

In Defence of Bankim Chandra
as an Artist par excellence

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For sometime past, there has been a tendency in Bengali critical studies to recognize Bankim more as a moralist and chauvinist Hindu writer than as an eminent literary personality. Such narrow and biased acceptance still lingers; even a section of the Bengali elite prefers to remember him as a Rishi, without caring much for his literary creations. It is, of course, a fact that towards the end of his literary career, this great novelist who was also a great social thinker and a pioneer of Bengal renaissance, felt an urge to turn towards socio-religious speculations which may be briefly described as refined Hinduism based on a mixture of the Gita and the tenets of contemporary Western thinkers like Comte, Mill and Bentham. It is also a fact that in presenting real life stories in fiction, he had to make use of such materials in describing situations and building characters. We all know that a novelist is entitled to give free vent to his imagination, thought or other susceptibilities according to situations, without impairing the inner artistic qualities of his creation. But a few sermon-like comments to be found in the body of Bankim's later novels do not touch the inner core of his characters. He is another man there - the visionary and lover of mankind. In the depiction of natural scenes close to the moments of conflict within characters, perhaps, Bankim has no equal. As far as the social and religious predilections to his characters are concerned, Bankim sometimes sought help from his own theories about the reconstruction of our society out of the clash between the West and the East. But in most cases, he has been found to make experiments only to see if such theories worked well.

I would like to quote Bankim himself in support of his preference for art and beauty in a literary composition. The following opinion is from his criticism of *UTTARACHARITA OF BHABABHUTI*:

সৌন্দর্যসৃষ্টি ই কাব্যের মুখ্য উদ্দেশ্য
গৌণ উদ্দেশ্য পাঠকের চিত্তশুদ্ধি-জনন

(Presentation of art and beauty is the main aim of a literary production; purification of the reader's soul is to be considered a secondary affair.)

In the third part of his novel *Sitaram*, he writes:

উপন্যাস লেখক অন্তর্বিষয়ের প্রকটনে যত্নবান হইবেন। ইতিবৃত্তের সঙ্গে সম্বন্ধ রাখা নিষ্প্রয়োজন ।

The chief consideration of a novelist ought to be to discover the inner secrets. the conflicts within and between the characters; a faithful presentation of external events is of minor importance, and has to be avoided if occasion so demands). Here, however, I want to take the liberty to substitute the word 'philosophical speculations' in place of his 'Itivritta' or historical events.

Very much allied to the above misconception about our novelist runs another set of conservative and perfunctory observations describing him as the upholder of traditional Hinduism with its accompanying narrowness and superstitious beliefs. This also we must discourage as mistaken and biased. The novelist's later essays on religion and culture clearly indicate that he was in favour of a refurbished edition of the so-called Hindu codes, i.e., of a purge of our current narrow Hinduism by the rational and scientific outlook of modern Europe. Soon we shall see that this great novelist did not hesitate to describe the power of pure love between men and women either not united by sacramental ties, or once united but since separated, or in adulterous relation with each other. So much for my introduction of the novelist negatively, i.e., under the shadow of unsympathetic and careless criticism. I shall now consider the positive aspect of some of his novels and try to present him in his true colour. But before that, I would request our modern readers of Bankim to give consideration to the fact that treatment of love or sexual passion is the main theme of all his novels and that this love, whether married or unmarried, whether lawful or illicit, is in general depicted to end in tragedy.

In his first novel *Durgeshanandini*, the chief attraction of the readers is the deep love of Ayesha for Jagat Singh and the hero's tacit acceptance and appreciation of her feelings towards him. The love-affair of Jagat Singh with Tilottama culminating in their marriage is rather colourless for the readers. I would not have been surprised if the orthodox critics were found to put their prohibitive seal on Ayesha's love for Jagat Singh and to comment that such illicit love is bound to suffer its doom. But so far as my knowledge goes, they have desisted from indicting the author here, perhaps because the author himself expressed his highest esteem for Ayesha and described her love as a light from heaven on this earth. It is also to be noted that the writer did not think for a single moment that the narration of meetings between a Hindu youth and a Muslim girl should be taboo from the Hindu point of view.

