HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF BENGALI LITERATURE

Mohammad Abu Tayyub Khan

Abstract

After the conquest of Bengal by Muslims in 1201 A.D., Muslim immigrants of Turkish, Iranian and Arab descent had settled in the then prosperous Bengal and assimilated themselves with the natives through intermarriages, enriching Bengali language with their dialects and dictions. Towards the early 19th century, under the British patronage a campaign was carried out by pundits appointed by Fort William College Calcutta, to substitute Muslim domestic words by Sanskrit, words. The popular style incorporating Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Urdu words evolved in the 18th century was, also rejected as vulgar even by modern Hindu writers. For understandable reasons financially weak Muslim writers had to shy away and imitate the style that the Hindu writers had evolved. By the advent of the 20th Century, Muslims in Bengal realized that they had no option but to get modern education and adopt the new genres to express their contemporary sensibility. By 1918 Muslim Bengali literature had gained sufficient vigor to compete with Hindu writers. Bengali literature owes thanks to Qazi Nazrul Islam who with his mastery poetic skill effectively incorporated Urdu, Persian and Arabic words and expressions to enrich and imprint Muslim Identity on Bengali. His literary career from 1917 to 1942 underlines strength and boldness. Muslims of South Asia for the first time found in him 'a powerful' poet to express effectively their sensibility. Nazrul initially tried reconciliation between Hindus and Muslims as may be gleaned from his poems but soon he realized the futility of his attempt. He found that the two communities, embedded in their backgrounds, had drifted apart irreversibly on sociopolitical and economic grounds.

Background of Bengali Literature

"The Bengali-speaking people belong to two major societies having different social traditions, and different and even antagonistic symbolism. Though the Hindu and the Muslim societies speak the same language, breathe the same air, live on the same land, they have consistently followed different historical trends, responded differently to the same situations and hence created different forms and linguistic and thematic traditions. Bengali literature is thus a huge river having two correct tributaries. Even when the two tributaries meet the major river and combine to create a mighty confluence, like the Padma and the Meghna (in Eastern Bengal) they retain their distinctive characteristics though they flow together to the same Bay of Bengal.[1]

Bengal literature that sprang and flourished during Muslim rule (i.e. 14th and 15th century) was by any standard a rich and impressive accomplishment. A critical study of literature produced during the period amply demonstrates that the literary traditions and thereof formulation are 'intimately tied up with the social sensibility' of the times. The 'inter play of the social sensibility and literary production evidently shows up varied social

[1] Syed Ali Ashraf, *Bengali Literary Society Review*, (Karachi: University of Karachi, 1973). pp.24-25

consciousness that underlines the ages.[2]

Historically Muslims entered Bengal as victors in 1200 and replaced old Hindu rule. By 1350 A.D the Muslim society had emerged and expanded throughout Bengal under the domineering influence of Ulema, Sufi's and their Khanqas. With the establishment of the political supremacy of the Muslims two educational systems – one led by Hindu pundits and another by Muslim clerics at Madrassahs – came up. Similarly, different social institutions came up marking the two communities attitudes towards life and events. The difference prominently feature through their respective literatures though written in Bengali. The Muslims symbolism under the Qur'anic teachings are universal and iconoclastic whereas Hindu symbolisms are imagistic confined to Bharat.

As obvious, Hindus did not reconcile to the Muslim rule, and sporadically attempted to regain power. Contrary to the Muslim benign attitude the orthodox Hindu preserved imagistic approach in day–to–day life They manifested the difference between the two communities through various 'revival movements'. All their movements whether Political or literary were directed to capture power. To negate the assimilatory and secular attitude of the Muslims and to perpetuate the well – designed agenda to return to the helm of state affairs, they left no stone unturned. In the literary arena they launched an imagistic 'Navaya' – movement but failed to enlist Muslim litterateurs support for its religious overtones. Consequently, the Muslim culture and the Hindu culture continued to flow as 'two distinct streams'. So were their 'literary traditions'.

The literary traditions were therefore different. For the Hindus the most significant was that of the Mangala Kavyas which, as Dr. Asutosh Bhattacharya has said, was the product of Hindu reaction to Muslim cultural dominance and political domination. It was an attempt to provide sustenance to Hindu society by showing God's favour and the favour of gods and goddesses. The emotive response was that of a defeated society seeking pride-fulfillment through pictures of divine assistance and also seeking consolation ideals.[3] The translation of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata provided the common Hindu men and women with ideals to emulate and take pride in their own historical past. It is thus the Aryan and the Puranic past that they repeatedly drew inspiration from.

