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Battala and the *Babu*: English Literature in Nineteenth-Century Bengal

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Abstract: The study of English literature in nineteenth-century Bengal facilitated the emergence of a discursive terrain which was crucial for Bengalis not only for coming to terms with the colonial encounter but also for the reconstitution of a new Bengali subjectivity. This complex cultural negotiation has sometimes been reduced to a colonial project of ideological indoctrination, as in the work of Gauri Viswanathan. Others, while emphasizing the agency of Bengali readers and their cultural predilections in the process, have largely overlooked the internal contradictions and dilemmas that dogged this discursive terrain. I shall argue in this paper that this discursive terrain 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 contradictions. I shall try to focus on the zones of contestation and collaboration between the nationalist elite and the readers and writers of Battala in terms of their engagement with English literature by counterposing Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's censure of Battala with an obscure Battala writer Parameshwar Datta's pamphlet which satirizes the supposedly high cultural pretensions of the nationalist intelligentsia.

Key-words: Battala, Nineteenth-century Bengal, English literature, *babu*, Colonial Bengal, Print culture.

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1. Introduction: *The Battle of the Books*

The inception of the academic study of English literature in nineteenth-century Bengal has been viewed by some critics like Gauri Viswanathan as a ploy to bolster colonial rule by means of ideological indoctrination. It has been widely shown, however, that the impetus for the institutional study of English literature came not primarily from the colonizers but from upper-caste Hindu families eager to secure for their children a foothold in a rapidly changing world. The crucial question here is whether Bengali readers of English literature had agency over their reading habits and preferences. In order to answer that question, we need to take into consideration not only the institutional study of English literature but other spaces

and modes of its dissemination. While students can have little control over the syllabus, general readers are free to exercise their cultural predilections and preferences when it comes to deciding what to read. In nineteenth-century Bengal, the readers of English literature can be thought of as belonging to a hierarchy: At the zenith were the creative writers who were imbibing crucial influences from English literature in order to shape a modern Bengali literature and at the bottom were readers of the so-called Battala book market, many of whom did not even have the proficiency to read English texts in the original but nevertheless were consumers of English literature by means of translations and adaptations of popular texts regularly churned out by hack writers. The divisions among readers of English literature in colonial Bengal did not always correspond to hierarchies of class, caste, and gender. Readers belonging to the same social stratum often held very different views on modernity, tradition, and literariness, revealing profound contradictions and dilemmas at the heart of the nationalist project of reshaping a modern but/and authentic Bengali subjectivity. I shall try in this paper to foreground this contestation between the nationalist elite and the readers and writers of Battala in terms of their engagement with English literature by counterposing Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's censure of Battala with an obscure Battala writer Parameshwar Datta's pamphlet which satirizes the supposedly high cultural pretensions of the nationalist intelligentsia.

2. Juxtapositions

Chairs, tables, pankhas,—seldom meant to be pulled, American clocks, glassware of variegated hues, pictures for which the *Illustrated London News* is liberally laid under contribution, kerosene lamps, book-shelves filled with Reynold's Mysteries, Tom Paine's *Age of Reason* and the Complete Poetical Works of Lord Byron, English Musical-boxes, compose the fashionable furniture of the sitting room of Young Bengal.¹

Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's curious depiction of an Anglicized Bengali 'sitting room', which, he said had replaced the '*Poojah Dalan*' as the most cherished and flaunted part of the Bengali household, is meant to give us an idea of the wrong sort of emulation of the colonizer's culture practised by the *babus* whom Bankim had frequently lampooned. Not only are the books mentioned in the above excerpt part of

¹ Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, "The Confession of a Young Bengal," vol. 3 of *Bankim Rachanabali*, ed. Jogeshchandra Bagal, rev. ed. (Kolkata: Sahitya Samsad, 1995), p. 137.

