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Representing the colonized selfhood: A journey towards the definition of Indianness

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The Empire is experienced textually by the present-day readers in its various forms and manifestations, The British Empire was both maintained in the past and is understood today through various forms of writing, which included but were not limited to, administrative reports, legal adaptations of sacred texts, periodicals diaries, and news advertisements etc. Further, The way the interactions and relationships between the colonizers and the colonized were documented reflects the core essence of the colonial mindset. Imperial ideas of national prowess and race pride heavily shaped Victorian literary genres, particularly novels and stories of the era.

These approaches, especially during the initial stages of the colonial contact, often incorporate in varying proportion hostility towards and willing acceptance of the alien presence. A significant feature of these responses is the knotting together of an acute sense of subjection, and its resultant urge for freedom, with a sense of grateful loyalty British rule. Faith in the colonial connection, despite understanding its iniquitous and exploitative nature, constituted the tragic essence of colonial consciousness. To the extent that this paradox was realized by the colonized, it only created a dilemma that necessitated the search for viable tactics that would have to be experimented with to express and record complex situation. As Nicholas B. Dirks in the Foreword to *Colonialism and its forms of Knowledge* by Benard S. Cohn (1997), writes:

> "The colonial state is seen as the theater for state experimentation, where historiography, documentation, certification, and representation were all state modalities that transformed knowledge into power." (p. xi)

Indian writers adopted prose to counter colonial knowledge. The new subjects and themes provided by this situation gave a new life to the already existing genre of novel writing which had until now limited themselves to existent themes. Using innovative techniques, these writers replaced magical heroes and royal romances with real-life situations. Moreover, writers like Lal Behari Day were also greatly influenced by form and content of great Indological researches going on during the first half of the nineteenth century. With orientalists like Sir William Jones, Henry Maine etc. knowing about the east became not only a matter of Anthropological and Indological study but also exploring the rich cultural, social and literary heritage of India. Social novels of this period looked beyond domestic life to address British oppression and Hindu-Muslim relations. In Bengal, both Hindu and Muslim authors exposed how British magistrates supported abusive indigo planters, while historical novels from the 1860s explored the mutual regard between the two religious communities. It is therefore, important to understand how the British attitude towards India reflected through its policies and administration shaped Indian responses to the British during the later part of the

nineteenth century and beginning of twentieth century. This paper attempts to delve into colonial consciousness through an analysis of contemporary literature. It is impossible to examine the diverse variety of literatures within the limited scope of the paper, therefore, the paper limits itself to some of significant writers of this period, namely, Lal Behari Day, Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore and Munshi Premchand, analysing some of their important novels, and, charting out a running strand which connects these writings. Also, how the novels evolve thematically till they reach their maturity with a rising awareness of nationalism evident in the novels of Premchand will be another important aspect of the paper.

It will be readily agreed that literature illumines the depths of social consciousness better than the conventional sources of the historian's raw material. What were the views of the politically conscious pioneers of literature, during this period, with regard to British rule and the question of freedom and subjection? To answer this question, it is important for us to understand the social and political situation after the Mutiny of 1857. The 1857 Mutiny shattered the decades-long British policy of favouring peasant proprietorship, replacing it with a landlord-oriented system. For fifty years, paternalist and utilitarian reformers had promoted peasant settlements—like the *ryotwari* system—to protect cultivators. However, the Oudh uprising forced a complete policy reassessment, ending the vision of a peasant-based reformed India and ushering in a *laissez-faire* approach that empowered landlords. Further, with the introduction of the Taluqdari system, the British government came to be absolutely centred around the concern for the upper classes. This led to the formation of the nexus between the taluqdar, the zamindar and the British aimed at exploiting the poor peasant which found literary expression in various novels of this period beginning from Lal Behari Day's *The Bengal Peasant* (1874) to Premchand's *Godan* (1936). By decreeing land sales for debt, British courts forced peasants into bankruptcy and turned them against the government.

Moreover, contact with the European spirit through English literature ushered in an era where literature specifically novels became a platform where social and political causes could be expressed. This revolutionized the attitude to literature and inaugurated the current phase in Indian literature. The transition of the Indian mind from medieval to modern moulds of thought and experience found its first expression in Bengali literature in Indian from the second half of the nineteenth century. As Margaret Chatterjee, in her essay titled "Social and Political ideas in nineteenth and twentieth century Bengali Literature", points out, "The ideational element to be found in the early part of the century was socio-religious and not political" (p. 261). Whether this was due to the fear of the rulers or ignorance about one's location is a matter of speculation. The allegiance of the upper middle classes to the political status quo was seen as responsible for the indifference particularly of the Bengali bhadralok to the first war of independence. However, the indigo agitation which witnessed the sufferings of the cultivators reaching their climax in the middle of the century was perceived differently. The unresolved tension between appreciation and condemnation of foreign dispensation did not render the realization of subjection less acute. But the paradox was not faced squarely in the beginning. The reality of the colonial connection was clearly seen. So was the futility of relying on the colonial masters. yet the masters were appealed to for relief and reform. This dependence was not merely pragmatic; faith in the rulers had somehow been internalized. Lal Behari Day's *Govinda Samanta* or *Bengal Peasant Life* (1874) can be seen as an instance of this peculiar positioning. Initially written to win a prize of £ 50, the novel elaborately illustrates the rural life of Bengal. The main purpose of the novelist seems to depict realistically the life and manners of Bengal peasants, their beliefs and superstitions, their joys and sorrows. There is nothing grand but "a plain and

