



The Essential Conflict in Michael Madhusudan's Thought

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Research Article

Abstract

*The main objective of the paper is to look at the essential dilemma, the conflict working at a deeper psychological level in Michael Madhusudan Dutta, regarding the influence of English literature, culture, and the literary authors. It is an obvious fact that while studying at Hindu college, Michael tutelage under a westernized curriculum, and became impacted by the western style, habits, and, manners so much that he formed an antipathy to his own culture, and, yearned to be integrated into the European culture. That resulted also in his getting converted into Christianity at the Old Mission Church on 9th February, 1843; despite vehement protests from his parents and relatives. In spite of getting influenced so much by the western culture and the tide of Anglicization (which caused him being disinherited by his father, and face various family tensions and economic hardship), did Michael somewhere suffer from a dilemma, an inner anguish to not love his mother tongue, literature and culture? Was he truly abhorrent of his own literature and mother-tongue as is generally known? Or, was there an inner flow of love lurking in him for his mother-tongue, and, literature? Though a thorough explication of the several letters written to his friends (like Gour Das Bysack), and, contemporaries (like Rajnarayan Basu) at different points of time; and, essays like *The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu*, the present paper would like to unearth whether there was this curious psychological dilemma/tension working on him, and, if so, then to what extent. As it will be shown through the analysis, that the psychological dilemma/tension of getting anglicized and leaving the roots (which probably pained him deeply and made him talk about his mother-tongue, literature again and again at a later stage) is quite evident in almost all of his critical writings, which got carried to his creative writings as well.*

Keywords: Essential Dilemma, Psychological, Anglicization, Christianity, Mother-tongue.

Introduction

The endeavour of the present paper is to look at the curious fact whether, in spite of Michael's general predilection/penchant for western education, culture, literature and civilization (which he manifested quite explicitly, and, gave vent to, on numerous occasions), somewhere in the need to fall back on some indigenous ethos, a native influence somewhere? While seeking the help of the foreign Muses continuously to endow him with literary creativity, name, fame, recognition as an English writer; was he somewhere direly in search of some nativity/native essence/influence, and an indigenous Muse, to provide him with the necessary inspiration? Did he somewhere get tired of practising foreign languages, literatures to understand the true value of his own literature, and culture at last, and be enthusiastic about them? Or, did he actually believe in and talk about promoting simultaneity, co-existence of different languages and cultures, which he practised in his personal life as well; thereby earning him the status of a world poet somehow? Did he actually overlook the immense potential and richness that his own language and literature possess to pay homage blindly to other languages, literatures, as is manifested in his numerous letters? Did he somewhere get carried away by the western tide and showed disrespect to his



own literature and mother-tongue, or, were there other sides to it? A conflictual mind in both personal as well as literary inclinations, Michael is indeed a curious and contradictory case in many aspects. From his conscious decision to become converted to Christianity by Mr. Thomas Dealtry, the archdeacon of Calcutta, and yet remaining in touch with his father to come back home and live with/near him, his penchant to fly away to England leaving everything and have his life fulfilled (“Depend upon it—in the course of a year or two more—I must either be in England or cease ‘to be’ at all;—one of these must be done!”), and his simultaneous passion, love and even fear of losing touch of his own mother-tongue, his profound knowledge of the Sanskrit and an abhorrence of the same school, Michael’s contradictions never seem to cease.

Essential Conflict in the thoughts of Michael Madhusudan

If Michael’s decision to get baptized (by Mr. Dealtry) was his own conscious decision, even then it was not his decision to leave his father, and go to England against his wish; as is mentioned in a letter written to his friend Gourdas Basak somewhere in April, 1843:

I won’t go to England till December next. I am now about to come and live with or rather near to my father. I am not going to England with Mr. Dealtry; my father won’t allow that. (Murshid, The Heart of a Rebel Poet, 37)

But the tone of this letter gets sharply contrasted when we read another letter written on 26th November, 1842 to the same friend. This change of tone is quite baffling indeed:

I am now plotting against my own parents. (I won’t explain this, understand it yourself.) By the bye, last evening you had impudence to tell me (at M.P.’s) that you will inform my father about my intention of running away to England and thereby prevent me from doing so! If these are what really you think, you are no friend of mine, I can assure you. If these are your sentiments, you would be damned! Perhaps, you think I am very cruel, because I want to leave my parents. Ah! My dear! I know that, and I feel for it. But ‘to follow poetry,’ (says A. Pope) ‘one must leave father and mother.’ (Murshid, The Heart of a Rebel Poet, 30)

Again, one wonders whether this is the same Michael from the last letter (who was planning to go to England by leaving behind his parents); is vigorously, frantically trying to search and clutch his Bengali roots (because he felt losing touch with his Bengali) in another letter written to Gourdas Basak on 18th February, 1849:

I say, old Gour Dass Bysack! Can’t you send me a copy of the Bengali translation of the Mahabharat by Casidoss as well as a ditto of the Ramayana—Serampore edition. I am losing my Bengali faster than I can mention. Won’t you oblige me, old friend, eh, old Gour Dass Bysack?

As an equivalent, end the following to Bp’s College, you will get all the books I have left behind me. Cut off the above and send it in a cover. Now, don’t disappoint. You can easily ship the books or get them sent to the care of some house of agency here. (Murshid, The Heart of a Rebel Poet, 63)

So, we can see that there is an essential conflict in Michael Madhusudan Dutta which never really allowed him to stay quiet, and, rather let him to be the just the opposite; contradictory, turbulent. There is a strange unease always working on him, probably stemming from his conflict-ridden personal life and unconventional rebellious temper, which also had its corresponding effect on his literary career and thinking as well. As is usual with him, we can trace Michael’s conflict/dilemma regarding the status of the then Bengali language and literature in his various critical writings. As a person whose mother-tongue is Bengali, he saw many lacunas in the concerned language and literature, but at other times he viewed abundant possibilities in the same. A letter written to Mr. Gangooly in August, 1860, shows Michael lamenting the



shortcomings of Bengali drama, as compared to the great Shakespearean plays:

Look at the splendid Shakespearean Drama. If you leave out *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet* and perhaps one or two more, what play would deserve the name of *Romantic*? Romantic in the sense in which Sacoontala is Romantic? In the great European Drama you have the stern realities of life, lofty passion and heroism of sentiment. With us it is all softness, all romance. We forget the world of reality and dream of fairylands. The genius of the Drama has not yet received even a moderate degree of development in this country. (Murshid, *The Heart of a Rebel Poet*, 139)

But another lengthy letter written by Michael to Raj Narain Basu on 15th of May, 1860, shows him talking about the immense literary possibility that his country can offer and simultaneously his urge/keenness to do something good for own countrymen. Also it shows the nice blend of Christianity and Indian mythology working on Michael Madhusudan:

....I am going on with *Meghanad* by fits and starts. Perhaps the poem will be finished by the end of the year. I am glad you like the opening lines. I must tell you, my dear fellow, that though as a jolly Christian youth I don't care a pin's head for Hinduism, I love the grand mythology of our ancestors. It is full of poetry. A fellow with an inventive head can manufacture the most beautiful things out of it. When you get your copy of *Tilottoma* you must send me a regular Aristotelian letter about the fable, the characters, the sentiments and the language. You must also review it in such a way (publicly) as to initiate our countrymen into the mysteries of a just and enlightened criticism. What a vast field does our country now present for literary enterprise! I wish to God, I had time. Poetry, the Drama, Criticism, Romance—a man would leave a name behind him, 'above all Greek, above all Roman fame.' (Murshid, *The Heart of a Rebel Poet*, 122)

At times we find him conscious of the fact that Bengali language is somewhere suffering from an inner lack/deficiency, and, it requires a 'jolly lift' from elsewhere; as becomes manifest in a letter written to Keshab Chandra Ganguli in April, 1860:

Take my word for it, that Blank verse will do splendidly in Bengali and that in course of time, like the modern Europeans, we too shall equal, if not surpass, our classic writers. What we want at present are men of zeal, of diligence, of energy, of enthusiasm, of liberal views to give our language a jolly lift. If we have no 'genius' among ourselves, let us prepare the way for future ones. Have you ever heard of Sackville—Lord Buckhurst, born in 1527? This nobleman's play, called 'Gorboduc' first introduced to Englishmen the form of verse in which William Shakespeare wrote. My motto is, 'Fire away, my boys!' (Murshid, *The Heart of a Rebel Poet*, 115)

