CHAPTER – II: REFLECTIONS ON THE SLT: *Meghnadbadh kabya* (1861)

Any research on a translated literary work should begin with some reflections on the original, that is the SLT, taking into account chiefly its background and its uniqueness, if any. This chapter, therefore, will first discuss the *zeitgeist* that produced *Meghnadbadh kabya* (1861) as its background, and then its uniqueness as an epic poem.

The Background

The main story of *Meghnadbadh kabya*, Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *magnum opus*, is taken from the canonical *Ramayana*. It basically narrates the 'killing' (William Radice's translation) or 'slaying' (Clinton B. Seely's translation) of Ravan's valiant son Indrajit or Meghnad by Lakshman rather surreptitiously. But this olden occidental tale found an unprecedented and extraordinary turn in Dutt's hand, so much so that Seely would later be tempted to subtitle the work as '*A Ramayana from Colonial Bengal*'. Seely has aptly remarked, "It is an extraordinary piece of literature, a sophisticated verse narrative in nine cantos; it is utterly representative of the cosmopolitan culture of mid-nineteenth-century India" (*The Slaying* 3). There is no gainsaying that in *Meghnadbadh kabya*, the East and the West meet, and the nature of this meeting, as finely pointed out by Radice, can be traced in the mysterious heraldic emblem present in the frontispiece of the early editions of the poem:

> Presumably designed by Madhusudan himself, the emblem consisted of a shield with a cross of St. George, surmounted by an elephant, lion, sun and ś*atadal* (lotus), and a Sanskrit scroll underneath with the inscription: *śarīraṃ vā pātayeyaṃ kāryaṃ vā sādhayeyam* ('I would rather die than fail to achieve what I have set out to do'). […] The Sanskrit inscription is illuminated by the emblem above, for 'anyone who has read Madhusudan's poetry and plays will know that they are a literary fusion of east and west', and the emblem expresses that fusion. The elephant is India, the

> lion is Europe, the sun symbolizes Madhusudan's own personality and creative genius, and the *śatadal* is the work, the [poem] that he was determined to complete even if it killed him. (Radice, *The Poem* xiii)

This fusion was of course the product of contemporary politics. Here is Thomas Babington Macaulay's project:

> In one point I fully agree with the gentlemen to whose general views I am opposed. I feel with them, that it is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population. (qtd. in Seely, *The Slaying* 12)

Outrageous though Macaulay's language might appear, the Company's educational policy proved successful to a considerable degree. To quote Seely again:

> Hindoo College, in a sense, had pre-empted Macaulay's minute. It was already producing those persons described by Macaulay. Michael Madhusudan Datta epitomizes the perfect Macaulayan product, acculturated to English tastes, notably in literature. Little wonder, then, that Datta began his literary career writing in English. (Seely, *The Slaying* 12)

This East-West interface becomes patent enough in Book or Canto VIII of *Meghnadbadh kabya*, the Canto that can be regarded as the most derivative as far as the Western influence on the poet is concerned. It is in this Canto that we get the description of Ram descending

into the netherworld, with the goddess Maya as the guide. This has no counterpart in the canonical *Ramayana*, but is quite reminiscent of the Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid* and Dante's *Inferno*. This is how the goddess Maya is urging Ram to visit the world of the dead:

রাঘবের কর্ণমূলে কহিলা জননী,-
"মুছ অশ্রুবারিধারা, দাশরথি রথি,
বাঁচিবে প্রাণের ভাই; সিন্ধুতীর্থ-জলে
করি স্নান, শীঘ্র তুমি চল মোর সাথে
যমালয়ে; সশরীরে পশিবে, সুমতি,
তুমি প্রেতপুরে আজি শিবের প্রসাদে।
পিতা দশরথ তব দিবেন কহিয়া
কি উপায়ে সুলক্ষ্মণ লক্ষ্মণ লভিবে
জীবন। হে ভীমবাহু, চল শীঘ্র করি।
সৃজিব সুড়ঙ্গপথ; নির্ভয়ে সুরথি,
পশ তাহে; যাব আমি পথ দেখাইয়া
তবাগ্রে!" (Sanyal VIII.134-45)

Reproduced below are the translations of the passage cited above, the first being by Seely and the second by Radice:

