

Retelling the Ramayana: Meghnadbadh Kabya and the Dawning of a National Consciousness

Abhay Kumar Roy

Part-Time Lecturer, Department of English (P.G.), Malda College, Malda

Received: May 27, 2018

Accepted: July 13, 2018

ABSTRACT

The present paper is an attempt to explore Madhusudan Dutt's revisionist approach to the epic Ramayana as an artistic way of imagining the subjugation of the Indians by the Colonizers and the way his Meghnadbadh Kabya contributes to the dawning of a national consciousness in the nineteenth century Bengal and India at large.

Keywords: Retelling, Ramayana, National Consciousness, Meghnadbadh Kavya, Nineteenth Century

Contact with western culture and education facilitated the social and religious reformation in Bengal and India at large in the nineteenth century. Luminaries like Raja Rammohan Roy, Henry Vivian Derozio, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Rabindra Nath Tagore and many others with their wealth of talent and expertise took the initiative of reforming the society. Literature in the nineteenth century Bengal played a major role in re-defining the concept of culture, nation and national consciousness. In so doing, it ushered in the "Bengal Renaissance". Retelling of the great epics, *Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*, in the nineteenth century opened up new vistas of cultural nationalism. The "mythopoeic" approach to literature re-built a new world with its own cultural vision which laid the foundation of a new era. On one hand this approach provides the opportunity to comment on or subvert some established notions regarding heroism, hero-worship, masculinity, femininity, the domestic spaces and at large an entire cultural code. On the other, it rekindles a national consciousness full of patriotic fervour. This paper is an attempt to re-read Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Meghnadbadh Kabya* and shows how this retelling of *Ramayana* initiates a dawn of national consciousness.

Meghnadbadh Kabya, "on the whole the most valuable work in modern Bengali literature" (Wikipedia.org) as Bankim Chandra has called it, is a ballad in nine different 'sargas' or parts modelled on Milton's *Paradise Lost*. As the title suggests, it is based on the demise of Meghnad, son of Ravana in *Ramayana*. Ravana stole the wife of Rama in his absence, and Rama with his brother Lakshmana invaded Lanka with a large monkey-army. The first 'sarga' opens in Ravana's palace. Ravana is sunk in sorrow at the news of Birvahu's demise. Ravana laments the death of all great warriors who have fallen fighting against Ram. The lights of Lanka are extinguished one by one and the flowers faded. At his request the wounded soldier who had given him at the sad message recounts once more the heroic deed of Birvahu in a spirited and martial description of the war which rouses Ravana from his grief. Chitrangada reproached Ravana for his failure to protect the "jewel", his son, she entrusted him. Second 'sarga' shows Indra and Sachi in Kailasa to pray for the defeat and death of Meghnad and the safety of Rama. Uma repairs to her husband Shiva, interrupts him in the midst of his devotions with the help of Love, and extorts a promise that Lakshmana with the help of the goddess Maya would kill Meghnad the next day. 'Sarga' three tells of Meghnad's wife Pramila's safe passage through Rama's army so that she can join her husband in Lanka. The fourth 'sarga' describes Sita guarded in the Asoka wood in Lanka, and though a long flashback recalls the story of her abduction. In the fifth 'sarga', Maya, the goddess of illusion and trickery-engages Svapna-debi (the goddess of dreams) to visit Laksman in his sleep and instruct him to go to the temple of Chandi in Lanka: it is through her grace that he will kill Meghnad. When Lakhsman arrives at the temple, he finds Maya herself on throne there. She gives him Siva's weapons and tells him to go with Bibhisan to the Nikumbhila place of sacrifice where Meghnad is worshipping Agni. She will make them invisible by covering them with "maya-jaal" or illusion. Lakhsman must kill unarmed Meghnad there. The sixth book describes the death of Meghnad. Lakhsmana dressed in celestial armour and accompanied by Bibhisan goes to Lanka to where Meghnad is engaged in worship. Meghnad throws a cup which strikes Lakhsmana on the forehead on which he falls in a swoon. Maya revives him and Lakhsmana kills him. In seventh 'sarga' Shiva is affected at the death of Meghnad and sends a messenger to fill Ravana with his prowess to give him a day for revenge. Ravana is intent on killing Lakhsmana. Kartikeya retires wounded and smiling when it is whispered to him that Shiva