His second novel *Kapalakundala* has an entirely different setting and although the writer's basic hypothesis of a heroine without the normal sex-instinct may be

questioned, his workmanship from start to finish reveals the superb imaginative faculty of an artist. Romance or novel by whatever term one may call these compositions, the redemptions of Mati Bibi in *Kapalakundala* and likewise of Jebunnisa in *Rajasimha* must be considered as highly sympathetic treatments of two fallen women. The Hindu dogma, if there had been any in Bankim's mind, did not prevail in the face of the writer's true artistic sensibility.

His third novel *Mrinalini* is also highly romantic and poetic, save of course his very realistic description of the sack of Nabadvipa by Bakhtiar's army. Here too the writer treats the apparently illicit affair between the hypocrite minister Pashupati and the innocent girl Manorama whom he knew to be a widow although she had been married to him many years back, the episode being kept a secret from Pashupati till his doom. Bankim was gifted with the highest imaginative faculty and penetrative insight and successfully blended earth with heaven and heaven with earth; hence, his romances are not songs of empty days, but presentations of real life based on a distant setting. Like Ayesha of *Durgeshanandini*, Manorama of *Mrinalini* is a product of unique talent displaying his eternal quest of true love. This particular quest and his ultimate findings have been the theme of all his later great novels, viz., *Bishabriksha*, *Chandrasekhar*, *Krishnakanter Wil*, *Rajasimha* and *Sitaram*. The depiction of maternal and paternal affection has never been a chief note of any of his themes. This fact, this eternal attraction between man and woman serving as a motif of all his creations reminds one of the romantic treatment of love in the Vaishnava and Baul songs which have their basis on *parakiya* love with its accompanying sufferings as exhibited by Sri Chaitanya and elaborated by the Vaishnava saints:

অকৈতব কৃষ্ণপ্রেম যেন জাম্বুনদ হেম
হেন প্রেম ন্লোকে না হয়।

- "Radha's yearning for Krishna is unalloyed gold to be found only in the imaginary Jambunada and rarely in our worldly existence". And the poet-saint continues:

যদি হয় তার যোগ না হয় তার বিয়োগ
বিয়োগ হৈলে কেহ না জীয় ॥

- "Still, if there happens any such union on this earth, mental separation until the pair's demise is not possible". And he concludes by saying:

কহিবাব যোগ্য নহে তথাপি বাউলে কহে

কহিলে বা কে বা পাতিয়ায়।।

- "It is ineffable, still the mystic singers sing about it; but alas! worldly beings do not believe in the existence of such soaring passion". The Vaisnavas, however, did not accept marital or sacramental union made through priest and fire as a source of such love, because the highest ecstatic bliss to be found in estrangement or *biraha* is not there; neither is there any obstruction hindering their union because the social bar preventing unlawful union only accelerates the force of an illicit love.

If we examine the state of passionate love in the novels of Bankim Chandra, we find that lovers, married or unmarried, have either to go through immense sufferings owing to circumstances before their momentary union at the final tragic state, or they do not meet at all. In some cases, the novelist is found to give only a hint of the lovers' early marriage, but conceals the fact from one of the couples in such a tricky way that their love-affair fully resembles the nature of *parakiya rati*. In others, prohibited passion appears in all its glamour, remaining indifferent to any probable attack from a blind society. Bankim Chandra is a naturalist and a consummate artist and not an orthodox Hindu as a few critics attempt to describe him according to their prejudiced mental make-up.

