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# **LITERATURES IN ENGLISH**

(Theories and Practices)


(Vol. II)

Edited by

**Mr. Bibhishan Phad**

  
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## Metamorphosis of Genres in Bengali Literature

Dr. Neeta Chakravarty

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**Abstract:** *While Bangla literature of medieval times thrived on heroic and romantic stories, Bengali literature went in for a mega change as Bengalis well versed with the English language tried to invigorate Bengali literature with new ideas. In fact, modern Bengali literature made a beginning with great stalwarts like Michael Madhusudan Datta and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. Bengali poets seldom wrote using the blank verse and Madhusudan was the first one to initiate this change. He combined western influences into the essence of Indian literature. Meghnadvadhkavya begins very much like Milton's Paradise Lost and ends by evoking the cremation scene in Iliad's final book.*

*As it stood in those times, the intelligentsia in Bengal openly spoke against expressions of weaknesses like fear or pity for themselves instead of giving vent to the intense anger that every countryman ought to feel. This theme made its appearance again and again repeatedly until the advent of the swadeshi movement. The Bengal renaissance can be said to have started with Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1775-1833) and ended with Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). However Kazi Nazrul Islam (1898-1976), a contemporary of Tagore must be mentioned for both, his intensely patriotic poems and incredibly charming romantic poems.*

*Bangla literature has imbibed features from different literatures. For instance, some forms introduced the sonnet with rhyme scheme abab cdcd efef gg while some made use of European type blank verse. This developed Shakespearean characteristics in bangla plays or helped create bangla dramas with Indian setting but based on Greek mythology. Besides, the age also incorporated use of psychological realism in novels, the trend of merging the finite with the infinite, use of sadhubhasa and chaltibhasa and encompasses the influences of both the spirit of the times and individual characteristics.*

**Keywords:** *Sadhubhasa, chaltibhasa, sonnet, renaissance, blank verse*



Bangla literature of medieval times thrived on heroic and romantic stories. Some of the famous stories include the cycle of stories related to the hero *Lau Sen* and his adventures, to the young merchant prince Lakhindra and his devoted wife Bewula and the snake goddess *Manasa*.

The educated Bengali abreast with newer forms of literature set about the task of revamping bangla literature in new colours, painted much from the perspective of the English literary forms. The Bengali poets and writers never ceased lashing their people English knowing Indians, who were well versed with Greek, Roman and European literatures too, revolutionized the attitude to literature and inaugurated the current or modern phase in Indian literature. This contact with the European mind first began in Bengal with Raja Ram Mohan Roy and by the middle of the 19th century, the emancipation or modernization of Bengali literature had already begun.

It was as early as 1795 that the form and content of Bengali drama and stage began to be modernized under the influence of the Russian Gerasim Lebedeff. Around the same time, some Sanskrit and Shakespearean plays were also being made. The first among these may be said to be the *Kulin-Kula-Sarvasva*, which was written by Ram Narayan Tarkaratna and published in 1854. In fact, this marked the birth of new Bengali drama as an instrument of social reform and entertainment.

On one hand, the rich from urban India and people from upper classes were encouraging the Bengali stage & new forms of drama and entertainment, there was also a rebellion prevalent in the country. But the appeal for the European model did not allow the interest in drama to wane. This gave rise to geniuses like Michael Madhusudan Dutt. In fact, modern Bengali literature made a beginning with great stalwarts like Michael Madhusudan Datta and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. Bengali poets seldom wrote using the blank verse and Madhusudan was the first one to initiate this change. He combined western influences into the essence of Indian literature. He was greatly influenced by classical themes. He produced about five plays and three

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narrative poems, which were prevalent in those times and lent the forms his own individual flavour which resulted in bringing about a synthesis of eastern ideals and western thought. To the plays he incorporated formal Shakespearean characteristics. In typical renaissance spirit Madhusudan produced two social farces. He felt that these were essential to show the public that it is possible to act both, the sublime and the ridiculous, at the same time. He disapproved of loss of morality amidst the so called educated Bengalis who were well read in the English language and imitated their habits of drinking. He expressed his angst against them in *Ekei ki Bale Sobhyata?* Which reads as 'Is this civilization?' in translation. His play *Padmavati* consisted of Indian characters in an Indian setting but it drew its inspiration from Greek mythology.