an inventory of furniture but the motley selection of the titles hint at the lack of taste and sincere engagement with English literature. The reference to ‘Reynold’s Mysteries’ is crucial here because G. W. M. Reynolds was a particular favourite of Battala writers and readers from the 1860s onwards. He inspired a new genre of prose narration in Bengali called *guptakatha* or *rahasya* of which the first instance was *Amar Guptakatha* (1871). Many of Reynolds’ novels were translated into Bengali. *Bilati Rahasya*, *Sainik Ramani*, *Rani Krishnakamini*, *Rani Eugenie Baithak* are a few examples such translations.² Bankim goes on to discriminate between apish imitation of English customs which he associates with ‘the English example’ and a sincere engagement with what is best in that culture, a consequence of ‘English education.’³

What is best in Western culture is, however, a matter of interpretation, one regarding which there was little unanimity in nineteenth-century Bengal. Although Bankim speaks of ‘cases of conflict between the action of English education and that of English example’, it should be noted that immediately afterwards he goes on to essentialize Western culture itself in terms of an excessive attention towards the material, and thus ‘external,’ aspects of life:

The very idea that external life is a worthy subject of the attention of a rational being, except in its connections with religion, is, amongst ourselves, unmistakably of English origin. In spite of their emphatic inculcation of the duty of self-preservation, the prevailing tendency of our Shastras was towards a severe asceticism, founded upon a profound feeling of the transitoriness and unreality of this world.⁴

It is, then, over the prerogative to choose the particular aspects worthy of emulation in the colonizer’s culture that the nationalist intelligentsia fell out with the masses whose tastes dictated the productions of the Battala presses to a large extent. We should also remember that the dichotomy of the interior and the exterior governed the paradigm of cultural transaction in nationalist imagination: a meaningful engagement with the colonizer’s culture which will lead to a reconstitution of the self can only happen in the interior, the ‘inner domain,’ and the nationalist elite took it upon themselves to monitor the cultural

²Sripantha, *Battala*, p. 62.

³*Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 138.

traffic. They were weary of the possibility that the newly-emergent reading public, if not provided with a 'healthy' literary diet, and protected from 'pernicious' influences by some kind of censorship, would surely go astray and jeopardize the project of shaping a *jatiya sahitya*. Bankim brilliantly sums up the clientele of Battala in the following excerpt from "A popular Literature for Bengal":

The artizan and the shopkeeper who keep their own accounts, the village zemindar and the mofussil lawyer, the humbler official employé (sic) whose English carries him no further than the duties of his office, and the small proprietor who has as little to do with English as with office, all these classes read Bengali and Bengali only; all in fact between the ignorant peasant and the really well-educated classes. And if to these be added the vast numbers who are likely to benefit by a system of vernacular education, extended and developed so as to suite the requirements of the country, we may be in a position to appreciate fully the importance of a literature for the *people* of Bengal; for these classes constitute *the people*.⁵

It is the same reading public which has the potential to become the patrons of a nascent *jatiya sahitya* and therefore the progressive refinement of their literary taste is one area of concern for the nationalist elite which figures prominently in their literary-critical discourse. The importance of this task for the nationalist project is expressed in unambiguous terms by Bankim:

A popular literature for Bengal is just blundering into existence, *it is a movement which requires to be carefully studied and wisely stimulated*, for it may exert a healthy or a pernicious influence on the national character, according to the direction it takes. The popular literature of a nation and the national character act and react on each other.⁶

Anindita Ghosh has shown the persistence of pre-print conventions and reading practices even after the coming of the book in Bengal, particularly in the Battala publications.⁷ Bankim, and the English-educated

⁵Bankim Rachanabali, "A Popular Literature for Bengal," vol. 3, p. 97.

⁶Ibid., p. 98. Italics mine.

⁷Anindita Ghosh, *Power in Print* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 188. "[T]he coming of print in Bengal, and

nationalist intelligentsia in general, were trying to dissociate the new literature of Bengal from many such pre-colonial cultural practices and literary orientation.

