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“Sail[ing] on the Pathless Deep”: Michael Madhusudan Datta’s Dramatic Entanglements

Michael Madhusudan Datta (1824–1873) was a pioneering Indian dramatist who wrote in both English and Bengali, and the first great canonical poet of modern Bengali literature. Datta’s was a fluid, flamboyant, and rather scattered personality and he was a polyglot, being fluent in English, Bengali, Sanskrit, Tamil, Greek, Latin, Italian, and French. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, India’s first great novelist, said that “to Homer and Milton, as well as to Valmiki, he is largely indebted, and his poem [*The Slaughter of Meghnad*] is on the whole the most valuable work in modern Bengali literature.”¹ Datta’s major works, written mostly between 1858 and 1862, consist of prose drama, long narrative poems and lyrical poetry. As a nineteenth-century classicist, he handled the mythological narratives that formed his intellectual inheritance with a vigorous methodological freshness: *Meghnād Badh Kābya* (*The Epic on the Slaughter of Meghnād*, 1861), a tragic epic in nine cantos, is deemed to be his masterpiece and is path-breaking in Bengali literature both stylistically and content-wise. Though the story of its publication and reach is anything but smooth and it took some years for its nationwide recognition, Datta, with its eventual acceptance, earned for himself acknowledgment as a serious practitioner of an entirely new form of heroic poetry, which was both Homeric and Dantesque in technique and style, and yet, thematically, so fundamentally Indian, something Sri Aurobindo does in the next century with *The Life Divine*. In the words of Lord Byron, who appears to have deeply influenced

¹ This quote is taken from Sri Chinmoy (*Mother India’s Lighthouse: India’s Spiritual Leaders*. Jamaica Agni, 1971). Cf. <http://www.srichinmoylibrary.com/books/3004/1/11/index.html>. Accessed 23 July 2018.

Note: All translations, unless it is mentioned otherwise, are by the present author.

The quote in the title is taken from Act I, Scene 1 of *Sermista*, the English version, done by Datta himself, of his Bengali play *Śarmiṣṭhā* (1859): “When a merchant, noble Sovereign, sails on the pathless Deep with his argoise laden with priceless gems and gold and silver [...]?” (Michael Madhusudan Datta. *Madhusudan Racanābalī* [“Collected Works of Madhusudan”], edited by Kshetra Gupta. Kolkata: Sahitya Samsad, 2012, p. 666.)

Datta – personally and stylistically – and was often quoted by him: “I awoke one morning and found myself famous.”²

He also wrote beautiful poems about the sufferings and travails of love as articulated by women, making him one of the first writers anywhere to ‘gender’ the representation of feeling. His lyrics on the mythopoeic love of Radha and Krishna are considered a significant improvement, both structurally and in content, on the medieval corpus of Bengali *Vaiṣṇava*³ poetry. He has also bequeathed to Bengali literature a cluster of one hundred and two sonnets and provides the modern reader with a rather disarmingly opinionated glimpse on nineteenth-century Calcutta through his countless letters, mostly to friends and well-wishers, which he wrote in English. As a playwright, he laid the foundations of modern Bengali dramaturgy, not only through the introduction of Europhone generic and technical novelties but also through the reconfiguration of classical Sanskrit mythopoeic constellations as tropes of the socio-cultural regeneration of colonial Bengal and India. Though an exhaustive research design, which could do justice to the immense versatility of Datta’s oeuvre, is beyond the scope of the current essay, one would like to indicate – admittedly in a rather prolegomenous fashion – the depth and fecundity of Datta’s interweaving of the ‘historical’ with the ‘mythological.’ Thus, it could be possible to theorize his dramaturgical

² This quote is taken from Byron’s “*memoranda*,” as attributed to the poet by Thomas Moore (*Life of Lord Byron: With His Letters and Journals*, vol. II. London: John Murray, 1854. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16570/16570.txt>. Accessed 23 July 2018). Byron was referring to the critical acclaim, which was not unlike that received by Datta for the *Meghnād Badh Kābya*, accorded to the first two cantos of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, a work quite popular in Datta’s intellectual circle.

³ The word *vaiṣṇava* means “adherent and worshipper of Viṣṇu,” one of the so-called Hindu Holy Trinity, who is supposed to be the upholder of the Cosmic System, being its preserver and protector: “Vaiṣṇavism has developed the most variegated and richest mythology of all the schools of Hinduism. At the core of Vaiṣṇavism, however, is Lord Viṣṇu as Savior, a belief that, again, has found expression in countless myths” (Klaus K. Klostermaier. *A Survey of Hinduism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007, p. 228). The *vaiṣṇava*-s, cutting across their sectarian dogmatic specificities, believe in the primacy of the divine love between Śrī Viṣṇu, as Himself and in his various *avatāra*-s (quotidian/mortal reincarnations) like Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, and His Divine Consort, Śrī Lakṣmī, as a determinant of the love between the Deity and humanity. Hence, *vaiṣṇava*-s, throughout the history of Indian literature, have come up with considerable works of lyrical poetry and verse-drama that locate amorous love, especially between divine and semi-divine figures, within the normative discourse of religiosity. Eastern India had seen a number of major epics, like Jayadeva’s twelfth-century text *Gitagovindam*, being composed in the medieval period. Datta, despite his conversion to Christianity, appreciated the immense literary value of this poetic inheritance and used and reworked the rich poetic techniques and metaphoric and metonymic schemes handed down through it. At the same time, he also introduced new Europhone literary forms in Bengal, like the blank verse in his play *Sermista*.

and broader literary-cultural contributions to the process of canonical consolidation in post/colonial India through the prism of cultural historiography. In this context, his work in reconfiguring classical Sanskritic myths and other literary narratives into 'vernacular' canonical texts in early-colonial Bengal is significant both in terms of the development of what may be called 'colonial modernity' and the gradual evolution of national/ist cultural expression/s. Datta's plays and his dramaturgical praxes, thus, serve as discursive models for the entangled process through which history and drama permeate each other.

