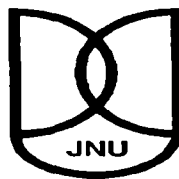


**MADHUSUDAN'S (MIS)ADVENTURES:  
COLONIALISM, MODERNISM AND NATIVISM  
IN *MEGHNADBADH KAVYA***

**Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University  
in partial requirements for the award of  
the degree of Master of Philosophy**

**DEB DULAL HALDER**



**Centre of Linguistics & English  
School of Language, Literature & Cultural Studies  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
New Delhi  
India  
2002**



CENTRE OF LINGUISTICS & ENGLISH  
SCHOOL OF LANGUAGE, LITERATURE & CULTURE STUDIES  
जवाहरलाल नेहरू विश्वविद्यालय  
JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY  
NEW DELHI-110067 INDIA

Dated: 17.07.2002

**CERTIFICATE**

This dissertation titled "**MADHUSUDAN'S (MIS)ADVENTURES: COLONIALISM, MODERNISM AND NATIVISM IN MEGHNADBADH KAVYA**" submitted by **Deb Dulal Halder**, Centre of Linguistics & English, School of Language, Literature & Cultural Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full for any other degree or diploma of any other University.

This may be placed before the examiners for the evaluation for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy.

Prof. Vaishna Narang  
[Chairperson]

**Chairperson**

**Centre of Linguistics & English**  
**School of Languages**  
**Jawaharlal Nehru University**  
**New Mehrauli Road.**  
**NEW DELHI-110067**

Prof. Makarand Paranjape  
[Supervisor]

## Declaration

This dissertation titled “**MADHUSUDAN’S (MIS)ADVENTURES: COLONIALISM, MODERNISM AND NATIVISM IN *MEGHNADBADH KAVYA***” submitted by me for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University.

*Deb Dulal Halder*  
17.02.2002

Deb Dulal Halder  
Centre of Linguistics & English,  
School of Language, Literature & Cultural Studies,  
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi – 110067.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This dissertation "MADHUSUDAN'S (MIS)ADVENTURES: COLONIALISM, MODERNISM AND NATIVISM IN *MEGHNADBADH KAVYA*" deals with a nineteenth century Bengali poet, Michael Madhusudan Dutt's loss and recovery of self under colonialism and how that loss and recovery is registered in his epic Meghnadbadh Kavya. I have finally completed the dissertation, but it would not have been possible for me to do the same if Prof. Makarand Paranjape would not have helped me by his valuable suggestions and continuing vitality without which this dissertation would have never taken the final shape. Not only academically, but as a true teacher he has also helped me in the way of looking at things in my personal life. Moreover I am again thankful to him for meeting my unjustified demands time and again.

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I would also like to thank Prof. Partha Mukherji of St. Xavier's College, Calcutta for his academic and emotional support, and constant vivacity that had made me reach the place where I am today.

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**CHAPTER ONE**



## INTRODUCTION

'*Aashar Chalane Bhuli*<sup>1</sup> [Forgetting the Deceitful Nature of Hope] is the most recent title of Michael Madhusudan Dutt's biography, written by Golum Murshid. "One of the greatest poets of Bengal, especially distinguished as an epic poet and as the first Bengali writer of blank verse"<sup>2</sup>— as written by his friends in the inscription of his tomb, for his great achievement in modernizing the Bengali literature, is shown to be a person deceived by hope, not only because Murshid wants to market his book, but he points to the factor how a single hope of becoming an English poet dominated the whole life of a person.

Madhusudan, born in a well-to-do upper class kayastha family had an inordinate fascination for English language and culture. He in his youth sighed for "Albion's distant shore" and wanted to establish himself as an English poet there. His whole life was spent

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<sup>1</sup> Golum Murshid, *Aashar Chalane Bhuli*, [Ananda Publishers Private Limited, Calcutta]

<sup>2</sup> Golum Murshid, *Aashar Chalane Bhuli*, p.362.



in that dream of going to England, as it was 'earthly paradise' to him. His becoming a Christian was only a logical step towards his goal of achieving a new identity as an English poet. Golum Murshid's biography is actually a study, which shows how Michael was preoccupied with his dream of becoming an English poet through out his life till he realized at the end, during his years in England and Europe, when he underwent a series of experiences, which cured him of his almost fatal Anglo-mania. So at the end of his life he embraced his native language realizing the maladjustment involved in self fashioning himself in the western mould, as he writes in the poem 'Bengali'-

O Bengal, many jewelers! All the treasures of your store

In folly I ignored; in befuddlement of mind<sup>3</sup>

Thus, Madhusudan registered the impact of both colonialism and westernization - his life itself can be read as an

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<sup>3</sup> Madhusudan Dutt, 'Bengali', trans. Marian Maddern in Marian Maddern, Bengali Poetry Into English: An Impossible Dream? [Editions Indian, Calcutta] p.73.

allegory of what Ashis Nandy calls "loss and recovery of self under colonialism"<sup>4</sup>

My project in this dissertation, in addition to reading Michael Madhusudan Dutt's life through the text Meghnadbadh Kavya is to show the enormous cultural and political complexities of his context and circumstances and his writing.

Meghnad and Ravana, the heroes of Meghnadbadh Kavya, are usually represented in the popular Indian tradition, somewhat similar to that of Satan in the Western tradition. Why Madhusudan is deliberately inverting that tradition of the Ramayana to make Ravana and Meghnad heroic [and tragic] figures, instead of Rama and Laksmana, is something which is not so easy as to say that he is clearly imitating Milton's Satan. From his personal letters written to his friends, we come to know that he has a great veneration for the greatest English epic poet Milton. [I will elaborate this in my second chapter.] That he is influenced by the Westernization that is a

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<sup>4</sup> Ashis Nandy, The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery Of Self Under Colonialism, [Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1983]

major change happening in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal is true. But apart from the Westernization there are other factors that do come to light if we try to see why Madhusudan is deliberately inverting the popular Hindu mythology. Isn't the factor of reacting to the colonial psychology also working in Madhusudan's mind when he is making Ravana and Meghnad the heroes of his work? For that one should also look at the psychology of the British rule during that period, and how Madhusudan is reacting to the British colonial psychology and culture.

Till the 1820's and 1830's the East India Company in India had only been busy making money and the British sahibs were respectful to the Indian traditions, customs, deities. Till then it was only the economic exploitation, which was going on in the Indian soil. Even we do find out that the official language of the Raj was Persian for the first seventy-five years of the British rule. The British rule then was in some way a continuation of the conventions of the Mughal Empire, rather than the application of the European statecraft.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Bernard C. Cohn, 'Representing Authority in Victorian India' in An Anthropologist Among Historians And Other Essays, [Oxford University Press, Delhi] pp. 632- 682

It is only after the emergence of Liberal and Utilitarian thinking and the emergence of the middle class evangelical spirit in Europe that <sup>the</sup> West began to perceive the colonial rule as their religious duty - as their civilizing mission, as their method of appropriation of their drive for mastery over the oriental [semi] barbarians. The scholars like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill conceptualized that colonialism is " a necessary step to progress and as a remedy for feudalism."<sup>6</sup> Thus colonialism proper started in India with the emergence of Modern Europe, as Bipan Chandra says "Colonialism in India was as Modern a historical phenomena as Industrial capitalism in Britain, the two developed together"<sup>7</sup> ore as J. S. Furnival wrote, " Modern India grew up with Modern Europe"<sup>8</sup>

It is in this notion of civilizing the [semi] barbarians that the Europeans had; Ashis Nandy talks about the homology between sexual dominance and political dominance. According to this homology the

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<sup>6</sup> Ashis Nandy, The Intimate Enemy, p.12

west saw and projected themselves as masculine because of their political and socio-economic dominance and legitimized the dominance over the 'feminine' orient, as Ashis Nandy writes -

Colonialism ... was congruent with the existing Western sexual stereotypes with the philosophy of life, which they represented. It produced a cultural consensus in which political and socio-economic dominance symbolized the dominance of men and masculinity over women and femininity.<sup>9</sup>

The first reactions of the Indians coming in contact with the colonial culture was simply to mimic the English and European culture and to defeat the British in their own game. Nandy shows how the writers like Madhusudan Dutt, Bankim Chandra Chatterji and others began to celebrate 'kshtriyahood' or the 'hyper-masculinity' of the figures from the Indian mythology to fight back the colonial

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<sup>7</sup> Bipan Chandra, 'Colonialism Stages of Colonialism and the Colonial State' [Journal of Contemporary Asia, Vol. 10, 1980] p.272.

<sup>8</sup> J.S.Furnival, 'Colonial Policy And Practices' pp.537-38

<sup>9</sup> Ashis Nandy, The Intimate Enemy, p.4.

paradigm of the so called masculine West. Bengalis were the first to come in contact with British and therefore they were the first to mimic the Western model of scientific progress, Enlightenment, Renaissance - to modernize India, to fight against the colonial power.

Thus we see in the field of social reforms Raja Ram Mohan Roy and others trying to fight against the internal societal and religious problems within India, to reform and make the Indian society prepared to fight against the colonial rulers. We do see that these social reformers are all educated in the western tradition of Enlightenment and Renaissance and they are using that education for the betterment of the masses of India.

Similarly, in the field of modern Indian literature, the forerunners were all educated in the western tradition of thoughts and it is this education of theirs that made them imitate the western model of writing. Bankim Chandra Chatterji, the first modern novelist of Bengali literature writes his first novel Rajmohan's Wife in English,

but he soon realizes that writing in his mother tongue would be a more preferable and fruitful, and shifts into Bengali language. Similarly, the first modern Bengali poet, Michael Madhusudan Dutt starts his literary career as an English poet, or to use a better expression starts his career striving to be an English poet, giving us the pioneering Indian English poetry. But, similar to Bankim Chandra Chatterji, he realizes that he can do a lot many if he shifts to his mother tongue as his means of literary expression. This decision of homecoming to the mother tongue made him the pioneering modern poet in Bengali literature. My project in writing this dissertation is to see whether Madhusudan Dutt in his return to his native land and native language tried to assert a certain kind of "nativistic awareness", which as Bhal Chandra Nemade<sup>10</sup> terms as Nativism - whether Madhusudan is merely a western imitator or a nativist writer.

In Chapter Two, I will primarily focus on the western impacts that made Madhusudan what he was and how we remember him today. Basically I will try to locate Madhusudan in the early and middle

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<sup>10</sup> Bhal Chandra Nemade, 'Nativism in Literature' in Makarand Paranjape edited Nativism: Essays in

nineteenth century context of Bengal, basically Calcutta, to show how the society shaped his mind to aspire to become an English poet. Then I will try to point out to those elements that seem to be a borrowing from the western literature and culture in Madhusudan's magnum opus, Meghnadbadh Kavya, and would try to see if those elements of Meghnadbadh Kavya, which has some similarity with the western texts are direct imitation of the western literature and culture or borrowings to enrich the native Bengali literature and culture.

In Chapter Three, I intend to discuss Madhusudan's deliberate attempt to construct a new tradition of dissent by inverting the tradition of making Ravana and Meghnad heroic and tragic figures in celebrating their 'aggressive masculinity'. I want to see whether in the celebration of the 'excess' of masculinity Madhusudan is simply reacting to the Western colonialism, which produced a cultural consensus in which political and socio-economic dominance symbolized the dominance of men and masculinity over women and femininity.<sup>11</sup>

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Criticism [Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1997]

<sup>11</sup> Ashis Nandy, The Intimate Enemy Loss & Recovery of Self under Colonialism (OUP, Delhi, 1983), p.4.