Till lately, the *Bidya Sunadar*, the best known production of that age, continued to be the most popular book in all Bengali literature. After the Nuddea poets, we come to the days of the kabis, jattras and love-songs, the only species of literary composition to which the nation confined itself for generations. And fit intellectual food they were for a race who had become incapable of comprehending any other class of conceptions.⁸

The reformist intelligentsia's efforts in the cause of women's education came with the drive to provide this new Bengali readership with morally suitable reading material. Bankim's censure of Bharatchandra in the following excerpt—besides foregrounding the strife in the discursive process of shaping an ideal reading practice and moulding literary 'opinion'—expresses his eagerness to protect women from the harmful effects of Battala publications of which *Bidya Sundar* was a staple.

The third class of writers we shall notice are those who flourished under the Nuddea Raja, Krishna Chandra. They enjoy an undeserved celebrity, and are, in our opinion, a very worthless set. The best known among them Bharat Chandra Ray, who was till lately considered the best of the Bengali poets,—an opinion not yet wholly eradicated, but fast losing ground....His works are disfigured, too, by a disgusting obscenity which unfits them for republication at a time when Bengali readers are not all of the rougher sex.⁹

One of the reasons for the vitriol against *Bidya Sundar* is perhaps to be found in Bankim's linking of Bharatchandra in an unbroken lineage to the hack writers of Battala. Although devoid of the wit and craftsmanship of their illustrious predecessor, they retained his legacy of what Bankim considered to be

the accompanying standardizing processes, did not carry with it any implications of an automatic closure of the text and the imposition of dominant cultural norms. Rather there is, on the part of the audience, plenty of evidence of struggle, contestation and appropriation of the new print medium, and the message it sought to convey."

⁸Bankim Rachanabali, "A Popular Literature for Bengal," vol. 3, p. 98.

⁹Bankim Rachanabali, "Bengali Literature," vol. 3, pp. 104-5.

‘disgusting obscenity’. In more ways than one *Bidya Sunadar* was the emblematic text of Battala.

There is perhaps nothing more lamentable in the whole history of literature than the school of Bengali writers who followed the Nuddea poets and preceded the present generation. There is scarcely any readable work...belonging to that age—the age of the Naba Babu Bilas and the Prabodha Chandrika; as for literary filth, there never was a more copious supply. Happily, the whole mass of rubbish has vanished from public recollection.¹⁰

The relationship between Battala genres and the new Bengali literature being shaped by the English-educated nationalist elite is not, however, that of unmitigated antagonism. There are zones of overlap between the two where contestation went hand in hand with collaboration. Bankim viewed Battala not only as a marker of lowly literary taste but also as a den of imitators who lived off the hard-earned success of writers like him. While reviewing Michael Madhusudan Dutt’s farce *Ekei Ki Bale Sabhyata*, Bankim writes:

The Bengali press at the present day is very prolific, but by far the largest part of the books published are mere servile imitations of some successful author. There are imitators of Vidyasagar, imitators of Tekchand Thakur, of Hutam, of Babu Dinabandhu Mitra and of the author of *Durgeshnandini*; but perhaps, no work has formed the model for so many imitators as *Is this Civilization?*¹¹

Popular and high cultures are not mutually exclusive realms: literary productions belonging to these realms very often share their concerns and preoccupations even though the treatment of similar themes may differ in terms of manner and complexity. Gautam Bhadra points out how we can find the same contest between good and evil both in the battala genres like *guptakatha* and the novels of Bankim. Literary and batatla genres were contiguous not only in terms of thematic concerns but also in terms of style. Both Bhadra and Sripantha cite a paragraph from Bankim’s novel *Durgeshnandini* where the word

¹⁰Ibid., p. 105.

¹¹Ibid., p. 116.