But elsewhere, in a letter written to Raj Narain Bose by the end of May, 1861, we find Michael appreciating the abundance of material that Bengali language offered to him while writing the second part of the *Meghanad*:

I believe you will like the second part of *Meghanad* still better, at least I have been finishing it with more care. I shall not conceal from you that some parts of it fill my heart with adulation. I had no idea, my dear fellow, that our mother tongue, would place at my disposal such exhaustless materials, and you know I am not a good scholar. (Murshid, *The Heart of a Rebel Poet*, 165)

And, this contradictory spirit seemed to torment him through and through, in various other



activities of life, and in mentality. In a letter written to Gour Das Bysack from Malta on 11th July, 1862, Madhusudan laments the lack of his own countrymen in an alien/foreign land; probably disturbed by the presence (or, attitude) of the white fellow passengers on board:

...I am at this moment floating down the famous Mediterranean Sea with the rocky coast of North Africa in view! Yesterday we were at Malta, last Sunday at Alexandria. In a few days more, I hope, we shall be in England. Just 32 days ago, I was in Calcutta! Is not this travelling with wonderful rapidity? But the journey has its dark side also. Patience, my friend, and you will hear everything. I intend drawing up a long account of the trip for the 'Indian Field' and asking the editor to send you a copy of his paper, in case you are no subscriber to it. What are doing with yourself, old fellow? I wish I had half a dozen of our countrymen on board. We would form a party by ourselves. (Murshid, *The Heart of a Rebel Poet*, 183)

Much astonished at Madhusudan's desire of having a dozen countrymen on the steamship 'Ceylon' when he was on voyage to different places of Europe, we can only wonder whether the 'dark side' of his journey and the reason of missing his countrymen abroad was the not so cordial (and, may be racist, in worst case) attitude of the white fellow passengers while travelling. But, then how came the same Michael express his willingness to stay in Europe 'a little longer', in a letter written to Gourdas Basak on 26th October, 1864? Is it also a result of his essentially contradictory spirit?:

I have neglected some terms, and will have to remain in Europe a little longer, but that is not to be regretted at all. I wish I could live here all the days of my life, with means to take occasional runs to India, to see my friends; but I am too poor for that, though you needn't have very large fortune to do all that. This is unquestionably the best quarter of the globe....This is the 'Amaravati' of our ancestral creed. Come here and you will soon forget that you spring from a degraded and subject race. (Murshid, *The Heart of a Rebel Poet*, 223)

Or, how could he talk about sending the son of Gour to Europe to train him in European education, if his own experience of staying in Europe was not so pleasant, as seems manifest in the earlier letter, dated 11th July, 1862? Is it a result of his conflicting mindset too?:

I am glad to hear that your son is getting on well. I wish to God, Gour, you would send him to Europe for his education. It would cost you about 2000 Rs a year or less. The lad is sure to get into the service under similar circumstances. If you want your boy to get in, send him here while he is young enough to be Europeanised. (Murshid, *The Heart of a Rebel Poet*, 224)

As a matter of fact, Michael's lecture *The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu* (published in 1854) probably shows the culmination of the essential conflict in him where he seems to be fully aware of the true power-mongering nature of the Anglo-Saxons on one hand, and, yet considers them indispensable to regenerate, renovate the Hindu race. This lecture shows that Michael was deeply conscious of the exploitative nature of the white colonizers:

Well, methinks, may she ask—who is this fair-haired stranger that has, in the course of a solitary century reared among us a fabric of power, the most wonderous and glorious? Who is the stranger that is lord of our sunny fields, of our shady groves, of our woody hills, of our wells of crystal water, of our mossy fountains, of our bowers of roses? Who is this stranger, for whom the most radiant diamonds are sought from the sunless depths of our mines; for whom the gold and silver, hidden in our treasure-caves, are brought forth to blush in the light of



the sun? Who is this stranger that has bound us, as it were, with chains of adamant, and whose bright sword gleams before our eyes like a fiery meteor—terrifying us into submission and humbling us to the dust? “Who is this stranger that has come to our dwelling?”—Well, methinks may she ask and wonder! (Gupta, Madhusudan Rachanabali: *Engrezi-Soho Samagra Rachana Ekkhande*, 596)