Moreover, as Nandy point out *Meghnadbadh Kavya* "is not merely an attempt to explain Indian culture in Indian terms, or even in Western terms, but was an attempt to explain the West in Indian terms."<sup>12</sup> In this chapter I would basically try to locate how Madhusudan reacted against colonialism and whether Madhusudan's way of reacting is only to fight back against the colonizers but against any form of oppression that is there in Indian society.

In Chapter Four, I will discuss Madhusudan's misguided quest of identity as an English poet and how he returns to his native language and native theme. Moreover, how in the celebration of Meghnad and Ravana, Madhusudan is questioning the oppressing internal dominance not only of the Western Colonial power but also questioning the oppressing dominance carrying on within India.

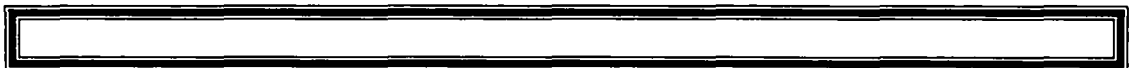
In the concluding chapter, along with summing up of all the points that I will be discussing through out my dissertation I intend to make a over all view to show how Madhusudan, more than a nativist or western imitator, is an assimilationist and a classicist.

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<sup>12</sup> Ashis Nandy, p.22.



## **CHAPTER TWO**



## MEGHNADBADH KAVYA'S ALLEGED **RELATIONSHIP WITH ITS WESTERN SOURCES**

Michael Madhusudan Dutt has often been regarded as the first modern Bengali poet, but at the same time he has been criticized for his blind imitation of the Western literature and culture. One of his contemporaries Bhudev Mukhopadhaya talked about "madhu's hin anukaran pravritti" [madhu's despicable inclination to imitate].<sup>1</sup> It is believed that Meghnadbadh Kavya is written more in the Western epic style, as we do find Meghnadbadh Kavya full of Greek imageries [especially from Homer], his heroes - Meghnad and Ravana, also do seem to be more like Milton's Satan; even it is thought that Madhusudan's 'amitrakshar chande' [blank verse] is Miltonic in nature. From all the angles it seems that Meghnadbadh Kavya is actually a Western text, incidentally written in Bengali language. Madhusudan wrote in a letter to his friend Raj Narain -

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<sup>1</sup> Bhudev Mukhopadhaya on Madhusudan, quoted in Madhusudan's biography by Jogendra Nath Basu, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, p.327.

It is my ambition to engraft the exquisite graces of the Greek mythology on our own; in the present poem [Meghnadbadh Kavya], I mean to give free scope to my inventing Powers (such as they are) and to borrow as little as I can from Valmiki ... I shall not borrow Greek stories but write, rather try to write, as a Greek would have done<sup>2</sup>

This shows how Madhusudan is Western in his outlook, as he wanted to be a western poet. But before discussing or criticizing Madhusudan for his veneration for Western literature and culture we should look at the socio-cultural context in which he was brought up.

Madhusudan Dutt was born in a well-to-do upper class Kayastha family on Saturday, January 25, 1824. His father Raj Narain Dutt was in legal profession in Calcutta, though their ancestral home was in the village of Sagardanri in the district of Jessore [presently in Bangladesh]. Though Madhusudan started his education in village, but soon Raj Narain Dutt, one of the best known and highest paid

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<sup>2</sup> Madhusudan's letter to Raj Narain written in 1860, Madhusudan Rachanabali edited by Khetra Gupta, pp. 551-552.

lawyers in Calcutta decided to shift the family to Calcutta in 1832. In 1837 Madhusudan joined the Hindu College and this institution had a significant role to play in Madhusudan's western outlook.

At this time when Madhusudan joined the Hindu College, it had become the center of Western education and rational thinking. Almost all the youths of the aristocratic families of Calcutta were studying in Hindu College at this time, getting inspired by the liberal, rational thoughts of Enlightenment. Henry Louis Vivian Derozio was a teacher in Hindu College, whose rationalistic philosophy of the age of the Enlightenment and his free thinking style, made a stir in the youths of the institution of Hindu College. His only aim was to broaden and deepen the knowledge of his pupils in Western thought and literature as we can find from his own lines -

Expanding like the petals of young flowers  
I watch the gentle opening of your minds  
And the sweet loosening of the spell that binds  
Your intellectual energies and powers.

What joyance rains upon me when I see  
Fame in the mirror of futurity  
Weaving the chaplets you have get to gain,  
And then I feel I have not lived in vain.<sup>3</sup>

According to Derozio's biographer "neither before, nor since his day has any teacher, within the walls of any native educational establishment in India, ever exercised such influence over his pupils."<sup>4</sup> But the influence that Derozio had on his students created a sense of deep admiration for the things European and a deep animosity towards Hindu religion and customs. One of his students Madhab Chandra Malick asserted in a college magazine - "if there is anything that we hate from the bottom of our heart, it is Hinduism."<sup>5</sup> It is true that Derozio initiated the quest for free rational thinking into the minds of the early nineteenth century youths, but that affected in giving up all the things Indian by his students and followers.

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<sup>3</sup> Derozio's poem, quoted by Susobhan Sarkar in Bengal Renaissance and Other Essays, [People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1970] p.110.

Madhusudan Dutt came to Calcutta in this atmosphere and joined the Hindu college in 1837. Though Derozio has died several years ago in 1832, but his influence was still carrying on in the Hindu College as Amalendu Bose writes -

Though Madhusudan joined the Hindu College several years after Derozio's death, he was like those scholars who yearned for a visit to England, their Earthly paradise, and continued to be inspired by the free thinking style of Derozio.<sup>6</sup>

From his letters [written primarily to his friends] we see how he wished to be an 'English' poet<sup>and</sup> sighed for 'Albion's distant shore.'

I have sent my poems to the Editor of the Blackwood's Tuesday last: I haven't dedicated them to you as I intended, but to William Wordsworth, the poet; my dedication runs like this: "these poems are most respectfully dedicated to William

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<sup>4</sup>Susobhan Sarkar, Bengal Renaissance and Other Essays, p.110.

<sup>5</sup> ibid, p.111.

<sup>6</sup> Amalendu Bose, Michael Madhusudan Dutt [Makers Of Indian Literature Series, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1981] p.12.



Wordsworth Esq. The poet, by a foreign admirer of his genius  
- the author."<sup>7</sup>

I have a strong conviction that a public like the British  
discerning generous and magnanimous will not damp the spirit  
of a poor foreigner.<sup>8</sup>

I am reading Tom Moor's life of my favourite Byron - a  
splendid book upon my word! Oh! How should I like to see you  
write my "Life" if I happen to be a great poet - which I am  
almost sure I shall be, if I can go to England.<sup>9</sup>

Thus from his personal letters we can find out how his mind  
was occupied with the idea of becoming famous as an English poet in  
the English soil. As we can also see from the poem written in 1841 at  
Kidderpore where his longing for his dream land is evident -

I sigh for Albion's distant shore

Its valleys green, its mountains high;

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<sup>7</sup> Madhusudan to Gour Das Bayssack, Madhusudan Rachanabali, edited by Khetra Gupta [Sahitya Samsad, Calcutta, 1986] p.520.

<sup>8</sup> Madhusudan to The editor of Bentley's Miscellany, Madhusudan Rachanabali, edited by Khetra Gupta, [Sahitya Samsad, Calcutta, 1986] p.520.

Tho' friends, relations, I have none

In that clime, yet, oh! I sigh

To cross that vast Atlantic wave

For glory, or a nameless grave!

My father, mother, sister, all

Do love me and I love them too,

Yet oft the tear-drops rush and fall

From my sad eyes like winter's dew.

And, oh! I sigh for Albion's stand

As if she were my native place<sup>10</sup>

Or

Oft like a sad imprisoned bird I sigh

To leave this land, though mine own land it be;

Its green robed meads, gay flowers and cloudless sky

Though passing fair, have but few charms for me.

For I have dreamed of climes more bright and free

Where virtue dwells and heaven-born liberty

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<sup>9</sup> Madhusudan to Gour Das Bayssack, quoted in Michael Madhusudan er Jiban Charit by Jogendra Nath Basu [Deys Publishing Calcutta, 1993] p.46.

<sup>10</sup> Madhusudan Dutt, in Khetra Gupta edited Madhusudan Rachanabali, [Sahitya Samsad, Calcutta, 1986] p.438.

Makes even the lowest happy; where the eye  
Doth sicken not to see man bend the knee  
To sordid interest: climes where science thrives  
And genius doth receive her guerdon meet;  
Where man in all his truest glory lives,  
And Nature's face is exquisitely sweet  
For those fair climes I heave the impatient sigh  
There let me live and there let me die.<sup>11</sup>

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When his father Raj Narain Dutt came to know about it, he thought it would be better to make Madhusudan marry [as it was believed that after marriage the responsibilities make the youth think in a rational way and not daydream]. But Madhusudan who was preoccupied with the idea of going to England and marrying a 'blue-eyed' westerner could not take the idea of getting married. Consequently he decided that its better to convert himself to Christianity - as that would help him in not marrying, as nobody would agree to marry a Christian and at the same time it would be a logical

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<sup>11</sup> Madhusudan Dutt, written in 1842, Kidderpore. In Khetra Gupta edited Madhusudan Rachanabali [Sahitya Samsad, Calcutta, 1986] p.449.

step towards his goal of achieving a new identity as an English poet.

Therefore Amit Chaudhuri concludes -

Whether he converted in reaction to the Hinduism; he, like many of his generations, had come to feel impatient with, or in his desire to become more completely "English" [and thus further his career as an "English" poet], or in defiance of his father, it is not known. At any rate, he hardly seems to have led a conventional Christian life.<sup>12</sup>

But as a result of becoming a Christian he lost all contacts with his family and even lost the freedom of entering the Hindu College, consequently he started studying in Bishop College and from there he went to Madras. In Madras, it was for the first time that he began to write seriously for publishing his own works and most of his English writing is done during that period of his stay in Madras. After that he came back to Calcutta and started writing in Bengali, but for a person

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<sup>12</sup> Amit Chaudhuri, "Poles of Recovery: From Dutt to Chaudhuri" [Published in the Literary Review Of The Hindu, Sunday, July 15, 2001.] p.9.

who had trained himself for years to be an English poet inculcating within him the European literature and culture, it's difficult for him to give up all in a moment and become nativized to the extent that he starts writing according to the standards of the Indian culture.

In this context, when we find Madhusudhan writing Meghnadbadh Kavya, (though much before that he had already made a good beginning in his journey as a Bengali writing) it's natural that the epic would have the western impacts in it and we do find the influence of writers like Milton, Virgil, Homer and others in Meghnadbadh Kavya.

### **MADHUSUDAN'S MEGHNABADH KAVYA AND MILTON'S PARADISE LOST:**

As I have already pointed out in the beginning of this chapter that it's generally thought that Madhusudhan's heroes - Meghnad and Ravana, seems to be more like Milton's Satan. The deliberate inversion of the heroic characters that we find in Meghnadbadh Kavya seems to

be nothing but blindly following Madhusudhan's greatest western inspiration - Milton. From his letters, we can find out the veneration Madhusudhan has for Milton. Madhusudhan wrote to his friend Raj Narain-

"... Milton is a grand being like his own Satan, he is full of the loftiest thoughts, but has little or nothing that may be called amiable. He elevates the mind of the readers to a most astonishing height. But he never touches the heart and that is the consequence? He has a glorious name but few readers. He is Satan himself. We acknowledge him to belong to a far superior order of being; but we never feel for him. We hear the sound of his ethereal voice with awe and trembling. His is the deep roar of a lion in the silent solitude of the forest."<sup>13</sup>

Similar is the state of Madhusudhan Dutt in Bengali literature.

