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# Layered homogeneities: Madhusudan Dutt, and the dilemma of the early Bengali theatre

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Owing to its colonial tag, Christianity shares an uneasy relationship with literary historiographies of nineteenth-century Bengal: Christianity continues to be treated as a foreign import capable of destabilising the societal matrix. The upper-caste Christian neophytes, often products of the new western education system, took to Christianity to register socio-political dissent. However, given his/her socio-political location, the Christian convert faced a crisis of entitlement: as a convert they faced immediate ostracising from Hindu conservative society, and even as devout western moderns could not partake in the colonizer's version of selective Christian brotherhood. I argue that Christian convert literature imaginatively uses Hindu mythology as a master-narrative to partake in both these constituencies. This paper turns to the reception aesthetics of an oft forgotten play by Michael Madhusudan Dutt, the father of modern Bengali poetry, to explore the contentious relationship between Christianity and colonial modernity in nineteenth-century Bengal. In particular, Dutt's deft use of the semantic excess as a result of the overlapping linguistic constituencies of English and Bengali is examined. Further, the paper argues that Dutt consciously situates his text at the crossroads of different receptive constituencies to create what I call 'layered homogeneities'.

I pray God, that the noble ambition of Milton to do something for his mother-tongue and his native land may animate all men of talent among us. If there be anyone among us anxious to leave a name behind him, and not pass away into oblivion like a brute, let him devote himself to his mother-tongue. That is his legitimate sphere—his proper element. European

scholarship is good in as much as it renders us masters of the intellectual resources of the most civilized quarters of the globe; but when we speak to the world, let us speak in our own language. Let those who feel that they have springs of fresh thought in them, fly to their mother-tongue.<sup>1</sup>

Madhusudan Dutt. Letter to Gour Das Basak, 1865.

Christianity and its historical utterances in Bengal continue to share a relationship of exclusions. Christianity came to Bengal only with the Portuguese colonial powers in the sixteenth century and has ever since borne the tag of being the natural suspect. Especially in the expressive reconstructions of nineteenth-century Bengal, the veritable springboard of Indian nationalism, accommodating a religion with imperialistic colours has proved to be particularly tenacious. A number of educated youth pressed by the concerns of colonial modernity often took to Christianity as an outlet of socio-political dissent. This paper addresses the crisis of entitlement that these Christian convert authors faced, with a particular focus on the father of modern Bengali poetry, Michael Madhusudan Dutt.

Dutt's conversion to Christianity, marriage to western women, and his love for excesses in terms of forbidden meat and alcohol have been habitually read as eccentricities associated with romantic poets (Everts and Yan 1995). In the same vein, his oeuvre has been treated as episodic and compartmentalised where his English writings have very little if any influence on his Bengali writings. In keeping with the assessment of his character, his entry into theatre has also been read as a chance encounter rather than a serious poetic investment.

Dutt's play *Sermista* (1859)<sup>2</sup>, has received little attention in terms of its literary prowess but has been largely celebrated as a historical milestone: the first Bengali drama ever written which the author himself had translated into English. As a play conceived in two languages and produced for a mixed audience (both the British and the Bengali), this piece of authorial endeavour brings to focus the complex interplay of the aesthetics of performance and reception. Theatre was a cultural neophyte in nineteenth-century Bengal, which modelled itself on its western counterparts and successfully marketed itself as a form of entertainment suitable for the 'bhadrakalok' class.<sup>3</sup> This paper seeks to read

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<sup>1</sup> Dutt, Madhusudan (1993), Letter to Gour Das Basak, 12 Rue des Chantiers, Versailles, France, 26th January, 1865, Madhusudan Rachanabali. Calcutta: Sahitya Sansad: p. 599.

<sup>2</sup> It was a play which simultaneously appeared in two versions: Śarmiṣṭhā (Bengali) and Sermista (English).

<sup>3</sup> Theatre as a cerebral mode of entertainment cannot be generalised throughout the nineteenth century. By the latter half of the nineteenth century topical debates relating to prostitutes and court cases and other such seemingly low forms often overlapped. As Bidisha Ray highlights, "Lower-order" groups were not silent about Bengal's political or social events. Scandals from elite bhadrakalok quarters often provided fodder for popular entertainment. The Elokeshi Mahanta adultery and murder scandal in the late nineteenth-century, 100 for example, wove its way across major English and Bengali language dailies, through the cheap presses and artist workshops of Calcutta's Battalla and Kalighat to Jatra performances all over the city and rural Bengal, being examined in varying idioms wholly dependent on audiences. The fortunes of the bhadrakalok public theatre house, Bengal Theatre, were made on the proceeds of a single play Mahanter Ei Kaaj! (What Did the Mahanta [priest] Do!) by an unknown playwright after a series of failed classical

Sermista within the context of 'bhadrlok' sensibility and situates itself in-between the charged literary spheres of the English and the Bengali in nineteenth century colonial Bengal. To unravel the complexities of contending literary spheres of the aspirational bilingual colonial elite we shall enter the text through the category of Hindu mythology.

The bilingual elite's various cultural affiliations are best understood in their desire to create layered homogeneities (in this case the upper caste/class theatre going Bengali). These constituencies would in turn affect the cultural production, dissemination and reception. I am aware of the pitfall of essentialising the bhadrlok as an elite group in control of the cultural capital<sup>4</sup>, but would merely suggest that the marginal (here Christian) bhadrloks distinguished between forms of reception to their advantage by constructing layered homogenous audiences. Dutt's presumptive group of recipients appear in at least five layers: the English colonial masters, the western educated elite (part of the invited audience), the people outside the purview of the enclosed space of the theatre (as a large mass of the 'other'), the literate audience who would read the play when published but would not be allowed inside the premises of the theatre, and the actors or the actresses acting in the play. These perceived spaces of reception constantly collide to generate multiple meanings which in turn allowed a Christian educated upper-caste convert to enter contested domains such as Hindu mythology. Dutt as the representative of this elite class prefers to operate within homogenous forms of experience, represented by his choice of subjects and their treatment, and his intended audience. This paper will further examine *Sermista's* position as the play in-between languages and its interaction with the poet's religious affiliation in the realm of the 'performative'. The first section investigates the critical reception of Dutt as the tragic hero. By examining the history of early Bengali theatre, the second section locates the layered nature of reception of theatre performance. The final section places bilinguality at the centre of the discussion to evaluate Dutt's formulation of the legitimacy of his narrative.

### **Madhusudan Dutt as a tragic hero**

Most schoolchildren in Bengal are introduced to the famous modernist poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt with a dose of nostalgia and nationalist fervent in the form of a sonnet.

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dramas' (Ray 2008:27). On the contrary, I consider the attempt on the part of the bhadrlok to project theatre as a respectable form.

<sup>4</sup> Several studies have identified the emergence of the bhadrlok as a post 1857 phenomenon where the colonial elite devised a strategy of foregrounding the cerebral capital of the Bengali intelligentsia. (McGuire 1983), (Mukherjee 1976), (Bagchi 1985: 57-58), (Bhattacharya 2005), to name a few. On the other hand, Sumanta Banerjee and Anindita Ghosh have suggested that there was an equally vocal culture in the streets that ran parallel and often threatened the bhadrlok discourse of respectability (Ghosh 2006) and (Banerjee 1989). Both these perceptions rely on boundaries that divide high and the low and exclude any manner of religious affiliations that can deeply problematise these constructions of cultural participation.

Ironically, Dutt wrote the work in question while he was in England<sup>5</sup> and it is part of his collection of sonnets, written in pentameter in English and paṃār metre in Bengali, called the caturdaś-paḍī ('fourteen liner'). Poetry in the form of the Bengali sonnet features almost at the very end of his career as a poet. Although he is credited with introducing the sonnet form in Bengali, it is the content of the poems which makes them his most favoured work. Baṅga bhāṣā (The Bengali Language—the earlier version was called Kabi-mātribhāṣā (The Poet's Mother Tongue), expresses a deep longing for the mother tongue.<sup>6</sup> The poet while residing in the far away foreign lands is visited in his dreams by none other than the goddess of Bengali language herself. She instructs him to look for riches within Bengali rather than in the wealth that lies with the foreigner.

Studded with invaluable gems  
Yet discarding them  
I roamed from land to land  
Greedy of wealth  
Like a merchant ship  
From port to port  
Then in dream one night  
The goddess appeared to tell me  
Your own language is full of wealth  
Why then have you turned yourself into a beggar?  
Why are you bereft of all the joy?<sup>7</sup>

Finally, after having written in English for a good number of years, Madhusudan declares his proclivity for the riches of his mother-tongue with this poem. In the course of his poetic career, this poem is not only incongruous with his initial desires of becoming an English poet but comes almost as a counter-narrative to his earlier poems and essays written in English.<sup>8</sup> It is no wonder then that the literary historiographers and critics alike

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<sup>5</sup> There is some controversy regarding the date of the poem. Amit Chaudhuri is of the opinion that it was written in 1860, well before Madhusudan left for England to study law in 1862. However, Dutt's biographers Jogeshchandra Basu and Amalendu Bose state that the sonnets were in fact written when Dutt was in Europe (Chaudhuri 2001).

<sup>6</sup> It is this longing for a linguistic nationalism that is often romanticized to draw an anti-colonial indigenized literary lineage. For a most recent attempt, see (Paranjape 2012).