In this lecture, we find Michael opining about the dominating nature of the British Anglo-Saxon people who has captivated/conquered/subjugated India and humiliated her spirit:

I need not, I repeat, waste your time with a lengthened narrative of the advent of the Anglo-Saxon to this broad, this magnificent land of the sun; nor need I dwell on his brilliant career, his wonderous achievements, his proud triumphs. Behold him here, sceptered and crowned—with his feet on the jewelled neck of fallen Hindustan! Verily the destiny of this stranger that has come to our dwelling—is a mysterious destiny! (Gupta, Madhusudan Rachanabali: *Engrezi-Soho Samagra Rachana Ekkhande*, 599)

Also, the vivid description of the heavy chariot-wheels of the Anglo-Saxon white colonizers marching on to the glorious path of victory over the hapless colonized people in an unimpeded, unobstructed way, becomes quite captivating in the sonorous language of Madhusudan:

I need not dwell on the career of Clive, that basest, that grandest of Indian Statesman, how he went forth making the path straight, levelling and beating down inequalities, that the chariot-wheels of Victory and of conquest might roll on unimpeded: I need not call to your mind the brilliant triumphs, the wonderous achievements which annihilated the turbulent and restless Maharatta, paled the bloodred glare of the tremendous Crescent, humbling the soaring pride of the Rajpoot, drove the wild and wily Goorka to the solitude of his mountain-girt home, razed to the ground the structure which the Lion of the North—prophetically named—when an helpless infant in his nurse’s arms—“the Victorious in war.” (Gupta, Madhusudan Rachanabali: *Engrezi-Soho Samagra Rachana Ekkhande*, 598-599)

But still, according to Michael Madhusudan, we need the aid of the British people, the Anglo-Saxons, because we have become fallen beings; once majestic, but now disgraced, due to ‘centuries of servitude and oppression’, predominance of superstition, and, ‘the furious waves of fanaticism. And we, as a race inevitably need regeneration. And, this regeneration, renovation can only happen through the Anglo-Saxon race:

It is the mission, and mark my words, ye manly sons and ye fair daughters of the Anglo-Saxon, it is the glorious mission of the Anglo-Saxon to regenerate, to renovate the Hindu race! The trumpet-call of the Anglo-Saxon, is destined to rouse from his grave the Hindu, to a brighter, a fairer existence; the mystic wand of the Anglo-Saxon, is destined to break the dreamless slumber which now curtains him round....I say, it is the mission of the Anglo-Saxon race to renovate, to regenerate the Hindu. (Gupta, Madhusudan Rachanabali: *Engrezi-Soho Samagra Rachana Ekkhande*, 605)

While communicating with an old friend through an exchange of letters, written from Madras (dated 19 March 1849), we find Madhusudan becoming satiric, referring to the oddity of being clad in European dress:

As for me, I am a poor ‘usher’ in a poor school—viz. ‘the Madras Male Asylum’ for the children of Europeans and their descendents’;--all my pupils are



Europeans and East Indians. I dress like them, both on account of my good lady, and the situation I hold. Did you ever see me in my European clothes? I make a passable 'Tash feringee'. (Murshid, The Heart of a Rebel Poet, 65)

Also, regarding the extent of English influence on him, Michael shows his limitations/reservations in a letter written to Gour around Mid-July, 1858:

In matters literary, old boy, I am too proud to stand before the world, in borrowed clothes. I may borrow a necktie, or even a waist coat, but not the whole suit. (Murshid, The Heart of a Rebel Poet, 107)

But the same letter written by Michael shows him inclining towards the western ideas and modes of thinking:

I am aware, my dear fellow, that there will, in all likelihood, be something of a foreign air about my drama; but if the language be not ungrammatical, if the thoughts be just and glowing, the plot interesting, the characters well maintained, what care you if there be a foreign air about the thing? Do you dislike Moore's poetry because it is full of orientalism? Byron's poetry for its Asiatic air? Carlyle's prose for its Germanism? Besides, remember that I am writing for that portion of my countrymen who think as I think, whose minds have been more or less imbued with western ideas and modes of thinking; and that it is my intention to throw off the fetters forged for us by a servile admiration of everything Sanscrit. (Murshid, The Heart of a Rebel Poet, 107)