‘Battala’ occurs.¹² Bhadra argues that the term was used by Bankim as denoting a particular literary style which he appropriates in order to describe the beauty of a minor female character in the novel. It is curious that Bankim’s low estimation of that particular style coincides with the depiction of an attendant, a low-born character in mediaeval India. In the following excerpt, on the other hand, the literary works of the English-educated modern writers are seen by Bankim not as being antithetical to battala genres but rather setting the trend for popular literature:

The Burtolla Presses and shops actually overflow with little books, containing a dozen or twenty pages each, and selling for an anna or two, all directed against the vice of drunkenness. There are farces, too, of larger bulk, one of which, called *Bujhile-ki-na*, or *Do you understand?* is very popular, and often produced at private theatricals; and these too, like the others, are mere copies of *Is this Civilization?* This little work, therefore, independently of its being in itself one of the two best farces in the language, gains additional importance from the large number of other books written after its model.¹³

Bhadra has argued that the term ‘Battala’, which initially denoted a geographic locale and a body of material practices, gradually came to embody the cultural attitudes of opposing groups to each other and thus came to accrue different connotations in different contexts and discourses. It was often hurled at each other as a term of abuse as can be seen in the following excerpt from the caricature of Bankim’s style made by Dinanath Bandyopadhyay:

O generous Deputy, I am a devoted lover of yours; I shall make my obeisance to you; I shall be gratified by singing your praises; please forgive my failings. ...You are the embodiment of all the ten *avatars*. Just as the *Matsyaavatar* created the four Vedas, you

¹²Sripatha, *Battala*, p. 11, and Gautam Bhadra, *Nyara Battalay Jay Kobar* (Kolkata: Chhatim Books, 2011), p. 206. The paragraph in question appears in the twelfth chapter of the novel. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, *Rajsingha*, in vol. 1 of *Bankim Rachanabali*, p. 18. “হে বটতলা-বিদ্যাপ্রদীপ-তৈলপ্রদায়িনি! আমার বুদ্ধির প্রদীপ একবার উজ্জ্বল করিয়া দিয়া যাও। মা! তোমার দুই রূপ; যেখানে তুমি কালিদাসকে বরপ্রদা হইয়াছিলে, যে প্রকৃতির প্রভাবে রঘুবংশ, কুমারসম্ভব, মেঘদূত, শকুন্তলা জন্মিয়াছিল, যে প্রকৃতির ধ্যান করিয়া বাণীকি রামায়ণ, ভবভূতি উত্তরচরিত, ভারবি কীর্ত্তার্জুনীয় রচনা করিয়াছিলেন, সে রূপে আমার স্বন্ধে আরোহণ করিয়া পীড়া জন্মাইও না; যে মূর্তি ভাবিয়া শ্রীহর্ষ নৈষধ লিখিয়াছিলেন, যে প্রকৃতিপ্রসাদে ভারতচন্দ্র বিদ্যার অপূর্ব রূপবর্ণন করিয়া বঙ্গদেশের মনোমোহন করিয়াছেন, যাহার প্রসাদে দাসরথি রায়ের জন্ম, যে মূর্তিতে আজও বটতলা আলো করিতেছে, সেই মূর্তিতে একবার আমার স্বন্ধে আবির্ভূত হও, আমি আশমানির রূপবর্ণন করি।”

¹³*Bankim Rachanabali*, “Bengali Literature,” vol. 3, p. 116.

too have created the Veda of Battala, like the fifth volume of Dasharathi and numerous other such titles. Byron and Bharatchandra have risen to prominence by giving utterance to the Veda that is truly your creation.¹⁴

Dinanath Bandyopadhyay goes on to accuse the ‘deputy’ of producing literary filth under the influence of alcohol and the muse of Battala. Bhadra argues that in this instance the term ‘battala’ does not denote the literary taste of the subaltern but rather the literary endeavours of the most celebrated author of the Bengali novel who was himself the staunchest denouncer of Battala, “as if the Bengali bhadralok himself was both the patron and critic of battala.”¹⁵ What is of interest, too, in Dinanath’s attack on Bankim is that he puts Bharatchandra in the same bracket with Byron, both being the propagator of bad taste synonymous to him with Battala.

