essay, “Chhoto O Baro,” in *Kalantar*. See Tagore 12: 567.

mission, demeans and dehumanizes them as a colonized race. The sense of betrayal is triggered by unfulfilled promises, promises held in literature.

My contention in this essay is that the colonial encounter in nineteenth-century Bengal was to a certain extent negotiated through the study of English literature and that a creative engagement with English literature opened up for Bengalis a discursive terrain where not only did they come to terms with an alien culture but reconstituted their subjectivity in relation to it. This discursive terrain, which is the object of my enquiry, assumed greater significance in the relative absence of any social/ political means of engaging with the colonizer that was not humiliating for the intelligentsia.

In *Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth Century Bengal*, Tapan Raychaudhuri argues that the disregard the Bengali intelligentsia had to countenance in their everyday dealings with the British rulers contributed significantly towards shaping their response to Europe. He writes regarding Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay:

The nature of Bankim's contact with Europeans in India was very probably a major factor in his eventual rejection of Western values. The rejection, of course, was never total. Ideas, absorbed over many years, had struck roots too deep to be weeded out entirely. His carefully worked out philosophy of life is replete with their insidious presence. The impulse to reject was, however, strong; for *whatever the attraction of Europe perceived through the written word*, the experience of encounters with the ruling race was for the most part deeply humiliating for this proud man. (113)

Initiated into the world of modern politics, members of the intelligentsia found their voices ineffectual. At work, they were never granted positions of highest authority even when they well deserved it. And yet, a significant section of the intelligentsia had responded eagerly to

the ‘call of Europe’ that held for them the promise of liberation from the dead weight of age-old traditions. In a letter to Amiya Chakraborty, Tagore writes:

We first came into contact with English literature in its time of expansion. The jolt that Europe took from the French revolution was one of breaking all barriers. Its literature, likewise, showed a capacity for universal hospitality. [...] strangers of all lands had invitation there to share in its joy. It’s our good fortune that the call of Europe reached us at that very moment—it was a call for the universal freedom for mankind. We did not hesitate to respond. We shared in its glory and were inspired to create something new. That inspiration led our awakened mind towards the world. We were convinced that not only science but literature as well goes beyond the place of its origin towards all places and times. (11:132)<sup>3</sup>

The ‘hospitality’ that the Bengali intelligentsia was denied in the daily affairs of a colonial regime was there to be found in English literature. Contrary to being a tool of colonial rule, the study of English literature was for Bengali readers a way of engaging with an alien culture in a manner that was not feasible in the social/ political domain. It was for them a means of coming to grips with the colonial experience itself. British domination was a reality over which they had little control but reading English literature provided them with a more dialogic space where they could exercise their preferences and judgments, oppose and argue, and finally, come to terms with themselves, their pasts and presents, fears and hopes, their desire for the master’s culture and urge to fashion a new subjectivity. In investigating the emergence of this new

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<sup>3</sup> “আমরা প্রথম শখন ইংরেজি সাহিত্যের সংস্রবে আসি সেটা ছিল ওদের প্রসারণের যুগ। যুরোপে ফরাসি বিপ্লব মানুষের চিত্তকে যে নাড়া দিয়েছিল সে ছিল বেড়াভাঙার নাড়া। এই জন্যে দেখতে দেখতে তখন সাহিত্যের আতিথেয়তা প্রকাশ পেয়েছিল বিশ্বজনীন রূপে... তার মধ্যে সকল দেশেরই আগলুক অবাধে আনন্দভোগের অধিকার পায়। আমাদের সৌভাগ্য এই যে, ঠিক সেই সময়েই যুরোপের আহ্বান আমাদের কানে এসে পৌঁছল—তার মধ্যে ছিল সর্বমানবের মুক্তির বাণী। আমাদের তো সাড়া দিতে দেরি হয়নি। সেই আনন্দে আমাদেরও মনে নবসৃষ্টির প্রেরণা এল। সেই প্রেরণা আমাদেরও জাগ্রত মনকে পথনির্দেশ করল বিশ্বের দিকে। সহজেই মনে এই বিশ্বাস দৃঢ় হয়েছিল যে কেবল বিজ্ঞান নয় সাহিত্যসম্পদও আপন উদ্ভবস্থলকে অতিক্রম করে সকল দেশ ও সকল কালের দিকে বিস্তারিত হয়।”

subjectivity within the discursive terrain that shaped notions of literariness and identity, I have taken a cue from Homi Bhabha:

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments and processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of the society itself.