Datta's education had started at an old village mosque, where he was taught Persian, as was the custom of the time. He was a brilliant and creative student, who was reputed to be "a precocious child with a gift of literary expression."⁴ An early exposure to English education and European literature at home and in Calcutta molded his literary tastes on Anglophone lines, making him take on English tastes, manners, and intellectual attitudes. His teachers at Hindu College, Calcutta, the cultural incubator of the Western-educated Bengali middle class, especially Captain David Richardson (1801–65), a Professor of English and an active Freemason and Utilitarian, were a significant formative influence, and Datta adopted his support of Thomas B. Macaulay's "Minute upon Indian Education" (1835) without, apparently, understanding its full significance. Capt. Richardson seems, as Sivanath Sastri notes, to have become "so intoxicated while discussing Shakespeare that his students came to believe firmly that there was no poet equal to Shakespeare and no literature equal to that of the English."⁵ Datta, though belonging to the Hindu landed aristocracy – having been born to an esteemed lawyer and his wife – converted to Christianity in 1843 at the Fort William Church, despite staunch family-opposition and social opprobrium, and the resultant alienation, and took the added first name Michael.

Datta dreamt of immense fame if he went abroad to England, to the part of the planet that, from his adolescence, he was convinced he belonged to, not least due to what he – and many others like him – saw as the spirit of fresh intellectual and cultural inquiry. He drew the conclusion that conservative Hindu society in early nineteenth-century Bengal and, by extension, India had not yet evolved sufficiently to understand and appreciate a spirit of rationalistic inquiry and intellectual eclecticism. This, he opined, would hinder his chance of public appreciation in India. He, initially, firmly believed that the 'free thinking' and post-Enlightenment West would be more appreciative of his talents and composed his

4 Zinia Mitra. *Indian Poetry in English: Critical Essays*. New Delhi: PHI Learning, 2012, p. 35.

5 Sivanath Sastri. *Rāmtanu Lāhiḍi o Tatkālīn Banga Samāj* ["Ramtanu Lahiri and the Contemporary Bengali Society"], edited by Barid Baran Ghosh. 1904. Calcutta: New Age, 2009, p. 113.

early works – both poetry and drama – almost entirely in English. Given their lack of success, he later shifted, though with initial reluctance, to Bengali. This shift could have been influenced by, among other things, his second partner Henrietta, “a Frenchwoman deeply enamored of Bengal and the Bangla language.”⁶ Also, when one of his friends had presented *The Captive Ladie*, Datta’s best-known English narrative poem, to John E. Drinkwater Bethune, the then Secretary for Education in Bengal, this is what the latter had commented:

he could render far greater service to his country and have a better chance of achieving a lasting reputation for himself, if he will employ the taste and talents, which he has cultivated by the study of English, in improving the Standard and adding to the stock of the poems of his own language [...].⁷

This seems to have produced a lasting impression on him, as he was already asking a friend, on 14 February 1849, to send him “a copy of the Bengali translation of the Mahabharat by Casidoss as well as a ditto of the Ramayana, – Serampore edition.”⁸ He began to consider the scope of expanding and enriching his literary tastes with the study of major European and Indian languages, ancient and modern, and wrote to his friend, on 18 August 1849: “[...] I devote several hours daily to Tamil. [...] Here is my routine; 6 to 8 Hebrew, 8 to 12 School, 12–2 Greek, 2–5 Telugu and Sanskrit, 5–7 Latin, 7–10 English. Am I not preparing for the great object of embellishing the tongue of my fathers?”⁹

Datta studied at the Bishop’s College, in Calcutta, after he converted and could no longer continue at the Hindu College. However, despite an added emphasis on Classical Greek, Latin, and Hebrew in the former, both these pioneering institutions had curricula, taught mostly by British educationists, that were deeply rooted in the Europhone tradition. It is also necessary to point out that though his intense passion for European literature and culture and undying aspiration towards ‘Englishness’ may have driven him towards Christianity, he genuinely did not, as he wrote to his friend Gour Dass Bysack on 15 May 1860, seem to have “care[d] a pin’s head for Hinduism,[despite] lov[ing] the grand mythology of our ancestors.”¹⁰ One could argue, with Amit Chaudhuri, that, “in India, such

6 Sheldon Pollock. *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, p. 228.

7 Datta, *Racanābali*, p. xv.

8 Ibid., Letter 36, p. 510.

9 Ibid., Letter 42, p. 516.

10 Ibid., Letter 58, p. 525.

journeys and disquiets [with cultural and linguistic inheritances] largely begin”¹¹ with Datta. He calls Datta “the first figure to give literary history in India, in effect, a sense of theatre,” with “his life and practice form[ing] a parable of inner and actual exile, a negotiation between the ‘civilized’ and the ‘barbaric.’”¹²