Bhadra’s argument can be extended to the term ‘babu’ the connotation of which is almost as contested and indeterminate as that of ‘battala’. The babu is made the butt of ridicule both by Bankim and numerous other writers of battala farces. But, while Bankim denotes by the term a particular section of sparsely-educated superficial imitators of English ways and is at pains to differentiate him from the ‘really cultivated class’ whose engagement with English literature is crucial for the forging of a new Bengali subjectivity and a *jatiya sahitya*, the writers of battala farces makes no such discrimination between the right and the wrong sort of imitation, between the *babu* and the enlightened intelligentsia. In the review of *Ekei Ki Bale Sabhyata*? Bankim writes:

To give any adequate idea of this clever little work by translated extracts would be entirely impossible, because half the fun lies in the absurd jargon interlarded with English words and the cant of debating clubs in which the characters speak. The scene is laid in the “Gyan Tarangini Sabha”—a sort of scientific debating society which chiefly devotes itself to nautch-girls and tippling.¹⁶

¹⁴ Quoted by Bhadra, *Nyara Battalay Jay Kobar?* p. 207. “হে মহাত্মন ডিপুটী। আমি তোমার নিতান্ত প্রেমিক ভক্ত; আমি তোমার পূজা করিব—তোমার গুণগান করিয়া কৃতার্থ হইব, তুমি ভক্তের সাত খুন মাপ কর...তুমি এই জগতে একাই দশ অবতার। মৎস অবতার কর্তৃক চারি বেদ উৎপন্ন হয়; তোমার মুখ হইতে দাশরথির পঞ্চমখণ্ড প্রভৃতি বটতলার বেদ কতশত উৎপন্ন হইতেছে, তাহার সীমা করিতে কে পারে? বাইরণ, ভারতচন্দ্র তোমার মুখের বেদ লিখিয়াই নরক গুলজার করিয়াছেন।”

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 207.

¹⁶ Bankim Rachanabali, “Bengali Literature,” vol. 3, p. 116.

If Battala farces were making fun of the *babus* and their supposed pretensions to a higher level of culture than the masses, they got the inspiration from writers like Madhusudan and Bankim. The intelligentsia was deeply mortified with the *babus* who made a travesty of their cherished ideals and projects. Bankim further writes:

The types of life and character which it represents are sufficiently disgusting, and the important question is, whether the representation is correct....To the shame of Bengal we must say that we fear the picture is a true one. The reformer who never gets beyond tipsy harangues full of English expressions, should not be confounded as he often is by Europeans with the really cultivated class.¹⁷

It is a testimony to the fact that the cultural negotiation with colonial experience was taking place at several levels in nineteenth-century Bengal, as manifested in the literary-critical discourse of the day.

I shall now look into a Battala text to demonstrate how it construes the relationship between the *babu* and his supposed pretensions to high culture in terms of reading practices. The pamphlet *Haba Chheler Babar Katha* by Parameshwar Dutta was published in 1863. It was printed by one Umanath Bhattacharya in Sahos Jantra. Sripantha has pointed out that many of the writers and readers of Battala were actually impoverished members of the rural gentry who came to the big city in search of work and were baffled by its ways. Although they did not necessarily belong to the underclasses of society, they nevertheless found themselves in a disadvantageous position in the newly emerging cultural hierarchy of the city. It is important to note that the Bengali *bhadralok* was in no way a homogenous entity with similar aspirations and motivations. At the top of the hierarchy was the English educated intelligentsia, divided by their attitudes to social and cultural change into conservative and radical camps. There was considerable animosity between these two groups. The next in the hierarchy, and earning the derision of writers like Bankim in “*Babubrittanta*”, were those who aspired to social prestige by emulating the British in their manners and taste. At the base of the hierarchy would be the large number of people who had migrated to the city in search of jobs. The battala clientele consisted mostly of this last section, though it was by no means limited to them.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 116-17.