Madhusudan's experimentation with the blank verse resulted in the production of *Meghnadvadhkavya* (1861) which was akin to the usage of blank verse in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. If Satan was the unconventional villain with a humane face in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Meghnad from *Ramayana* received a similar treatment at the hands of Madhusudan. *Meghnadvadhkavya* begins very much like Milton's *Paradise Lost* and ends by evoking the cremation scene in *Iliad's* final book. There are references to Aeneas and reflection of Dantean thoughts. Most important here, is his reversal of depictions of the hero and the villain. He succeeds in skewing readers response to the great Indian epic *Ramayana*. He does so by resorting to simple narrative strategies like the use of similes and juxtaposition of actors in the simile and the main narrative. Thus, an indirect linkage is created between Ravana with the Gods, Shiva and Krishna and the Pandavas. Also, he expresses admiration for Ravana's masculine vigour, this-worldliness and his consumer's lust for life. This was in sharp opposition to Indian culture which rejected these traits. Moreover, although Ravana's qualities were admired, they were essentially considered to be relevant in the realm of rakshasas only. In *Meghnadvadhkavya*, Dutt brings him on as a scientific, learned, modern kshatriya king who dared to

fight the non-secular politics of a banished pastoral prince. While colonialism was making its presence felt, Ravana was seen in much the same light. People tried to tame western concepts of manhood and womanhood at such time when the full power and glory of British imperialism were not yet apparent.

Also, through this work was born a new concept of tragedy which borrowed heavily from the west. Prior to this, a tragedy was perceived as something which caused the triumph of all that were good and the defeat of all that were bad. Tragedy was never an individual happening. But this new purview was now created by Dutt. As it stood in those times, the intelligentsia in Bengal openly spoke against expressions of weaknesses like fear or pity for themselves instead of giving vent to the intense anger that every country man ought to feel. This theme made its appearance again and again repeatedly until the advent of the swadeshi movement. Padmini Upakhyam written as an epic narrative poem in 1858 began a new trend of such expression of patriotism through literary forms.

In 1872, with formation of Vanga-Darsan, creativity took on a new form as Bankim Chandra went on to give shape to a new notion of Bengali nationalism with his song Vandemataram which was a part of his novel Anandamath. On the other hand, with Durgeshnandini the genre of romantic Bengali novel found expression. Thus, every voice in literature opined whatever was close to his/ her heart. Everybody had a different way of coming to the issue. While some relied on the past for a background, some locked horns with the present and yet others tried to grapple with issues troubling the nation. Even as they worked and reworked on these themes, approaching them from different perspectives, they successfully presented their abhorrence for foreign rule in their beloved country. Thus, literature became a weapon used to propagate nationalism and freedom.

Also, the first Bengali novel of social realism Peary Chand Mitra's *Alaler Gharer Dulal* (1858) was also created in this age. The novel was a masterpiece because while highlighting the truth of life in those times including some remarkable



personalities, it blended in the need for incorporation of education among the masses. Patriotism was very much in the air and was held in high esteem by all writers, whether they worked independently or were beneficiaries of the British Raj. The plight of their country was pretty evident to them. They did not like the British power lording over the nation and so, through their works, they tried to unite them in a courageous bid towards freedom.

Historically, the Renaissance signifies a many-sided, complex movement, a critical and creative outburst of human spirit to free itself from the worn-out moral and religious ideas of the time. It is a movement in which one finds expression for both one's intellect as well as one's imagination breaking old set ways of society.

