

Madhusudan and Meghanadbadh: A Reconsideration

by Azfar Hussain

The writer, who teaches English literature at Jahangirnagar University and who is presently involved in writing a book on Madhusudan aiming at a post-structuralist reading of his poetry, here underscores the need for breaking the spell of impressionistic criticisms hitherto mounted on Madhusudan inconsequentially, and stresses a re-reading of his epic in the light of changing critical perspectives and socio-political realities. He maintains that Madhusudan's epic is capable of generating the politics of the text which, among others, is very much relevant to the post-colonial times through which Bangladesh is presently passing.

his own mother tongue? Indeed, what can be a better specimen of intolerance than this rhetorical question raised with convex lips?

True, Mohitlal Majumder who wrote a book called *Sree Madhusudan* wanted to re-deem the lop-sided critical scale by paying close attention to Madhusudan's work, but his half-formalistic half-impressionistic consideration of the epic could not significantly unearth the genius of Madhusudan who, finally, led Mohitlal more to a mystification of *Meghanadbadh* than to

theories of formalism, to look into Madhusudan's work. However, such efforts are only sporadic and tellingly inadequate. In fact, the need for modernizing Madhusudan criticism is a crucial one, for a poet like him exhibits such potentials and possibilities as are adequately relevant to our times. Indeed, a close reading of Madhusudan, today, would reveal that he is very much our contemporary and that his texts, produced in the nineteenth century, are effortlessly permeable to the ethos of modernist and post-modernist

whole poetic enterprise was intended to dispense with the aesthetic and stylistic *koinos topos*. These are, no doubt, achievements and accomplishments one can fairly attribute to Madhusudan marking his power, prestige and position in literary history, but what actually captures the *ictus* of his voice, marks the pitch of his self, exhibits the apogee of his poetic genius and exemplifies the principles of his own aesthetic is *Meghanadbadh* — Madhusudan's epic consisting of 9 cantos and as many as 6092 lines.

Traditional interpretations of Madhusudan's *Meghanadbadh* have trekked all the way from the questions of genre and form, metre and rhythm, and external stylistic trappings to the art of narrative and characterization. These interpretations have, of course, yielded such rewarding results as are possible through 'thematic' criticisms only. But what remains mostly ignored is a reading of those possibilities of *Meghanadbadh* which make his poetry accommodative of creative and critical principles that are 'post-modernist'. Indeed, the fact that Madhusudan's texts invite even the recalcitrant post-modernist critical principles which happen to focus increasingly on signs of wreckage, breakages and slippages, and on the phenomena of de-centering, reversal and deconstruction is an indication of the poet's much-advanced vision and his massive stylistic resources. Let us now see some of the textual strategies of Madhusudan's *Meghanadbadh* in the light of the post-modernist and post-colonial critical concerns.

To read *Meghanadbadh* is indeed to read *ostrananie* — a Russian term translated into English as *defamiliarization*, used first by the Russian Formalists themselves to indicate a particular but essential quality of literature. The post-modernists are also concerned with the application of this quality — rather technique, the purpose of which, as Victor Shklovsky first put it, "is to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged." If one reads *Meghanadbadh* carefully and over and over again, one can not but miss the point that *textual defamiliarization* occurs at various levels in terms of creative deviations and trans-

gressions. Geoffrey N Leech, who has currently pioneered a kind of linguistic analysis of poetry fashionably called *neo-stylistics* speaks of a considerable range of deviations that can occur in 'writing' — lexical, syntactic, grammatical, semantic, metrical, metaphorical, imagistic and thematic.

In Madhusudan's *Meghanadbadh* one can certainly see these eight deviations which go on to constitute the epic as a text of defamiliarization. For instance, in Cantos 1, 3 and 8, we have a remarkable range of lexical deviations exemplified in the linguistic process of turning nouns into verbs, verbs into nouns, and at times, even adjectives into verbs, producing, during Madhusudan's times, a kind of linguistic black-comedy or linguistic surrealism.