However, it may be useful to take another look at the extent to which this exteriorized negotiation between the ‘old,’ Hindu patrimony of the early-colonial, western-educated, bourgeois Indian elites and the ‘new’ life they clearly aspire to is, in fact, a function of their pre-configuration of the discourses of secular Indian nationalism, as Chaudhuri seems to suggest. The remarkable processes of, at first, “a rejection, or disowning, of the polytheistic, idolatrous aspects of Hinduism” and, then, “of the intermittently comic, but nevertheless seminal, radicalism of Young Bengal, of the breaking of dietary and religious taboos, of social reform,” could not have – as they seem to have done, almost without much ado – led to the effective crystallization of what Chaudhuri calls “a relationship between identity, rebellion, creativity, and the subconscious.”¹³ It does seem that, in this tussle between “public acts of disowning and recovery,”¹⁴ the categorical reassertion of the older, more traditional modes of religious and cultural self-expression, though nuanced through their often, though not always, adversarial engagement with the new ideas of Europhone radicalism, points more towards the ‘old’ picking and choosing from the ‘new,’ to address the need to reinvent itself in keeping with the demands of the times. This is nowhere more self-evident than in the manner in which classical Indian drama was, in early- and mid-nineteenth century Calcutta, considerably enriched by cross-fertilization with the floating cultural material of Europhone dramatic techniques and theatergrams that had come calling with British ascendancy.

In his poetry, too, Datta takes his themes mostly from classical Indian texts, mostly Sanskrit epics like the *Rāmāyaṇa*, but often inverts the creative perspective, so as to focus on the marginalized and peripheral figures and narratives in those texts. In his best-known work *Meghnād Badh Kābya*, the first ‘modern’ Bengali epic, he takes the secondary tale of Meghanāda, the favorite son of the demon-king Rāvaṇa and an accomplished warrior, and makes him and his father the heroic figures. Meghanāda, in the original Sanskrit epic, died in battle with Rāma due to an unethical – according to epic battle-conventions – maneuver by

¹¹ Amit Chaudhuri. *Clearing a Space: Reflections on India, Literature, and Culture*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008, p. 39.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Rāma's soldiers, who were normatively seen to be fighting for T/truth and J/justice and, therefore, traditionally seen as the epic heroes despite their occasional lapses from the code of heroic conduct. According to Ashis Nandy, Datta was led to do this by his clear admiration of Rāvaṇa's "masculine vigor, accomplished warriorhood, and his sense of *realpolitik* and history; he accepted Ravana's 'adult' and 'normal' commitments to secular, possessive this-worldliness and his consumer's lust for life."¹⁵ Nandy interprets this as – in the contemporaneous context of British governmental power still being "a manageable vector within India"¹⁶ – Datta's "attempt to explain the West in Indian terms and to incorporate it in the Indian culture as an unavoidable experience."¹⁷

Thus, Datta's 'rebellion,' though clear and even abrasive, is one that seems to be more integrative than disruptive, if one does not view subversion as, necessarily, ever disruptive and a corollary to a total negation of the traditional. One sees the rebellion that Chaudhuri identifies, as mentioned above, but feels that the frames of reference, within which the romantic, even Byronic, heroism of Meghanāda is depicted, are decidedly classical Indian. If one were to venture a deconstructive reading of Datta's subtextual self-identification/s, Meghanāda, whatever be his un/just causes and actions, remains, like the poet himself, though "Christianize[d]," "Hindu".¹⁸ His prism, however, was certainly not that of a traditionalist Hindu "or at least a person treating the tradition respectfully."¹⁹ Inspired by his rebellious instincts, Datta effects numerous plot- and character-inversions in order to subvert the religious aspect of the traditional narrative, "depriving Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa of any divine halo and changing Rāvaṇa and his beloved son Meghanāda into real heroes."²⁰ In this, his work was of pioneering significance, especially in the contested domain of the secularization of the Hindu literary-mythopoeic canon "and its liberation from the traditional bonds with religion."²¹ He veritably blazed a trail for his numerous antecedents, who were shown

15 Ashis Nandy. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 20.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., p. 22.

18 Datta asserts, in the last paragraph of his long speech *The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu*, "It is the glorious mission, I repeat, of the Anglo-Saxon to renovate, to regenerate, or – in one word, to Christianize the Hindu" (*Racanābali*, p. 608).

19 Dušan Zbavitel. *Bengali Literature: A History of Indian Literature*, vol. IX, edited by Jan Gonda. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1976, p. 233.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

the exciting mimetic possibilities in the literary-cultural narratives of India's past and, crucially, how to deploy them in the modern post/colonial context.

Another theory, which needs to be engaged with before considering Datta's plays, especially points out his aversion towards "caste-based endogamous marriage"²² and ascribes his decision to convert to a move by his parents to arrange a custom-sanctioned match for him. This is, perhaps, understandable in view of his avid enthusiasm for European culture and the socio-cultural openness it had begun to generate at the time. He married Rebecca McTavish, the daughter of an indigo planter of Scottish origin, and had four children with her, as he wrote to Bysack on 20 December 1855.²³ Later, he separated from her and married Henrietta Sophia White, who is said to have been of French origin and was the daughter of a professor at the Madras Presidency College. This marriage lasted till the end of his life, even in times of dire and ceaseless poverty, often caused by his endemic insolvency, in London, Paris, Versailles, and Calcutta. This forced him to seek the support of his Calcutta-based friends and well-wishers, most notably Īśvar Candra Vidyāsāgar, the eminent Bengali Sanskritist, educational and social reformer and philanthropist.²⁴ From very early on, he had Anglophone

22 Mitra, *Indian Poetry in English*, p. 33.

23 "Yes, dearest Gour, I have a fine English Wife and four children" (Datta, *Racanābali*, Letter 44, p. 517). Vinay Dharwadker writes that she was "a Scottish inmate of the girls' hostel at the [Church of England's Madras Male and Female Orphan] Asylum" and "[d]uring the next eight years [they] had four children and lived on his limited income," which came from teaching at the boys' free day-school in the Asylum and journalism, since his father had, earlier, stopped his allowance (Pollock, *Literary Cultures*, p. 228). – This and other biographical details have been sourced from Dharwadker's essay "The Historical Formation of Indian-English Literature" (see Pollock, pp. 226–230). See also John B. Alphonso-Karkala. *Indo-English Literature in the Nineteenth Century*. Mysore: Literary Half-Yearly, University of Mysore, 1970; Amalendu Bose. *Michael Madhusudan Dutt*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1981; Kshetra Gupta. "Madhusudan Datta: Life-Story." *Racanābali*, pp. xi–xxiv.