This led to the creation of Mangala Kavya, poetic form dedicated to Hindu gods and goddesses. However, it did not attract any Muslim writer or poet to adopt it as predictably Muslims preferred to import the 'form' of their narrative poems from Arabic and Persian to write the Hamd and the Naat, a recital of Allah's glory and the magnificence of his Prophet Muhammad(Peace be upon him) to counter and negate the influence of Mangala Kavya.

Bengali Muslim writers and poets successfully effected 'Vijoy Kavya' (victory poems) to portray and interpret their historical past and deal with imaginary exploits of Muslim heroes to inculcate Muslim patriotism in their generations. Also, they translated Jami and Nezami's Persian narrative Cum–mystical poems such as Yousuf – Zulaikha and Laila – Majnu apparently to provide their society the long needed 'Myths'. Yet Muslim writers and poets demonstrated their universal and empirical attitudes towards mankind. As opposed to Hindus they were more liberal and progressive. They were literarily inspired by Islamic concept of man's greatness. This is evidently reflected in their 'romantic

---

[2] Dr. Mohammad Anessul Haq, *Muslim Bangla Sahitya*, (Dhaka: Pakistan Publication, 1968), pp.34-35
[3] Syed Ali Ashraf, *Op. Cit.*, [ed.], p.27

narratives' as well. Hence they liberally utilized knowledge of Hindu life and habits and wrote such tales on Hindu life as Padmavati of Alaol and Sati Maina of Daulat Qazi in the 14th century. Though most of the Hindu and Muslim writers had written about their own people and used their own myths but Muslim Writers had shown more catholicity and incorporated some Hindu myths for the sake of similes and metaphors. The tragic consciousness of the two societies also found expression in their own respective symbolisms. The Hindu writers penned 'Manasa Mangal' poems, depicting god and goddesses while the Muslim Writers preferred the tragic correct stories like Imam Hussain's martyrdom at Kerbala.[4]

The 'Vaishnava' Padavalees, literary trends pertaining in the 14th and 15th centuries, indicate an interesting interaction of the two traditions, leading the different use of the myth. On one hand 'Radha and Krishna' were denuded of their sex-symbolism while on the other under the influence of Muslim mysticism they were spiritualized. Radha was the human soul and Krishna the Divine being. The hardship suffered by Radha, when she rushed out in search of Krishna, was the hardship that the physical self must tolerate and even court in order to purify itself and be ready for union with the beloved. It was, therefore, suitable for use as a mystic theme by a Muslim poet. A number of Muslim writers including the highly religious 'Alaol' used this myth. But the Hindu poets followed the exclusiveness and isolationism and did not use any of the Muslim myths even for similes or metaphors. Thus the duality in the mythological patterns remained inspite of a temporary admixture.

When the decadence had set in the Muslim society the Muslim empire started crumbling, the social sensibility became very different. The Hindus continued to write 'Mangala kavyas' but the thematic, lexical and stylistic patterns of Muslim writing showed a remarkable change. The Dobhasi puthies[55] (two languages poems) emerged as an attempt to assert the distinctive character of the Muslim mode of utterance as distinguished from the mode of utterance of the Hindus. This style of writing at once became highly popular. Fatalism rather than human responsibility for his actions and their consequences became the dominant theme of the writers of this period. Adventure and the emphasis on the world of fairies and jinns indicate an escapist tendency, and a reaction against the crushing problems of defeat. Escape into the world of dreams, heroism and magnificence and the recurrence of religious symbolism in Qassasulambia and Hatem Tai show how the writers sought satisfaction and consolation in those traditions.

Thus during the first four hundred years of Bengali literature two distinct traditions emerged: the traditions of Hindu literature, and the traditions of Muslim literature. The former accepted as their, panorama- the two worlds of Man and the gods and goddesses as highly interlinked words with divine machinery as a useful tool for conducting action. The latter, though religious in outlook, separated human action from Divine action and thus created what may be considered a rational outlook among the writers. These traditions also introduced, besides two religious symbolism, two kinds of mythology. If we define a myth as 'a sensible and dramatic representation of a supposedly recurrent or unique event (in the past, the present, or the future), an event with an important theme which is represented primarily in the mind (imaginal myth) but secondarily in words (narrated myth), in quasi actions (enacted myth, or in some artistic

[4] Ibid. p.28
[5] Ibid. p.29

form (portrayed myth)[66], then we can say that two different traditions of portrayed myths persisted throughout these four centuries. The basic similarity in these two traditions lies in the religious character of these myths. They provided symbols for their respective societies through which the societies tried to penetrate into a meaningful reality that would transcend the objective reality. But the essential characters of the two mythical traditions were different, though the functions they performed were of the same nature. Their characters differed because the Hindu myths as used by the writers eliminated what Paul Tillich calls 'the unconditioned transcendent[7] of all religions and uses the gods and goddesses not as symbols of that Reality but as symbols of imaginary existence.