Again a letter written to Gourdas on 26th January, 1865, shows him as a devotee/votary of the mother-tongue, engaged in the mission of enriching it:

....I have had strength of mind and resolution to make the very best use of my misfortune in learning the three great continental languages, viz., Italian, German and French languages, which are well worth knowing for their literary wealth. You know my Gour, that the knowledge of a great European language is like the acquisition of a vast and well cultivated estate—intellectual of course. Should I live to return, I hope to familiarize my educated friends with these languages through the medium of our own. After all, there is nothing like cultivating and enriching our own tongue. Do you think England, or France, or Germany or Italy want poets or Essayists? I pray God, that the noble ambition of Milton to do something for his mother-tongue and his native land may animate all men of talent among us. I there be anyone among us anxious to leave a name behind him and not pass away into oblivion like a brute, let him devote himself to his mother-tongue. (Murshid, The Heart of a Rebel Poet, 240)

So, we find Michael continually torn between conflicting emotions. His mind continually reached out to Europe, the western countries and their different languages for the sake of enrichment/betterment may be; but at heart he was never really able to forget his mother-tongue, and cut off his roots from her. The same duality is also manifest in his going to pursue a law course in England, while having a penchant/passion/inclination for literary activity, which can be seen reaching its height in a letter written around February, 1862 to Raj Narayan Basu:

But I suppose, my poetical career is drawing to a close. I am making arrangements to go to England to study for the Bar and must bid adieu to the Muse! (Murshid, The Heart of a Rebel Poet, 178)

Probably, this very conflict/tension/dilemma of Madhusudan also got reflected manifestly in his various literary works too; i.e., in sonnets like 'Bangabhasha' ('The Language of the Bengal'), or, lyrics like 'Bangabhumir Proti' ('To My Native Land'), or, Bengali farce writings like 'Ekei Ki



Bole Savyata' ('Is this called Civilization?'), 'Buro Shaliker Ghare Row' ('Ro on the Old Man's Neck'), and even in some of his English poems. Did Michael manifest his predisposition for England explicitly in his English poem, 'Poem no: 08'? :

I

I sigh for Albion's distant shore,
Its valleys green, its mountains high;
Tho' friends, relations, I have none
In that far clime, yet, oh! ...

II

My father, mother, sister, all
Do love me and I love them too,
Yet oft the tear-drops rush and fall
From sad eyes like winter's dew.
And, oh! I sigh for Albion's stand

As if she were my native-land! (Michael Madhusudan Dutt's English Poems)

And, if he manifested his predisposition for England in 'Poem no: 08', then, in 'King Porus', we find the same Michael lamenting the lack of a spirited King Porus to fight for India's freedom from British oppression in his time:

But where, oh! Where is Porus now?
And where the noble hearts that bled
For Freedom—with the heroic glow
In patriot-bosoms nourish'd—
Hearts, eagle-like that recked not Death,
But shrank before foul Thralldom's breath?
And where art thou—fair Freedom!—thou—
Once goddess of Ind's sunny clime! (Gupta, Madhusudan Rachanabali: Engrezi-Soho Samagra Rachana Ekkhande, 446)

Probably, it is his contradictory spirit which is at work when he tried to portray two opposing viewpoints in two Bengali farces; namely *Buro Shaliker Ghare Ro* (published in 1859) and *Ekei ki Bale Savyata* (published in 1862). While *Buro Shaliker Ghare Ro* castigates the hypocrisies and sanctimonies of a conservative religious rural Bengali society, caught in the web of caste, old belief systems with an antipathy for the cultural change brought by the English education (well portrayed through the protagonist Bhaktaprasad Babu, who despite his old age is severely addicted to women, especially the young and beautiful ones, irrespective of religion or class); *Ekei Ki Bole Savyata* lambasts the evil sides of the English education among the urban youth (portrayed through the character of Naba Babu who has imbibed all the bad things of English education and gulped them down to his throat with facility; like boozing, carousal, going to the prostitutes etc in the name of liberalization), both of which are extreme and bad. Madhusudan, through these two farces actually tried to make us aware of the two extremes and wanted us to maintain a balance. We do not want the pretences of a hypocritical follower of Vishnu like Bhaktaprasad Babu, who tells his beads and eats only boiled sunned rice and ghee every Monday to internally covet, buy and possess a woman some other time:

Bhakta: (soliloquy) Ha! It seems that the day would not end today. (yawning)
God! All is your wish. Puti says that it is very difficult to get that lass Panchi, what a sad thing indeed! Eh! I could not manage such a golden-lotus. After conquering the entire world inclusive of the oceans, Arjuna ultimately got defeated by Pramila! Whatever, now that I have possessed



the wife of Haneef, that too is a thing to celebrate and enjoy. That lass is not bad looking, of a tender age, and, gets tottered and unbalanced every now and then, as it were, by the sheer weight of the newly fermented wine of youth. The Hindu scripture tells that even if you get a bitch in youth-time, you'll consider yourself lucky! (Dutta, *Buro Shaliker Ghare Row: A Farce*, 9, translation mine)

Neither do we want a social reformist like Naba Babu from *Ekei Ki Bole Savyata*, who only knows carousal 'enjoyment' as the key to freedom, and drinking as way to true liberation:

Naba: Gentlemen, the name of this meeting is Gyantarangini Sabha—we all are members of it—we meet here with a view to gaining knowledge—and we are jolly good fellows.

Everyone: Hear, hear, we are jolly good fellows.

Naba: Gentlemen, all of us are born in Hindu families, but we have become free by unfettering ourselves from superstition by virtue of our knowledge; we refuse to bow down to idolatry, the darkness of our ignorance has been removed by the lamp of knowledge; now I only pray that you people try for the social reformation of this country by collecting your head and mind together.

Everyone: Hear, hear.

Naba: Gentlemen, educate your daughters—give them freedom—differentiate according to caste—and get the widows remarried—then, and only then, our beloved nation of India shall be able to compete with civilized countries like England—otherwise not!

Everyone: Hear, hear.

Naba: But gentlemen, now this country is a vast jail for us; only this house is our liberty hall or our building of freedom; here all of you do whatever you feel like. Gentlemen, in the name of freedom, let us enjoy ourselves. (Sits)

Everyone: Hear, hear,--hip hip hurray, hu-rray; liberty hall—be free—let us enjoy ourselves.

Naba: Hey Balai, serve once to all.

Balai: Ok, come all (everyone drinks).

Naba: Then, the dancing should commence. Come; open the ball, my beauties. (Dutta, Michael Madhusudan, *Ekei Ki Bale Savyata*, 24, translation mine)

Madhusudan, in spite of his Christianization could not bear the profligacy and debauchery that the westernized urban people of his time (like Naba Babu) did plunge into, which can only come from a superficial/cheap imitation of the West:

Naba: (soliloquy) Damn your master—how long will the old fool survive? As long as I am alive, I would not let this committee to abolish. Let the old fellow die, then who the hell can say anything to me? Ha, ha, ha, wont I enjoy myself? (loudly) bring—bring drinks. (Dutta, Michael Madhusudan, *Ekei Ki Bale Savyata*, 31, translation mine)

So, we have the warning sounded by Madhusudan at the end of the farce:

Harakamini: The shameless fellows moreover dare to say, that we have become civilized like the sahibs. Oh my ill-fate! Can one be civilized by indulging in scandalous things by eating meat and drinking?—Is this called civilization? (Dutta, Michael Madhusudan, *Ekei Ki Bale Savyata*, Translation mine, 34)



Conclusion

Michael Madhusudan Dutta's life and works reveal a profound psychological conflict between his Anglicized identity and his deep, unresolved connection to his native roots. This duality permeates his creative works, where themes of cultural dislocation and identity crisis recur. Finally, Madhusudan's legacy is not just that of a Westernized poet but of a tormented visionary caught between two worlds; one he embraced outwardly and another he could never fully abandon inwardly. His life exemplifies the enduring struggle of colonial intellectuals torn between assimilation and belonging.

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