There is a prefatory poem to the text which succinctly expresses the frustration of the impoverished country gentleman towards the elite of the city: “the Mughals and Pathans are all gone. The weavers now recite Persian...the tiger went away and now the cat is here to hunt down elephants...”¹⁸ The tale revolves around a country household where the son, Haba, asks his father to tell him about his travails while roaming around the city in search of a job. The text, with some degree of self-awareness, posits the innocent ways of the village with the extravagant and corrupt ways of the city. The father talks about one Hotubabu, an eminent person in the city to whom he had applied for assistance. There are snide allusions to the low origins of the now eminent Hotubabu and to his high cultural pretensions indicated by the dalliance with Milton and Shakespeare: “No sooner had this Hotubabu been introduced to the *Second Reader* than he started dallying with Milton and Shakespeare to the great amazement of his parents.”¹⁹ His fondness for alcohol and his tendency to hobnob with the British is also ridiculed:

Hotubabu used to switch frequently to English ways and manners. The British do not like us clad in *dhoti* and *chadar*. Therefore Hotubabu started wearing *ijer-chapkan*. He roamed the offices in the city and managed to get close to a few Anglo-Indians and half-breeds.²⁰

Hotubabu also stands for the reformist Bengali bhadralok:

Hotubabu had been a true Vedavyas in his early years, and now, with the right kind of inspiration he turned into a real one. Earlier he used to climb trees with ladders in an attempt to grab the moon or at times would roll in the mud in frenzy because of a sudden impulse to fight with the *goras*. But he no longer does these things. He grows sombre now and then and would pray in his *thakurdalan* [courtyard] (Brahmasamaj) and give in to strange paroxysms of laughter and wailing. Sometimes he cries listening to the lectures of

¹⁸Parameswar Datta, *Haba Chheler Babar Kotha*, in vol. 2 of *Battalar Boi: Unish Shatoker Dusprapya Kuriti Boi*, ed. Adris Biswas (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2011), p. 23. “মোগল পাঠান্ হন্দ হলো পারসি পড়ে তাঁতি।/ বাগ্ পালালো বিড়াল এলো শিকার কন্তে হাতি।।”

¹⁹Ibid., p. 31. “কুলশ্রেষ্ঠ হটুবাবু সেকেন্-নম্বর রিডার না ধন্তে ধন্তে মিল্টান সেক্সপিয়্যার নিয়ে টানা-টানি কন্তে লাগলেন। বাপমার হাঁসি আর বাড়ীতে ধরেনা।”

²⁰Ibid., p. 32. “হটুবাবুকে বাঙ্গালীর ভাব হইতে বিলিতি ভাবে কখন কখন আবির্ভাব হোতে দ্যাখা যেত। ধুতিচাদর পোন্ধ্রে ইংরেজেরা লাইক্ করে না বোলে ইজের চাপকান পোন্ধ্রে শিখলেন। এ-আপিস ও-আপিস ঘুরেঘুরে দু-একটা মেটে-ফিরিস্কী আর ট্যাঁসফিরিস্কির সঙ্গে হরিহরআত্মা হোয়ে উঠল।”

[Alexander] Duff *sahib*.’²¹

This small excerpt makes fun of the urban elite in almost all of its incarnations, the romantically inclined literary enthusiast, the patriot with a nationalist fervour, the religious reformer, and those in the thrall of missionary preachers. The country gentleman apparently sees through their pretensions and exclaims: “Are these the people who would reform our country and make it prosper? Would the son of a blind mother insert the thread through the needle?”²²

What is important for us to note is that the narrator associates the great enthusiasm shown by the practitioners of high culture in the city for the great names of English literature with their literary pretentiousness. What was an intimate engagement for Bankim and Madhusudan seemed to many readers and writers of Battala genres as pretentious. The narrator continues:

Those who are pursuing their masters in the university would either become clerks or schoolmasters in a few years...the teachers are explaining Milton’s *Sakhisambad* to the students...some other teacher might be explaining what Shakespeare have written about Krishna’s affairs with the milk-maids...in some other school, the missionaries are enacting a rendition of *BidyaSundar* out of the Bible and their young students are either gasping for breath or are completely overwhelmed.”²³

The strange juxtaposition of Bengali texts which were frequently vilified and castigated for their alleged obscenity with English texts, including the *Bible*, is Battala’s way of countering the attack on its cultural predilections and also of suggesting that obscenity becomes deplorable to the Bengali reformists only when it is found in Bengali texts while similar instances in the work of English writers are passed over in awed silence. The ploy is paralleled by RangalalBandyopadhyay’s defense of Bharatchandra in the