had filled Ravana with his own prowess. Ravana finds out Lakshmana and they both engage in a dubious combat. Lakshmana falls like a falling star. Eighth 'sarga' shows Rama bemoaning the death of Lakshmana. With the permission of Uma, Shiva sends Maya to take Rama to the realm of shades where Rama's father tells him of a medicine by which Lakshmana is eventually saved. The last 'sarga' describes the funeral of Meghand. Pramila mounts the pyre with the corpse of her lord after taking an affecting farewell of her maids and companions and Ravana busts into an exclamation of bitter grief at the loss of the bravest of warriors and the dearest of sons.

When William Radice raises the question-"Is it too far- fetched to suggest that this reflects the shameful subjugation of Hindu India by the alien, outcaste British?" (163)- arguably, the answer is no. Meghnad Badh Kavya was published in its entirety in 1861. That was only four years after the suppression by the British of the Indian Mutiny. He might well have shared the view of the-then Bengali elites that the decaying Hindu culture is in desperate need of renovation. In his lecture entitled "The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu" Dutt saw it as "the solemn mission of the Anglo-saxon to renovate, to regenerate, to civilize-or, in one word, to Christianize the Hindu!" (qtd. in Radice 163). Therefore, it is not impossible to believe that "at a subconscious, creative level the glory and futile heroism of the Raksasas" (Radice 163) should have been associated in Madhusudan's mind with subjugated Hindus.

However, the thing to be said with certainty is that the narrative of the ballad captures the "insider/outsider" dichotomy in a dramatic manner. The heroic resistance of the "insiders", the Rakshasa clan, to the advancement of the "outsider", Rama and Lakshmana with a large monkey army is presented in a grandiloquent manner. This is evident when in the first 'sarga' the messenger describes the way Birvahu fought against Rama:

How shall I describe the heroism of Virbahu? Bearing
his bow, the mammoth hero burst through the ranks
of the enemy,
Like a must elephant through a clump of reeds. My heart
still shudders, remembering that fearful uproar!
I have heard, Rakshas lord, the booming of the clouds,
The roaring of the lion, the crashing of the ocean's
Waters; I have seen,
Sire, swift lightning chasing the wind. But never have I heard,
In the three worlds, dreadful rattling twanging of
bowstings like to this! Never have I seen such
terrifying arrows!

.....
Virbahu! Who count how many enemies died? (Bk. I, 144-63)
Again, the same heroic resistance is echoed when Meghnad said to Ravana, his father:
He said: 'O Lord of the Raksha race, is it true that
I have heard,
That Raghav has died, and then revived? This sorcery,
Father, I cannot understand! But give me your
permission to uprootand branch that miscreant
today! (Bk. I, 729-33)

The motherland is above all and death of Birvahu will not diminish spirit of Ravana. Doesn't matter how much worried mother Chitrangada is. She has the fortitude to bid her another son to war though with tears in her eyes.

Madhusudan Dutt finds a shadow of Hector of troy in Meghnad. This exposure of heroism shaped a national consciousness- a patriotic fervour and a sense of duty towards the motherland which is in danger. The narrative of the ballad inspires the countrymen to break the stupor and collectively work towards a national cause.