24 Īśvar Candra Bandopādhyāy (1820–91), better known by his honorific *upādhi* (title and/or surname earned by a display of major educational aptitude and merit, especially in the field of traditional Sanskrit Studies in India) *Vidyāsāgara* (meaning "Sea of Knowledge"), was one of – often the only one – of Michael Madhusudan Datta's consistent benefactors. As their ample correspondence – between London, Paris and Versailles, where Datta had stayed at various times, and Calcutta, where Vidyāsāgar was based – shows, the latter took a personal and engaged interest in the material subsistence of Datta and his family. This was born out of Vidyāsāgar's great personal love for Datta and appreciation of the work he was doing for Bengali literature and culture, given the former's vigorous and steadfast interest in social and educational reform in India. In his personal life and belief-systems, Vidyāsāgar was a confirmed rationalist and even something of a sceptic, despite his Brahminical and traditionalist upbringing and education, and tried, throughout his life, to reconcile classical Hindu noetic and theological frameworks

socio-cultural aspirations but, later in life, he regretted this attraction to the Occident and even attempted to arrive at a stylistic balance. Many intensely emotional sonnets and other poems date from this period and he even goes on to write: “If there be any one 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. That is his legitimate sphere, his proper element.”²⁵

Datta was one of the pioneers of Bengali drama and, arguably, the most important, having played what some historians have called a ‘historical’ role in its growth and evolution. Kshetra Gupta credits him with the “establishment of the occidental dramatic idiom”²⁶ in India, with interventions in the form of introducing the first historical play, significant tragedy, and Europhone farce. His early works, including *Śarmiṣṭhā* and another play called *Ratnāvali*, literary translations like that of the *Nil Darpaṇ* by Dinabandhu Mitra and – not to overlook his primary creative self, that of a poet – poems like the *Captive Ladie*, which was written about the mother of his close friend Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, demonstrate immense intellectual sophistication. This creative achievement was not always effortless and uncomplicated, especially in the delicate negotiations that had to be carried out between the demands of Sanskritic dramaturgy. These stylistic maneuvers were, occasionally, forced upon him by considerations of audience-responses and the tastes and limitations of his patrons, notably the Belgāchiā Theatre,²⁷ which was managed by people who did not always appreciate Datta’s overt Occidentalism. In fact, in his own words, “he was too early for the age”²⁸ and his extensive introduction of European stage-techniques and generic specificities in his plays, were, more often than not, frowned upon and even derided as irreverent.

with the demands of Europhone modernity. In Bengal, his name is almost a byword for boundless philanthropy – despite great personal poverty or financial limitations – erudition, selflessness, and strength of character. Datta, in many of his letters to Vidyāsāgar and others, appears beholden to him. On 2 June 1864, he writes to the latter: “You are the only friend who can rescue me from th[is] painful position... and in this, you must go to work with that grand energy which is the companion of your genius and manliness of heart” (Datta, *Racanābali*, Letter 95, p. 555).

25 Arabinda Poddāra. *Renaissance in Bengal: Quests and Confrontations, 1800–1860*. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1970, p. 216.

26 Datta, *Racanābali*, p. xlvii.

27 The so-called “Belgāchiā Theatre,” which was located in a neighbourhood still called Belgāchiā, was one of Calcutta’s first suburban garden-house stages, which was patronized by Išvar Chandra Singha, the Rājā (King) of Pāikpārā, who became one of Datta’s staunchest friends.

28 Datta, *Racanābali*, p. xlviii.

His first play, *Śarmiṣṭhā* (1859), first written in Bengali, apparently in 1858,²⁹ though performed and “also translated into English by the author himself”³⁰ as *Sermista* in 1859, is based on an episode from the ancient Sanskrit epic, the *Mahābhārata*. It was first performed at the Belgāchiā Theatre on 3 September 1859, with the English version of the play being distributed to the European visitors, and “[t]he audience on the first night gave a very cordial reception to the play.”³¹ The play presents the story of a tussle between two women, one sacerdotal and the other aristocratic, against the backdrop of the rivalry between the Gods and Datta's Titans. It was replete with contextualized rhetorical embellishments and Datta's encoding of the same sort of assertive valorization into the demonic characters – the so-called “Asuras or Titans”³² of his English translation – in it as in the *Meghnād Badh Kābya*. It develops the well-known legendary narrative, recurring in the *Mahābhārata* and various *Purāṇa*-s,³³ of the mythical king Yayati (Yayāti, son of Nahuṣ), who was forced to age prematurely by the sage Sucracharya's (Śukrācārya) curse, and the crisis that was caused in his kingdom by his love for his wife Devayani (Devayānī), the sage's daughter, and his passion for and relationship with Sermista (Śarmiṣṭhā),³⁴ a princess of the Asuras, given an old quarrel between the two women. Datta seems to emphasize the personal

29 According to Kshetra Gupta, “it appears, after reading a letter[, dated 16 July 1858,] from Jatin-dramohan Thākur to Gaurdās Basāk, that the play had been completed” on that date. Thākur (Anglicized: Tagore) writes, in this letter, that he is “very anxious to have a perusal of your friend's manuscript drama, for I am pretty sure that he who wields his pen with such elegance and facility in a foreign language may contribute something to the meagre literature of his own country, which cannot but be prized by all” (Datta, *Racanābali*, p. xlviii).