Muslim writers used historical figures almost in the same sense. Strange enough that both of them wanted to elicit belief in the essential validity or authenticity or faith in the occurrence of such events in future and both tried to evoke empathy (corresponding feeling) and guide conduct by portraying one or more basic human needs, their goal, the actions they propel, and the disastrous or successful outcome of these actions[8]. But the Muslims kept God outside the world of myths because of the transcendent and objectively real character of God vouched by their faith; the Hindus brought the gods and goddesses in. It is only in their use of historical figures that the Muslims' forgot the world of objective reality and made them mythological in character. At the same time both of them maintained that these myths had significance beyond their artistic use therefore they wanted readers to proceed beyond aesthetic response and get emotionally moved to believe in the objective reality of what was just a portrayed myth. Muslim writers such an Alaol group, Daulat Uzier and Daulat Qazi created narratives without any such intention. But the artistic intention is mixed up with religious intention even in Bharatchandra, the poet of Annada mangal Kavya. This also indicates another basic difference in the character of the two literary traditions. The Muslim writers considered the work of art as a figurative thing which 'does not point beyond itself to a reality of a different order. It expresses wholly intrinsically the reality that it aims to express.[9]

Throughout the British regime the reactions of the two societies were different and hence their sensibilities did not follow the same channel. The common education system did provide them with a common framework of reference and the reactions show a remarkable similarity. But the impact of this education system was not felt by the two societies at the same time. The Muslims resisted its impact till the last quarter of the nineteenth century whereas the Hindu society willingly accepted it in the early nineteenth century.

Moreover the political reaction of the Hindu upper classes to the change of rulers was one that could be characterized as a welcome release. It was possible for the Hindu writer to talk of freedom, Ramraj and Hindu revivalism. They could use therefore the conflict between the Hindus and the Muslims in novels and their historical dramas and the invariable greatness of Hindu heroes and heroines as symbols of their released feelings. Revivalism followed reassessment of their own selves in the Muslim society as well. Just as Ram Mohan Roy, Vivekananda and Dayananda Saraswati had carried on revival movements in the Hindu society and encouraged artistic response to this feeling. Titu

---

[6] Henry A. Murray, '*Introduction*' *to the Issue Mythmaking,* (Daredulas Spring 1959). p.215
[7] Paul Tillich, *The Religious Symbol*, (Daredulas Summer, 1958). p.12
[8] Ibid. pp. 215-216
[9] Ibid.

Meer and Hindu Mela of the Thakur family had reinforced the sentiment. Maulana Keramat and Haji Shariatullah carried on the revival movement among the Muslims. Shaikh Abdul Rahim, Munshi Meherullah, Maniruzzaman Islamabadi and Ismail Hussain Sherazi had tried also to create aesthetic response to this feeling among the Muslims. As a result, the Hindu writers engaged themselves in the search of their own myths and the history of the subcontinent to revive the concept of Hindu glory while Muslim writers went back to the source of their religious inspiration and their international historical framework of reference for images on Muslim heroism, and glory. It was the downfall of the Muslims and their own decadence that they lamented in such poems as 'Mahashashan Kavya' and 'Siva-Mandir'.[10] In the same vein the Hindu writers sought Hindu glory and heroism and preached it in such works like Anandamath and Rajshinha.