This sense of patriotism and heroic resistance to the 'alien' power is exhibited through the women as well. Pramila, the wife of Meghnad, is disconsolate at the absence of her and longs to leave her country seat and repair to Lanka where her lord had gone. But the way lies through Rama's army. Still she is determined to make her way through Rama's army. And the fierceness Nrimundamalani exhibits on behalf of her mistress Pramila in her confrontation with Hanuman adds grandeur to the text:

Bring Sita's husband here quickly, you villain! Who is
interested in you,

Small fly that you are? We do not choose to use our weapons
on creatures like you. Does a lioness fight with a jackal? (Bk III, 189-92)

Again, Nrimundamalini challenged Rama into a battle:
Take bow and arrow if you wish, sir, or shield or sword
or club;

And we constantly practise wrestling! Whatever means
you like, lord-

But hurry: my lady is making her army wait merely on your
permission, like a huntress holding back a leopardess,
champing to attack a herd of deer she has seen. (Bk. III, 322-28)

At Pramila's command, her maids and attendants, all valiant warriors, conceal or heighten their charms by donning armour and grasping the martial spear and martial music proclaim the march of the proud heroines. The whole ballad is replete with the most gorgeous description of the haughty grace, the pride of deportment, the splendour of queenly charms which mark the female warriors, whose eyes dart a keen lustre than the spears which they bear. "Rama will not fight with women, he willingly and even respectfully lends a passage, and the radiant file of valour and beauty pass by, illuminating the darkness of the night. Rama, struck with the sight, can scarcely believe that it was not a gorgeous dream" (Romesh Chundra Dutt 180).

What is projected through the character of Pramila is a consciousness that women too have a great role to play as far as the duty towards the country is concerned. She becomes an archetype of "birangana" or female bravery carrying forward the legacy of heroism exhibited by heroines like Camilla of *Aeneid*, Clorinda of *Jerusalem Delivered* and the great women warriors of Amazon. Pramila with her real-life counterpart Rani Lakshmi Bai who died while defending the mother land, entered the national consciousness providing "agency" to women.

This brings in the issue of hero and hero-worship in the text which is associated with national consciousness. The idea of heroism is always discussed only in relation to that of the masculine power. It is always the male who is worshipped as a hero, arousing the wonder of the onlooker by his magnificent and grand appearance. But this idea is subverted in the text when Bibhishan and Rama talked about the departing Pramila:

'Look at Pramila's strength, look outside, my lord!
I do not know who, in battle, could match these women,
Awesome as Durga when she fought against Raktabij!
Ram replied, 'When I saw how the messenger looked
I qualified in my heart,
Great Rakshas! I gave up the fight forthwith! To stir up
such a tigress would be madness;

Come, my friend, let us see the wife of your nephew.' (Bk. III, 355-63)

Meghnad Badh Kavya also shaped and inserted domestic values into the national consciousness. The "national cause" demands the sacrifice of his "innumerable sons" which Ravan meets but with a heavy heart. The clash in his psyche between a king and a father finds beautiful dramatic expression in the text. Besides being the "Rakkhas-kulopoti" (the demon king), unlike in *Ramayana*, Ravana becomes the emblem of a loving father who is grief stricken and, at the same time, furious for the demise of his son:

...O son, O Virbahu,
Crest-jewel of heroes! By what sin have I lost such a
treasures as you? O harsh Fate,
What sin did you see in me to steal this treasure? Oh
alas, how can I bear this pain? (Bk. I, 94-98)

Meghnad is a responsible son, a loving husband and a great warrior all in one. He is ready to do anything to save the honour of his father. He is respectful to his mother and even assures her with hope for a brighter future. The love-bond between Meghnad and Pramila is beautifully projected when Meghnad is preparing to leave for the temple:

...The hero smiled,
Joyously flung his arms round lotus-faced Pramila.
'Alas, lord,'
She said, 'I thought I would go with you to the place of
Sacrifice- that I would then dress you for battle.