He is thought to be the father of blank verse and the pioneer of

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<sup>13</sup> Madhusudan Dutt's letters, Madhusudan Rachnabali, edited by Khetra Gupta, [ Sahitya Samsad, Calcutta, 1986] p.561.

Modern Bengali Poetry. He is thought to be a brilliant epic writer, but he has fewer readers, though his name is taken with great veneration. As Paradise Lost has references to the Bible, to the Greek mythology, to Homer, to Plato, to Euripides, to Virgil, to Dante, to Ariosto, to Spenser. Similarly Madhusudhan's Meghnabadh Kavya is also full of imageries from Indian mythology, Greek mythology and many others. As we find the trace of classical literature in every step of Milton's writing -

For never since created man,  
Met such embodied force, as named with these  
Could wait more than that small infantry  
Warr'd on by cranes: though all the giant brood  
Of Phlegra with the heroic race were joyn'd  
That fought at Jheb's and Dlium, each side  
Mixt with anxilian gods; and what resounds  
In fable or Romance of Uthers son  
Begirt with British and Armonic knights;

And all who since, baptized or Infidel  
Jousted in Aspramout or Montalban,  
Damasco, or Morocco or Trekisond,  
Or whom Biserta sent from Afric shore  
When Charlemain with all his Peerage feel  
By Fontarabbia.<sup>14</sup>

Similar influence of classical literature in Madhusudan's Meghnadbadh

Kavya-

No dream of night  
O lord of Sita, dost thou witness here.  
There is a Danav famous in the world,  
Kalnemi, foe of gods, whose daughter fair  
Is Pramila, a damsel who hath sprung  
From Durga's digits, rested with the might.  
Of that eternal goddess. In the world  
In valor have the nymph excels.  
As Kali crushes with her feet her lord,



The naked Shiva, so this charming lass  
Subdues the lion Meghnad.<sup>15</sup>

Or

So, to the rescue, friend.

Protect my helpless army, as the go  
Adorned with blue neck, Shiva, Gouri's lord.  
Preserved the world oppressed in ages past.<sup>16</sup>

Or

... as the son of Drona, Aswa-Thama brave  
In Pandava's tent destroying children five  
Who lay in secret repose at dead night  
As speedy as the mind, with fear and joy  
To Duryodhan, the king of Kurus, ran  
Whose thighs were shattered in the battlefield?  
Of Kurukshetra.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Milton, Paradise Lost, Book-1.

<sup>15</sup> Meghnadbadh Kavya, Book-3, p. 72

Both Milton and Madhusudan in their epics often referred to classical literature and myths to ornament their poetry. Both of them are in one sense great conservators and also great reformers. If they appear to be less originators either of myth or of idea, they are more conclusively the interpreters of a great and varied human heritage. That Michael Madhusudan Dutt is not altogether away from the Indian tradition and myths can be seen from his knowledge of classical Indian mythology as we see in the imageries of Meghnadbadh Kavya. In a letter to Raj Narain, Michael Madhusudan Dutt writes -

I love the grand anthology of our ancestors. It is full of poetry. A fellow with an Inventive head can manufacture the most beautiful things out it.<sup>18</sup>

Madhusudan's taking up of 'blank verse' to write poetry is thought to be a direct influence of Milton. When Madhusudan introduced blank verse or 'amitrakshar chande' to the treasure of Bengali literature he

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<sup>16</sup> ibid, p.73.

didn't feel the need or even the urge to analyze how he innovated the 'amitrakshar channe', instead he simply asked to read and reread Milton to get an understanding of the rhythm of 'blank verse'. In a letter to his friend Raj Narain, Madhusudan wrote -

" If your friends know English, let them read the Paradise Lost, and they will find out how the verse, in which the Bengali poetaster writes, is constructed. The fact is, my dear fellow that the prevalence of Blank verse in this country, is simply a question of time. Let your friend guide their voices by the pause (as in English blank verse) and they will soon swear that this is the noblest measure in the language.<sup>19</sup>

It seems that Madhusudan himself didn't have to try too hard to write poetry in 'amitrakshar channe'. It seems that his wide and alternating reading of Western writers and particularly Milton made

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<sup>17</sup> ibid,Book-6,p-157.

his mind accustomed with the rhythm of the iambic pentameter line of the English blank verse.

Except that, when Madhusudan thought of writing in 'amitrakshar channde' he had the 'payar channde' of Bengali ready to work upon. From his childhood he was acquainted with the poetical works of Kalidasa, Krittibas, Mukundaram and other Bengali poets. They all used to write in 'payar channde' where 'matra' (quantity) 'akshar' (roughly, syllable) and 'swar baisamyā' (stress) were already existing. What Madhusudan did was to bring 'rhythm' of blank verse into the already existing 'payar channde' of Bengali. Motilal Mazumdar is of the opinion that it was possible for Madhusudan to introduce the rhythm of English blank verse into 'payar' because 'payar' in the way of its growth has changed from sixteen syllabic structures to fourteen syllabic one. The fourteen syllabic 'payar channde' that Madhusudan got from its predecessors divided the fourteen syllables into 8/6 or 6/8 structure; and as the end of the lines used to rhyme in the 'payar channde' Madhusudan left that 'rhyme' of 'payar' and enriched it with

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<sup>18</sup> Madhusudan's letters, p.547.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, pp.548-549.

the rhythm of blank verse. It is the rhythm of Milton's iambic pentameter line that Madhusudan borrowed and applied in the already existing 'payar'.

The question would naturally arise why has Milton influenced Madhusudan so much in writing blank verse; Why not Shakespeare or Marlowe who were also stalwarts of iambic pentameter. Shakespeare and Marlowe had written excellent blank verse, but they haven't written epic in blank verse what Madhusudan was going to write. When Madhusudan was thinking of writing an epic, that too of heroic figures of Meghnad and Ravana, he should be more influenced by an epic writer and for him Milton was the best poet to follow. I think it is natural for Madhusudan to read and reread Milton as his heroes are quite similar. To Raj Narain, dated 24<sup>th</sup> April 1860, <sup>he</sup> wrote-

Good blank verse should be sonorous, and the best writer of blank verse in English is the toughest of poets - I mean old John Milton!<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.545.

From this section of his letter it seems that 'sonorous' quality or rhythm of blank verse is what Madhusudan thinks to be the most important characteristics of blank verse and when Madhusudan thought Milton to be the best blank verse writer, it is evident that while innovating 'amitrakshar chande' Madhusudan obviously had Milton's blank verse as his role model. Mohitlal Mazumdar is of the opinion that instead of rhythm in blank verse, if Madhusudan would have given more attention to fixed foot and accent of Milton's iambic pentameter line then it would have been difficult for him to take out the rhythmic or sonorous qualities of English blank verse.

We have seen earlier that when Madhusudan asked his friend Raj Narain to read Paradise Lost he talked about the 'pause' [in Bengali called 'জতি' (joti)] as the parameter to understand the rhythm of blank verse. There are two types of pauses in blank verse - a pause that naturally comes as the line ends (end-pause) and the pause that

the poet deliberately uses in between the lines to create a rhythmic quality, that is harmonic pause.

I will now take up first few lines from both Milton's Paradise Lost and Madhusudan's Meghnadbadh Kavya to see how Madhusudan was influenced by Milton in using the 'यति' (joti) or the pause in amitrakshar channe. I will use '/' mark for the end pause and '+' for harmonic pause or Caesura.

*FROM MILTON'S PARADISE LOST, BOOK- I, LINES 1-5:*

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*Of man's first disobedience, \* and the fruit /*

*Of that forbidden tree, \* whose mortal taste /*

*Brought death into the world, \* and all our woe /*

*With loss of Eden, \* till one greater man, /*

*Restore us, \* and regain the blissful seat, <sup>R1</sup>*

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*FROM MADHUSUDAN'S MEGNHADBADH KAVYYA, BOOK -I,*

*LINES 1-4:*

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সম্মুখ সম্মরে পড়ি / বীর-চুরামনি /  
বীরবাহু, + চলি যাবে / গেলা যমপুরে /  
অকালে, + কহ, + হে দেবী / অমৃতভাষিনি  
কোন বীর বরে বরি / সেনাপতি পদে, +

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TRANSCRIPTION OF THE FOUR LINES FROM  
MEGHNADBADH KAVYA

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Sammukh samare pari / bir churamani /  
Birbahu, + choli jabe / gela jampure /  
Akale, + kaho, + he Debi / amritbhasini /  
Kon birbare bari / senapati pode + /<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Milton, Paradise Lost, Book-1.

<sup>22</sup> Meghnadbadh Kavya, Book-1.



In Paradise Lost there is a pause in the end of the each line and also deliberate pauses in the middle of a line and the part of that line continues to the next line- that is, there is run-on lines. Madhusudan borrowed these run-on lines from the English blank verse. Earlier in the 'payar chande' of the Bengali poetry by Krittibas, Kalidas, Mukundaram and in the literary works like Mangal Kavya the pause would come only when the line ends and at the sametime the line used to rhyme. Madhusudan changed the pattern -- firstly his lines do not rhyme; secondly, the pause even comes in the middle of the line. But whereas in Miltonic blank verse the lines are simply iambic parameters (with little variations); in Madhusudan there is a clear eight/six division. In every line there are pauses after the eight syllables or 'akshar' and again after the fourteenth 'akshar' and also the harmonic pause, which makes the lines more rhythmic. By bringing these innovations Madhusudan made Bengali verse more vigorous and masculine. Earlier the 'payar chande' didn't have a masculine vigour. Though Buddhadeva Bose vigoursly criticized Madhusudan for his language.

But talking about his 'amitrakshar chande' he says that the real magic of Madhusudan's 'chande' lies in the unpredictable odd number stress in the usual eight/six lines. Mohitlal Mazumdar in his book Kabi Madhusudan writes:

Nor should it be forgotten that the sense of the words, their weight, their rhetorical value in certain phrases, constantly affects the theoretical number of stresses belonging to a given line; in a blank verse, for instance the rhetorical five stress are often but three or four in actual practice, lighten stresses taking place in order to avoid monotony.<sup>23</sup>

Like this deviation in the English blank verse from five-stress line, in Madhusudan also we see the similar thing happening that instead of the stress in a change to break the monotony of rhyme.

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<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Mohitlal Mazumdar, Kabi Madhusudan, [Bodhoday Library Private Limited, Calcutta, 1972] and p. 186.

Moreover Madhusudan also used 'अनुप्रास'

(ANUPRASH) in the verse to give a rhythmic quality- for instance, the use of the ' वीर ' (vira) in the lines 1 & 2 lines of Book-I of Meghnadbadh Kavya " वीर चूरामनि वीरबाहु " (Bir churamani/ Birbahu) or in line-4 " कोन वीर बरे बरि " (Kon bir bare bari). Such use of language in blank verse makes the rhythm of language more vigorous to the reader's ear.

Another characteristic of blank verse that Madhusudan borrowed from the English blank verse is 'verse paragraph' - divisions used in blank verse to set off a sustained passage. The first twenty-six lines of Paradise Lost constitutes one verse paragraph. In Madhusudan's Meghnadbadh Kavya similar verse paragraphs are there - for example first 32 lines of Meghnadbadh Kavya constitutes a verse paragraph. In both the epics the opening 26 lines of Milton's Paradise Lost and the opening 32 lines of Madhusudan's Meghnadbadh Kavya, the poets introduce the readers to the theme of the poems and write their respective Muse to sing poetry through their pens. It seems that when Madhusudan was writing in first verse paragraph of

Meghnadbadh Kavya he has distinctly in his<sup>mind</sup> the Invocation of Book-I of Paradise Lost.