<sup>7</sup> I have used Sajal Nag's translation here. Amalendu Bose translates the goddess's speech as "You have, my child, a mass of jewels in your mother's lap; then why should you be in a beggar's garment? Go back home, you foolish child"—I obeyed this maternal command and presently found in my mother-tongue, a mine of gems' (Nag 2007: 432), (Bose 1981: 73).

<sup>8</sup> Germane to this discussion is the views that he propounded in his powerful essay, 'The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu' (1854): '[I]t is the solemn Mission of the Anglo-Saxon to renovate, to regenerate, to Christianize the Hindu' and he also proclaims that he loves 'the language of the Anglo Saxons. My imaginations visions forth before me the language of the Anglo Saxon in all its radiant beauty; and I feel silenced and unabashed' (p. 638). Quite in contrast to his later poems in his English verses in the oft quoted poem is seen sighing for the distant Albion's shores:

I sigh for the Albion's distant shore,  
Its valleys green, its mountains high;

find relief in this collection of poems and often read them as the prodigal son's final homecoming.<sup>9</sup>

A rationale of the success of this collection of sonnets and its lasting impact on the literary memory of the Bengalis lies in the fact that these epiphanic poems were written by a proclaimed anglophile in England.<sup>10</sup> Located not in the distant colony but in the heart of the empire, this proclamation of loyalty towards the mother-tongue gives him the added degree of credibility.<sup>11</sup> This also comes in response to a number of contemporary critics who were sceptical of his 'Indian-ness'.<sup>12</sup> His classmate at Hindu College, Rajnarain Basu had remarked that '[t]he national sentiment is least evident as compared to the other Bengalis. He has dressed his poetry in a Hindu garb, but "coat-pantaloon" were visible from beneath' (Basu: 26). Declaration of love for the mother-tongue and the motherland, it seems, is finally capable of striking a balance between the 'Hindu garb' and the English attire. For critics in the twenty-first century, it is the 'trajectories and metaphors of exile and homecoming that define it and 'repeat themselves in subsequent narratives of Indian modernity' (Chaudhuri 2001). Therefore, this narrative strikes a cord with colonial modernity and it is intuitively identified with the Janus-faced disposition of Dutt's existence where the European and the Bengali selves play equal parts.<sup>13</sup> Rosinka Chaudhuri however suggests that the euphoria concerning

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Tho' friends, relations I have none  
In that far clime, ye, Oh! I sigh  
To cross the vast Atlantic wave  
For Glory, or a nameless grave.  
Kidderpore 1841.

<sup>9</sup> Rukmini Bhaya Nair quite contrary to the Madhusudan Dutt's altruistic proclamation of love for his mother-tongue claims that 'Michael Madhusudan Dutt, majestic poet of the nineteenth-century Bengal Renaissance was initially encouraged by the acquaintance with this verse to produce hideously stilted sonnets and plays in English. Ironically, Dutt began to compose in Bengali only after his writing was exposed to severe criticism in England (Lord Bethune's remark in 1849 that Dutt's poetic efforts were unlikely to bring him "either fame or food" illustrates the general tenor of his reception'. (Nair 2002: 272)

<sup>10</sup> Some slanderers however claim that Dutt was in dire economic straits in Europe where he repeatedly wrote to Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar for money to support him and his family and that these poems are merely reflective of his pecuniary worries. (Murshid 2004: 161)

<sup>11</sup> Amalendu Bose notes, 'In most of these poems written abroad, we cannot fail to note a haunting nostalgia for his national heritage; his language, village temples, trees, plants, the Sanskrit language, the Rāmāyaṇa, the Mahābhārata, traditional oral tales, Valmiki'. (Bose 1981: 74)

<sup>12</sup> Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay had initial reservations about his 'Indianess' and had criticized his most famous poem the Megh'nād'badh kābya. Raychaudhuri, Tapan. 'VI. Bengali Perceptions of the Raj in the Nineteenth Century'. *Itinerario*, 13. 1(1989): pp. 87-94. For the critics the comforting nature of the final turn of the poet towards his mother-tongue is complemented but could not be dissimulated by the paradoxical nature of his life. His first biographer, Yogendranāth Basu, notes that: 'At a ripe age he was not inhibited to write poetry in Bengali, but he was ashamed of writing letters in the same. On the day of the pūjā, <sup>12</sup> the sight of the idol of the goddess would bring tears to his eyes, but at the same time he would be annoyed if someone addressed him as bābu rather than mister. On the day of the koyagari pūrṇimā<sup>12</sup> and on the Daśamī<sup>12</sup> he would be brimming with emotions but he was of the opinion that getting a traditional Kabirāji<sup>12</sup> would tarnish his image. He was curious mix of jātīya bhāb ('national sentiment') and sāhebiyānā ('sahib-ness')'. Dutt's life has been full of such contradictions and oddities.' (Basu: 36. my translation).

<sup>13</sup> Makrand Paranjape insists that twin conflicting ideological positions that define the oeuvre of Madhusudan 'were both made and unmade by colonialism'. (Paranjape 2012: 80)

the reification of Madhusudan as the centrepiece of modernism of Bengal was suitably challenged along with the concept of the renaissance as an elitist preserve.<sup>14</sup>

Dutt was born on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 1824 in Sagardari (Sāgar'dārī), a village in Jessore district of Bengal, now in Bangladesh.<sup>15</sup> He was the only surviving child of his parents and hence was showered with extraordinary love. He was an unusually gifted student who did very well in school and subsequently in the Hindu College. It is believed that it was under Professor Richardson's tutelage at the Hindu College that Michael had conceived of revolutionary ideas. Although he had joined the College well after the death of its famous professor and the proponent of the Young Bengal group, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, in terms of ideas and anglophilic tendencies he seems to have followed in his footsteps. The young Bengal movement had far reaching influence and ideas and manner of disowning the traditional past and looking to the West for modernity were still very popular in the corridors of the Hindu College. As a young student Dutt is said to have taken very dearly to the classics of Europe, and he began to compose poetry in English, his idols being Byron, Milton, Tasso, Dante, Virgil and Homer.<sup>16</sup> His poems as a student of the Hindu College were not exquisite either in terms of technique or content, but he was nevertheless encouraged to write as an initiative to develop English language skills by Professor Richardson.<sup>17</sup>

His love for everything European was particularly nurtured during this phase of his life. It is generally agreed that Dutt converted to Christianity to avoid traditional arranged marriage (Murshid 2003).<sup>18</sup> This is not incompatible with the popular lore of the time,

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<sup>14</sup> Chaudhuri contends that the marxist influence in literary criticism of the 1960s challenged the elitism of the Bengal renaissance thereby displacing the pride the post colonial Bengalis invested in Madhusudan Dutt. (Chaudhuri 2009)

<sup>15</sup> There are several nostalgic accounts of how Madhusudan Dutt had a romantic idea of his village which remained with him in his ripe years, chief among them his epitaph which reads:

Hi Traveler, if Bengal gave your birth  
Stay here for a moment!  
For in this grave lies Madhusudan  
In eternal sleep (just as a child  
Rests in his mother's arms).  
Born of Jessore's earth in Sagardari,  
On the shores of Kapatakhyā River.  
Quoted in (Rahman: 92)

<sup>16</sup> Brenda Deen Schildgen observes that Dutt's love for Dante was not merely part of his Europhilia. It was part of the Bengali intelligentsia's self conscious attempt to draw parallels with the Italian Renaissance. 'The interest in Dante as a model for national poetry shows that the Indian writers conjured an image of their Italian precursor to parallel their own cultural and political aspirations. Many saw Dante as a model to follow: a poet who gave birth to a new poetry and a revived (or new) language in which to express it; a political figure whose literary activity was his means to uphold a moral vision of political life in which justice was the core; and an ethical and religious visionary who strove to restore Christianity to its pristine origins' (Schildgen: 326).

<sup>17</sup> R.L. Richardson had a profound influence on most of his students at Hindu College. For reference see: (Gupta 1977), (Majumdar 1960), (Dasgupta 1970)

<sup>18</sup> Amaresh Datta calls Dutt as spoilt child whose '[...] intense desire to "cross the Vast Atlantic wave/For glory or nameless wave "prompted him to embrace Christianity which caused great sensation in Calcutta and eventually changed the course of his life' (Datta 1988: 899).

which suggested that his conversion was based on his desire to land in the ‘Albion’s shores’.<sup>19</sup> His conversion meant that he had to forego his seat at the Hindu College and instead join Bishop’s College. It is at Bishop’s that he was able to realise his love of languages, and he began taking lessons in Latin and Greek. His conversion also meant that he was disinherited by his father, and despite several attempts he refused to perform the requisite penance to become a Hindu again. The search for a livelihood took Dutt to an orphanage in Madras where he learned Tamil and continued his tryst with English poetry and journalism. During this phase of his life, inspired by James Tod’s *The Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, he wrote two long poems. He returned to Calcutta a few years later to find himself a Bengali poet and playwright. Interestingly enough, even as critics have looked for resolutions in the paradoxical character of his life, they have in turn honoured his love for Italian and Greek tragedies and have in many ways given him the status of a tragic hero. His early demise coupled with his atypical lifestyle and his spectacular rise to fame have contributed to this story.

His earliest biographers Yogindranath Basu (1893) and Nagendranath Som (1921) take to creating an exceptionally gifted tragic hero who straddled two worlds (European and Bengali) only to realize that his dexterity and craft were best exhibited in his mother-tongue. This aspect played out as an antithesis to his apparent transgressions<sup>20</sup>: conversion to Christianity, alcoholism, and a penchant for everything English, including his choice of white women as life partners. Most importantly, his Christian conversion and inter-racial marriages never superseded his image as a Bengali national poet.