What can I do? My mother-in-law insists on confining
me to her palace. But I could not stay without one
more sight of your feet! (Bk. V, 542-49)

This is also a familiar image of a traditional Indian household where a woman is torn between her love for the husband and her duty towards the rest of the family. Pramila too appears with her various selves- a loving wife, a responsible daughter in law and a patriot-warrior. Chitrangada embodies the image of an affectionate mother always worried and praying for the well-being of her “jewel”s, her sons. Bibhisana becomes an embodiment of the “black sheep” in the family. Meghnaad castigates him evoking the familiar image of castigation of the “black sheep” in the family by the family members. However, Meghnaad does not forget that he is an elder and should be given respect. In this way the values of a domestic household are exhibited in the text and raised to the level of a national culture.

It should never go unconsidered that the values of hospitality are upheld in the text. Sita is abducted and kept in Lanka. But the text never mentioned any harm done to Sita in Lanka. Neither Ravan nor any other Rakshasas are shown to even appear before Sita. She is left on her own. Even in a situation when Ravan is losing his children in the hands of Rama and Lakshmana, he does not lose his sanity and take his revenge by harming Sita. Is it because she is an “atithi” (guest) in Lanka? Well Meghnaad’s words to Lakshmana give us enough reason to consider so: You are the enemy of the Rakshasas, yet you are now a/guest. Let me put on my armour” (190).

Meghnaad expected same treatment from Lakshmana for such is the Kshatriya code of conduct:

It is not the custom of warriors to fight an unarmed
enemy; this rule, O excellent hero,
Is not unknown to you. You are a Kshatriya: what more
need I say? (Bk. VI, 480-84)

But Lakshmana is not going to miss the opportunity to kill Meghnaad. This scene, therefore, is reminiscent of the idea of the “outsiders” as “atithi” and the eventual betrayal of “insiders” by such “outsiders”. This concept became a part and parcel of the collective national consciousness.

Finally, the text exhibits a national consciousness torn between what William Radice has described as a tension between “xenophilia” and “xenophobia” (143). The text shows a kind of love/hate attitude towards the “alien” or the “outsiders”. On the one hand there is a fear of “mayabi” Rama and a resistance to him. On the other hand, there is an alliance of Bibhisana and Rama and a sense of hospitality towards the enemies. This “prophetic ambiguity” as Radice has called it is the reflection of a greater dilemma that the nation was exposed to in the nineteenth century (143). The cultural renovation was taking place under the influence of western thinkers or those who are conversant with western culture. But, interestingly, they are the same “aliens”/“outsiders” who had entered the land through deception and hypocrisy. The same tension characterizes the formation of *Meghnaad Badh Kavya* which becomes an “intertextual” space where, although Pramila embodies in her being the essence of great western heroines like Camilla and Clorinda, she mounts the funeral pyre of her husband catering to the norms of a traditional “decaying” Hindu culture. Admirer of Kalidasa and the Mahabharata though he (Madhusudan) became, Shakespeare and Milton remained his ideal, and his formal models were mostly European (Radice 145).

Works Cited:

1. Dutt, Michael Madhusudan. *Meghnaad Badh Kavya*. New Delhi: Penguin Books Ltd., 2010. Print.
2. Dutt, Romesh Chunder. *The Literature of Bengal*. London: OUP, 1877. Print.
3. Radice, William. “XENOPHILIA AND XENOPHOBIA: MICHAEL MADHUSUDAN
4. DUTT’S MEGHNAAD BADH KAVYA”. *Classics of Modern South Asian Literature*. Eds. Rupert and Ian Raeside. Germany: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 1998. Print.
5. Wikipedia contributors. “Meghnaad Badh Kavya.” Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Wikipedia,
6. The Free Encyclopedia, 17 May. 2017. Web. 1 Jun. 2017.

BIO-NOTE: Abhay Kumar Roy completed his M.A in English from University of Gour Banga in 2013. He has completed his M.Phil from University of Gour Banga in 2017. He is also a Part-Time Contractual Lecturer at the P.G. Department of English, Malda College. His research area is Contemporary Mythological Retellings. He has presented papers at various National and International seminars and has also contributed to books and journals with his writings.