30 Zbavitel, *Bengali Literature*, p. 232.

31 Prabhucharan Guha-Thakurta. *The Bengali Drama*. 1930. London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 78–79.

32 In the literary traditions of Sanskrit demonology, *asura*-s, *rākṣasa*-s and *daitya*-s, despite being generically categorizable as demons, refer to different levels of monstrosity and antagonism to the Vedic Gods. While only *daitya*-s, being usually of large, even gigantic proportions, could be compared to the classical European Titans, Datta seems to use these terms rather freely and interchangeably in his translation.

33 The *Purāṇa*-s (= “of ancient times”) are ancient post-Vedic and even early-medieval Sanskrit texts, which are widely accessible through culturally-significant medieval translations in almost all the major vernacular languages of the Subcontinent. They deal with the genealogies of the various Hindu Deities, semi-divine monarchs and heroic figures, along with their respective families and clans, sages, and savants, for which they have been called “the true Bibles of Hinduism” (Klostermaier, *Survey*, p. 15). They also serve as compendia that structure ancient and medieval knowledge of Hindu cosmogony, philosophy, and sacred geography.

34 *Sermista* is the Anglicized form, as used by Datta in the English version of the play, of Śarmiṣṭhā.

rivalry, leading to intense animosity, between the two main female characters; but he does so with considerable sensitivity.

The play begins with Vakasura (Vakāsura), a heroic demon-warrior, informing another demon, who is serving as a border-guard and spying on the city of the Gods, the sworn enemies of the Asuras, about the terrible news that was shaking their kingdom. The king's beloved daughter Sermista, while engaged in a juvenile argument with her friend Devayani, pushed the latter into a dark pit (a "well" in the Bengali version); she is rescued from there by Yayati, who was passing by during a royal hunt. Devayani's father Sucracharya, who is the supreme spiritual guide or *guru* of the Asuras, was so enraged by this humiliation of his daughter that he demanded, from the Asura-King, whom he bullied into abject submission by threatening to desert them – something that would certainly lead to their decimation by the Gods – that Sermista become Devayani's slave. Though the King is loath to banish his daughter to such a fate, he is pressurized by his Minister and his sense of his royal duties to agree to this demand. Sermista accepts her lot and joins Devayani's household in her new state of abject servitude. Devayani's earlier humiliation seems to have changed her destiny: having been saved from the dark pit by the mighty king Yayati, she fell in love with him the moment she saw his face. However, Devayani has no legitimate hopes of marrying him as a union between a Brāhmaṇa girl and a Kṣatriya king would, normally, be unacceptable. Her father, nevertheless, gladly agrees to give her in marriage to Yayati, as he perceives him to be a spiritually gifted ruler, who, more than once, proved himself to be a true defender of Dharma, the code of Righteousness and Justice that is central to Indic socio-religious thought. The King is also happy to make Devayani the Queen of Prātiṣṭhāna, as he has also fallen deeply in love with her.

However, after marrying Devayani, Yayati spotted the princess of the Asuras among her maids, who constituted her dowry, and her beauty made him fall in love with her. Sermista reciprocates and becomes Yayati's second wife and they even have three children together. Their almost idyllic relationship, kept a secret from the Queen, lasts for many years, but one day the truth is revealed to her accidentally. Hurt, devastated, and craving for revenge, Devayani leaves the palace and begs her mighty father, the sage Sucracharya, to curse Yayati with premature old age. Consequently, the King becomes decrepit and ill, which brings his kingdom to near chaos. This is the occasion for Devayani to reconsider her actions and responses: she is remorseful for her ill temper and asks her father to recall the curse. However, as curses like this one are irreversible, Sucracharya is unable to oblige her and can only modify it: the King will be given his youth back only in case any of his children agreed to bear the curse, for a thousand years, in his place. None of Devayani's progeny agrees to do this and it is left to the youngest of Sermista's children, Puru, to offer to save his father. Sucracharya realizes the

events that have been leading to this moment are not random, but have been arranged by Fate, for Puru is destined to become the king of the world. Eventually, the King recovers his youth and the sage releases Sermista from her bondage to his daughter and both Devayani and she reign as Queens beside Yayati.

In his “Reminiscences of Michael Madhusudan Dutta,” Gour Dass Bysack attributes the origin of the play to a conversation between Datta and himself about the paucity of good Bengali plays worthy of the Belgāchiā Theatre:

I laughed at the idea of his offering to write a Bengali play, and chaffingly asked if it was his wish to see us introduce a wretched Vidya Sundar on our stage. Conscious of the dearth of really good plays in language [sic], he could not but feel the sting of my remark as a home-thrust and simply muttered, “we shall see, we shall see.” [...] [I]n the course of a week or two [he] read to me the first few scenes of his Sarmishta which struck to me as having the ring of true metal.³⁵

Thus, it does appear that Datta did have a pioneering motivation in writing this play and went about it with the hands-on approach of a literary apprentice, having borrowed “a few Vernacular and Sanskrit books, dramas specially”³⁶ from Bysack and resolved to give the Bengali-speaking stage its hybrid bridge to the future of the past.