Utpal Dutt’s famous portrayal of Madhusudan Dutt in the eponymous film directed by him in 1950, which later turned into a theatre production staged at Minerva theatre by Dutt himself, depicts the poet as a hopeless romantic gone overboard with his love for European poetry, customs and manners. As Himani Banerjee has pointed out, these understandings develop out of the middle class’s identification with the *bhadralok* of the nineteenth century. Hence,

[n]o wonder, Utpal Dutt decided to focus on this fragmented colonial psyche by writing a play on Michael Madhusudan Dutt who was ambivalent enough to sway between ‘colonial’ admiration and ‘anti-colonial’ revolt. (Banerjee 2000: 297)

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<sup>19</sup> Refers to the mythical foundation of Britain by Poseidon’s son Albion. This ancient name of Britain after its founder was popularized by the Romantic poet William Blake in his collection of poems, *The Songs of Experience* (1793).

<sup>20</sup> In *A History of Indian Literature*, published by the Sahitya Academy, the Indian Academy of Letters, edited by the eminent literary critic Sisir Kumar Das, Dutt’s predicament is read as an obsession: [...] was so infatuated by everything English that he became literally obsessed by it. In 1843 he was even converted to Christianity (accepting the Christian name of Michael) and continued his studies at Bishop’s College. (Das 1994: 232)

In the foreword to the translation of the latest and most comprehensive biography of Madhusudan thus far in 2003, William Radice also expresses the desire to focus on the tragic sentiment of Dutt. In commenting upon the slips inevitable during the process of translation he notes,

he has gone for readability and vividness in English, for Dutt's personality, for the colourfulness as well as the tragedy of his life, rather than the literary analysis and meticulous footnoting that characterize the Bengali text. But nothing in the broad thrust of Dr Murshid's interpretation of Dutt's career—and in the very real personal sympathy he brings to his book—has been lost. (Radice 2003: xi)

These representations have tried to read Dutt as a romantic hero, the prophetic figure who is often not in sync with the flow of his times. In the same vein his religious choice has not found much critical purchase as a cognitive spiritual act. However, it is interesting to note that Madhusudan chose to use his Christian name in all his Bengali pieces. Dutt accords a symbolic value to his conversion by relating his experiences in a poem.<sup>21</sup> On the day of his conversion, the 9<sup>th</sup> of February 1843, Dutt wrote 'The Hymn':

Long sunk in Superstition's night,  
By sin and Satan driven  
I saw not, cared not for the light  
That leads the blind to Heaven

I sat in darkness, Reason's eye  
Was shut, was closed in me,  
I hasten'd to eternity  
O'er Error's dreadful sea:

But now, at length thy grace, O Lord  
Bid all around me shine  
I drink thy sweet, thy precious word,  
I kneel before thy shrine  
I've broken affection's tenderest ties  
For my blest Saviour's sake  
All—all I love beneath the skies,  
Lord: I for thee forsake. (Bose 2007: 43)

Dutt unequivocally exhibits his faith in Christianity and dedicates his life to the Lord while rejecting the religion of 'sin and Satan'. Despite efforts by his father to 'purify' him and his eventual penury he did not abandon his newfound faith.

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<sup>21</sup> As Ghulam Murshid's research shows, during his stay at the Bishop's College in one of his letters to the Bishop of Madras, Madhusudan expresses his desire of becoming a missionary. (Murshid 2004: 12-13)

Equating rationality with western modernity and Christianity is a more processual operation that we have seen recurring with most first generation converts to Christianity in the nineteenth century. The adoption of western Christianity, closely associated with colonialism, often came with a deep understanding of class, which, in the nineteenth century, also corresponds with 'culture' and 'taste'. With Dutt this is informed by a liberal education at the Hindu College. Radice points out that in fact in his very last days, he wrote a sonnet for his godson Krishtadas Saha in 1872.<sup>22</sup> While often the contradictory impulses of Dutt's life have been difficult to navigate, it is but certain that Dutt's understanding of religion as a 'jolly Christian youth' is ensconced in the 'Reason's eye'. His foray into theatre is informed by all these ideological underpinnings and most importantly his understanding of literary value in relation to questions of literary reception.

### **Bengali stage and the theatre of respectability**

Madhusudan is widely believed to have contributed significantly to the birth of the modern Bengali theatre.<sup>23</sup> Dutt's entry in the world of theatre was bemired in the changing perceptions of *bhadralokdom* and to understand the constructions of the same, it is important to take a detour into the history of modern Bengali theatre and its audience. The advent of colonial education and associated cultural practices were fast changing the performative spaces of colonial Bengal (Banerjee 1989). Subsequently, the changing equations of performance were closely related to the coming into being of the *bhadralok* class. 'The term "bhadralok"', notes Tithi Bhattacharya, signifies 'a whole world of culture, morality and practices [...] In their own perception this was a middle class (*madhyashreni*, *madhyabitta*) *bhadralok* world which situated itself below the aristocracy but 'above the lesser folk' engaged in manual labour, and distinct from the lower castes and Muslims.'" The '*bhadralok*' class came into existence in the nineteenth century and

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<sup>22</sup> After-Life(*Paralok*)

Into the dawn sun's radiant sea of light  
The star of morning sinks her smiling fire;  
And flowers there are whose swelling buds desire,  
And greet with blooming love, approaching Night;  
And eager are the streams that rush to reach  
Joyous Nirvana at the Ocean's feet—  
Like wise mortality receives the sweet  
Jewel of immortal life (the scriptures teach)  
If we have faith. Ah, Faith to what false gain  
Does man forget you, choose the path of sin?  
What lures prevail on him to sever  
Your golden boat, to let the windswept main  
Of the world drag her down? Willing to win  
Two paltry days of life, to die forever.  
(Radice 2010: li)

<sup>23</sup> Dusan Zbavitel draws from several sources to convincingly argue that Madhusudan Dutt foray into the Bengali theatre contributed significantly to the birth of the modern Indian theatre. (Zbavitel 1976: 234)

held education as their key index of defining their society<sup>24</sup>. This was no ordinary tutelage at the traditional learning centres run by the Brahmins but the education system that came with the British. Most importantly, 'what distinguished them from both was education of a particular kind, so much so that in common-sense terms the pronouncements about education became the sole criterion for defining the "bhadralok"' (Bhattacharya 2001: 162). The bhadralok class maintained their self-ascribed superior identity by defining themselves in opposition to the choṭalok the sole virtue of the bhadralok's sophisticated cultural practices ordered perceptions about popular sources of entertainment.

For instance, a report on ākh'raī gān published in the newspaper Candrikā on the 28<sup>th</sup> of January 1832, speaks of gross partiality.

While the news of the staging of the English translated version of the Uttar rām'carit yātrā at the residence of Sri Prasanna Kumar Tagore has been duly reported by the said newspaper, the reportage of the bulbul fight at the residence of Sri Babu Ashutosh Deb on the third of month māgh has been wilfully omitted. Whatever be the reason, if the newspaper decides to publish the report of the contest of ākh'raī gān held on the 9<sup>th</sup> of māgh night at the residence of Sri Babu Rammohan Mullick of Mechuabajar, between Sri Megha Chand Basu of Baghbajar and Sri Kashinath Mukhopadhyay of Jorashanko, then please be so kind as to relate the results of the same.<sup>25</sup>

This sarcastic report is a reminder of the changing perceptions of literary taste in nineteenth-century Bengal. Forms of consumption were not merely equated with money but with other registers, most importantly education (for e.g. Bhattacharya 2005 and

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<sup>24</sup> Poromesh Acharya discusses how the colonial education system created an educated class of 'bhadraloks' who in turn constantly influenced the tenets of the system to the effect that the education system became a prerogative for the 'bhadralok' class (Acharya 1986).

<sup>25</sup> My translation. Ākh'raī Saṃgram'biṣayak. Candrika. 16 Magh 1238(28 January 1832) Ed. Brajendranāth Bandyopādhyāy. Śambād Patrey Sekāler Kathā. Kalikātā: Baṅgiyā Sāhitya Pariṣad, 1994.

Acharya 1985). The popular forms of entertainment that included: *yātrā*<sup>26</sup>, *kabigān*<sup>27</sup>, *nāc* (nautch), *Kheu*<sup>28</sup>, kathak dance, *p cālī*<sup>29</sup>, etc., were viewed as entertainment suitable for the 'effeminate babus' (Banerjee 1993). For the rural folk, it was often the *gāyens* and

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<sup>26</sup> 'Jatra (or Yatra, "journey"): Best-known form of travelling Bengali theatre. In older times, procession at a religious festival where a community of devotees danced and sang in several voices, perhaps while carrying idols, was such a specialised "journey". The earliest mentions of performance approximating Jatra come in the sixteenth century, when biographers of the saint Chaitanya drew attention to the association of Vaishnava devotion with the medium of song and dance, not confined to *namsankirtan* (chanting God's name), to popularise a priestless adoration based on bhakti. The Jatra easily became the most popular performing art and an integral part of village life in greater Bengal (including Bihar, Orissa and Assam). Gradually, myths with pronounced human interest like *Harishchandra* and *Nala-Damayanti* ("Nala and Damayanti") joined the purely rural Krishna, Rama and Manasa Jatras, to be secularised further with the addition of *Vidya-Sundar* ("Vidya and Sundar", 1752) by Bharatchandra (1712–60), court poet of Raja Krishnachandra of Nabadwip, Nadia district. Although *Vidya-Sundar* (or *Annada mangal*, "Propitiation of Annada") belonged to the medieval Mangal-kavya (propitiatory verse) tradition, its valorisation of romance and sexuality sought only an ultimate sanctification through the adoration of Annada. Its success coincided with Jatra's spatial shift to the newly growing city of Calcutta for easy accessibility, turning professional under the guidance of owner-managers who booked actors for the "season", from Durga Puja in autumn to the start of the next monsoon. The nouveau riche in Calcutta, too, formed amateur Jatra groups mainly for *Vidya-Sundar* shows which revelled in the *khemta*, a light dance accompanied by loud gestures and swinging steps, and in extensive wordplay, riddles, and sexual innuendoes of which Gopal Ure was the best-known exponent. [...] After the 1920s Jatra went through major changes, the most important being its institutional settlement in the metropolis' (Lal 2004: 171-72).