It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. (2)

The Europe that Bengalis marked with their desire came into being out of a long engagement with English literature, an engagement that involved subversive strategies of reading. Even if the British had introduced the study of English literature as a tool for generating consent for colonial rule, as Gauri Viswanathan has argued in *Masks of Conquest*, Bengali readers had never been passive recipients of their master’s culture. They exercised their preferences according to their tastes and volition and indeed participated in a process that would ultimately make English literature a part of their culture. Priya Joshi and Anindiata Ghosh have, in their respective studies, focused on the agency of the reader in this context, though they have not looked at the literary-critical discourse which gave meaning to these multitudes of responses caught up in the vicissitudes of the colonial situation and often at odds with each other. Raychaudhuri has drawn our attention to the relative autonomy of this sphere of cultural transaction:

A weak and dependent intelligentsia necessarily admires its masters. The admiration for their civilization is, however, not exclusively a result of dependence. Such responses are very much a part of the history of cultural encounters. Equality or inequality in terms of power is not the sole determinant of their content. The evolving values of the parties concerned and the specific historical situation determine what people nurtured in one civilization admire in another. (4)

Tagore himself comments on the double-edged nature of the subject people's admiration for the colonizer's culture in his lecture delivered at the Emerald Theatre. The following excerpt not only proves his understanding of a shift in the mode of colonial domination but also his faith in the power of words. Replying to allegations that the English educated Bengali was good at nothing but words, he said it was time for cannonballs to give way to words:

We have learnt this art from you. This intricate political system here is being run by the steam of words. You are constantly sending ships full of books for our benefit. After learning them by rote for so many years if we hadn't learnt a thing or two what else will we learn? It's from you that I have learnt that words are your chosen weapons in this century. The cannons and the rifles are falling silent.' (15:131) <sup>4</sup>

The excerpt shows Tagore's awareness of the discursive nature of colonial domination and it is in that domain that he wanted his countrymen to resist its debilitating machinations. More importantly, however, he saw this terrain as the site of a creative engagement with the 'lofty

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<sup>4</sup> “তোমাদের কাছেই আমদের শিক্ষা। কথার বায়ব শক্তিতেই তো তোমাদের এত বড় রাজনৈতিক যন্ত্রটা চলিতেছে। কথা-ভরা-ভরা রাশি-রাশি পুঁথি জাহাজে করিয়া প্রতিনিয়ত আমাদের নিকট প্রেরণ করিতেছ এতদিন মুখস্থ করিয়াও যদি দুটো কথা কহিতে না শিখিলাম তবে আর কী শিখিলাম। তোমাদের নিকট হইতে শিখিয়াছি—কথাই তোমাদের ঊনবিংশ শতাব্দীর ব্রহ্মাণ্ড। কামান বন্দুক ক্রমশ নীরব হইয়া আসিতেছে।”

ideals' of the 'great Englishman' and it is in this respect that he later fell out with the nationalists after an initial phase of collaboration.