Syntactic, grammatical and semantic deviations can be observed right from the beginning canto of the epic, particularly in lines 205-17, where the riches and the glory, the pomp and grandeur of Lanka are described with powerful narrative and imagistic zest, and also in lines 405-416, where the urge and excitement of Ravana centering around the war are expressed in jerky, pause-and-move-type of syntax, and further in Canto 5, in lines 1-17, where sleeplessness at midnight in 'Indralaya' is brought to the fore in terms of images and metaphors drawn but internalized from Canto 2 of Homer's *Iliad*. The example of metrical deviation is the blank verse itself, which was then unknown in Bengali poetry.



True, Madhusudan explored and exploited the resources from Europe; but Europe — and for that matter, a Homer, a Virgil, a Milton — never conquered and possessed Madhusudan. In fact, it was Madhusudan who conquered and possessed Europe, establishing his own style of counter linguistic and aesthetic hegemony on the European 'Other.'

of its kind in the history of Bengal poetry.

It is indeed interesting to observe that Madhusudan's *Meghanadbadh* serves as an unmistakable example of *intertextuality*, a concept and a process with which post-modernist and post-structuralist literary theorists are exceedingly concerned today. The term *intertextuality* was coined by the Bulgarian semioticist and post-structuralist feminist Julia Kristeva. Indeed, there are numerous theories and practices of this *intertextuality* today, characterizing a bewildering variety of contemporary critical scenarios in the West. But, one of the ways of coming to terms with *intertextuality* would be to say that it refers to texts not as a self-contained structure but as differential and historical. Texts, indeed, are shaped not by an immanent time but by the play

of divergent temporalities. Texts are therefore not structures of presence but "traces and tracings of otherness." Intertextuality, thus, clearly indicates that "texts are shaped by the repetition and transformation of other textual structure's" as John Frow justly puts it.

To speak of *Meghanadbadh's* intertextuality is to speak of the tradition and the individual talent of Madhusudan, of course in the Eliotesque sense of the term. True, any poet is bound to be intertextual, but Madhusudan's intertextuality evinces its own zone of signification, its own inescapable pressures, its own magic and logic its own links and prints capable of re-activating a world of linguistic games and counter-games. In *Meghanadbadh* intertextuality is exemplified in resources Madhusudan explored and exploited, transforming the 'Other' into the 'here-and-now'. Fragments of Indian myths, Sanskrit metaphors and similes, Kalidassian dynamics, the web of Miltonic images, the lyricism of medieval Latin lyrics, the traces of long punctuations of *payar* in blank verse, close punctuations noticeable as they are in typographical poems and in medieval Latin 'prometa figurata' Latin-Greek-Sanskrit ornamental and rhetorical devices, verb-making games a la English poets, repetitions in the forms of *anaphoras*, *epanophoras*, *ploces* as can be found in Hebrew poetry and Anglo-Saxon elegies — all these, *inter alia*, go together to constitute rich, dense intertextuality in Madhusudan's *Meghanadbadh*. This intertextuality, of course, speaks of the range and breadth of Madhusudan's assimilation which, hitherto, remains unsurpassed indeed. It seems that Madhusudan himself was conscious of this 'intertextuality' though this term was not discovered during his times as the poet informs us in a letter he wrote to one of his friends: "I had no idea, my dear fellow, that our mother tongue would place at my disposal such exhaustless materials... The thoughts and images bring out words with themselves — words that I never thought I knew. Here is a mystery for you." Interestingly enough, Madhusudan, here, was anticipating a creative process which recently Geoffrey N Leech described both in terms of intertextuality and 'free lexical and syntactic associations'. Indeed, in *Meghanadbadh*, we have such 'free' lexical and syntactic associations as can be found in numerous places of the epic, particularly in lines 323-31 of Canto 5 where Lakshman expresses his feelings of adoration and adulation towards Chandi; in lines 174-79 of Canto 6, where Bivishana assures Ram of the possible victory of Lakshman; in lines 158-192 of Canto 7 where Ravana's preparation for the war appears to be charged with

wrath and passion; in lines 548-72 of Canto 7 where Ravana's aggressive movement towards Indra is brought to the fore with rhetorical energy and enthusiasm, etc.