unvarnished tale of a plain peasant, living in the plain country of Bengal... told in a plain manner" (p. 4). Along with the story of Govinda, the son of Badan, there is another sub-story of suffering and torture at the hands of people in power. The other innocent and passive sufferer in the book is Madhav who had married Govinda's sister Malti. **Unlike the Indian Zamindar in *Govinda*,** the oppressor here is a British indigo planter, Mr. Murray, who exploits Madhava by trapping him in perpetual debt just like his father. In the fierce struggle with the indigo-planter to be released from the debt, Madhav faces his destiny which was to die as he had attempted to raise voice against the exploiter. The story of Madhava and Govinda are thus similar in several ways. Both novels depict unrelenting suffering under British rule without offering traditional hope for a better future. Beyond detailing the oppressive social milieu, the stories highlight the early sparks of Indian resentment and rebellion that laid the foundation for the national movement. Furthermore, by meticulously documenting Bengali culture, customs, and traditions, the author uses a survey-like narrative style to powerfully assert the nation's cultural identity. According to Gobinda Prasad Sharma, "It is for a search for identity that in the simple and rather brief story of Govinda, the author has brought in the descriptions of Bengal households and villages, cultivations of paddy, sugarcane, and indigo, village markets where peasants assemble for their commerce, and river-ghats where village-women gather together for carrying water" (p. 39). *Bengal Peasant Life* is thus a novel with a nationalist purpose, showing how the oppression of the native feudal lords and the tyrannies of the foreign indigo-planters let loose by foreign government had reduced the pleasantry into abject poverty. However, in the novels of Bankimchandra Chatterjee, it is not the plight of the common man but the zamindar and his household which form the plot of most of his novels.

In their theme and plot Bankim's novels come closer to S.C. Dutt's novels like *The Young Zamindar* (1885) than Day's novel. Moreover, retrieving a past or constructing a past was necessary part of Bankim's novels. It was not an accident that in the latter part of the nineteenth century a few Indian novelists, began to make large scale use of historical material for writing fiction. These narratives thus document the crystallization of an emerging, though still inchoate, feeling of selfhood for the people. However, even at this time, the idea of community was still not consolidated. In Bankim's novels very often 'we' meant only the Bengalis; sometimes it extended to include all Hindus or perhaps only the upper-caste Hindus. It is noteworthy to observe that the ambivalences that one comes across are not unique to Bankim but this dual perception of society is shared by his younger contemporaries like Romesh Chandra Dutt (1848-1909). Whether there is a certain historic inevitability in this dichotomy in the English educated elite of the nineteenth century India is a question that needs to be debated before any final assumptions are made. Another significant aspect is Bankim's situation as a civil servant which was restrictive to his endeavour. The challenge for him, therefore, was to create a sense of national identity without condemning the British presence openly. For nearly three decades from the late sixties to the mid-nineties of the nineteenth century – Bankim carried out his project of building up the collective self-esteem of his people simultaneously through his novels and his discursive prose. The use of historical material that Bankim included is evident in his various novels and other prose works. For instance, in *Rajsinha*, he delineates the story of a patriotic fight against imperialist aggression. This and other such works by him clearly establish that Bankim believed in the newly awakened fervour for Indian unity and nationhood. According to S.K. Bose, Bankim's political thought demonstrates three different traits – 'liberalism, radicalism and ethical orientation' and he, through his writings, was trying to 'synthesize' these. His most acclaimed work *Anandamath* (1882) reflected the spirit of Swadeshi Movement. The plot of

the novel is based on the organization and activities of 'Santan Sena'. To them the activities of the British rulers were no better than banditary. The Sanyasi Rebellion of 1772 that took place in Purnea is used by him as the background in the novel to make people conscious because he felt that so long people were unable to remove the inertia, no political movement could be successful. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee, the documented records of the Sanyasi Rebellion gave him a convenient point where 'elements of bravery, religion and nationalism could be made to converge' (p. 45). *Anandamath* uniquely fused the concept of the mother goddess and *Shakti* with the idea of the motherland as a political unit.