But, my endeavor so far was to see how Milton influenced Madhusudan and how he is indebted to Milton for his pioneering of blank verse in Bengali poetry. Madhusudan wrote this letter to his friend Raj Narain about the growing popularity of Megnadhbadh Kavya -

The poem is rising into splendid popularity. Some say it is better than Milton but that is all bosh- nothing can be better than Milton; many say it licks Kalidasa; I have no objection to that. I don't think it impossible to equal Virgil, Kalidasa or Tasso. Though glorious, still they are mortal poets; Milton is divine.<sup>24</sup>

The reception of Meghnadbadh Kavya as Miltonic, and Madhusudan being compared with Milton shows that in those days of

1860's people could make out the fact that Milton has a deep influence on Madhusudan. Moreover, the reverence that Madhusudan has shown by saying that 'Milton is divine' and writing poetry to his level is unthinkable very clearly points out to the fact that Madhusudan considered Milton to be his 'guru'.

### ***HOMER AND MADHUSUDAN:***

The epic poetry is usually centered on a heroic or quasi divine figure on whose actions the fate of a tribe, a nation, or the whole human race. In other words we can say that the epics revolve around the heroism of the epic protagonist. Therefore 'vira rasa' is the main characteristic of epic poetry. But when we try to compare Homer and Madhusudan's epic heroes the problem that crops up is that their heroes are set in altogether different time and space - therefore the idea of 'heroism' or 'viratva' is also not the same. With the Homeric warriors the heroism is that of sword and spear - when the hero's sword cuts deeper than those of other soldiers, Homeric heroes are filled with an exhilaration and sense of glory. But with

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<sup>24</sup> Madhusudan's letters, p.557.

Ravana and Meghnad [Madhusudan's heroes] there is a sense of candor, rectitude, and righteousness with their strength and glory. When Madhusudan is trying to sketch his heroes he is creating his characters keeping in mind the Indian civilization and their standards of virtue and morality. So we find Madhusudan's hero anguishing -

Woe, woe to thee, O cursed Shurpanakha  
For in an evil hour, thou didst behold  
This reptile full of venom in the wood  
Of Panchavati, which hath proved, alas!  
The source of death. The spring of all my grief!  
With thee condoling in a wretched hour,  
Fair Sita, glowing like a brand of fire,  
I [ill-advised] removed from Rama's side.<sup>25</sup>

This sense of righteousness that we do find in Ravana, and the despair that he shows, <sup>is</sup> because he himself has committed the fault, which cannot be seen in Homeric heroes.

Though such differences exist between Homer and Madhusudan in the portrayal of their epic heroes, but in Madhusudan's epic similes we can find the influence of the Greek epic poet. Whether that is incidental or a conscious decision, there can be a great debate about that; but there are many instances where we do find that Homeric similes correspond exactly to Madhusudan's similes - similes of hunting, of sea, of wind.

*On hunting -*

**Homer:**

To guard his slaughtered friend Aeneas flies  
His spear extending where the carcass lies;  
Watchful he wheels, protects its every way  
As the green lion stalks his prey.<sup>26</sup>

Or

Trojans and Greeks now gather round the slain;  
The war renews, the warriors bleed again;

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<sup>25</sup> Madhusudan, *Meghnadbadh Kavya*, Book-1 p.5.

<sup>26</sup> Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Pope book-I 361-364.

As o'er their prey rapacious wolves engage

Man dies on man, and all is blood and rage<sup>27</sup>

**MADHUSUDAN:**

O Lord of Rakshas, I have heard, indeed!

The roars of thunder, billows, lions fierce:

And through the sky I saw the lighting speed . . .

The heroes led by Vir-vahu brave

The field of battle entered, like the herd

Of elephants with their chief<sup>28</sup>

Or

The town's amusement wandered, to and fro

As leaving life-less in her lair a fawn,

Her hapless prey, the tigress, free from care

Adventures wildly through the distant woods<sup>29</sup>

Or

As in the forest dense the fowler runs

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, book -4, 538-541

<sup>28</sup> Mcghnadbadh Kavya, Book-1, p.7.



To catch the prostrate fawn his arrow hit,  
The Raksha lord descended from his car  
And swift advanced to seize the hero's corpse<sup>30</sup>

***Imagery of bird:***

**Homer:**

Fierce to the van of fight Patroclus came!  
And like an eagle an darting at his game,  
Sprung on the Trojan and the Lycian band<sup>31</sup>

**Madhusudan:**

And Rama's force, with panic struck, dispersed  
Like mound collapsing, pressed by deluge hard.  
The gods deprived of grace by eagle's might<sup>32</sup>

Such similarities<sup>of</sup> imageries and epic similes of wind, mountain,  
sea, fire can be found in both Homer and Madhusudan. But there are  
some instances where we do see that though both the epic poets are

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<sup>29</sup> ibid, Book-4, p.83.

<sup>30</sup> ibid, Book-7, p.186.

using the similar similes but their way of seeing and perceiving the world is very different, as we can see in the perception of poets on fire similes.

Homer writes -

Thus like the rage of fire the combat burns  
And now it rises; now it sinks, by turns<sup>33</sup>

Madhusudan, not only saw the ruthlessness but at the same time saw a wondrous beauty in the fire, as he writes -

As when the thunder roars and lightnings flash  
Like sparks of fatal fire, the lioness' club  
Affrighted crouches to its dam's embrace  
Lord Shiva glanced, and got up from his seat:  
And Gouri laid aside her magic guise<sup>34</sup>

Or

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<sup>31</sup> The Iliad, trans. Pope, Book 16, 709-11.

<sup>32</sup> Meghnadbhadh Kavya, Book-7, p.185.

The shadow of the wings like clouds obscured  
The sky, and venom in the center flawed  
Like Pralay fire which burns to end the world<sup>35</sup>

We will find many such similarities in similes in Madhusudan and in Homer, but at the same time there is a basic difference - the difference is that of using the similar images but in a nativised manner, by making the context familiar to the Bengali readers. Therefore though we find that there are many a places where Madhusudan seems to have been directly influenced by Homer, but that does not mean that Madhusudan is merely imitating the Homeric style. Instead we say that he is doing 'selective assimilation' [I will come to this discussion in details in Chapter- four] so as to enrich the Bengali and Indian Literature. Madhusudan himself wrote to his friend Raj Narain -

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<sup>33</sup>The Iliad, Book-18, 1-2.

<sup>34</sup> Meghnadbadh Kavya, Book-2, p.46.

<sup>35</sup> ibid, Book-6, p.136.

It is my ambition to engraft the exquisite grace of the Greek mythology on our own; in the present poem [i.e., Meghnadbadh Kavya] . . . you shan't have to complain again of the un-Hindu character of the poem. I shall not borrow Greek stories but write, rather try to write, as a Greek would have done.<sup>36</sup>

This part of the letter certainly points out to the fact that Madhusudan is not imitating the Greeks, but is trying to write in such a manner so as to be grand and sublime as the Greek poet Homer. In that sense, whereas we can see Milton's influencing Madhusudan directly, we do find out that Homer is not a direct influence on Madhusudan in terms of merely imitating the Greeks epics.

Thus it is very evident that the western writers influenced Madhusudan very much. That Madhusudan thought consciously of imitating Milton and tried to write like Homer<sup>is</sup> clear from his personal letters and the way he has constituted Meghnadbadh Kavya. But<sup>it</sup> is also not true altogether that Madhusudan only imitated the western

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<sup>36</sup>Madhusudan Dutt to Raj Narain, Madhusudan Rachanabali, edited by Khetra Gupta, p.552.

epic writers in writing his magnum opus - Meghnadbadh Kavya. I will come back to this discussion in Chapter Four.

## CHAPTER THREE



# MEGHNADBADH KAVYA'S COLLABORATION AND COLLUSION WITH DOMINANT COLONIAL CULTURE

In Chapter Two, I have discussed that Madhusudan was much influenced by the Western poets, but at the same time his Meghnadbadh Kavya is not a direct imitation of the western epic poetry. I have also discussed how Madhusudan's desire to become an English poet was a by-product of the colonial culture. In this particular chapter I want to see how Madhusudan Dutt reacted to the colonial power in India and how his reactions to the colonial power can be traced in his writings.

As it is generally thought that Madhusudan's writings are a direct copying of the western writers, it is also thought that, in nineteenth century Bengal, Madhusudan's life portrays the suffering that the colonial process makes the colonized go through as he fails to see the beauty and depth of the Indian civilization and tries to blindly imitate the West not only in literature,

but in religion, in culture, in life [as he thinks that everything western is superior to that of the Indian], which can be described as 'westoxication'. But to understand Madhusudan and his writings we need to go beyond his apparent intoxication for the west and see the real being that emerges out when that phase of intoxication gets over.

It's true that Michael Madhusudan Dutt is a product of the nineteenth century colonial Bengal, which we cannot deny, because in the time and place where one is born and brought up one's psychological and emotional growth depends on that. In Chapter Two I have shown in brief how it is impossible for a native elite in the nineteenth century Bengal to deny the Western influence as the tone of the age was set in that fashion in Calcutta. All the youths, educated in Hindu college, Calcutta, aspired to be western - and Madhusudan being an extraordinary genius in the field of literature, especially poetry, obviously dreamt of becoming an 'English poet'. His whole life went on in carrying out the only dream he has seen - to transcend the limits of being a 'native elite' to get included in the foreign elite class. But at last he realizes the pain of trying to attain the impossible and with a 'critical awareness' comes back to the native elite class. This journey from native elite to the attempt to



get included into the foreign elite and back to the native elite should not be seen as a defeat of Madhusudan [or of the colonized, in general], nor should it be seen as a triumph of modernity over tradition; but it demonstrates the complex interplay as Madhusudan came back to the native class with a critical synthesis - the critical synthesis which made him produce many great Bengali literary works in general and Meghnadbadh Kavya in particular.

In Meghnadbadh Kavya we do find that Madhusudan is deliberately inverting the tradition of The Ramayana to make Ravana and Meghnad the heroes of his magnum opus. Some scholars think that this is a deliberate inversion following Milton's Satan. But Ashis Nandy points out that it has other implications. According to Nandy, this inversion is not just a mere copying of Milton's Satan, but it has its roots in the colonial culture.

In The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism, Ashis Nandy points out two homologues which brings out the psychological back up of the west to colonize the Afro-Asian countries as the "the crudity and inanity of colonialism are principally

expressed in the sphere of psychology."<sup>1</sup> Till 1820's & 30's, the East India Company in India had only busy making money - the British sahibs were respectful to Indian tradition, customs, and deities. Even the official language of Raj was Persian for the first seventy-five years of British rule. The British rule then was in some way a continuation of the conventions of the Mughal Empire rather than the application of the European statecraft<sup>2</sup>. It is only after emergence of liberal and utilitarian thinking and the emergence of middle class evangelical spirit in Europe that West began to perceive the colonial rule as their religious duty - as then 'civilizing mission' - as their method of appropriation of their drive for mastery over the oriental (semi) barbarians. The scholars like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill conceptualized that colonialism is "a necessary step to progress and as a remedy for feudalism"<sup>3</sup>. Thus colonialism proper started in India with the emergence of Modern Europe<sup>4</sup> and it is the West that gave interpretations of their civilizing mission by the earlier

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<sup>1</sup> Ashis Nandy, The Intimate Enemy, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard S. Cohn, 'Representing Authority in Victorian India', in An Anthropologist Among Historians and other Essays (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1987). pp. 632-82.