Given the scale and space of intertextuality in Madhusudan's epic, it is possible to dwell at length on this issue, but space here does not permit such an exercise. However, a few points can be carefully underlined here. True, for Madhusudan's intertextuality, fragmented texts from poets like Homer, Virgil, Dante, Tasso, Shakespeare and Milton are reckoned important, but what was more important to Madhusudan's epic intertextuality was his insistent drawing-upon the Indian and Oriental resources found in Balmiki, Sree Vortirahri (author of *Bhattikavya*), Bhabavuti (author of *Uttarharitama*), Kalidas and Krittibas — to all of whom Madhusudan paid his ardent poetic tribute at the beginning of Canto 4 of *Meghanadbadh*. Madhusudan, thus, was not only intertextual, but also *intra-textual*, for he brought together the texts of the Orient in a manner unprecedented.

But Madhusudan's intertextuality is not a mere process indicating the dynamics of the text, nor it is inconsequential. The consequences — rather rewarding ones — of intertextuality include, first, a kind of textual politics which is often lost sight of in traditional Madhusudan criticism. Those who raise their eyebrows heavenward at the so-called Europeanization of Madhusudan may now look into the power and politics of the text. Madhusudan is capable of generating, True, Madhusudan explored and exploited the resources from Europe; but Europe — and for that matter, a Homer, a Virgil a Milton — never conquered and possessed Madhusudan. In fact, it was Madhusudan who conquered and possessed Europe, establishing his own style of counter linguistic and aesthetic hegemony on the European 'Other'. One can say in the fashion of Edward Said's 'Orientalism' that Madhusudan was powerful enough to effect and activate an 'orientalization of the Occident'. Indeed, there is not a single place in *Meghanadbadh* where Madhusudan simply translated from European poetry, but his was a flair for twisting, compressing, expanding, inverting and subverting the resources he drew either from the West or from the East.

Madhusudan's intertextuality is further indicative of 'creative globalism', hitherto unknown in Bengali poetry, which, as Madhusudan indicates, is possible only through exploring links with rhythms and resources of indigenous poetry. Further, this intertextuality provides a few significant clues to 'modernity'. What Eliot formulated as a critical principle in the twentieth century was profoundly realized by Madhusudan much earlier: "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists". And, of course, Madhusudan's intertextuality invites even the most radical critical discourse starting from the *comparativistic* ones down to those, post-modernist and post-structuralist in nature.

Through positioning Ravan strategically in 'Meghanadbadh', Madhusudan challenged the hegemony and centrality of the Indian myth and thus challenged the mythic hegemony of Ram and Lakshman who were decentred in the process. Madhusudan struck at the 'centres' of conventions and commonplaces, morality and myths, grammar and semantics, standing against all conceivable forms of fundamentalism-political, philosophical, mythical, imagistic, grammatical.

a close, critical reading of it with the needed *aesthetic distance*. Mohitlal's emphasis was on the rhythmic clan and cosmic musicality of *Meghanadbadh* which can exhibit all the possible insignias and grandeur of epic poetry. His emphasis was not wrong, however. But, it was jazzed up with a proportion that could only breed a form of *critical sifism* — not, for that matter, very conducive to salvaging transparency.

Thus, in harmony with these instances, (though its possible to multiply them), one can see that within a span of more than one hundred years, Michael Madhusudan Dutta has been subject to high-voltage reactions — either extremely negative or extremely positive, and of course, impressionistic in nature. But unfortunately, one can see less of — though not an absolute absence of — close, sustained critical analysis of Madhusudan's oeuvre. In recent times, efforts are being made, in the fashion of Anglo-American neo-critics and their

critical enterprise being undertaken today.