But we must not also lose sight of the fact that this discursive terrain, occupying an 'interstitial space between cultures,' was not simply the locus of an anti-colonial struggle because here the colonized was at war not only with the colonizer but with contesting versions of himself, and the emergent subjectivity was fraught with innumerable contradictions. It is necessary to move beyond the polarities of colonial hierarchy and see the Bengali readers' engagement with English literature in all its complexity. Consider, for example, the following scenario: the British rulers, the missionaries and a section of the reformist Bengali intelligentsia came together in their drive to purge Bengali literature of 'obscenities' while another section of the intelligentsia joined hands with writers of Battala pamphlets to deride such attempts. The reasons for supporting or opposing such a drive were not uniform either. While the British might have been wary of seditious writing being circulated in the native quarters, the reformist elite saw in the popularity of such titles as *Bidyā Sundar* an impediment to the formation of a new literature, *jatiya sahitya*, which was part of the hegemonic project of nationalism. Curiously, when Rangalal Bandyopadhyā came to the defense of Bharatchandra in response to a controversial paper read at a meeting of the Bethune Society which dwelt on the supposed obscenity of Bengali literature, he launched a comparative study of *Bidyā-Sundar* and *Venus and Adonis*, and made a sly reference to the popularity of *Fanny Hill* among British readers. There are Battala pamphlets, like *Haba Chheler Babar Katha* (Datta), which mock the elite enthusiasm for the great English writers as nothing more than literary pretension, to be ridiculed as yet another attempt of the *babu* at mimicking his master. The readers and writers of Battala genres, of course, had had their own criteria to judge what was good for them in English literature—the *Mysteries* of Reynolds for example (Sripantha). The literary text became the site of a complex negotiation with the colonial experience which cannot be reduced to binaries

of power: The engagement took place at several levels and at each level was fraught with internal contradictions. It is misleading to project a uniformity of purpose on either the Bengalis or the British who were part of this cultural transaction, as commentators like Gauri Viswanathan have done.

The next part of my argument concerns the reconstitution of a Bengali subjectivity: Long before the actual emergence of the nationalist movement in the political realm, the formation of a nationalist consciousness has begun in the attempt to bring forth a new literature in Bengali, a national literature or *jatiya sahitya*, and the leading creative writers of the nineteenth century were more or less unanimous in their view that this new literature was to a great extent the product of a creative engagement with English literature. Leading creative writers like Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore repeatedly emphasized the importance of an enlightened literary criticism to justify the claims of the new Bengali literature as it straddled the in-between space of two cultures and could not be evaluated either by the old standards of pre-colonial Bengali literature or by those of Western literature. In Partha Chatterjee's formulation, nationalist consciousness envisioned an 'inner' or 'spiritual' domain of authentic/ essential Bengali identity impervious to Western influence:

The colonial state...is kept out of the "inner" domain of national culture; but it is not as though this so-called spiritual domain is left unchanged. In fact, here nationalism launches its most powerful, creative, and historically significant project: to fashion a "modern" national culture that is nevertheless not Western. If the nation is an imagined community, then this is where it is brought into being. In this, its true and essential domain, the nation is already sovereign, even when the state is in the hands of the colonial power. The dynamics of this

historical project is completely missed in conventional histories in which the story of nationalism begins with the contest for political power. (6)

But, paradoxically, the literary-critical discourse which made the emergence of the new literature possible was an attempt to lay down the terms of negotiation for a creative engagement with English literature. Reading/ interpreting English literary texts entailed evaluating one's own past—literary and otherwise—and envisioning a future, walking a tightrope between opposing imperatives. It seems quite obvious from this point of view that the most profound and creative engagement with the colonizer's culture took place in the discursive terrain where literariness was being redefined, and it preceded any articulation of the nationalist subjectivity in political terms. Chatterjee has further argued:

The bilingual intelligentsia came to think of its own language as belonging to that inner domain of cultural identity, from which the colonial intruder had to be kept out; language therefore became a zone over which the nation first had to declare its sovereignty and then had to transform it in order to make it adequate for the modern world. (7)

But the literary-critical discourse which made possible that 'transformation' was a site of contestation and collaboration from which 'the colonial intruder' could not eventually be 'kept out': it was precisely where the Bengali intelligentsia, at least a section of them, was actively seeking that intrusion. The radical potential of that intrusion is central to any understanding of Bengali readers' engagement with English literature in the nineteenth century.

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## **About the Author**

Himalaya Jana is an assistant professor of English at Raghunathpur College. He did his M. A. at University of Calcutta and M. Phil. at Jadavpur University. He is currently engaged in doctoral research at Jadavpur University. He may be contacted at [himalaya.jana@gmail.com](mailto:himalaya.jana@gmail.com).