<sup>3</sup> Ashis Nandy, The Intimate Enemy, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> As J.S. Furnival wrote Modern Indian grew up with modern Europe" (Colonial Policy and Practices pp. 537-38) or as Bipan Chandra says "Colonialism in India was as modern a historical phenomena as industrial capitalism in Britain, the two developed together", Bipan Chandra,

mentioned two homologies. According to the homology between sexual and political dominance the West saw and projected themselves as masculine because of their political and socio-economic dominance and dominated the feminine Orient. Moreover the West began to perceive Orient as 'Veiled' - 'Veil' immediately because a symbol of resistance which made the West desirable to unveil the orient. In addition to that the subsidiary homology between childhood and the state of being colonized where the child is no more seen as the 'smaller version' of the adult, but as 'inferior version' to be educated to become mature. Through these two homologies the West tried to legitimize their drive for mastery over men whom they stereotyped as (semi) barbarians and un/semi civilized.

The first reactions of the Indians coming in contact with the colonial culture was simply to mimic them and to defeat them in their own game. Nandy show how the writers like Madhusudan Dutt<sup>5</sup>, Bankim

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<sup>5</sup> 'Colonialism, Stages of Colonialism and the Colonial State', (Journal of Contemporary Asia, Vol. 10, 1980), p. 272.

Madhusudan Dutt's celebration of Ravana and Meghnad (as masculine, aggressive) as against the sacred figures of Rama and Laksmana who were portrayed as weak-kneed, feminine villains in Meghnadbadh Kavya, (Nandy, The Intimate Enemy, pp. 18-21).

Chandra Chatterji<sup>6</sup> began to celebrate 'Khatriyahood' or the 'hyper masculinity' of Indian figures of mythology to fight back the colonial paradigm of the masculine West. Bengalis were the first to come in contact with British and therefore they were the first (Social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan and others) to mimic the Western model of scientific progress, enlightenment, and renaissance - to modernize India to fight against the colonial power. But as Nandy pointed out in the beginning of The Intimate Enemy that the "ruled are constantly tempted to fight their rulers within the psychological limits"<sup>7</sup> set by the rulers. Therefore as a direct response to colonialism, what was recessive and in fetters in traditional Indian masculinity became salient over a small period of time.

The West tried to legitimize their rule over the colonized by giving these two homologies because they thought that it is necessary to prove to themselves that they are superior. The colonizers, similarly, as a revolt against colonialism, tried to prove themselves better or superior in matters relating to the colonizer. They even

tried to imitate the colonizers culture to prove that the colonized can beat the colonizer in their game.

In the field of literature, we do find that the Indians trying to do the same. Madhusudan, as a product of the period of the initial encounter of the colonial British and India, tried to react against the colonial paradigm of the equation of political and sexual dominance. Madhusudan, like Bankim Chandra Chatterji picked up characters from Indian mythology, to disapprove the western notion of the Orient as the feminine. Madhusudan wrote to Raj Narain in 1860 -

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<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Bankim Chandra Chatterji's 'Sannyasis' in Anandamath mimics priesthood in some versions of western Christianity and his essay on Krsna (Nandy, The Intimate Enemy, pp. 23-24).

Thus Madhusudan having a great knowledge about the poetic Indian mythology used it to fight against the colonial paradigm by making the traditional heroes of The Ramayana feminine and unheroic figures, and making Ravana and Meghnad the tragic heroes. As he himself said that an intelligent mind can manufacture beautiful things out of Indian mythology; Madhusudan being a person brought up in his childhood listening to the stories of Indian mythology from her mother and being educated in the western liberal ideas and western culture and literary fashion of the west in his youth; he could very easily assimilate the eastern and western mythological, literary and cultural prototypes to 'manufacture' something which is at once thought to be a direct imitation of Milton's Satan by some scholars, but at the same time viewed as an attempt to fight back the colonial homology on the other.

Though Buddhadeva Bose in "Sahitya Charcha" altogether debunks the idea that in Madhusudan we do find an assimilation of the east and the west and says that it is actually in Rabindra Nath Tagore

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<sup>7</sup> Ashis Nandy, The Intimate Enemy, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Madhusudan Dutt to Raj Narain, Madhusudan Rachanabali, p.547.

that the real assimilation of the eastern and the western cultures takes place in Bengali literature.<sup>9</sup>

Generally it is being thought that Madhusudan is western to the core of his heart and soul, but at the same time his journey of becoming western and the failure to be so should not be seen as a failure altogether because the journey had a greater significance. There are some failures that make people learn more than what they can learn from the successes. Madhusudan's failure, in his desire to get recognition as a great English poet, should not be viewed as a collapse altogether, as this failure of his made him realize the vanities of his wishes. And realizing the vanities he moderated his desire and fought back against the parameters that he once dreamt for. This journey to prove himself as an English poet was long and very painstakingly suffering, but the pain that Madhusudan has to go through to realize the vanities of that dream must have given him more pain. Scholars and critics of Madhusudan do point out to the fact of the pain of his impossible journey, but no one realizes the pain Madhusudan deliberately inflicted upon himself. The journey to

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<sup>9</sup> Buddhadeva Bose, 'Sahitya Charcha' [Signet Press, Calcutta, 1953] p.31.

transgress from the 'native elite class' to the 'foreign elite class' was a painful sojourn, which the circumstances of the nineteenth century Bengal imposed upon him; but the return journey to 'native elite class' from the 'foreign elite class' is 'self-inflicted' - and the scholars on Madhusudan generally neglect this pain of Madhusudan. The pain that he went through to dewesternize himself [if not fully, but partially] is what makes him react against the colonial power in a particular way which resulted in the inversion of the protagonists of The Ramayana.

In the inversion of the characters of The Ramayana, we do see in Madhusudan Dutt a fascination for the colonialist masculinity - but that fascination is more there to fight against the so-called masculine west. For Madhusudan, unlike Gandhi, the way to resist the masculine west is not 'klivatva' [androgyny]<sup>10</sup>, but an indigenous masculinity - the masculinity that he perceives in Meghnad and Ravana. Madhusudan perceives the rakshashas in the position of the innocent pre-colonials, brave but foolish, therefore easily

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<sup>10</sup> As Asish Nandy points out in The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism that there are two ways of fighting against the colonial homology between sexual and political dominance. The first is to fight back the colonizers by defeating them in their own game. As the early nineteenth century scholars, who tried to imitate the colonial culture to prove that, do it they are better in that too. But Gandhi



defeated by effeminate Rama and Laksmana. The rakshasa clan of Ravana is shown to be extraordinarily brave and honest, whereas Rama and Laksmana are shown to be cunning in their nature - without their cunningness it would be impossible for them to kill Meghnad in a battle if Meghnad would have completed the 'nikumbhila yagna.' Therefore it was essential for Laksmana to disrupt that worship of Meghnad so as to stop him from attaining the divine power and grace. But the way Rama and Laksmana decide to murder Meghnad only portrays them as cunning murderers, rather than gods who are fighting a battle for their rights. Madhusudan describes how Laksmana takes the help of goddess Maya to slay Meghnad -

Goddess Maya revealed her presence, bestowed

The boon; she the ocean of compassion, said; --

"delighted, pleased with you, today,

oh son of chaste Sumitra, -- gods, goddesses

all! Basav has, heaven's own arms

sent for you; I am here in person

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way to react was altogether different, he discarded the colonial homology of sexual and political dominance by saying that 'klivatva' or androgyny is superior to masculinity and femininity.

at lord Shiva's behest to accomplish  
your task, destined. Wielding celestial arms,  
mighty one, with Bivishana along,  
proceed into the city, where Ravani  
does Yajna Nikumbhila at the pedestal,  
worshipping lord Vaishwanara,  
in a flash, pouncing as the panther, set upon,  
slay the rakshasa! By your grace,  
ye two enter unseen; as the sword in sheath,  
I'll shroud you with the charmed veil!"<sup>11</sup>

The "charmed veil" suggests the cunning nature of Rama and Lakmana who knows that in an equal battle it would be impossible for them to defeat Indrajit [Meghnad], therefore they use their craftiness to murder Meghnad. Thus Madhusudan presents the sly nature of "Rama and his rabble". This cunning effeminate nature of Rama and Laksmana is portrayed against the brave masculine Ravana

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<sup>11</sup> Madhusudan Dutt, Meghnadbadh Kavya, Canto 6, Translated by Shyamal Bandopadhyay, [Toms Publications Calcutta, 1986] pp.150-151.

and Meghnad to spot out the nature of the entry of the colonial power into our India. Shyamal Bandopadhyay writes -

The rebel in Michael had his sympathy turned with anybody who fought his right against intruders; he [Ravana] was bound to be his favourite.<sup>12</sup>

The Britishers have also entered India by using their shrewd sly mind, which not only has ruined the Indian societal and economic fabric, but also has harmed its backbone by corrupting its culture.

Shyamal Bandopadhyay writes -

The war was one of heroic defense by the Rakshasas of their motherland.<sup>13</sup>

Rama and his company were intruders to the city of Lanka, and it is quite obvious that Madhusudan, while reacting against the colonial west would take up the most popular tale of India. He took up the

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<sup>12</sup> Shyamal Bandopadhyay, Introduction of his Translation of Meghnadbadh Kavya, p.x.

<sup>13</sup> Shyamal Bandopadhyay, Introduction, Translation of Meghnadbadh Kavya, [Toms Publications, Calcutta, 1986] p.xxii.

Ramayana because he sympathized with the fortune of Ravana and Meghnad, as he writes -

I despise Rama and his rabble. The idea of Ravana elevates me.<sup>14</sup>

Ravana's idea elevates his mind as he could identify himself with the fortune of Ravana, who is trying to save his motherland from the intruders. As Madhusudan Dutt is also doing the same therefore Madhusudan's mind would quite naturally celebrates the bravery of Ravana and Meghnad.

According to Madhusudan Dutt, its not that the pre-colonial Indians were feminine and immature as the colonial west perceives it, but they are brave, masculine but innocent lot [like Meghnad and Ravana]. In Meghnadbadh Kavya, 'innocence' again is not a negative characteristic as the west perceives it - the colonial west perceives the colonized as the inferior version of the adults who are to be taught and educated to make them civilized. The innocence that

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<sup>14</sup> Madhusudan quoted by Shyamal Bandopadhyay, Introduction, Translation of Meghnadbadh Kavya, p.xvii.

is generally associated with the childhood is supposed to be a mark of righteousness and rectitude is professed as a lack by the colonial culture of the west. Madhusudan Dutt, who is much influenced by the romantics, differ from the colonialist propaganda in this way. Though in the celebration of the "aggressive masculinity" is taking up the parameter of the colonial homology of the sexual and political dominance, but at the same time he differs from the colonialist mission when it comes to the question of innocence to be seen as a lack of superiority and excellence.

Thus Michael Madhusudan Dutt tries to fight back the colonialist west in his life long desire to equal his the then masters. Earlier he tried to equal them by imitating their culture, but was not included into their community, realizing the futility of his attempt he fought back. But what he could not achieve militarily, he tried to achieve that through his poetry - thus we see that his style is masculine. His obsession with the "masculinity" was such that not only he praised the masculinity of Ravana and Meghnad which was earlier thought to be demonic; but his style of writing itself became very

masculine. His masculinity in style consists of being brave to innovate the "amitrakshar chhande" in Bengali language and literature and in innovating a language in Bengali, which has its elegance of its own. Shyamal Bandopadhyay points out several distinguishing features of Madhusudan's "amitrakshar chhande" -

First, the theme and the words were freed for the first time from the compulsion of punctuation.