One of the key thematic constellations in *Śarmiṣṭhā* is that of the rivalry and ill-feeling between two powerful female characters that seem to be locked in what are, basically, ego-clashes. From this perspective, one European play that parallels, in this thematic orientation and also in the dramatic resolution in its *dénouement*, is Friedrich Schiller's *Maria Stuart* (1800), a play consisting of five acts, each of which is sub-divided into numerous scenes. The first English translation of the play seems to be that of Joseph Mellish, “who appears to have been on terms of intimate friendship with Schiller.”³⁷ He made his translation, apparently, from the pre-publication prompt-copy and, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge had done with Schiller's *Wallenstein* trilogy, made a number of his own interpolations while omitting a number of passages from the German original. Mellish's own creative interventions, in the English version of the play, as with the Coleridgean ones in the *Wallenstein* trilogy, were not without a certain degree of accomplished craftsmanship and a sensitive appreciation of his friend's artistic proclivities. It is quite possible, even to a degree of certainty, that Datta had familiarized himself with this English version of Schiller's *Maria Stuart* during his voracious engagement

³⁵ Bysack quoted in Datta, *Racanābalī*, p. xlviii.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ This reference is from the *Project Gutenberg* edition of Mellish's translation of the play, which is accessible at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/6791/6791-h/6791-h.htm>. Accessed 23 July 2018.

with Europhone literature, primarily but not always in English translation, at the Hindu and Bishop's Colleges. In fact, given the *leitmotif* of feminine rivalry and an asymmetric power-distribution between the leading female characters – putting one at the utter mercy of the other – Datta's conceptualization of the relational gradient between Sermista and Devayani, the two rival characters in *Śarmiṣṭhā*, seems to have noteworthy parallels with that of Schiller's treatment of the asymmetric relationship between Mary, Queen of Scots, and Elizabeth I.

Mary is in an English prison, ostensibly for having had her husband Darnley murdered but, in reality, due to her claim to the English throne, which was held by her cousin Elizabeth I. While the latter prevaricates – or pretends to, as is closer to the historical facts – over signing the warrant of Mary's death, the Queen of Scots swings between despair and hope about a possible reprieve or escape. Upon coming to know that Mortimer – an imagination of Schiller's – the nephew of her custodian, is favorably disposed to her cause, she puts her hopes in his efforts to free her by interceding with Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester, who, despite his unwillingness to see Elizabeth have Mary's blood on her hands, seems well-disposed towards the English Queen. When Mary, ultimately, is given an audience with Elizabeth – again a figment of Schiller's imagination – her hopes for a reprieve are dashed after a rather bitter altercation breaks out between the two, given Mary's unreadiness to surrender completely to her cousin's wishes. Mortimer's ill-starred plans of freeing Mary, which are based upon the historical Babington Plot, lead to his suicide and – under the rubric of popular demand – Elizabeth's signing of Mary's death sentence, which is passed to Lord Burleigh, in confirmation of the order, by Sir William Davison. This allows Elizabeth to transfer the culpability for Mary's execution to these two members of her court and the play draws to an end with the former left completely alone, with both the Earls of Shrewsbury and Leicester leaving her retinue forever. The intensity of relational angst and political competitiveness between Mary and Elizabeth does resonate – both historically and dramatically – with the fraught relationship between the two female protagonists of *Sermista*; thus, the personal becomes the political in the latter, too.

In the case of his *Śarmiṣṭhā/Sermista*, this constant code-switching between the often-colliding lexical-metaphorical worlds of Sanskritic Bengali and Romantic and/or early-Victorian English led to an intense polysemy between various mythopoeic, semantic, discursive, and metonymic fields. This polysemic engagement would, of course, trigger off a cultural-metaphysical revolution in mid-nineteenth-century Bengal, through the asymptotic operation of competing, though, quite often, collaborating socio-cultural trajectories. Datta's life and work do seem to fulfil the discursive patterns enumerated by Pascale Casanova in her characterization, following Goethe, of the notion of *Weltliteratur* as a

self-regulating function of the interplay of the “competitive nature” of international literature and “the paradoxical unity that results from it.”³⁸ The complex processes through which Sanskritic paradigms of classical Indic dramaturgy were adapted to work with their Europhone counterparts, along with the travel of the results of this cross-cultural formal dialogue to Europe in the mid-twentieth century, deserve a separate paper. For the time being, it should suffice to bear in mind the various interesting commonalities and divergences between semantic and staging-structures in the two dramaturgical paradigms, as seen in the way Datta's plays – especially *Śarmīṣṭhā* – were fashioned, especially at the textual level. Specialists in early modern European dramaturgy do not seem, till date, to have managed to envision and analyze the holistic scheme through which the complex interweaving of early modern theatergrams, plays, dramatists, actors – both rooted and peripatetic – generic and theoretical debates and staging-technologies, through transcontinental travel, reconfigured Europhone theater into a multifaceted transcultural platform.

It is interesting to note, in this context, that one of the most significant plot-defining aspects of Datta's play was the operation of a spatio-temporal ‘deferral,’ in keeping with Jacques Derrida's formulation of the concept, that serves as a powerful challenge to “the possibility of an identity, sameness, or inside that could be conceived of independently of the altering power of its difference, its other, or its margin.”³⁹ This deferral oscillates with “affirmation [... in a manner Hélène] Cixous makes productive especially in her autobiographical feminist texts of the 1970s.”⁴⁰ Further, as in Datta's play, it seems to encapsulate “the systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the spacing by means of which elements are related to each other”⁴¹ that is an important aspect of the dramaturgical scheme through which Datta sought to adapt classical Sanskritic mythopoeic and socio-cultural motifs and tropes to the demands of early-modern European norms of theatrical stage-production. This rather intuitive configuration and concatenation, on Datta's part, of thematic and dialogic similarities and material-contextual asymmetries between a neo-classical Sanskritic mythopoeic landscape and early-modern European theater culture creates an interstitial pattern of alternating transformations, through structural negotiations and

38 Pascale Casanova. *The World Republic of Letters*, translated by Malcolm B. DeBevoise. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 40.