<sup>27</sup> 'During the latter half of the eighteenth century, both Mangalkabya and Vaishnava poetry of the medieval ages lost their vitality and ultimately declined and in their places was born a new form of secular lyrics [...]. The city of Calcutta had begun to grow and it was necessary to cater to the taste of the new urban population of Calcutta and its suburbs. The songs mainly secularised the divine love of Radha and Krishna preached by the Vaishnava devotee poets of the medieval ages. They had little or no literary value in comparison with the Vaishnava lyrics. What they offered were amusement and excitement mostly created by high sounding words and artificial altercations. [...] The performance was, in fact, a kind of verbal combat between two parties each consisting of half a dozen singers, men and women, headed by one reputed *kabiwala*. The *kabiwala* improvised songs in the form of questions and answers or attacks and counter-attacks. Being a duet, such performances came to be known as "kabir larai" (poets' fighting)'. (Datta 1988: 76)

<sup>28</sup> 'On the serious sections of the Radha–Krishna narrative, the *kobis* used to treat the theme in an effusive, sentimental manner, more conscious of the conventional requirements like alliterations and the rhythmical framework. But through the *kheud*, they expressed in a rollicking style the "naughty" thoughts that lurked behind the serious gestures of the divine pair—often openly erotic or suggesting the fun of love in secrecy [...] The themes of the *kheud* were borrowed not only from the legends of Radha and Krishna but also from other mythological sources like those of Durga and Shiva'. (Banerjee 1998: 97-98)

<sup>29</sup> '*Panchali* (literally "five-edged debate"): A living Bengali tradition in the form of anecdotal narratives, extolling divinities in the classical Hindu pantheon as well as the more popular folk deities worshipped by different communities. It is usually recited in a sing-song manner with accompanying celebratory invocatory rituals, mainly in women's quarters its texts circulating in printed chapbooks used by devotees. [...] It came into its own with Dasarathi Roy (1806–56), a singer-poet who used the semi-classical *tappa* style, conveyed a mix of literary flavour, religious feelings and social concern, demystified and humanised the Hindu deities by exposing their vulnerability, and drew them into contemporary space through recourse to topical allusions and earthy character types like Krishna's gatekeeper (speaking the language of Calcutta's Bhojpuri guards). In the hands of his successors *Panchali* came closer to *Kabigan* before Rev. James Long removed it beyond the culture of the *bhadralok* (gentry) by describing it as "filthy and polluting". For a while sung exclusively by women performers, it almost vanished at the close of the nineteenth century, to resurface later and survive marginally as part of subaltern culture' (Lal: 331–32).

pāiles who provided the necessary amusements (Sutton 1926). The babu class was associated with opulence, often beyond their means, and lacking the cultivated sense of culture (Chowdhury-Sengupta 1997). In contrast the 'bhadralok' class was not necessarily a moneyed group, but instead were an assemblage of educated people who shared a common cultivated 'taste'.<sup>30</sup>

The traditional methods of viewing performances while sitting on all three sides were discarded in favour of the western proscenium stage.<sup>31</sup> It is interesting that the Bengali indigenous form of the yātrā might have played little or no role in the development of the modern Bengali theatre.<sup>32</sup> In fact it has also been argued that the Bengali theatre was an 'edifice' that was built 'on the ashes of people's culture' (Kundu 2010). Ram Narayan Tarkaratna, himself a revered Sanskrit pundit in the introduction to his translation of Ratnābali speaks of yātrā in contemptuous terms and suggests that one should look for inspiration either in Western or Sanskrit models (De 1919: 643). Proscenium theatre, a cultural neophyte in nineteenth century India, took to defining itself as a form best produced and consumed by the genteel or the 'bhadralok' class.<sup>33</sup> The relationship between theatre practices and the culture enters troubled waters by the end of the last quarter of the nineteenth century with the Dramatic Performance Act of 1876 (which banned obscenity).<sup>34</sup> Since the earliest theatre productions were restricted to the homes of the genteel, and the public theatres were unaffordable (as compared to the yātrā or the kabigān performances which were often held in the open) the nineteenth century theatre audiences largely came from the 'bhadralok' class. There grew a direct relationship

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<sup>30</sup> Hans Harder is of the opinion that such distinctions are not as easy: babu and bhadralok cannot be taken apart, they are two sides of one coin/class (Harder 2004: 358).

<sup>31</sup> Rakesh H. Solomon observes that the modern Indian theatre was a 'formation under the complex and mutually-influencing pressures of an encroaching culture of empire, a renascent indigenous culture, imperial censorship policy, and nativist and nationalist resistance'. (Solomon 1994)

<sup>32</sup> One of the earliest critics of the Bengali Theatre, Brajendranath Banerjee, contended that the yātrā had no role to play in the development of the early Bengali theatre. 'As a matter of fact, the Bengali drama did not grow out of the Bengali yatra, nor did the demand for a new kind of theatre come from the class which, as a rule, patronized yatras'. (Banerjee 1943: 7)

<sup>33</sup> Kiranmoy Raha believes that both the yatra and the English theatre contributed to the birth of the theatre in Bengal. He points to the fact that there were are other hues to the debate as well, 'On the other hand, Amulya Charan Vidyabhusan, another authority on the subject, upholds the opposite view that only jatra can claim parentage to Bengali theatre, a view with which again not many are likely to agree. [...] for jatra over the years changed considerably and some scholars have even demarcated two periods marked by a distinct change in form and content. Responding to socio-economic changes, jatra, according to them, underwent a major transformation in the mid-nineteenth century'.

<sup>34</sup> Manujendra Kundu observes that the rhetoric of morality was intertwined with the perceptions of theatre and respectability, which made it possible for them to have supported the act of 1876. 'They had a reason to favour the law: this was the eradication of what, in their view, were expressions of obscenity and immorality. From contemporary reports it was apparent that all sections of Bengali society had an inclination towards indecency of expression; obscenity was a feature of the social intercourse of the rich and the poor, educated elites and illiterates alike' (Kundu 2013: 80).

between theatre and a reified sense of culture that came with the colonial education system.<sup>35</sup>

R.L. Richardson was the most popular professor after Henry Louis Vivian Derozio who came to teach literature at the Hindu College. Rajnarain Basu in his autobiography, reminiscing about his Hindu College days in the 1840s, notes that the principal of Hindu College, Captain R.L. Richardson would 'urge his students to learn how to articulate the Shakespeare plays they were reading by observing how it was done on the stage. Going a step further, Richardson regularly asked them: "Are you going to the theatre tonight?"' (Basu 2007: 14) In keeping with the notion of equivalence often drawn between rationality and Western education, it was believed that the 'amusement in vogue in the native society' would aid in the 'rapid spread of a rational taste among our countrymen' (The Hindoo Patriot: 9). The fact that theatre was a part of the educated comprador elite was a detail that was stressed through the colonial education machinery.<sup>36</sup>

The entry of the theatre in the colonial Calcutta owes its lineage to the demand for entertainment by the European settlers. Proscenium theatre was largely the prerogative of the English in the eighteenth century. The British in fact had built a playhouse after the fort and armoury as early as 1753 which was lost in the battle with Siraj-ud-daula. Theatre was a crucial part of the cultural matrix of the British in Bengal right from the inception of the colonial rule and was seen as a form that defined 'English taste'.<sup>37</sup> The Britons' love for the stage prompted them to build the Calcutta Theatre in 1776 at the cost of a princely sum of one lakh rupees.

The Bengali gentry was very interested in the promotion of the English theatre in Calcutta. One of the last European theatres in Calcutta, Sans Souci, which began in a book-seller's 'godown' (warehouse) in a court-house in 1839, sought donations for building a playhouse. Among the donors were a large number of Indians and it was said that the Dwarkanath Tagore's contribution was comparable to Lord Auckland's, the then Governor-General of Calcutta (Raha 1999: 51). The Bengali theatre had to wait for nearly forty years after that for its first production. A Russian violinist named Gerasim Stephanovich Lebedeff with the help of his translator Golak Nath Das, translated two plays. In 1753, in a theatre with a makeshift stage in 'Domotollah' (that is, Dharmatalla, Central Calcutta) built by Lebedeff with Bengali players, one of the translated plays, *Kālpanik Sambadal* ('the disguise') was staged.