Furthermore, Bankim appears to be a cautious but progressive social thinker. Thus, though, the ideals of individualism and nationalism that his novels formulated were not always reconcilable with the traditional Hindu qualities, his manner of reconstituting the past to suit the needs of the present provided a paradigm for many other writers like Rabindranath Tagore.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) belonged to a family that produced pioneering composers, painters, and poets. Tagore himself was a multi-faceted and many-splendoured genius. He was poet, philosopher, prophet, patriot, painter, musician, mystic, novelist, essayist, and educationist. Though, the genius of Rabindranath Tagore found expression in myriad ways, his novels are significant as they not only reflect his creative ability but are his statements on nationalism and selfhood as well. Tagore had witnessed the plight of the poor farmers which he variously expressed in many of his prose writings and essays like 'The City and Village', 'Co-operation' and 'Swadeshi Samaj'. He advocated the reconstruction of the village as the real independence of India, for him, rested in the villages. For him the path to national freedom lay in the attainment of selfhood. The idea of selfhood is explored him in both *Gora* (1910) and *The Home and the World* (1916). Infact, *Gora* is integral to a period of growth in India and arises out of the despair of the Indian youth during years when the Swadeshi Movement was gaining momentum. The novel's basic situation concerns a fair faced boy brought-up as an orthodox Hindu, who rejects the Brahmo Samaj but falls in lore with a Brahmo girl. Gourmohan Babu or Gora's pride perverts his nature entirely that, at times, he seems a diabolical creature, destroying himself and continually taking the rise out of the others as a compensation for his own inner weakness. His tremendous conceit and self-opinionated priggishness makes him an immediately hateful but ultimately pathetic character, poignant in his loneliness. But his chauvinism is still preferable to hypocritical conventionality of Haran Babu, the influential editor and 'Headmaster' of the school of the Brahmo Samaj. However, in Binoy, Tagore presents a balance of these two extremes. He is described as the individual who grows up through his troubles and faces up to the implication of his acts and beliefs. Though, the novel primarily revolves around the central characters who belong to the elite Bengali Bhadralok class depicting their relationships with each other and to women like Sucharita, Lalita, Anandamoyi etc., it manages to indicate that the path to freedom does not only lie in social, political and legal reforms but by a raised awareness and recognition of the self.

Moreover, the role of women in this reform is further explored in his next novel, *The Home and the World* (1916) which centres around the conflict in the minds of three sharply contrasted characters, at the time of the crisis in the affairs of India which arose from what is generally known as partition of Bengal. But the real theme of the novel is self-assertion which has intelligently been handled through the use of contemporary socio-political movements like the Swadeshi and the Boycott. The three characters, Nikhil, a sensitive landlord, Sandip, a devout and rather pugnacious nationalist and friend of Nikhil, and Bimla, Nikhil's wife, narrate their individual reactions in

relation to the crisis in which India was involved. In both these novels Tagore shows that the impact of white mastery on Indians is not merely confined to the political and economic spheres, but meant, at a deeper psychological level, the undermining of the personality structure and distorted images of the self. Moreover, within this broader set of psychological problems in Indian society under British rule, there was a special set of problems concerning men's relations with women. Thus, for Tagore, the problem of self-statement in colonial India had a dual aspect; firstly of restoring self-esteem and secondly in positioning women in their proper place. Finally, Tagore expressed his conviction, in his novels, that honour, pride and freedom would have to be restored to women if men were to win back the birthright to their own land.

A further development of a powerful nationalist movement of a consistent nationalist critique of colonialism is clearly reflected in the pages of Premchand. The critique of the economic consequences of colonialism, mounted by early nationalists, had assumed an almost axiomatic character by the beginning of the twentieth century. One may discern two levels in Premchand's portrayal of the confrontation between imperialism and nationalism. In Premchand's work there appear many faces of Indian nationalism. He shows no hesitation regarding the liquidation of the external enemy, that is, the British. Premchand's novels like *Premashram, Rangbhumi, Karmabhumi* and *Godan,* thus, depict the poor fighting both unseen foreign oppressors and internal exploiters like rajas, landlords, capitalists, and the English-educated elite. Premchand dealt directly with the theme of British rule in India in only a few non-fictional pieces. More commonly colonialism provided the backdrop and helped from the context for what he had to say. The network of the exploitative relationships drawn up by Premchand forms a pyramidal structure which in many ways is similar to the one described by Lal Behari Day in *Govinda Samanta*. However, apart from this exploitative structure, Premchand's novels primarily delineate the predicament of the most exploited, both socially and economically, i.e. the poor peasant who was increasingly becoming the essence of Indian society. This helpless figure came to be representing India through its struggle both from the native master and the foreign ruler. The importance of this figure during the struggle for freedom is evident from the fact that with the growth and evolution of the freedom struggle into mass movement with Gandhi entering the political scene, was centred around him. While *Godan* is a true representation of the Indian peasantry fighting against the zamindari system, *Karmabhumi* portrays an idealistic community solidarity that brings about reform as a consequence of its struggle. The difference in Premchand's novels here, in contrast to the one's discussed earlier, is that now the concern is struggle for independence. Premchand's portrayal of rural society thus reflects his search for a vision of a free India.

Thus, novels, from 1860s to 1940s necessitated the study of the past and present, thereby enabling a vision of the future. The way out of the past and present torment for these novels lay in the future where independence, both political and social, will lead to the attainment of selfhood. To conclude, the attempt at defining the Indian self which had begun initially as a cultural stereotype was now seen as an individual who is conscious of his/her rights and responsibilities and is seen progressing towards being free.

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