39 Irene Rima Makaryk, editor. *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993, p. 585.

40 Ibid., p. 275.

41 Jacques Derrida. “Interview with Julia Kristeva.” *Positions*, translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 27.

content-acculturations. This does seem analogous to Derrida's categorical identification of "[d]ifferences [as] the effects of transformations," and his deduction of the incompatibility of the concept of *différance* "with the static, synchronic, taxonomic, ahistoric motifs in the concept of structure."⁴² In this very structural fluidity of dramaturgical borrowings and thematic adaptations, Datta's *Śarmiṣṭhā* embodies noteworthy parallels with, for example, southern German folk-drama,⁴³ especially in the context of their expressions of a pastoral, even bucolic ideal of romantic love. In fact, the dialogue between the Vidushaka and the King, in the former (Act II, Scene ii), especially when the Nati sings what can doubtlessly be described as an attempt at configuring an Indic bucolic idyll, may be read through the prisms of speech-act theories and perception-analysis and construed to be attempts at the retrospective nationalization of bucolic descriptive modes. This is quite apparent when the Nati sings for the King at the behest of the Vidushaka:

Hark to the herald kokila – [...]
How loud it swells – that sylvan lay –
Above the air-born minstrelsy!
Lo! Incense-like o'er grove and bow'r,
O'er forest-glade, and green-rob'd vale,
Floats the soft perfume of each flow'r,
Borne gaily by the winged gale.⁴⁴

Along with the above-mentioned section, one could also characterize the opening scene of the play, containing the stage-setting dialogue between the Asura-guard and Vakasura, as attempting to create a bucolic milieu. Especially significant from this perspective is the Asura's opening monologue, where he talks of "this wild mountain solitude... [and] this lone and vast valley, [where] a thousand birds people the air with the softest melody and myriads of sweet flowers bloom and smile around"⁴⁵ him. However, it ought also to be noted that this Indic approximation of the bucolic includes certain unnerving non-bucolic elements: "I hear the deafening roar of the lion; the thunder growl of the tiger; and the hoarse and angry voice of the mountain-torrent ceaselessly struggling to leap down its

⁴² Makaryk, *Encyclopedia*, p. 275.

⁴³ This was initially pointed out to the present writer by a colleague on the ERC Project "Drama-Net," Toni Bernhart.

⁴⁴ Datta, *Racanābali*, p. 676.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 665.

cloud-cradle.”⁴⁶ The fact that the Asura finds the juxtaposition and even simultaneity of the bucolic semi-domesticity of his vantage-position with natural and animal presences and phenomena that can only be described as constitutive of the ‘*raudra*’⁴⁷ or ‘*furioso*’ should indicate that Datta’s configuration of the bucolic ambience followed the more eclectic formal and content-related conventions of the Sanskritic theoretical paradigm, where the pastoral/bucolic idyll coexisted and collaborated with the more tumultuous aspects of Life and Nature.

Thus, the term ‘bucolic’ should, perhaps, be used in any discussion of Datta’s work in a rather qualified manner, so as to acknowledge the tonal and formal distinctions between it and, for example, Torquato Tasso’s *Aminta* (1573), one of the most significant examples of the use of bucolic elements in early-modern European drama, the poetry of the German Baroque-era *littérateurs* Georg Philipp Harsdörffer and Sigmund von Birken, the essays published in *The Spectator* and *The Tatler* by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele in the early eighteenth century. Here, it should be useful to point out that Datta, from an early age, must have been familiar with, at least, Addison’s work given that the latter had written the preface to John Dryden’s 1697 translation of Virgil’s *Georgics*. Given that world literature is seen, to a considerable extent, as a function of paradigm-shifting socio-cultural and politico-economic developments, one could connect Datta’s theatrical evocations of bucolic idylls to the configurations of landscaped civility, through the design and maintenance of elaborate gardens and garden-houses – in affluent early-colonial Indian households – following the British model. Thus, Datta’s Asura was not only admiring the ethereal beauty of his vantage-post outside the City of the Gods but also addressing the urbane angst of the leisured absentee landlords, who would, largely, constitute his audience, at the overwhelming transcontinental psycho-social footprint of the British Industrial Revolution. The felicity with which *Weltliteratur*, as both an aspirational framework to emancipate literary-cultural texts from the boundaries of language and a global portal for noetic and aesthetic consumption, enters the domain of the subaltern stage shows the parallelism between anthropological and rhetorical-discursive evolution. The need of the hour was to formulate new thematic frames for a new *Zeitgeist*.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ *Raudra* (= furious) refers to one of the nine *rasa*-s (= functions/categories of aesthetic/poetic pleasure and appreciation) that constitute the core of Indian aesthetic/poetic theories. Cf. Satya Dev Choudhary. *Glimpses of Indian Poetics*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2002, p. 67.