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<sup>35</sup> The segregation of spaces of performance was a relatively late development as the early European theatre in Calcutta saw a different admixture of audience. 'In the context of the 1780s, the power relation between colonizer and colonized had not developed explicitly into the configuration of oppressor/oppressed: When Sheridan's School for Scandal was performed in Calcutta, its audience was homogeneous-consisting of those who resided in the 'White' Town; the 'Black' Town was almost entirely segregated'. (Choudhury 1994: 321)

<sup>36</sup> Jyotsna Singh points out that there was a fine line that separated secular education and religion in colonial India. (Singh 1996: 101-125)

<sup>37</sup> Richard Schechner in the foreword to *The Colonial Staged*, talks about the propensity of the British in India to replicate 'London Theatre'. (Chatterjee 2007: xii)

One may very much like to consider this as a stray and isolated event which was not followed up by anyone, even not shown any interest by the 'Bengalee' gentry for a Bengali play. [...] For one thing, there was no Bengali dramatic literature at that time and, no one appeared as a standard bearer" (Roy 1999: 57).

There seems to be ebb after the initial Bengali productions by Lebedeff, and it is only in the mid-nineteenth century, and among the middle class *bhadralok*, that he would take a keen interest in producing plays. Unlike Lebedeff's experiment, the theatrical production would now be limited to a select few and would take place within the confines of the dwellings of the *crème* of the Bengali society. *Bidyā Sundar* was the first significant play performed after Lebedeff on the stage built by Nabin Chandra Bose at his grand house at Shyambazar in 1832. But it was only with *Nīl Darpaṇ* (1859) that Bengali plays came to be a regular feature in the cultural scene of colonial Calcutta. Under the patronage of the rich and the famous, plays began to attract private audiences until the establishment of the Public Theatre in 1872.

It is likely that the Western education system had a key role to play in the selection of subjects of the plays that were performed. Samik Bandyopadhyay suggests that 'the Victorian bogey of obscenity and the valorisation of a Sanskrit literary culture 'meticulously sanitized and purged' the modern Bengali theatre of its sensuality (Bandyopadhyay 1996: 50). Shakespeare seems to have been one of the most favoured playwrights, as Bengali authors frequently translated his works: C.C. Gupta's *Kīrtibilās* (1852) was based on *Hamlet*; Harachandra Ghosh's *Bhānumaticittabilās* (1852) was a re-working of *The Merchant of Venice*; *Romeo and Juliet* was adapted as *Cārumukhacittaharā* (1863); and perhaps the most famous of the lot, Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay's *The Tempest* as *Nālinī Basanta* (1868) (Gupta 2005). Apart from translations, his plays were also staged in English with Bengali theatre actors. On the other hand, translations from Sanskrit into Bengali became the mainstay of Bengali theatre. Nanda Kumar Ray's translation of the *Abhijñāna-Śakuntala* (1857), Ram Narayan Tarkaratna's *Beṇī-Saṃhāra*, Bikram'barṣī, *Mālatī Mādhab*, were frequently staged. In fact, the first production of Prasanna Coomar Tagore's Hindu Theatre was a selection from *Julius Caesar* and H.H. Wilson's translation of Bhavabhuti's *Uttar Rāma Carita*. Jatindramohan and Sourinmohan Tagore of Pathuriyāghātā had their own private theatre where they produced a translation of Kalidasa's *Malavikagnimitra* in 1859. These spates of translations were followed by polemic political treatises which went by the generic suffix *darpaṇ* or the mirror. *Nīl'darpaṇ* (1859) on the plight under the indigo planters by Dinabandhu Mitra was followed Mir Mosharraf Hossein's *Jamidār Darpaṇ* (1873), *Cākar-Darpaṇ* (1875) and *Jel-Darpaṇ* (1876) by Dakhinaranjan Chattopadhyay. In keeping with the satirical spirits of the times, there were farces on topical issues that challenged tradition. In fact, Dutt himself was to write two farces: *Ekei Ki Bale Sabhyatā* (Is this civilization?) (1860) and *Buṛo Śāliker Ghāre Rō* (New Feathers on an Old Bird) (1860).

The topics of all these plays ranged from attacking the caste system, widow remarriages to multiple marriages of the upper caste Kulins. In the nineteenth century scheme of things, Bengali theatre as a continuous tradition started with Mitra's polemic play *Nildarpan* in 1858-9. With this the bhadralok's taste for culture was forever altered.

Madhusudan's intervention in this new form was seen by many as a largely impulsive decision. In 1858, barely a year after the Sepoy Mutiny, the Rajas of Paikpara (better known as the Belgachia theatre) had decided to stage a play. There were no significant Bengali plays available and hence it was decided that the Bengali translation of Ratnābali would be staged. The Rajas were interested in inviting the Sahebs for the occasion and a translation of the same was required in English. Gour Das Basak, Dutt's closest friend and confidant, suggested his name, thought he was received with a great deal of suspicion. A Bengali Christian youth who had just returned from Madras could surely not be trusted with such an important job. The day before Dutt was scheduled to translate he had come to witness the rehearsal for the play. Dutt could not believe that the Rajas were wasting such a lot of money on such a substandard play. Gour Das lamented that there weren't enough plays in Bengali fit to be staged. Dutt staked a claim at that very moment that he was going to write a play in Bengali. With the help of some Sanskrit and Bengali books he was able to draft his first play, *Śarmiṣṭhā* (Das 1994: 1-2).

Apart from the small poems that he had written in Bengali in his student years at the Hindu College, this was Dutt's first attempt at writing a full length work in Bengali. Moreover, it was Dutt's crucial entry into the Bengali literary arena proper. The run-up described above lends to a reading of Dutt's writing of the play as an impulsive act with no significant bearing on his personal journey. Read in context, however, Dutt's foray into theatre in his literary voyage seems like a conscious decision. Unlike other established literary forms, theatre carried the potential of a lot of tinkering from within, both in form and content. Secondly and perhaps more significantly, Dutt was very sure of his audience. Unlike other printed literature of the day, which could be read and consumed by a large cross-section of the Bengali society, staging his first Bengali play within the confines of the theatre of the Rajas of pāthuriyāghāṭā meant that his audience were more or less products of the same Western education system as him. He chose a form that heavily relied on classical principles for structure and as a diversion for the elite class it carried the optimum potential for adapting to Western literary forms.<sup>38</sup> Ironically, this was the same play that Girish Chandra Ghosh in 1867 performed with his yātrā troupe with his friends Nagendra Banerjee, Dharamdas Sur and Radhamadhab Kar, seeking to prove the efficacy of bringing a European form to a yātrā audience.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> His decision might also have benefited from the Orientalist scholars privileging Sanskrit drama 'over all other genres of sub continental literary enquiry' (Dharwarkar 2005: 129).

<sup>39</sup> 'This at once marks off Girish from the usual practitioners of yatra of his time. Girish did not follow the usual repertoire of religious subjects of Lord Krishna's adventures, or the cheap love-themes such as Vidyasundar. He chose Michael's tragedy which was structured on the European-model but chose it to bring it to the arena of a Yatra audience. Already Girish's theatrical ideals seemed to have taken shape; he

Why would Girish Chandra Ghosh choose this particular play to launch his struggle to combine the yātrā and the theatre in nineteenth-century Bengal? This play enabled Dutt to make the shift from his otherwise English literary career to a Bengali one. Unlike the other projections of him as an eccentric and romantic litterateur, this establishes him as 'consistent' in his modernity.<sup>40</sup> This play in its bilinguality sets out to define the various limits of reception even when it challenges some of his key tenets.

Dutt was conscious of his English speaking audience who could read the English translation and presumably relate to the Bengali production on stage and the bilingual audience who would discern the differences between the English and the Bengali texts. Dutt's staging the play for a select audience, 'others' a large section of the populace, who were outside the physical dimensions of the theatre of the rajas. But on the other hand Madhusudan was keen to publish the play thereby including the textual participation of the Bengali literate audience (part of the performative 'other'). As a result, it allowed a textual interpretative authority to a literate audience even while depriving them of a performative participation. But this equation is complicated by the most interesting category in this schema: the actors and actresses of the theatre. They belong to the grey area where the bhadralok and the rest come tantalisingly close even to include the courtesans. Some plays encouraged the participation of even the rajas while others involved professional actors and actresses who came from dubious social backgrounds. Dutt was one of the first playwrights to have advocated the inclusion of women actors in theatrical productions (Raha 1978: 27). While women of the Tagore family acted in their own productions, prostitutes like Binodini Dasi were famous theatre actresses by the end of the century.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, the receptions were carefully sequestered to both allow and disallow certain categories of meanings to co-exist independently. This area of layered homogenous spaces of interaction which collide in certain dimensions, as I shall discuss in the following section, allows the Christian poet to partake in the effective use of Hindu mythology.

### **Forging a new genealogy: Śarmiṣṭhā and the Bengali theatre**

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of March 1859, a few days after his book was published, Dutt wrote to Gour Das Basak,

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wanted an amalgam of theatre and Yatra, all his life he sought to master the technique of theatre: its five act drama structure, its refined human conflict, its sophisticated suspense and catharsis, but he wanted to infuse it with whatever was lively and powerful in the traditional yatra. Above all he wanted to free the theatre from the whims of a bourgeois audience; he wanted the public in his theatre, a public he knew so well and could tell unerringly what pleased it and what did not'. (Dutt 1992: 11)

<sup>40</sup>According to Sajal Nag, 'Madhusudan's innovations were a covert political intervention. His 'denationalisation' and literary innovations in the field of Bengali poetry attracted hushed but huge criticism which developed into a movement for "othering" him. The movement was led by a group which was trying to construct a Hindu 'self' in colonial conditions. Madhusudan and intellectuals like him were seen as obstacles to this new Hindu "self" that was under construction'. (Nag 2007: 429)

<sup>41</sup> (Singh 2008), (Chatterjee 2006) and (Banerjee 1993)

this book is destined to occupy a prominent place in the literature of the country, it will not be condemned on its head, twenty years hence, everyone is learning Bengali [...] This Sharmistha has put me at the head of all Bengali writers. People talk of its poetry with rapture.