The political, social and cultural consciousnesses of two societies were thus following independent channels. Hence their imagery, symbolism and mythical consciousness had to be different. In the twentieth century this became more evident even in the words of such a poet as Nazrul Islam who had always striven at cultural synthesis. His poems on Shatil Arab, Anwar Pasha, Khalid (Bin Walid), Tariq (Bin Ziayad), and his songs and ghazals were written during the Khailafat movement and immediately afterwards. Their appeal was primarily to the Muslim audience. Their thought and their essential poetic qualities made them appealing to the Hindus as well. But Nazrul's attempt at the cultural synthesis failed because the Hindu and Muslim socio-political consciousness demanded different emotive responses. That is why Nazrul's poems based on Muslims consciousness appealed so widely to the Muslims and were supplemented later by Golam Mustafa's and Farrukh Ahmad's remarkably successful poems. Farrukh Ahmed expressed the feelings of the suffering Muslims who had lost direction and were seeking to rediscover their goal and true identity. It is also significant to note that except Mohitlal Majumdar, and that too for a short while, no other Hindu writer, not even Tagore, had used Muslim myths and tradition, obviously they preferred cling to their coined imagistic confined to Hinduism.[11]

It may be pointed out that the acceptance of literature as a self – subsistent unit of expression is essential. Intrinsically, literature unravels a meaningful reality. Hence it should not go beyond or transcend itself to appeal to audience or make them under stand the unintended meaning of the writer or the poet.

Hence the 20th century may be noted for the emergence of this remarkable trend in Bengali literature under the influence of Rabindranath Tagore's noble prize winning 'Gitanjali' and his other works indeed. Tagore for the first time succeeded in rousing aesthetic response to literature. That is why he denuded the Hindu myths of their realistic character and used them not as Bharatchandra or Mukundaram had done to elicit religious belief, but to rouse aesthetic response to the imagery and symbols created by those myths. Leaving aside his occasional lapses into such socio-politico-Hindu-Mela consciousness exhibited in such poems as 'Sivaji' and 'Hori Khela' in nearly all his great poems he succeeded in eliminating this extra-artistic bias even when he was using historical figures. The only great limitation that he suffered from was the lack of his emotive response to Muslim mythology used for so many centuries by Muslim writers. The other limitation like any .Bengali writer was that he always suffered from was that he drew his imagery and metaphors from Hindu social life and culture alone besides the

[10] Syed Ali Ashraf, *Op. Cit.*, [ed.], p.32
[11] Ibid. p.33

external Nature which he loved so dearly.

This limitation is also highly significant. It indicates a character of Bengali literary traditions which no writer can ignore. A Bengali Hindu does not understand the life, habits or institutions of a Bengali Muslim except intellectually. He has never responded to them emotively except occasionally or sporadically or individually. Similarly a Bengali Muslim does not fully understand Hindu habits or institutions and cannot respond to them emotively. It is therefore legitimate and proper for the writers to confine their imagery or symbolism to what they understand and fully appreciate. The collective consciousness of the two societies had always been different and will remain so until and unless they accept a completely alien culture or evolve a complete synthesis. But communalism and bias against the other society must be uprooted by the writer from his heart if he wants to create literature not tainted by partiality or bias. Partiality compelled Bankim Chatterjee to portray Muslims as culprits and Hindus as heroes.[12]

Muslims in Bengal owe genuine thanks to poet Qazi Nazrul Islam who lifted them and reinforced the identity of being Muslims. The Muslims over the years in Bengal had developed an inferiority complex owing to non-projection of their lives in the literature of their language. For instance Kaikobad (1858-1952), the only Muslim writer of epics, is reported to have once said that his practice was to write in such a way as would not reveal his identity as a Muslim. He did not lack in feelings for his community; he wrote epics on the tragedy of Kerbala and the fall of the Mughals, evoking with passionate sincerity, the past glories of the Muslims. But so mighty were the Hindu writers in Bengal that Kaikobad, powerful, although, he was, never dared defy the conventions they had set up. Hence his anxiety to hide his identity.[13]

This anomaly of writing on Muslim themes without revealing the fact that the writer was a Muslim, had more than a literary significance, for it showed how shy and diffident even the most outstanding among the Muslims were. Nazrul's contemporary Mir Mosharraf Hossain (1847-1912), a better and bolder artist, depicted life in the Muslim society but did not use the language spoken by the Muslims. It was Nazrul Islam, who, for the first time boldly made free use of the words, phrases and idioms current among the Muslims.
With the advent of British rule, the comparatively Bengali Muslims in particular and Muslims elsewhere in India suffered a lot. The curse of bondage had bred many evils – economic, social and intellectual. The degeneration of political life had taken away initiative and independence of thinking from them. Since the whole system of administration was geared not to the betterment of the public but to the promotion of the administrator's welfare, the masses received but perfunctory attention. Education primarily aimed at the creation and perpetuation of a class of natives who would understand the rulers and serve them, whatever may be the consequences. In this decadent society there was no dearth of mutual jealousies, prejudices and superstitions.[14]

[12] Ibid. p.34
[13] Ibid. p.35
[14] Ibid.