Poetry has always been at the forefront of modern writing in India and has examples par excellence. Who does not know the saga of the 19<sup>th</sup> century poet Rabindranath Tagore? He not only wrote in Bengali but successfully created beautiful fabric drawing from the substance of traditional poetry. Tagore is famous not only for the noble prize that he won or the knighthip that he declined but also for conceiving of the new form of school, Shantiniketan where all art forms were taught in natural surroundings. Tagore's compositions like his musical drama, *Dak-ghar* (The Post Office, 1912), were created here. As Tagore received recognition as a Nobel prize winner in 1913, his other literary pursuits also received the limelight. As the first person to bring out volumes of short stories in his three volumes of *Galpaguchcha*, attention was drawn towards them automatically. Some of his short stories with eternal, universal appeal include *Kabuliwallah*, *Durasha*, *Post Master*, *Samapti*, *Monihara*, *Nashta Neer*, *Megh O Raudra*, *Atithi*, *Kshudita-Pashan*, *Rabi Baar* and *Laboratory*. His short stories were not about the rich and the famous only although they did find place in them. In fact, his characters were ordinary characters from everyday life as evidenced in his *The Hungry Stones and Other Stories*. Women in India and their oppression was often

highlighted by litterateurs of the time. Their woes in the backdrop of their inability to earn money and receive education cut off their wings effectively in Bengali patriarchal society. Tagore's female protagonists from his works like *Nashtanir*, *The Broken Nest* and *Ghare-baire* and those that he represented in his short stories were bereft of freedom but his other characters were also not less oppressed. Rabindranath was a multi-faceted gem, a gifted genius who left an indelible impression in the sphere of Bengali novels. *Chaturanga*, *Chokher Bali*, *Nauka Dubi*, *Gora*, *Ghare Baire*, *Char Adhyay*, *Dui Bone*, and *Malancha* are among his best.

Rabindranath Tagore's background was classical Indian. Yet, he rebelled against classical orthodoxy and introduced a rich variety of form and content, enriched by bangla folk music such as the baul and bhatiyali type. He enriched Bengali drama with his symbolic and intricate plays which were innovative and unique in concept. Some of his immortal plays are *Balmiki Pratibha*, *Dakghar*, *Mukta Dhara*, *Rakta Karabi Taasher Desh*, to name a few. His writings epitomized the Bengali culture, lifestyle, and psyche in an inimitable style. Rabindranath had amassed within himself a vast storehouse of wisdom, energy, poignant emotion, and romanticism. He brought about an unprecedented fusion of the earthly limits with infinity, of fragments with the whole, which lent an ethereal quality to his poetry. Few other poets have ever displayed such versatility Tagore experimented with poetry in prose format, devoid of rhyme, which culminated in a series of poems compiled under the title *Lipika*. *Sonar Tari* may be regarded as a symbol of Tagore's life. The soul's quest for the eternal, the desire to journey into a mysterious world, leaving behind the familiar, mundane one has been effectively brought out. Tagore became an icon of Bengali society, lifestyle and culture, after the publication of *Gitanjali* which fetched him the Nobel Prize in 1913.

The Bengal renaissance can be said to have started with Raja Ram Mohan Roy and ended with Rabindranath Tagore. However, Kazi Nazrul Islam, a contemporary of Tagore must be

mentioned for both, his intensely patriotic poems and incredibly charming romantic poems. The rebellious songs and poems of Nazrul had inspired the freedom fighters to lay down their lives for the country and were immensely popular. He was even imprisoned several times by the British. Utterly secular in thoughts and spirits, Nazrul was unrivalled in the field of devotional songs as well. Some of his outstanding books are *AgniBeena*, *Bhangar Gaan*, *'Bisher Banshi* etc.

Bangla literature has imbibed features from different literatures. For instance, some forms introduced the sonnet with rhyme scheme abab cddc efef gg; while some made use of European type blank verse. This developed Shakespearean characteristics in bangla plays or helped create bangla dramas with Indian setting but based on Greek mythology. Besides, the age also incorporated use of psychological realism in novels, the trend of merging the finite with the infinite, use of sadhubhasa and chaltibhasa and encompasses the influences of both the spirit of the times and individual characteristics. Most importantly, the renaissance literature was alive to the defects in Indian society. Modern literature, too, takes its cue from renaissance and welcomes newness in its form and content.

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