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Since Madhusudan is primarily known for his epic, here we would keep our discussion confined to *Meghanadbadh*. True, apart from writing this epic, Madhusudan introduced the *sonnet-form* in Bengali poetry, and experimented with dramatic forms, writing 'farce' with remarkable freshness and originality. The blank-verse that he introduced in Bengali poetry was not simply a mechanical imitation of iambic-pentameter blank verse that one can find in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, or for that matter, in Shakespeare's plays, but it was a creative variation, and also an improvisation, on Milton's metre and rhythm and form. Indeed, the tone, tune, texture and text one experiences in Madhusudan's *oeuvre* is essentially *Madhusudanian*, making the point that his

A great deal of traditional Madhusudan criticism is characterized by the binary polarities of applause and assault which, sometimes, are found to be blown out of proportions. Rabindranath Tagore, characteristically responsive as he was, read Madhusudan when he was only sixteen. But, his teen-age response to Madhusudan was not one of critical acceptance. He was, in fact, 'intolerant' towards Madhusudan's epic which, as Tagore then felt, lacked the essential poetic nobility, and also the energy and clan which stand for life itself. The fact that Tagore was not doing justice to *Meghanadbadh* was a matter of realization. Indeed, Tagore took time to dispense with his earlier opinion of Madhusudan. Deceived by the surfaces of Madhusudan's glittering verbal resources, Tagore once found in Madhusudan's epic nothing but an apparent poetic competence predicated more on craftsmanship than on vision and realization. But, years later, it was Tagore who had swung to another extreme of response, viewing signs of unmistakable immortality in the epic of Madhusudan: it is modern, it is great, an outcome of a massive but a rewarding poetic struggle. No doubt Madhusudan deserved poetic homage from Tagore, but this epic poet does not certainly demand mere uncritical applauses.

The self-recognized reversal of reactions exhibited by Tagore himself was no doubt a characteristic mark of the poet's ever-evolving, ever-responsive critical sense and sanity. But, the poets of the thirties — particularly that Baudelaire-infected, self-consciously 'colonized' poet Buddhodeva Bose noted for his imported Lawrenceality — could not accept Madhusudan Dutta with ease. Indeed, it was a kind of 'critical' fascism which was mindlessly unleashed on Madhusudan by Buddhodeva Bose who pushed the poet to a point where Madhusudan's efforts were reckoned mere excitations, a mere linguistic sleeves-rolling. In fact, Buddhodeva went to the extent of maintaining that Madhusudan was at best a juggler of words — rather cacophonies and linguistic tantrums and that he even could not understand the nature of the Bengali language itself. With a telling intensity of passion of course, Buddhodeva embarked on the enterprise of debunking Madhusudan, and this enterprise could sustain a certain amount of appeal for not-a-very-long period of time. Sudhin Dutta, yet another poet of the thirties, did not have the kind of atrocity perpetrated by Buddhodeva, but he had his own anxiety with regard to the epic — *Meghanadbadh* (the Killing of Meghanad) — of Madhusudan who, according to Sudhin Dutta, could only end in trumping up a particular brand of blank verse. Sudhin raised the question with a self-complacent certitude: 'how could a poet write genuine poetry if he is not able to understand

The Changing and Unchanging New York



The brilliant yellow of America's taxi cabs fills the city's Fifth Avenue

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There is of course the Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities concentrated mostly in Queens. Colourful sari and grocery stores line the streets of Jackson Heights in Queens. Jewellery shops displaying loud and heavy gold necklaces and earrings had increased in number and it seemed there was no dearth of customers. The restaurant business also seemed to be flourishing as I smelled with nostalgia the aroma of our delicious curries and spices.

The Bangladeshi community is a very special group of people in the city. Although small in number compared to other communities of the sub-continent, they have made their reputation as hard working and conscientious. They are in all kinds of professions —

from the highly skilled computer expert to the cab driver and restaurant waiter. Talking about cab drivers, I was told that one out of every four cab driver is a Bangladeshi. I met one who refused to accept payment just because my in-laws are from Mymensingh which is his home town. There is so much to write about the Bangladeshi immigrant community and I will do so separately in another article.

To sum it all up, I can only say that it is truly an amazing city. Lady Liberty still stands on Liberty Island symbolizing of "Give me your tired, weary and hungry" has worn out a little, yet people from all over the world still come, with dreams of making it in the "Big Apple".

Berlin Fights on for Economic Revival

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moving around with a South African journalist, Musa Juedi. Both of us got lost and it took almost two hours to discover the way to the hotel.