Dutt is an unusually self-conscious poet, and in the same letter he talks about how he 'stepped out of the path of the dramatist, for that of mere poetry'. With his idol Milton, Madhusudan was convinced of the reified temperament of poetry and hence, unsure of his dramatic prowess he stresses on the poetic quality of his play. Madhusudan was very careful in selecting his audience for the performance which was incidentally a coterie of an opportunist class, capable of appreciating his rapturous poetry. In January 1859, immediately before the publication of his play, he wrote to Gour Dass Basak:

I am aware, my dear fellow, that there will be in all likelihood, something of a foreign air about my drama; but if the language be not ungrammatical, the characters well maintained, what care you if there be a foreign air about the thing? [...] I am writing for that portion of my countrymen who think as I think, whose minds have been more or less imbued with Western ideas and modes of thinking; and it is my intention to throw off the fetters forged by us by a servile admiration for everything Sanskrit. (Murshid 2004: 33)

In contrast to his next play, *Padmābatī*<sup>42</sup> published in the same year, Śarmisthā's plot is not from a Greek classic but from the first part of the epic *Mahābhārata*. The 'foreign air' that he talks about is mainly in the structure of the play which spans like an Elizabethan drama with clearly etched out acts and scenes, in its props and settings, and also the overarching role of 'fate' (more a character of the Greek classical drama).

The plot of *Sermista* is taken from the *Ādīparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* which is titled: 'the disagreement between Devayani and Sermista'. The original plot begins with Indra in his form as the wind, the king of the Gods. Indra is seen exchanging the clothes of a few women who were taking a bath. Sermista, the daughter of the Asura king Br̥sparva, and Devayani, the daughter of the powerful Brahmin advisor to the Asura king Sukracharya, inadvertently exchange clothes. Devayani was furious and Sermista was quick to remind her of her status as her subordinate. A physical fight ensued and Devayani was cast into coup. King Yayati saves her and agrees to marry her. Devayani is furious and seeks revenge and Sukracharya pleads to the king for justice. As a punitive measure Devayani demands that Sermista accompany her to Yayati's abode as a servant along with a thousand other Asura women. Most importantly, Sermista would never be allowed to take Yayati for her husband. Devayani soon expects her first child and

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<sup>42</sup> The plot's origin lies in Greek mythology and reminds the reader of Tennyson's *Oenone* and the eighteenth century play *Judgement of Paris* by James Beattie. For details see (Riddiford 2013)

Sermista is sad and furious. She decides to convince the king to take her as his wife according to Vedic customs. The king agrees and Sermista eventually gives birth to three sons and Devayani to two. When Devayani comes to know of the truth, she approaches her father for justice. Sukracharya curses Yayati with senility. Yayati tries to defend himself and Sukracharya pronounces that he can transfer this curse on to one of his five sons and whoever agrees to do so would be blessed with a long life, successors and an illustrious life. Only the youngest Puru, the son of Sermista, decides to take on the senility of his father for a thousand years and goes on to become one of the most celebrated emperors of his times.

If the plot is from Hindu mythology and the structure is borrowed from the West, what kind of literary continuity or discontinuity is Dutt looking at? Like his inspirational figures (such as Milton and Dante), he wanted to become a poet, but makes theatre as a stepping stone. The coterie that was targeted with his play subscribed to a kind of cultivated cultural urbanity which ironically dissolved the possibility of branding Dutt as an outsider. As we have observed earlier, his conversion to Christianity and his insistence on English as the primary language had already made him an outsider in the Bengali literary circles. His conversion to Christianity was a much talked about affair as he was kept in Fort William for fear that he could be forcibly taken back by his family. His avowed disregard for traditions coupled with his fidelity to Christianity had made him a 'relational other' in the eyes of the Bengali elite.

The charge against Madhusudan largely has been that he often borrowed too much from the West. His affinity towards Greek and Latin classics in this regard is carefully highlighted.<sup>43</sup> But it can also be argued that Dutt was in fact responding to all the Orientalist studies about symbiotic philologies and deemed the marriage of Indian classics with their western counterparts as long desired and natural.<sup>44</sup> The Indo-Western conflict that is often a bone of contention in other emerging literary forms like the novel, satires, and poetry are to a large extent also informed by the philological research and practices in the nineteenth century. Several well-known Orientalists were working and publishing on the common origins of Sanskrit, Greek and Latin; the languages deemed as classical.<sup>45</sup> In the case of Dutt, the relationship is tinged not only by his religious

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<sup>43</sup> William Radice notes, 'Madhusudan is thought of as a learned poet, bahu-pāthī as opposed to the svabhāb kabi (natural poet) Rabindranath. Undoubtedly he had a tremendous appetite for languages, grappling with Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, and Italian epic poetry in original. He learnt French very well: contemporaries attest that he and Henrietta often spoke French to each other in their house in Calcutta after five years in Europe. With regard to his some other linguistic claims (Tamil, Telegu when he was in Madras, German when he was in Europe) one feels a little sceptical'. (Radice 1995: 178)

<sup>44</sup> It was prominently heralded by William Jones as the study of comparative philology which set to discover a common proto language, connecting India with Europe.

<sup>45</sup> As Buddhadeva Bose argues, 'Sanskrit is a distant cousin of Greek and Latin, and most modern Indian languages stand in exactly the same relationship to Sanskrit as those of modern Europe to Latin and Greek. It is axiomatic that the characteristics of a literature are to a large extent determined by the nature of language in which it is written. Since the Indo-European languages—however removed in space and time—essentially belong to one family and to this day have recognizable similarities in grammatical

affiliation but an understanding of layered homogeneities. With his choice of subjects, treatment and language, he creates models of homogenous spaces in terms of grooming and selecting his audience. These layers of homogenous spaces then interact to produce the desired effect of creating alternative literary trajectories which can then organically accommodate 'alien' influences.

It is well documented that Dutt had his first lessons in the epics from his mother and other female relatives, most probably under the auspices of Hindu ceremonial practices. The popular culture of the period, prior to the advent of theatre, largely depended on mythology to provide them with plots. The Bengali literary tradition which has a continuous history since the fourteenth century, in the medieval times had songs and lyrical poems, long narratives and short verses.<sup>46</sup> Although there were poems which were paeans to great and mighty kings it to a certain extent consisted of retellings of the Sanskrit texts in Bengali which linked 'Bengali literature with the ancient Sanskrit tradition' (Van Meter 1968: 353). Aware of the differences in reception between his English and his Bengali audience, he chose disparate frames to aid in comprehensions and interpretations. The Bengali play begins with a song supposed to be sung in the rāginī Khāmbāj and tāl Madhyamān. Interesting enough this song is absent in the English translation of the play.

mari haṃ, kothā se sukher samaṃ,  
ye samaṃ deśamaṃ nāṭyaras sabiśeṣ chilo rasamaṃ.  
śunago bhārata-bhūmi, kata nidrā yābe tumi,  
ār nidrā ucit nay.  
uṭha tyaja ghum'ghor, haṃlo haṃlo bhor,  
din'kar prācīte uday  
kothā bālmiki byās, kothā taba kālidās,  
kothā bhababhūti mahodaṃ.  
alīk kunāṭya-raṅge, maje lok rā e baṅge,  
nirakhiyā prāṅe nahi saṃ.  
sudhāras anādare, biṣ-bārī pān kare,  
tāhe haṃ tanū-manakhay  
madhu bale yāgo mā go, bibhūsthāne e imāgo,  
surase prabta hauk taba tanaṃ niścay.<sup>47</sup>

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technique, it should not surprise us if the literatures written in them reveal some kind of affinity even when produced in mutual isolation'. (Bose 1964: 48)

<sup>46</sup> It goes with the caveat that Caryāpadas approx. 11<sup>th</sup>, Śrīk ṣṅakīrtan 14<sup>th</sup>, and nothing in between; also the Caryāpadas are in Eastern Apabhramsha and are also claimed by other vernacular literatures.

<sup>47</sup> Paraphrased, the song laments about the lost glory of the tradition of the plays across India. It urges Mother India to wake up from her slumber as it is high time and the sun is on the horizon and the dawn of a new era is at hand. Madhududan then shifts to the present day where the amusements of the people have become crass which he cannot stand and hence he invokes the lineage of Sanskrit masters of the epics, Valmiki and Vyasa and the dramatists of the golden Gupta age, Kalidasa and Bhababhuti. In Dutt's contemporary age people are drinking poison which is adversely affecting both their minds and their body. Dutt takes up the challenging task of waking up Mother India and entertaining her with his play which will invigorate both the mind and the body. (Dutt, Śarmiṣṭhā: 68).