Second, the phrases rise up to the theme, to the music of the poetry, the passion, the sweeps of imagination, the melancholy sadness that weaves the verse form.<sup>15</sup>

As Bengali language is not bonded by compound words and phrases, therefore it was extremely difficult for any poet to write in blank verse, but Michael Madhusudan Dutt succeeded in infusing into the Bengali language the "amitrakshar chhande" by varying rhythms, phrases, stops and creating new words of music and power that transcended the routine frame of Bengali language. Scholars on

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<sup>15</sup> Shyamal Bandopadhyay, Introduction of his Translation of Meghnadbadh Kavya, [Toms Publications, Calcutta, 1986] p.xxxviii.

Madhusudan are of the opinion that there are certain distinct characteristics of Madhusudan's poetry -

... a preponderance of uncommon, difficult words ... lack of simplicity and straightforwardness in the construction of sentences, - a combination of masculine words artificially bound together, - farfetched metaphors and imageries - and of course boundless passion, imagination and flights of fancy get out of control; unconventional construction of verbs which are basically nouns and adjectives - and a frequent mixture of chaste and colloquial words and phrases.<sup>16</sup>

These characteristics of his verse has made his poetry overwhelming, but to achieve this overwhelming success in innovating the 'masculinity' of the Bengali language he didn't have to be too cautious as he writes to Raj Narain -

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. The thoughts and images bring out words themselves - words that I never thought I knew. Here is a mystery for you.<sup>17</sup>

The above lines from Madhusudan's letter points out to the fact that the masculinity that he brought to Bengali language is because the theme of the grand defeat of Madhusudan wanted that kind of masculine language. The "mystery" that Madhusudan talks about is not mystery but 'spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions' - the emotions that were there in his heart of not being included into the 'foreign elite class'. Therefore he choose not "vira rasa" [courage] as the theme of his epic, as Madhusudan writes to Raj Narain -

... I am going to celebrate the death of my favourite Indrajit. Do not be frightened, my dear fellow. I don't trouble my readers with *vira ras*.<sup>18</sup>

In another letter he wrote to his friend -

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, p.xxxviii.

<sup>17</sup> Madhusudan to Raj Narain, *ibid*, p.28.



You must not, my dear fellow, judge of the work as a regular 'Heroic Poem'; I never meant it as such. It is a story, a tale, rather heroically told.<sup>19</sup>

The theme of the epic poetry usually deals with the "vira rasa" [the heroic], but as Michael Madhusudan Dutt pointed out Meghnadbadh Kavya does not deal with the heroic tale of Meghnad but deals with the "karuna rasa" [pathos] of Ravana. Bharata muni, in his famous text Natya Sastra says -

The Karuna Rasa takes its origin through different Bhavas either at the sight of the death [or murder] of the dear one or when unpleasant words have an adverse impact.<sup>20</sup>

Meghnadbadh Kavya starts with the news of Virvahu's death and ends with the lamentation of the death of Meghnad. From the

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<sup>18</sup> Madhusudan to Raj Narain, Madhusudan Rachanavali, edited by Khetra Gupta, [Sahitya Samsad, Calcutta, 1996] p.546.

<sup>19</sup> Madhusudan's letters quoted by Shyamal Bandopadhyay in the Introduction of his Translation of Meghnadbadh Kavya, [Toms Publications, Calcutta, 1986], p. xxi.

very beginning to its end the epic deals with the 'sthayi bhava' [emotional state] of "soka" [grief]. The grief, that Madhusudan experienced in his wish to become an English poet is not similar to that of the grief of Ravana. But both of them are trying to fight for their motherland. Ravana is trying to fight it with his military force, while Michael Madhusudan Dutt is trying to fight it with his masculine poetry. Both of them are using their masculinity to overcome their grief. Madhusudan's grief is in his self-inflicted pain as he wanted to be an English poet and latter realized that it was a vain attempt, and Ravana's grief is in his self inflicted suffering as he says -

Alas, Surpanakha,  
what inauspicious hour was it you descried - luckless,  
this venomous deadly serpent  
in the fatal Panchabati wood?  
What evil moment, [sharing your lament],  
did I force Janaki, as the tongue of flame.  
into this golden Lanka,  
I left for the densest wood - alone,

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<sup>20</sup> Bharata Muni, Natya Sastra, translated by A Board of Scholars [Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi] pp.79-80.

seeking solace in this burning agony!<sup>21</sup>

Both Ravana and Madhusudan has inflicted pain upon themselves and therefore its quite natural that Madhusudan Dutt would take side with Ravana and would celebrate his masculinity because in the celebration of Ravana's cause, Madhusudan Dutt can see himself fighting. Thus though the tale of Meghnadbadh Kavya is that of a grieved father's suffering, but it's also a tale of fighting back that pain heroically. Madhusudan Dutt thus attains the grandeur that he wanted to achieve all his life - by telling his own tale of fight against the intruders through the mouth of Ravana. It can be that Madhusudan Dutt is fascinated by the colonialist masculinity but the latter Madhusudan [the dewesternised one] is trying to celebrate the indigenous masculinity of Ravana and Meghnad to battle against the colonial west and his westernized early self.

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Meghnadbadh Kavya translated by Shyamal Bandopadhyay, [Tomsii Publications, Calcutta, 1986]

**CHAPTER FOUR**



## ELEMENTS OF NATIVISM IN STYLE AND CONTENT

As I have already referred to in Chapter Three, Michael Madhusudan Dutt in writing Meghnadbadh Kavya as an epic with Ravana and Meghnad as the tragic heroes, not only to fight against the colonial west, but also against any form of domination, suppression and oppression prevailing in the society. In this struggle against the domination, primarily against the colonial power Madhusudan Dutt's Meghnadbadh Kavya becomes one of the early texts of dissent against the alien domination. But at the same time the text Michael Madhusudan Dutt is choosing to dissent from the domination of the western power and culture is the most famous and popular text of India - The Ramayana. It is not that there was no such versions/reinterpretations of Ramayana existing earlier than Meghnadbadh Kavya. Therefore Ashis Nandy writes -

"Meghnadbadh was not the first reinterpretation of The Ramayana . . . therefore was in the living tradition of dissent in India."<sup>1</sup>

That Rama and Laksmana were viewed as weak-kneed, feminine characters was not a discovery of Michael Madhusudan Dutt, but there are many reinterpretations of The Ramayana prevailing in the local cultures and dissenting ideologies, as Nandy refers to in The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism -

In South India, an alternative tradition of Ramayana, which antedated Madhusudan, had off and on been, a source of social conflict and controversy. In Jainism, too, a version of the Ramayana had been sometimes a source of intercommunal conflicts.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ashis Nandy, The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism. [OUP, Delhi, 1983] p.19.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p.19.

Or as K. Satchidanandan writes in the essay 'Defining the Premises: Nativism and its Ambivalences' -

We have ... as many Ramayanas as we have languages and traditions, ... for, besides the various written Ramayanas from those of Valmiki and Tulsidas to those of the Pampa and Kambar and Ezhuthachchan, we have too the very different Ramayanas of the Buddhist and Jain traditions, the visual texts of our murals and miniatures as also the performed texts from Harikatha to Burakatha, from Yaksahgana to Kathakali to Ramleela"<sup>3</sup>

Thus it becomes very clear that what Michael Madhusudan Dutt is writing about is nothing new to the Indian culture, it was there for ages, Madhusudan Dutt is only reworking on that popular myth. In that he again seems to be following Milton - as Milton chose the story of Adam and Eve, which is at the heart of the western culture to write

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<sup>3</sup> K. Satchidanandan, 'Defining the Premises: Nativism and its Ambivalences' in Makarand Paranjape edited Nativism: Essays in Criticism [Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1997] p.15.

his epic, similarly Madhusudan also chose a tale, which is at the heart of the Indian culture.

Some scholars would point out that Madhusudan being westernized in his youth would naturally hate "everything Hindu" as was the tradition among the youths in the first half of the nineteenth century Bengal, because of their reverence for the west. But though his westernized self would hate "everything Hindu", but when it came to react against the supremacy of the west/ British he reacted by taking up a tale that is there in the mind of every Indian. Madhusudan, in his youth, as a product of nineteenth century Bengal behaved in a similar fashion of that of his contemporaries, but at the same time his failure in 'self-fashioning' himself in the culture of the west and his vain attempt of being included into the "foreign native class" as an English poet made him react against any form of coercion and domination. He found out that he should not only fight against the alien domination in India, but against the domination that is there within the homeland.



His realization of the self-confessedly misguided quest of being a poet of international fame by writing in the language of the west, made him return to his native land and language, as he writes in the poem 'Bengali' -

O Bengal, many jewelers! All the treasures of your store  
In folly I ignored; in befuddlement of mind.<sup>4</sup>

The understanding of the 'befuddlement' made him discover the depths of beauty of Bengali language, which made him the first modern Bengali poet. He realized, as he wrote to Gour Das Bassyack -

There is nothing like cultivating and enriching our own tongue ... when we speak to the world, let us speak in our own language ... our Bengali is a very beautiful language.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Madhusudan Dutt, Bengali, trans. Marian Maddern in Marian Maddern, Bengali Poetry in English: An Impossible Dream? [Editions Indian, Calcutta, 1977] p.73.

<sup>5</sup> Madhusudan Dutt to Gour Das Bassyack, quoted by Dr. Amalendu Bose in Michael Madhusudan Dutt. [Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1981] p.89.

This realization of the beauty of his mother tongue, the realization that he does have the potential in him to express himself well in his mother tongue, this insight of enriching one's own language and literature, made Michael Madhusudan Dutt such a literary figure in the history of Indian literature. Its not that his "Captive Lady" and other famous poems written in English wasn't of any caliber, but what he has achieved in writing Meghnadbadh Kavya and other Bengali poems and plays could not be done in English language.

Meghnadbadh Kavya portrays the poet's ability of poisedly matching the innovative style and the grand native theme. Thus though most of the critics of Madhusudan talk about his westernization, but no one views his return to the native theme and language as having a 'nativistic critical awareness' of his. That the phase of his intoxication to the western literature and culture is actually a phase of 'amnesia' which got over soon and Madhusudan realized what his project should be - the project, which "understands writing as a social act, and expects of it an ethical sense of commitment to the society within which it is born. It rules out the

colonial standard of literary history as a series of epochs, and the 'marga' claim of the mainstream literature as being the only authentic literature."<sup>6</sup> This project is what G. N. Devy calls Nativism, which is basically a critical project that sets out to free the 'desi' or the 'bhasa' literary sensibility and criticism from the colonial or the 'videshi' and the 'marga' traditions.

As G. N. Devy points out "In India, Westernization has also brought with it a regressive tendency of Sanskritization, in the sense of reviving a distant past and repressing the immediate past."<sup>7</sup> and there are two clear tendencies - westernization and sanskritization.

Michael Madhusudan Dutt, from the very beginning was critical towards the Indian dominant culture - that is the sanskritization [or the dominance of the Sanskrit texts] and after the dewesternization of his self [though partially] he became critical towards the western culture - thus his position when he is writing Meghnadbadh Kavya is

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<sup>6</sup> G. N. Devy, After Amnesia – Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism, [Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 1992] p.120.

against the two tendencies that dominated the Indian literary sensibility. In the earlier chapter I have tried to show how Madhusudan tried to fight against the imperial mission by trying to fight the so-called masculine west by celebrating the 'hyper-masculinity' of the 'khatriyahood' in India. In this chapter my emphasis is on how Madhusudan tried to fight against the domination that is there within India. Madhusudan as a dissenting figure of the mid nineteenth century Indian situation in general and Bengali situation in particular is not only a figure to dissent against the foreign domination but also against any form of domination that suppresses the individuality of a person or that of a social group.