Hence, it does appear that the “value of *Śarmiṣṭhā* is not as literary as it is historical.”⁴⁸ Though Datta had talked of the “foreign air”⁴⁹ of the play, the play seems to be an affirmation of the normative frameworks of classical Sanskrit dramaturgy. This is, according to Kshetra Gupta, apparent in different aspects of the play, namely, “the configuration of the jester’s character, the predominance of the descriptive mode in the dialogues, the lack of complexity and individualism in characterization, the style of dramatic creation based on *ménage à trois* romances like that seen in *Ratnāvalī*, *Vikramorvaṣī* and *Mālavikāgnimitra*.”⁵⁰ All of these, along with Datta’s adherence to the linguistic practices of Kālidāsa, only reflect Sanskrit dramaturgical ideas much more than the Europhone. One could, in keeping with some mid-twentieth century critics and literary historians, like Kshetra Gupta himself, call *Śarmiṣṭhā* a ‘romantic comedy’ that belonged more to the realm of classical Sanskrit dramaturgical norms, which privileged evocative descriptions of locale and mood over the dynamic directness of action. This would, then, highlight the clashes between human inclinations and moral/ethical conflicts – in the play – that were considered to be rather European. In the matter of characterization, too, one can only categorize the play as rather unremarkable, with characters often following the preset trajectories that had been stereotypically assigned to them as per the conventions of Sanskrit dramaturgy. Thus, Yayati comes across solely as having a weak-minded, licentious, and loose personality, Sermista is the picture of serene, all-suffering, benevolent, and dignified *noblesse*, and Devayani is portrayed as “a character with a strict personality,”⁵¹ in what has been identified with the stock conventions of classical Sanskrit dramaturgy. However, one feels that critics like Gupta have been somewhat harsher to this play than it deserved, especially given the prescriptive nature of the influence of Datta’s patrons at the Belgāchiā Theatre. He does seem to have been successful in effecting a tenuous negotiation and even reciprocity between the ‘West’ and the ‘East’ in this play, even if the creative orientation did stay somewhat formulaic Sanskrit.

If, as Stuart Blackburn and Vasudha Dalmia say, “[e]ver since Clifford Geertz transformed the drama of Balinese cock-fighting into a text, and new historicism made the complementary gesture of returning culture to the center of literary studies,”⁵² there has, indeed, been a conceptual, methodological, and referential

⁴⁸ Datta, *Racanābālī*, p. li.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 1.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. li.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Stuart Blackburn and Vasudha Dalmia, editors. *India’s Literary History: Essays on the Nineteenth Century*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004, p. 1.

convergence between literary and cultural historiography, one can be sure that one area in which this development should be of significant help is that of researching Datta's work. As seen earlier, Datta's personal and literary biographies often coalesce into a composite narrative, which is not bereft of its bipolar surprises. He did show himself to be acutely sensitive to both positive and negative criticism of his work, as seen often in his letters, especially after Bethune's lukewarm response to *The Captive Ladie*. This, along with the manner in which he responds to traditionalist critiques of *Śarmisṭhā* – “I have no objection to allow a few alterations and so forth, but recast all my sentences – the devil !! I would sooner burn the thing.”⁵³ – shows that it is imperative to look very closely at the critical histories of both the Bengali and English texts of the play, keeping the cultural context always in the foreground. If one returns, briefly, to the “zone of conversion,”⁵⁴ as a factor in framing creative choices, one should note the argument put forward by Vinay Dharwadkar about this protean space, that, “when placed on a continuum with the zone of interracial marriage and family, [it] produced a high proportion of the Indian-English writers of the nineteenth century.”⁵⁵

Thus, one could argue that, in the case of Datta's creative output, the personal is conflated with the literary, and his defense of Europhone dramaturgical innovations, especially when those were challenged by the more traditional critics, could have been characterized by a sense of cultural otherness, even if ‘borrowed.’ This, however, assumes an interesting dimension when the ‘borrowed’ elements are stylistic and semantic and do not have much or even anything to do with thematic and structural continuities and ruptures. There, Datta is very clear in his stand: “In matters literary, old boy, I am too proud to stand before the world in borrowed clothes. I may borrow a neck-tie, or even a waist coat, but not the whole suit.”⁵⁶ In this letter, he also makes it clear, in no uncertain terms, that he is aware of his readership: “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* [italicized by Datta]; and that it is my intention to throw off the fetters forged for us by a servile admiration for everything Sanskrit.”⁵⁷ This championing of the linguistic subaltern could also be linked to “the strong long-term effect on the transmission of the English language and its culture to

53 Datta, *Racanābalī*, Letter 49, p. 519.

54 Pollock, *Literary Cultures*, p. 214.

55 Ibid.

56 Datta, *Racanābalī*, Letter 49, p. 519.

57 Ibid.

Indians”⁵⁸ that European and, with the arrival of the first significant educated gentlemen-converts like the Rev. Krishna Mohan Banerjee on the scene, Indian missionary activity had in early-nineteenth century Calcutta, whatever may have been its evangelical success.

Nevertheless, one should not be oblivious to the potential implicit in pre-colonial literary-cultural forms and tropes to leverage dynamic articulations of protean normativities in narratives of identity-formation. One cannot deny, to paraphrase Indira Viswanathan Peterson, “[t]he ability of traditional scholars to transform literary genres in response to new patrons and worldviews.”⁵⁹ In an essay on a nineteenth-century Tamil Christian poet and playwright, Vedanayaka Sastri, Peterson demonstrates how transitional and interstitial literary personalities can adapt “prevailing poetic and performance conventions for new ritual and devotional roles.”⁶⁰ Sastri had used a traditional form of dance-drama, the *kuravanci*, to praise European scientific rationalism and privilege Christianity; this hybrid mode of literary-theological syncretism, after multiple vicissitudes over the centuries, is still in use today. Datta’s plays, though largely shorn of theological and even metaphysical approximations, retain a strong sense of the traditional, as in Sastri’s case above. Thus, despite the strength of its Europhone component, *Śarmīṣṭhā* retains an Indic core that defies the dilution of the fact of its secure location within the frames of reference of traditional content-specifications. This dramatic entanglement is, therefore, not bereft of rootedness.

⁵⁸ Pollock, *Literary Cultures*, p. 214.

⁵⁹ Blackburn and Dalmia, *India’s Literary History*, p. 9.

⁶⁰ Ibid.