With the song quoted above it is clear that Dutt is trying to invoke a tradition of classical writing while dismissing the popular forms that were available in the nineteenth century. It is from the highest form of mythology, the epic, and the 'golden age' dramatists Bhavabhuti and Kalidasa, that Dutt draws inspiration. Dutt accepts continuity with the earlier Sanskrit tradition when he invokes Valmiki and Vyasa, mythological authors of these epics, and the famous dramatist of the later years Bhavabhuti. Dutt's imagined relational discontinuity comes with his contemporary age where people indulge in 'tasteless' amusements.<sup>48</sup> This perceived discontinuity urges him to look for structures outside the current canon while still maintaining a temperamental connect with the lost 'golden age' and it is forged through the translations of the canon in Bengali. Therefore, his reworking of the myths does not merely subscribe to the idea of a palimpsest. He is interested in creating a parallel tradition which rests on a common understanding and hence he writes for his fellow countrymen who think like he does. As is evident from the song quoted above, he dismisses the possibility of simultaneous existence of the current forms of amusement with drama.<sup>49</sup> But this neat perception is concomitantly challenged by the very inclusion of the songs. The topicalities of the songs point to his connect with the *yātrās* and other forms of popular entertainment of the day.<sup>50</sup> Even in his disavowal of the audience of the popular entertainment, the repeated occurrence of the songs attests to their presence. Therefore, the neat segregation of spaces is consciously invaded, even when ridiculed, by popular genres. A subterranean presence of other forms encourages the possibility of contending genres to co-exist, even when advocating simultaneity.

Mythology and drama in Dutt's conception invoke a winning concoction that can awaken even the somnambulant goddess. But importantly, Dutt is trying to create a

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<sup>48</sup> As Rimli Bhattacharya outlines: 'Let us consider another set of examples, this time from the repertoire of the most "Westernised" of the early dramatists, Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Shormistha*, written in 1858 and staged the following year at a private Belgachia Theatre had six songs. The 13 year-old boy cast in the heroine's role was chosen by Michael's patron particularly for his melodious voice. Dutt's *Padmavati*(1860), staged only in 1865, had eight songs though all were meant to be sung in the background. The most interesting illustration is from his farce *Ekei ki Bole Sabhyata?* where the intertextuality requires some explication. Dutt's patrons, the Paikpara rajas had been persuaded not to stage it for the fear of offending certain groups; the farce was finally produced by Shovabazar Amateur Theatrical society. A song and dance sequence by Nat and Nati, not present in the original play was added by the latter and performed to great applause. The other song (present in Michael's play) is for the two dancers who are asked to perform in the midst of the Jnanatarangini Sabha. Dutt chose a song which would instantly tell the audience about the real agenda of the society of the knowledge seekers'. (Bhattacharya 2003: 210).

<sup>49</sup> It is interesting to note that during Madhusudan's lifetime, by second half of the nineteenth century, topical farces often based on scandals would become the normative. (Sarkar 1997)

<sup>50</sup> Dutt's famous tribute to Kashiram Das, the creator of the Bengali *Mahābhārata*, reads: 'As the Jahnabi was(entwined) in the matted locks of Candracur, so the divine sage Dvaipayana poured forth the essence of the Bharata, and held it in the lake of Sanskrit. Restless Bengal wept with thirst. As the *vraṭi* Bhagiratha(most blessed tapasa in this world, treasure of the human race!) worshipping the Ganges with austerities, accomplished the release of the Sagaracran,(and) bringing the Mother, purified the three world; so you digging the channel of language have brought the streams of the Bharata-essence to assuage the thirst of Gaur with that pure water. The land of Gaur will never be able to pay this debt. The words of the *Mahabharata* are like nectar—O kash! In the company of chief poets, you are worthy'. "*Kāśirām Dās*", *Caturdaśpadī kabitābalī* 1866'. (Van Meter 1968: 355)

common ground of understanding by appealing to the cultural subconscious albeit separated by a few centuries. Like a prophetic Romantic poet, he claims that it is an enlightened soul like him who can selectively appropriate classicism in the nineteenth century which is struggling to understand its own rich heritage. Hence, he is constantly talking about a common thinking process. What kind of thinking is he talking about here?

The review by the *Hindoo Patriot* of his play soon after it was staged at the Belgachia Theatre, does not call it a mythological play. Judging by the earlier review (referred in the later article) of *Rutnavali* where the reviewer constantly bemoans the substandard acting skills of the players, positing them against their famous English counterparts like Mrs Siddon (who essayed the role of Lady Macbeth), and adding frequent asides which compare Polonius of Hamlet with Yoggundrian, *Sermista* is looked upon not as a mythological piece from the depths of time but as a 'socio-comic' drama (Ghose 1980: 135). It seems that Dutt had indeed understood the pulse of his fellow thinkers to be able to produce a play that creates literary continuities even when it severs its tie with the present. In the cloak of a Romantic drama, Dutt raises several topical issues like the role of the woman in choosing her partner, and the stratification of the society in terms of caste.

We have already discussed the contradictions that abound in Dutt's life and the way he has been represented during his times and after. In these representations he has been projected as an 'outsider' and an anomaly who can be co-opted into the mainstream literary lineage once he has subscribed to a greater religion: that of Bengali nationalism. Dutt, in his peculiar way has tried to draw parallel literary lineages within the Bengali literary framework, which while excluding popular cultural practices, also shuns 'borrowed clothes' and creates its own heroes. As Amit Chaudhuri has noted,

In his personal and creative life, we see, again, the related impulse towards, on the one hand, the disowning of tradition, and its recovery as a creative constituent of the secular self on the other. Crucially, however, he translates the public acts of disowning and recovery that, so far, marked the spheres of religious debate and social reform, into the personal sphere of art. In a sense, almost, he suddenly, and unprecedentedly, gifts the Bengali a relationship between identity, rebellion, creativity, and the subconscious. (Chaudhuri 2003: 11)

His giving up of tradition and accepting what Chaudhuri calls a 'secular self' creates multiplicities of reference frames in terms of religion, language and genres. Added to this dimension is the fact that this play was simultaneously written in both Bengali and English. This is a most curious case of bilinguality (another example is that of Rev. K.M. Banerjea's *Encyclopaedia Bengalensis*) where the author invites bilingual readers to participate in the reading of plays through varying frames, thereby toying with the duality of perception. Dutt had the experience of translating *Rutnavali* and *Nil Darpan* before venturing into the translation of *Sermista*. Dutt's intention is transparent: he is appealing not only to a Bengali literate audience but far beyond it. He expects the language of the

performance to be intelligible to the colonial masters, who were invited by the Rajas to witness the staging of the play. Even when he speaks of the mother awakening from her slumber, why is there the need to be understood in English? This tension highlights the central dilemma of the Bengali theatre in the nineteenth century: pitching to the space and the audience of the theatre. As Dutt's act of translation of one of the earliest of the staged Bengali drama demonstrates, it lays somewhere in-between languages as the bilingual intelligentsia wishes to garner a wider audience. Does it always therefore speak in translation? The dilemma of the early Bengali theatre is a unique predicament of the colonised, where the language and its reception are caught in a charged ideological net. This aspect radically changes the receptive dimensions of the play and its position within the precincts of an emerging bilingual intelligentsia. Power relations between the coloniser's tongue and the mother tongue, made language choices a political affair. As Partha Chatterjee has remarked,

The bilingual intelligentsia came to think of its own language as belonging to that of the inner domain of cultural identity from which the colonial intruder had to be kept out. Language therefore became a zone over which the nation first had to declare its sovereignty and then had to transform in order to make it adequate for the modern world. (Chatterjee 1997: 7)

This choice is further complicated by the question of translation. What defines the relationship between the translator and the translated? Tejaswini Niranjana suggests that colonial subjects already lived 'in translation', imaged and re-imaged by colonial ways of seeing (Niranjana 1992).

In creating coherent and transparent texts and subjects, translation participates—across a range of discourses—in the fixing of colonised cultures, making them seem static and un-changing rather than historically constructed. Translation functions as a transparent presentation of something that already exists, although the 'original' is actually brought into being through translation. Paradoxically, translation also provides a place in 'history' for the colonised. The Hegelian conception of history that translation helps bring into being endorses a teleological, hierarchical model of civilisations based on the 'coming to consciousness' of 'spirit', an event for which the non-western cultures are unsuited or unprepared (Niranjana 1992: 3).

In a loose sense, Dutt specifically establishes the contested relationship between a 'fixed' culture (in terms of choosing a plot from the *Mahābhārata*)<sup>51</sup>, and re-inventing it to position it vis-a-vis the 'coming of consciousness'. This is best established in the use of Hindu mythology that is always already mediated (as it was constantly worked upon

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<sup>51</sup> It can be argued that it was only by the end of the nineteenth century when religious texts acquired some kind of fixity. See for example, Panikkar, K.N. *Colonialism, Culture and Resistance*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007 and *The Bengal Renaissance: Identity and Creativity from Rammohan Roy to Rabindranath Tagore*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007.

and survives in the oral cultural practices). In that sense, *Sermista* not only introduces an understanding of parallel literary genealogies, but most importantly initiates an understanding of cultural homogeneity.

In the previous section we have already discussed the increasing presence of the western education system which has engendered 'similar modes of thinking'. While cultural heterogeneity remained as the subterranean level certain homogeneities were superimposed on it.<sup>52</sup> At one level, Dutt responds to this homogenisation by performing in the frame of the 'bhadrak' class and at the other level he is keen at looking for a common genealogy that would come to define Bengali literature. In this, he looks for the participation of an audience (albeit in defence) outside the precincts of the coterie. This layered homogeneity makes it possible for a Christian poet to dabble with Hindu religious texts – the religious tradition he was seen to have abandoned. Even when he retains the popular songs, he can be dismissive of the popular cultural practices while retaining the claim that the play and its literary pedigree has similar origins in the Sanskrit tradition of Valmiki and Vyasa. These levels of engagement and disengagement allow Dutt to partake in a larger tradition of Bengali literature as he continuously contends with its elements.