I have already pointed out that there are different versions or reinterpretations of the Ramayana prevalent in many parts of India. But the Sanskrit text becomes the only authoritative version as that version is thought to be the only authentic one. Thus the so-called authentic Ramayana suppressed the other local interpretations of one of the most popular epic story of India. Madhusudan in

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<sup>7</sup> G. N. Devy, After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism, [Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 1992] p.55.

inverting the characters of the Ramayana and in his attempt to write an epic to parallel Vedvyasa is trying to go against the domination of the Sanskrit text over the local and the folk ones. K. Satchidanandan talking about the various Ramayanas in India says-

None of these texts [various versions of Ramayanas] can claim to be more authentic than any other; privileging one at the expense of another will be a violation of ... 'textual democracy'.<sup>8</sup>

From Madhusudan's letters it becomes evident how much he hated the 'pundits' who are traditionally thought to be knowledgeable scholars, as he writes to Raj Narain -

We ... are the men to turn away those beggars or pretenders, whom they call pundits but whom I call barren rascals.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> K. Satchidanandan, 'Defining the Premises: Nativism and its Ambivalences', p.15.

These pundits are those people who tried to dominate the academic circle of India by advocating the fact that their knowledge is authoritative and authentic as it is based on the Sanskrit texts. Madhusudan had a vehement angst against these so called literary and philosophical scholars or pundits. He termed himself as a "tremendous literary rebel"<sup>10</sup> and as a rebel he decided to change the whole setup of the Bengali language -

In the course of four and five years Dutt will, if spared, revolutionize the language of your country<sup>11</sup>

He not only revolutionized the language, but also made a revolution in ideas, in the ways of looking at the Indian epic stories, at the Indian culture. In that, Madhusudan Dutt did something to the Bengali language and literature, which made the Bengali language and literature progress towards its modernity. Madhusudan's contribution and his status in the history of Bengali literature is so important that

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<sup>9</sup> Madhusudan Dutt to Raj Narain, Madhusudan Rachanabali, edited by Khetra Gupta, [Sahitya Samsad, Calcutta, 1996] p.550.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p.550

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, p.557.

without him it's impossible to think of the development of the Bengali literature to its present state.

When Madhusudan came back from Madras and was dewesternizing [if his giving up of his Anglo-mania can be termed in that fashion] himself and thinking about writing in Bengali, he wrote to Gour Das Bassayack -

If I can achieve a name by writing in Bengali, I ought to do it.<sup>12</sup>

The name and fame that he wanted to achieve and wanted to make a mark in the world literature by being an English poet was shattered by the time, but the shattering of his dream made him realize the reality, made him realize the potential that he has within him, the poetic vigor that could not find proper vent in an alien language, the mastered, spirited and unparalleled rhetorical dynamism that was lying within him. This realization that whatever he wanted to achieve - the dream of becoming a great poet - can be true but it can only be true if the theme of his writing is contextualized and is

expressed in the language in which that particular content has taken its birth. This understanding of his misled enthusiasm and the understanding that expressing oneself in the native language, in his mother tongue, in a language that he has neglected since his youth, a language though neglected has grown up within him unconsciously, made him not only one of the greatest poet of the nineteenth century Bengal, but of the whole of India.

Though, usually Madhusudan's use of Bengali language is thought to be much sanskriticized, so sanskriticized that often it becomes difficult for the common reader to understand his poetry, especially Meghnadbhadh Kavya. Shyamal Bandopadhyay, one of the translators of Meghnadbhadh Kavya, is of the view that "the style and power [of Meghnadbhadh Kavya] ... tore the fetters off Bengali verse forms. It was revolutionary when it came."<sup>13</sup> There was a mixed response to Meghnadbhadh Kavya's early reception. In one of the letters to Raj Narain, he wrote about an episode that he encountered

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<sup>12</sup> ibid, p.543.



Some days ago I had to go to Chinabazar. I saw a man seated in a shop and deeply pouring over Meghnad. I stepped in and asked him what he was reading. He said in very good English; -- " I am reading a new poem, Sir!" "A poem!" I said :I thought there was no poetry in your language." He replied - "Why, sir, here is poetry that would make my nation proud"<sup>14</sup>

That was how Meghnadbadh Kavya was received at one level, but some people even didn't like the epic for it's over sanskritized nature. Madhusudan himself argued with Maharaja Jatindra Mohan Tagore, reverently claiming the venerable Sanskrit -

Bengali language is the daughter of Sanskrit; nothing is outside the reach of a child of such mother.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Shyamal Bandopadhyay, in the Introduction of the Translation of Meghnadbadh Kavya [Toms Publications, Calcutta, 1986], p.27.

<sup>14</sup> Madhusudan Dutt to Raj Narain, in Madhusudan Rachanavali edited by Khetra Gupta, p.561.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted by Shyamal Bandopadhyay in the Introduction of his Translation of Meghnadbadh Kavya. [Toms Publications, Calcutta, 1986] p.22.

Therefore whatever Sanskrit we perceive in Meghnadbadh Kavya is not what the nativists can term as sanskritization, but it can be said to be an embellishment of the Bengali language.

Similarly, the theme of Meghnadbadh Kavya is often thought to be more western than native - so western that sometimes it seems only to be an attempt to imitate the western epic tradition. But those scholars who only view his writing as westernized and sanskritized tend to simplify things very much. Madhusudan's writing and his life are not so simple as people tend to think. Though his writing seems to be going much against the project of nativism [as people do view his writings usually]; but at the same time if his works, especially Meghnadbadh Kavya, is seen closely than it is more nativistic than being westernized and sanskritized.

Madhusudan's nativism has struck a different path altogether. A path that has its own peculiarities. As Swami Vivekananda says -

No individual or nation can live by holding itself apart from the community of others, and whenever such an attempt has been made ... the result has always been disastrous to the secluding one.<sup>16</sup>

So the question that crops up is that in the mid nineteenth century context of Bengal and India was it really possible for Madhusudan to dewesternize himself altogether so as to leave everything that is western. Or the question can be put in a different fashion -whether it is at all possible for any writer to write in the mid nineteenth century Bengali context altogether about a native theme without being influenced by the western ideas and culture as the center of learning of Bengal, Calcutta, was much westernized after hundred years of the rule by East India Company. The question is put in the postcolonial context in a different fashion - whether we can decolonize ourselves?

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<sup>16</sup> Swami Vivekananda quoted by Makarand Paranjape in Decolonization and Development: Hind Swaraj Revised. [Sage Publications, New Delhi/Newbury Park/London, 1992] p.122.

Therefore the discussion comes to a point where the real question comes to whether we can negate history or not. As in the present context we can't negate the two hundred years of the colonial past of ours, similarly Madhusudan could not deny the western influence in which he was brought up. Thus whether it is possible to completely resist the alien influence or it is desirable to completely resist the foreign influence becomes the major area of discussion whenever there is a discussion on Nativism.

Makarand Paranjape in Decolonization and Development: Hind Swaraj Revised suggests that in the post-colonial context "selective assimilation" would benefit us more than complete resistance, otherwise it would lead our culture and literature to a closed one and would gradually progress to the death of our culture; similar idea also is being suggested by Swami Vivekananda. Bhalchandra Nemade in the essay 'Sahityaee Deshiyata' ['Nativism in Literature'] writes—

Culture is a network of interacting systems. Every living and potent culture has the in-built capacity to convert and absorb all external influences into a native system.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore in the context of the mid nineteenth century it also was not desirable from any writer to completely ignore the western ideas and culture, as that would have lead our literature and culture to be a secluded one in the global context. Thus Madhusudan's Meghnadbadh Kavya is not nativistic in the absolute sense of the term, if nativism is thought only to be a critical project as defined by G. N. Devy. But Bhalchandra Nemade and other nativists are of the opinion that the outside influences are not to be discounted but, if necessary to be assimilated and Nemade terms this assimilation of the foreign influences and ideas as "nativization."<sup>18</sup> Madhusudan was nativist writer in that sense that though he has been influenced much by the western ideas and culture but he only assimilated those elements [as I have discussed them in Chapter Two] of western epic

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<sup>17</sup> Bhalchandra Nemade, Nativism in Literature, in Makarand Paranjape edited Nativism: Essays in Criticism, p.243.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, p.243.

tradition, which made *Meghnadbadh Kavya* the first pioneering text of the modern Bengali literature.

Moreover as Ashis Nandy writes -

His [Madhusudan's] aggressive criticism of the Indian traditions was in the style of the major reform movements of India: it was not merely an attempt to explain Indian culture in Indian terms, or even in western terms, but was an attempt to explain the West in Indian terms and to incorporate it in the Indian culture as an unavoidable experience.<sup>19</sup>

Thus Madhusudan though has borrowed many a things from the western civilization, but those borrowings from the alien civilization are for the sake of the reform of the Indian culture and civilization. Moreover the borrowings are nativised so as to make them a part of our cultural and literary traditions. The elements that he borrowed are not those that would make *Meghnadbadh Kavya* a western text,

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<sup>19</sup> Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy*, p.22.

but a text that is a product of the reaction to the dominance of the west.

But as I said in the beginning of this chapter that Madhusudan's celebration of the 'aggressive masculinity' of Rama and Lakshmana is not only a reaction against the domination of the West, but against any form of dominance and oppression that exist in the Indian society. I have already discussed how Madhusudan was trying to fight for the 'textual democracy' of the local and the subaltern reinterpretations and versions of the Ramayana. Makarand Paranjape in the essay 'Towards a Contemporary Indian Tradition in Criticism' writes -

Nativism ...is subaltern - the celebration of the local, the immediate, and the marginalized.<sup>20</sup>

Thus Madhusudan's reinterpretation of the Ramayana is a native text not only because it is a reaction against the dominance of the

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<sup>20</sup> Makarand Paranjape, 'Towards a Contemporary Indian Tradition in Criticism' in Makarand Paranjape edited Nativism: Essays in Criticism, p.173.

colonial west, but also a reaction against the hegemony of the so-called authentic version of the Ramayana.

In the beginning of his youth, he aspired to become international by being an English poet, by giving up everything Indian, by embracing the Christian religion, by marrying white female, by trying to imitate the west in all its essence, but as Makarand Paranjape writes in 'Challenges in Theory' -

Being national does not, in itself, deny the possibility of being international, but if we start off wanting to be international, then we may end up being denationalized instead.<sup>21</sup>

Or as Mahatma Gandhi wrote -

Internationalism has got no malice, no ill will or contempt, but it had only peace and goodwill in its, and unless a

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<sup>21</sup> Makarand Paranjape, 'Tradition, Modernity and Post-Modernity/Region, Nation and Internation: Challenges in Theory' in Litcritt, Journal of Indian School of Aesthetics, Thiruvananthapuram, Vol.21, No.-1, June, 1995, p.7.



man can began to love heartily his neighbours, he couldn't cultivate the spirit of love for the outside world.<sup>22</sup>

Madhusudan started his life in his aspiration to become international by imitating the western culture, because as a colonized his mind also found the colonial culture to be superior to his own culture. To him, in his youth, the western ideas and culture were the parameters through which one can aspire to be international. In other words, to him being western was the way to become international. But as soon as he realized that internationalism or international recognition is not there in imitating west, but in being native, in celebrating the local, in loving one's own culture, he came back to his own land, to his mother tongue, to the theme that is his own, to the ideas that was there in his blood cells. Dr. Amalendu Bose makes a shrewd and sensitive observation by saying -

When Michael started writing in his mother tongue - lo and behold - he takes the Ramayana, which is at the very center of Indian culture -and he bases his poetry on that. Now

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<sup>22</sup> Collected works of Mahatma Gandhi, Volume-28, p.134.

he does not write about Alexander the Great or anything that is alien to India. But he goes to the very crux of Indian life, culture and civilization. He remained a Bengali, remained Indian, not in external features perhaps but in his heart of hearts.<sup>23</sup>

He came out of the self induced hypnosis and realized that only way of getting the recognition as an international poet, as a person of good literary caliber is to express oneself in a language that suits the context in which that particular expression has taken birth. And in doing so Madhusudan though borrowed many a things from the western epic tradition, but never imitated fully a single object. Thus his process of nativization or that of selective assimilation of the western ideas in his work makes Meghnadbadh Kavya a native text. Madhusudan in a letter to his friend Gour Das Bassayck writes -

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<sup>23</sup> Dr Amalendu Bose quoted in the Introduction by Shyamal Bandhopadhyay in the Translation of Meghnadbadh Kavya, p.xxii.