Riding a bus here is quite a pleasure, compared to the 'task' in cities like Dhaka. Barring peak hours, buses run with significant numbers of empty seats. And not only the buses, the riders do behave well, too. Even in a crowded bus, passengers are seen queuing up to show the driver their weekly or monthly cards, or pay the driver in cash. Similar were my experiences of traveling in trams and trains.

One day, on my way back to the hotel, an occurrence at Alexanderplatz metro station stopped me for a while. A very old and perhaps extremely sick man collapsed on the platform. Shortly after, a policeman carrying a walkie talkie reached the spot and tried to talk to the elderly German for a few minutes. And minutes later, the policeman aided by some others took away the old and sick man obviously is an ambulance to a hospital. All that proved the state's responsibilities to its citizens.

We had little chance to move around the city of Berlin and visit the tourist spots, because of our preoccupations with the conference and tasks there of. Nevertheless, I managed to spare some time to shop. Being afraid of getting lost, I preferred to buy things from two selected department stores Bilka and Wolfware near the Zoological Garden. My conversation with the shoppers was bilingual with me speaking in English and they using the German. To communicate, I had to use body language too. However, the shoppers were patient enough to waste their time in trying to understand me I couldn't but forget the

botheration of my limitation in communicating when pretty girls bade farewell with warm smiles. Shops in Berlin are mainly run by ladies, from teenagers to elderly.

Bangladeshi immigrants
The immigrants from this region, including Bangladesh, primarily live on selling flowers at the street-corners. Having a job in Asian restaurant, mostly owned by Indians, is considered a better chance.

It was a great pleasure for me to have a nice time with a Bangladeshi environment specialist serving the German Government, Dr. Saifullah A K Khandker. He gave me and another colleague of mine from Bangladesh several hours while hosting us at an Indian restaurant and also at his rented house in Helmholtzstr, West Berlin. Living in Germany for nine years, Dr Khandker was keen to know about the national issues, including politics, of his motherland. Having obtained his doctorate degree from a Berlin university and serving the German Government for last several years, he is now eager to utilise his knowledge for his own country. "I'll leave Germany had I been offered a suitable job in Bangladesh", he said, seeking us to provide him any information as such.

Another Bangladeshi, Mozammel Haque, currently undergoing a training course, I met on the day I left Berlin. Introduced at a bus stand, Haque and had our first conversation over riding a bus. He felt a special interest with me, knowing that we hail from the same Thana of Narsingdi district. Haque repented for not having enough time to accompany me while seeing me off at the ICC gate.

It was a rare opportunity for me to cover an assignment like the international AIDS

Conference that drew 15,000 participants from all over the globe, took place at the huge ICC. Two thousand journalists from across the world gathered there to cover the conference, where hundreds of sessions were being held everyday. There, I had the privilege to meet-journalists, ex-



ponents on the deadly disease AIDS and also AIDS victims representing all nations of the world. For the mediamen, a Media Centre was set up with modern gadgets. They cast surprise at me when I asked for a manual typewriter, the use of which they perhaps forgotten by now.

Here, I have deliberately focused more on *intertextuality*, of course within a brief compass, than on any other aspect the post-modernists can viably deal with. There are certainly reasons for deconstructionists to zero in on Madhusudan, for his epic exhibits a number of centre-exploding tendencies which can be read in terms of Derrida's 'free play' and *différance*. Yes, Madhusudan, like today's deconstructionists and post-colonial writers, went on to demolish so-called 'centres', evolving the texts of free play. Positioning Ravan strategically, Madhusudan, for example, challenged the hegemony and centrality of the Indian myth and thus challenged the mythic hegemony of Ram and Lakshman who were decentred in the process. Madhusudan also struck at the 'centres' of conventions, morality, myths, grammar and semantics, standing against all conceivable forms of fundamentalism-political, philosophical, linguistic, mythical, grammatical. *Meghanadbadh* is essentially an anti-fundamentalist epic, for it eternally gravitates towards freedom and humanity.

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In today's Bangladesh, Madhusudan is undoubtedly an inspiration for poets and people struggling to find the path to freedom in the midst of such social and political realities as are characterized by repression, violence, fundamentalism, communalism and other anti-liberation forces.

For reasons of space, a number of our regular Weekend Magazine features have been held over for the next week.