²¹Ibid., p. 32. “হুঁবাবু বাচ্চাব্যালায় একটি বাচ্চা বেদব্যাস ছিলেন, অ্যাখন চারিদিক্কার নরমগরম বাতাস পেয়ে একজন সাঁচ্চা বেদব্যাস হোয়ে পোল্লেন। আগে আগে য্যামন অমাবস্যার রাতিরে মই নিয়ে চাঁদ ধোন্তে গাছে উঠতেন, কখন বা তাল ঠুঁকে গোরার সঙ্গে লড়াই করেঙ্গে বোলে ধুলায় গড়াগড়ি দিতেন, অ্যাখন আর তা করেন না। বাবু কখন কখন ভারিক্ষে হোয়ে আপনার ঠাকুরদালানে (ব্রহ্মসমাজ) গিয়ে কাঁদতেন আর হাসতেন, কখন বা ডক্ সাহেবের লেকচার শুনে আদাস্থীঠান হোতেন।”

²²Ibid., p. 33. “হা অদৃষ্ট! এঁরাই কি দেশের শ্রীবৃদ্ধি কোর্কেন? হোয়েচে? কানীর ছেলে নাকি আবার ছুঁচের ভেতর সুতো দিবে।”

²³Ibid., pp.37-38. এম, এ, ওলারা আজও এমে এমে কোরে কাল কাটাচ্ছেন, হয়ত কেরানিগিরি নয়ত গরুতাদানে গুরুমহাশয়গিরির ঘাড় ভাঙ্গবেন। কোন কোন ইঙ্কুলের কোন কোন সাহেবেরা মিল্টনের সখিসংবাদ বুঝিয়ে দিচ্ছেন দ্বোজবোরে ছোকরারা সব সমুদ্র চোকে করে ভাস্তে লেগেচে। কোন কোন ইঙ্কুলের কোন কোন ক্লাশে সেক্ষপিয়ার অন্তর্গত গোপিনীদের বস্ত্রহরণ নিয়ে টানাটানি হচ্ছে,...কোন কোন ইঙ্কুলের কোন কোন পাদ্রিবাবুরা বাইবেল হাতে করে বিদ্যাসুন্দরের পালা আরম্ভ করেচেন, এঁচোড়েপাকা ছেলেরা কখন কখন খাবি খাচ্ছেন, কখন বা তলিয়ে যাচ্ছেন।

Bethune Society where he counterposed excerpts from Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* with those from *Bidya Sundar* to justify the alleged obscenities in the latter. What is remarkable here is that the same maneuvers are coming from two very different strata of readership, with different degrees of familiarity and engagement with English literature.

There is of course an element of jealousy and animosity in the assumption that the elite intelligentsia's engagement with the great writers of English literature is little more than cultural pretension, but there is some truth in an observation like this:

It is fortunate that writers like Jonson, Addison, Cowper, Milton have all passed away so that they do not have to undergo the humiliation of knowing that [Bengalis] are cramming their work in a desperate bid to become clerks.²⁴

While the writers of battala made fun of what they saw as cultural pretensions of the urban elite in flaunting their fervour for the great writers of English literature, they had had their own preferences and ways of engaging with English literature.

3. Conclusion

Understanding the discursive terrain that shaped ideas of modernity and authenticity in colonial Bengal is impossible without paying attention to the fate of English literature in the 'interstitial space between cultures,'²⁵ where it bore strange fruits the seeds of which continue to sprout even today. A nuanced understanding of the beginning of our encounter with English literature might open up new ways of studying and engaging with English literature which pay adequate attention to the historical entanglements of the embodied reader.

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²⁴Ibid., p. 36. “বাস্কাল কামার আর মেডুয়াবাদীরা ইংরিজি শিখে চাকরি কোর্সে জেনে, জনসন, এডিসন্, কাউপার, মিল্টন্; এঁরা আগে থাক্তে পথ দেখ্লেন, তাঁদের এ যন্ত্রণা ভোগ কোন্তে হলো না”।

²⁵Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 2.

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