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.<sup>24</sup>

It can be that there are some western elements in his Meghnadbadh Kavya, its true that Madhusudan was much influenced by Milton [by the character of Satan, by Milton's blank verse], by Homer, Virgil, Tasso; but he never tried to imitate any one of them. He may have borrowed an element or two from them, but what he created was not a replica of anyone of the western poets. What he created was something that has a distinct space of itself, not only in the history of Bengali language and literature, but in the world literature as well. Therefore, Dr. Amalendu Bose in the very beginning of Michael Madhusudan Dutt's biography says -

Michael was among the earliest of modern India's internationalists.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Madhusudan Dutt in a letter to Gour Das Bassayack, Madhusudan Rachanavali, edited by Khetra Gupta, p.541.

Thus Madhusudan's return to "Bangla" can be viewed as his love for the native land and native language, but in the strict sense of the term 'nativism', he cannot be termed as a nativist poet. Rather he can be called an "assimilatioinst", who tried to assimilate things western into the native language and literature of 'Bangla' to make it rich. There lies the greatness of Michael Madhusudan Dutt.

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<sup>25</sup> Amalendu Bose, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, [Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1981] p.2.

## CHAPTER FIVE



## CONCLUSION

Through out my dissertation I have tried to point out various ways of looking at Meghnadbadh Kavya, in particular and Madhusudan's life and writings in general. I have shown the western elements in his writing, how he reacted against the colonial west, how there are nativistic elements in his writing, how his return to his mother tongue 'Bangla' made him get international recognition as a poet which he dreamt all his life.

But more than that what is important is his classicism - the way he has created his Meghnadbadh Kavya. Madhusudan wrote to his friend Raj Narain -

I think I have constructed the Poem [Meghnadbadh Kavya] on the most rigid principles and even a French critic would not find fault with me.<sup>1</sup>

Thus Meghnadbadh Kavya seems to be such a creation of Michael Madhusudan Dutt that seems to be flawless in its design. In the earlier chapters I have tried to show the various aspects of his writing, especially Meghnadbadh Kavya, which seems to be a unique creation as the poet has tried to assimilate different trends together create a matchless piece of work. Thus Michael Madhusudan Dutt, more than anything else can be termed an 'assimilationist' who tried to assimilate different trends of thoughts together - in one way he seems to be a nativist, some would like to term him as a imitator of the western thoughts and culture, some would even think of him as a literary brat. This various readings of his works and his life can be done because he had such a varied outlook. Moreover, the variety of trends that was prevailing in the early and mid nineteenth century India made him caught up in an unusual situation. On the one side is the Anglicist and on the other is the nativist. He had to constantly negotiate between the two. Mohitlal Mazumdar<sup>2</sup> is of the opinion that while reading Meghnadbadh Kavya we do perceive an inner and outer tension always carrying on - this tension, though has been grappled by

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<sup>1</sup> Madhusudan Dutt to Raj Narain, Madhusudan Rachanavali, edited by Khetra Gupta [Sahitya Samsad, Calcutta, 1996] p.558.

Madhusudan, but the pains of that tension left its traces in his work. He tried to take a in between path - a path of assimilation. But in the process of assimilation the tension between the two extremes has left its traces of suffering that the poet has gone through before and during the creative process. Therefore in the strict sense of the term he can neither be described as Anglicist, nor a nativist. Instead he can be termed as a neo-classicist, like Milton, who used the sacred myths of the past to create something new. As in Milton's work there has been a successful assimilation of Hebrew, Latin, Greek, and English elements, similarly there had been a successful integration of the European, Sanskrit, and Bengali elements in Michael Madhusudan Dutt. But most of the critics think that Michael Madhusudan Dutt did not do a successful assimilation. Mohitlal Mazumdar says that though Madhusudan aspired to "engraft the exquisite graces of Greek mythology" on his own literature but he has failed in doing so. Mohitlal Mazumdar says -

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<sup>2</sup> Mohitlal Mazumdar, Kabi Sri Madhusudan, [Bodhoday Libraray Private Ltd, Calcutta, 1998], p.103.



But in reality his [Michael Madhusudan Dutt] writing focuses, less on Hindu 'Purana', and more on Greek; and he couldnot assimilate the two properly.<sup>3</sup>

Buddhadeva Bose in the essay "Sahitya Charcha" talks about how Rabindra Nath Tagore in his early life criticized Meghnadbadh Kavya saying that its nothing but a "keranigiri" [clerical job]. Rabindranath was of the opinion that Michael only imitated and did nothing -

It is as if he acquired all the characteristics of an epic and thought 'lets write an epic'; and then with extreme patience he wrote it based on those acquired characteristic with the help of the pact that he made with goddess Saraswati.<sup>4</sup>

Though Rabindra Nath Tagore in his later life praised Michael Madhusudan Dutt, but Buddhadeva Bose is of the opinion that appraisal of Madhusudan is Rabindranath's respect for his

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<sup>3</sup> Mohitlal Mazumdar, p.105, [My Translation]

predecessor and nothing else. But at the same time Edward Thompson says that while discussing the Meghnadbadh, Rabindra Nath Tagore once said -

He [Michael Madhusudan Dutt] was nothing of a Bengali scholar; he just got a dictionary and looked out all the sounding words. He had great power over words. But his style has not been repeated. It isn't Bengali.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, though Michael Madhusudan Dutt is regarded as the first modern Bengali poet, but he has been criticized much for the modernity that he has brought into Bengali literature, because of his over sanskritized Bengali, because of his classical outlook. But the fact remains that he was the first one to bring those new things into the vista of Bengali literature and culture. Rabindra Nath Tagore may argue that Madhusudan's Bengali is no Bengali at all, but it should also be remembered that he is the pioneer of what is thought to be the modernity of Bengali literature.

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<sup>4</sup> Rabindra Nath Tagore's views used by Buddhadhava Bose, 'Sahitya Charcha' [Signet Press, Calcutta, 1953], p.29.

But at the same time scholars like Mohitlal Mazumdar is of the opinion that

"the age that gets started in our [Bengali] literature with Michael Madhusudan Dutt, that gets reawakened in Bankim Chandra and reaches its culmination in Rabindra Nath ... the wave that Madhusudan has freed and which Bankim has made more intense and deep, Rabindra Nath had taken that into a unfathomable profundity of the ocean."<sup>6</sup>[My translation]

Thus it is impossible to deny the place of Madhusudan in the development of Bengali literature. Moreover as Mohitlal Mazumdar says about Michael Madhusudan Dutt quoting what Mathew Arnold has said about German poet Heine -

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<sup>5</sup> Rabindra Nath Tagore by Edward Thompson, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1948, p.16.

<sup>6</sup> Mohitlal Mazumdar, Kabi Sri Madhusudan [Bodhoday Library Private Limited, Calcutta, 1998], p.25.

He is not an adequate interpreter of the modern world.  
He is only a brilliant soldier in the war of liberation of  
humanity.<sup>7</sup>

Michael Madhusudan Dutt is obviously a defender of the liberation of the mankind from the fetters of domination and oppression of a particular class of people over others, but it's not true that he could not interpret the world in which he lived. Instead he is the one of his times whose life represents the effects of colonialism in India in its proper colors. Madhusudan's veneration for the west and his collusion with the colonial culture seems to be a paradoxical situation, and for that reason it becomes difficult to form a explicit identity of him. Edward Said, in the context of his exile, writes -

Most people are principally aware of one culture, [but]  
exiles are aware of two, and this plurality of vision gives rise

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<sup>7</sup> Mathew Arnold on German poet Heine, Quoted by Mohitlal Mazumdar, Kabi SriMadhusudan, p.25.

to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, and awareness that - to borrow a phrase from music - is *contrapuntal*.<sup>8</sup>

If Michael Madhusudan Dutt's state can be metaphorically thought to be that of the self inflicted exile as he tried to westernize himself and also took up Christianity for that purpose, then it becomes very clear that Madhusudan's awareness can also be termed as 'contrapuntal' - because he was aware of both the culture, the Indian culture that was there in his heart and the western culture which is there in his mind as he has studied it thoroughly. Because of this apparent contradiction that he seems to embody, the identity of Michael Madhusudan Dutt seems to be more and more complex. Madhusudan's ambivalent location within the western culture, both spatially and metaphorically, is in many ways metonymic of the history of the colonial subjects, because such histories display a constant tension between the dominant western culture and the culture of the colonized. This tension is more vigorous in him because of his dynamic personality and his vibrant intellectual persona.

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<sup>8</sup> Edward Said quoted by Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia, *Edward Said: The Paradox of Identity*, [Routledge, London and New York, 1999] p.11.

The question that becomes important here is whether one can negotiate the tension of these two cultures - one in the mind and another in the heart. Or to put it in other words, how to form an identity of such a person. In the seminar on "Nativism" in I.I.T., Kanpur in January 1995 Ganesh N. Devy started his Keynote address by comparing the contemporary Indian intellectuals to a "hayavadana" character - "part man and part horse" - a character of Girish Karnad's play Hayavadana, dealing with the theme of inadequacy. Devy says -

Whereas all the blood cells in this body standing before you are made of the Indian soil, air and water; the stock of knowledge stored in the brain seems to have come from elsewhere.<sup>9</sup>

If the nativists, like Devy, were asked to talk about the identity of Michael Madhusudan Dutt then immediately he would be termed as a "hayavadana". But the problem that these nativists don't

seem to understand is that it is not easy to stereotype identity in terms of specific cultural practices.

Therefore when it comes to the construction of an unequivocal identity of Michael Madhusudan Dutt then it becomes a problematic one, as he himself had led a life where he himself constantly tried to grapple with his own identity. Now the question arises whether we should only take up the identity of older Madhusudan to form our notions of him, or should we try to take the early and latter Madhusudan and compare and see the differences that have occurred in his formation of his own identity as he matured with his age, and his intellectual development. We should notice the change that has happened in him - and how that change has affected his writing. Meghnadbadh Kavya, the text in which the poet Madhusudan is at his best portrays the change that has taken place in him after the boyhood fantasies of getting included into 'foreign elite class' was over. It is true that the fantasies of his teenage were his misadventures but at the same time it should also be remembered that without those fantasies Meghnadbadh Kavya would never be

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<sup>9</sup> G.N. Devy, 'Desivad: Keynote Address' in the Seminar on Nativism In IIT, Kanpur, January, 1995, and Latter Published in Makarand Paranjape edited Nativism: Essays In Criticism, [Sahitya Akademi, New

there in reality, as those years of Madhusudan's austerity and dedication to the acquisition of the western literature and culture, made him assimilate some western elements [primarily, blank verse] into the treasury of 'Bangla' literature. Moreover the understanding of the misguided quest made him react against the domination of the western colonial culture. Therefore Madhusudan's misadventures should not be viewed as his failure, but as the sojourn of the colonized which, as Madhusudan did, should end in the recovery of one's self.



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