I now quote Bankim's own opinion of the irresistible charm of the *parakiya rati* or non marital and so-called illicit love which is capable of transcending our finite existence. The quotation is from *Sitaram*, his most mature work when he is describing Sitaram's uncontrollable desire for uniting with 'Sri' with whom he has happened to be acquainted only very recently :

যাহা পরীক্ষিত, তাহা সীমাবদ্ধ; যাহা অপৰীক্ষিত, কেবল অনুমিত, তাহার সীমা দেওয়া না-দেওয়া মনের অবস্থার উপর নির্ভর করে। তাই নূতনের গুণ অনেক সময় অসীম বলিয়া বোধ হয়। যদি ইহাকে প্রেম বল, সংসারে প্রেম আছে। সে প্রেম বড় উন্মাদকর বটে। নূতনেই তাহা প্রাপ্য। তাহার টানে পুরাতন অনেক সময় ভাসিয়া যায়..... তুমি নূতন, তুমি অনন্তের ই অংশ... তাই তুমি এত উন্মাদকর।

- "What is in hand and has been tested, stands limited through our experience of it, but that of which we have no previous acquaintance, and which has to be inferred or imagined, has a place in our heart. The unknown is endowed with a light that never was on sea or land. If you call such attraction love, then surely love is available in this dusty world. It is bewildering indeed. The unknown has an overwhelming charm and is very often a cause for hatred of the known, the

established and tested oh, thou unknown, thy charm is infinite. Surely you are part and parcel of infinity".

It will not be out of place to mention in this connection that poet Tagore too felt a deep attraction for the distant and unknown and this particular sentiment was responsible for the composition of many of his poems of permanent value.

Our author's fourth novel is *Bishabriksha*, a tale of extra-marital connection of a young and already married zaminder with a widow of tender age and exquisite grace. A side-episode of the novel describes the physical appetite of a deceptive person and the devouring passion of a woman for him. The novel is a tragic-comedy. It is chiefly on the basis of this social novel and its better counterpart, *Krishnakanter Wil*, that the assumption of the novelist's preference for married love and denouncement of extra-marital sex-relation has been so loudly voiced by some critics. The *Wil* too describes the running away of the hero, already possessing a loving wife, with a widow of exceptional beauty, with however this difference that in the first novel the non-marital attachment of the hero developed gradually from the hero's kind sympathy for the distressed girl while in the second one outward circumstances like changes made in the will of Krishnakanta played some part. Here too, however, pity and sympathy had their part to play. Still Govindalal's accidental presence near the Baruni-tank, where the unfortunate widow Rohini drowned herself, acted as an irony of circumstances. In both cases, the hero's fascination for the *parakiya* was a psychological reality and has been accepted by the novelist as a valid reason for rejection of the loving wife. The novelist, however, believed that grace of physical form must serve as a dominant factor in cases of love at first sight, which concept is traditionally romantic as well as classical; but what happens afterwards is that human passion, affection and struggle have their natural course as in modern novels. Like other great writers, Bankim created characters torn between good impulses and bad, between 'Sumati' and 'Kumati'. He portrays this conflict in Govindalal. The readers have felt much for Bhramar and perhaps wept along with her, but the course of love never runs smooth and what is inevitable in such cases did happen. Had the novelist wielded the iron-rod of morality, he would have nipped such 'infatuation', a term coined by some critics to describe the nature of this forbidden attraction, in the bud. Instead, he aroused the hero's pity for the distressed girl, and who would dare say that Rohini's drowning herself in the Baruni-tank was a coquettish show? 'Let events take their own course' was our novelist's firm determination as an artist and hence, at the conclusion of this tragedy he is found to comment: Govindalal loved two women but when he came to his senses or, rather when the second woman, his 'fairy queen', became fully revealed, or, in other words, became his *swakiya* like Bhramar, the adventurer turned towards the other who in the meantime, on account of long separation, had behaved like a *parakiya*. This appears to be the psychology behind Govindalal taking a drastic step to let rid of

his second love and going back to the first one. Nowhere does the author sermonize that marriage is a sacred tie, a religious bond which must not be transgressed. He has done only what an impartial artist should do in such cases.