For the drama, Dutt had introduced several characters, like Madhava the vidūṣaka, the three attendants of the women, Shukracharya's disciple Kapila, Bakasura and another demon. Other than introducing new characters, Dutt's play makes a crucial departure. Unlike the epic's rendition of the story, Dutt takes clear sides and makes the daughter of the Asura king, Sermista the protagonist of his play. It is not by chance but by design that the Asura princess in the play is more humane than the daughter of the Brahmin. Even when the play sticks to the moral codes in the *Mahābhārata*, the inversion of the moral universe is pronounced. Dutt in his most famous epic poem *Meghnād'badh Kābya* will perfect the same. Even when Yayati sighs 'Alas! 'twas in an evil hour that I set foot in the accursed land of the Asura' (Dutt 1859: 715) he can never forget the beauty that he found in the Asura land. Significantly, Dutt chooses to name Yayati as the 'King of India' in the English version of the play. In an attempt to undermine the haughty behaviour of Sermista, the play does not provide enough reason for a fight to take place between the protagonist and Devayani. It is reported through the conversation of the two Asuras. The dignified departure of Sermista contrasted with the heartlessness of Sukracharya immediately strikes a chord of empathy with the audience. Bakrasura says:

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<sup>52</sup> Most common among these homogeneities was 'revivalism'. Aravdan Srinivas observes: 'Various Romantic interpretations of pantheistic monism and mysticism would also help propel the abstract philosophy of Advaita Vedanta into the position of prime representative of the construct of 'Hinduism' as a new religious definition. The extended result of this operation was the prosthetic limb of the Bengal Renaissance that would twitch in response to a long-distance Romantically inspired language, generating the reformative religious vocabularies that would later be variously named "neo-Hinduism", "semitized Hinduism", "universal Hinduism", and "syndicated Hinduism"' (Srinivas 2003: 182).

'Ah, my brave comrade, when the royal maiden came to the audience-chamber, her countenance beamed like the autumnal moon; but when she heard the cruel words of the sage, she grew pale as does the autumnal Moon when dark-browed clouds come rushing on to veil its splendour! O great God! What strange destiny is hers!'<sup>α</sup>

Dutt's Sermista is quite unlike the character that we find in the *Mahābhārata*. She makes the drama come around as a romantic play. For the sake of the romantic element in the play, Dutt does away with the most important clause in the agreement between Sukracharya and the Asura king, namely that Sermista will never be allowed to marry King Yayati. Quite unlike the telling of the epic, the King is actually besotted by Sermista. Yayati's first encounter with Sermista is introduced to the audience with all the right omens like the throbbing of the right arm which indicates reaping of a worthy fruit. Dismissing the expectations that the audience might have of an Asura princess, Dutt gives her the status of a romantic heroine:

Yayati: Her mellifluous strain no longer floats on the hush'd air — the leaf hidden kokila has ceased (Seeing Sermista). But soft! Do I see before me some heavenly nymph that hath descended from her very haunts to wander in the solitude of this noontide bow'r, or is it some daughter of Earth with the unfading light of Heav'n in her eyes, the radiant glory of Heav'n on her virgin brow? Hush! Methinks she speaks. I must conceal me behind this tree and listen to the enchanting melody of her voice. (Dutt 1859: 725)

The conflicts between the world of the Asuras and the world of men are ruefully dissolved. The Asuras in Dutt's world inhabit the same plane as the humans and are not asinine and war-loving people constantly threatening the Gods. Instead when Sermista's cousin, Bakasura visits her, Yayati praises him and welcomes him with open arms as an equal:

Serm. Prince Vakasura, my lord, is my most honoured cousin.

King. I've heard of him a hundred times, sweetest, and fame speaks goldenly of his valour. 'twere a foul shame he should depart this city without the rites of hospitality due to so distinguished a guest. Pray thee, let us go and welcome him with such poor cheer as we may command (Dutt 1859: 727).

Dutt's hero Yayati is willing to treat the Asuras and equals which in sharp contrast to the figure of the vidūṣaka or the narrator (a common feature of the Sanskrit play, where the narrator provides commentaries).

Vid. True! Most true! The women that dwell around this garden, are the daughters of the Asuras and Enchantresses, and I've heard say that by their vile sorceries; they often turn men

into—goats! Mercy! If the manly beauty of our sovereign hath tempted one of these weirds to practice her vile arts upon him, then? (Dutt 1859: 727)

The high point in the drama is the chance discovery by Devayani of the existence of the three sons of Sermista. It is at this point that the moral dilemma of Yayati becomes apparent. Rather than his worries about placating his bereaved wife, he is afraid of the wrath of Sukracharya. Yayati says 'O, how can I escape destruction, Thou know'st the immortal God themselves dread the anger of the Sage, the most irascible and implacable of Rishis! (Sighs) Alas 'twas an evil hour when I met the daughter of the King of Asuras' (Dutt 1859: 727). Sukracharya emerges as the central negative character in the play, who constantly changes the course of the life of the lovers, propelled by the anxieties of his daughter. Devayani's constant reminder that she is the daughter of the venerated Brahmin brings her in sharp contrast to Sermista, who being the daughter of the king of the Asuras had silently accepted her fate and joined the train of slaves. In quite a departure for a Hindu wife, Devayani compares her husband and Sermista with the lowly Chandalas'. The Vile Chandalini alone is a meet companion for the vile chandala! The sweet-voiced Kokila disdains to dwell together with the croaking raven! Will the lioness deign to look at the jackal? Aawy, I tell thee away! Touch me not! What I care for thy crown, thy sceptre, thy throne! Know'st thou not that I'm the daughter of the illustrious Sage, whom the gods and men unite to reverence—the sage Sukracharya?' (Dutt 1859: 731) And it is Devayani who asks her father to curse the king with decrepitude.

Yayati stands to lose his youth and health if he does not relegate it to one of his sons. All his sons refuse except the youngest Puru, and the play ends with a chorus blessing the King and wishing them a very happy life. The vidūṣaka or the commentator in the play introduces the key moral dilemmas in the play. This allows Dutt to construct a fallible and a mortal hero. Yayati faced with the curse is not ready to give up either his health or his youth and without any afterthought or remorse hands down a thousand years of senile life to his youngest son by Sermista. The Vidushaka makes a snide remark 'Ha! Ha! I must have something out of these news-loving citizens. The Jack-fruit tastes doubly sweet when eaten at another's expense'. Dutt has overturned all expectations with this play: by making the tolerant Asura Princess as the heroine, a fallible pleasure-loving king as the hero, the Rishi as the curse-mouthing terrifying figure, and his daughter as a haughty, caste-conscious woman. The resolution of the play is a fitting closure to his homage to the nature of the Asura princess. Sukracharya, Sermista's adversary in the play who brings about all misfortune in her life says, 'And now, most noble Yayati may your majesty be happy, and may the banner of Sermista's glory ever continue to float on the gale of Fame' (Dutt 1859: 742). By dismissing all the expectations from the play (given that the plot was most likely familiar to the Indian audience) the audience might have, Dutt successfully plots systemic imperatives against each other.

The most striking feature of the play remains the reported nature of the actions. Apart from the romantic scenes in the play between the King and his two wives, all the

important actions in the play are reported by the people who do not take part in the actions themselves, and then these reportages are commented upon by the Vidhushaka. In keeping with the understanding of mythology as always already mediated, the key perspectives come from people who are not directly involved. For example, Puru's decision to take the curse upon himself is a testimony that we get from two unnamed citizens. The play, in a sense, is a play of (in)actions. Umpired knowledge of the actions and then interpretation is a clever technique that Dutt employs to recover mythology. The play begins in media res, when the Asuras report the quarrel between Devayani and Sermista, while dismissing it as squabbles of women. There are no props given to the audience or to the reader to enter the play, it is as if the audience is already a part of the action of the play. This technique appeals to the common received knowledge about the *Mahābhārata* which then the author seeks to dismantle.

*Sermista* plays cleverly on multiple registers. While looking at the 'Grand mythology' of the Hindus, it is given to understand that mythology is always mediated knowledge and lies in a culturally homogenous subconscious from where it can be successfully summoned. Even while avoiding Hindu iconographic overtones, Dutt manages in the play to create orders of understanding. From the lowly citizen, to the palace guard of the Asuras, a diversity of characters participate and report on the important events of the lives spanning the world of the Gods, kings and Rishis, the real audience of the play is limited to the 'bhadrakok' few. This creates a complex and layered perception of understanding. Dutt as the Christian outsider and a 'bhadrakok' insider is able to simultaneously create worlds of cultural homogeneities which overlap in the frames of the play. These seemingly sequestered levels of interaction that often collide ensure that the Christian convert can participate in the cultural economy of nineteenth-century Bengal. Referring to the problematics of legitimation of the narrative authority of the Christian convert, it is important to observe that Dutt's strategy of narrative authority emanates from his desire to allocate homogenous spaces of reception and interaction. Therefore, in the altered frames and significant omissions, mythology and Christianity correspond to variables of performance. Semantic possibilities are dependent on the receptive constituencies. 🙏

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