Chandrasekhar, Bankim's important romance-cum-novel, supplies another example of his maintenance of justice in favour of pure but unlawful love. It was a tragedy of fate for Pratap and Shaibalini that they deeply loved each other from their adolescence and suffered till their end. The extreme torture of Shaibalini to which her husband had recourse to cure her of her mental guilt, was of no avail at the end and Pratap's most selfless love led him towards self-immolation. That their case was a case of true love and not momentary infatuation or physical hunger is attested by many incidents, particularly the risky steps taken by both the hero and the heroine, and the worst suffering of the heroine caused by the Hindu method of application of psychic force (*prayaschitta*) as an experiment. We must thank the artist that he did not respond favourably to this liturgical experiment. One can get a glimpse of our artist's opinion about the obscure Hindu rites of *shuddhikarana* and such other pseudo-religious practices of feudal times vis-a-vis the Hindu dogma for penalising unlawful love in the incident of the conversation between Pratap and the ascetic Ramananda Swami :

Pratap: Do please tell me what sort of penance can bring me salvation if my true love of Shaibalini is considered as a vice.

Ramananda Swami: I do not know. Human power of judgement cannot reach such height. The scriptures are speechless. ·

Surely we hear Bankim's voice through such submission of a revered ascetic. He was no defender of Hindu dogmas. As a first-rate novelist, he did not care for whatever Hindu idea Sati would proclaim. There is another glowing instance of the artist's indifference towards codes of religion and social behaviour. It is the case of Lavangalata of *Rajani* accepted in society as a perfect housewife. She is found to have kept reserved one corner of her heart for Amarnath her previous lover and finally confesses to Amarnath that so long she had secretly cherished her desire for him. These are facts of our human existence and Bankim was no supporter of Hindu fanaticism. If we cite Lavangalata and Amarnath's case as a crucial instance, would the Hindu chauvinists hold that adoration of husband, or, in other words, seeming *patiseva* or *patipuja* with internal devotion to a non-*pati* is a sufficient certificate for a woman to enter the gates of Heaven ?

At the end I must say a word or two about the traditional criticism of *Sitaram*, the last great novel of Bankim. It is known to every reader of the novel that "Sri", the legally married first wife of Sitaram, was not allowed to meet her husband on the pretext of an astrological prediction that she was destined to be the killer of a

person dear to her, mistakenly thought to be her husband. Sri was ultimately forgotten by Sitaram, till after a lapse of years there was a chance-meeting between them in the tense moment of a historical incident.

Sitaram was so overwhelmed by her youthful beauty and her bravery that he felt a keen desire to obtain her although meanwhile he had secured two other wives and also had progeny by them. Although earnestly solicited, Sri could not agree to join him as wife in the face of the ominous prediction about her. Ultimately she left the land, took to hermitage along with a maiden companion and began to tour extensively till again on the advice of another astrologer she with her companion was obliged to come back to Sitaram, at that time recognised as a feudal Rajah, to save him from the eminent danger of Mughal invasion. The other woman-hermit, i.e., her companion, saved the situation through her presence of mind, but this time Sitaram would not let 'Sri' go and he kept her confined. As under this situation too she did not agree to submit, Sitaram's desire to have her increased day by day, so much so that he forgot to administer his land and people and even did not visit his harem and eventually brought disaster to his kingdom. *Sitaram* is a tragic novel of untold suffering on the part of both the heroine and the hero and amply proves that the ideology of 'Niskama karma' preached by the Sannyasini Jayanti was of no avail in the face of the very natural hankering of man for woman, embodying eternal passion and eternal pain at moments and carrying the inevitable nemesis with it.

I have reached the conclusion of this discussion and at the end I would exhort the modern readers of Bankim's or Tagore's or Saratchandra's novels or, for that matter, any creative piece of literature to try to catch the intention of the artist, to arrive at the meaning he intends to convey and not be deluded by catch-words of opinionated and superficial critics. Bankim is to be remembered not only as a novelist but also as a great poet of man and nature.

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- Based on a speech at the Literary Society of Manipur.