1. At Rāghava's ear, Mother whispered, "Wipe away your streams
of tears, charioteer Dāśarathi, your beloved
brother shall revive. Bathe in the sea's sacred waters, then
come with me at once to Yama's quarters. Noble one, you
will enter bodily the land of spirits by virtue
of Śiva's favor. Your father Daśaratha will make
known how well-marked Lakṣmaṇa will again live. O fierce-armed
one, come now. I shall excavate a tunnel. Fearlessly,

fine charioteer, proceed through it. I shall go ahead
of you to show the way. (Seely 8.128-37)

2. Māyā said in Rāghav's ear: 'Wipe away your flow of
tears, son of Dasarath –
Your brother will live; bathe in the sea-waters, then
come with me quickly to Death's abode;
In your mortal frame, wise Rām, you will enter the city
of ghosts today through Siva's grace.
Your father Dasarath will tell you how well-favoured
Lakshman will come back to life. O great-armed one,
come quickly with me.
I shall make a tunnel; go down it fearlessly, hero!
I shall go ahead of you, showing you the way. (Radice VIII.134-45)

Even a lip-deep acquaintance with Dante's description of Hell reminds us of the inscription written on the Hell Gate in *Inferno*: 'Abandon all hope, ye who enter here'. Dutt's Ram has the same experience:

আগ্নেয় অক্ষরে লেখা দেখিলা নৃমণি
ভীষণ তোরন-মুখে, - "এই পথ দিয়া
যায় পাপী দুঃখদেশে চির দুঃখ ভোগে;-
হে প্রবেশি, ত্যজি স্পৃহা, প্রবেশ এ দেশে!" (Sanyal VIII.217-220)

Seely translates the lines as follows:

[…] On
the face of that imposing gate, the jewel of men saw
written there in fiery letters, "By this path sinners go

to suffer constant sorrow in the realm of sorrows – you
who enter, give up all hope as you step inside this land!" (Seely 8.205-209)

Radice's translation of the lines, too, retains the Dantesque evocations present in the SLT:

[…] The jewel of men saw on that awesome
gate, written in flaming letters,
The message: 'By this road go sinners to a land of
torment to suffer eternal torment; you who enter here
must abandon all hope!' (Radice VIII.216-20)

As one of the brightest students of Hindoo College, Dutt well knew that "in Dante's Hell souls are not deadened, as they mostly are in life; they are actually in the greatest torment of which each is capable" (Eliot 166).

All told, *Meghnadbadh kabya* is a repository of the East-West interface, a representative product of Colonial Bengal. As Seely aptly comments:

> […] *Meghanada* is a text wherein East meets West, where literary traditions blend in Datta's adept hands to become the epitome of the cultural assimilation, selective as it was, taking place in the elite Bengali population of nineteenth-century Calcutta. The period has been labeled the Bengal Renaissance for its reinvigoration and reconfiguration of the Hindu past and for the florescence of the literary arts. […] *Meghanada* and its author are, each in his [*sic*] own way, perfect metonyms for their times. (*The Slaying* 33)

The Uniqueness

If 'uniqueness' implies the quality of being unprecedented, of being unrivalled in essence and existence, *Meghnadbadh kabya* remains in the firmament of modern Bengali

literature as a star that dwells apart. Like *The Waste Land,* it has no precursors or successors in the language in which it is written. The uniqueness of the poem led the noted in Bengali critic and historian Romesh Chunder Dutt to lavish eulogy on the poem and the poet in the following manner:

> The reader who can feel and appreciate the sublime, will rise from a study of this great work with mixed sensations of veneration and awe, with which few poets can inspire him, and will candidly pronounce that bold author to be indeed a genius of a very high order, second only to the highest and the greatest that have ever lived like Vyas, Valmiki or Kalidas; Homer, Dante or Shakespeare. (qtd. in Banerjee 122)

Primarily, two things have made the poem a unique one: first, the way the poet has transcreated the canonical *Ramayana,* and secondly, his superb use of the Blank Verse or 'amitrakshar chhanda' which was his own invention.

The transcreation was a kind of bravado which many of Dutt's contemporaries could not put up with. *Chuchundaribadh kabya* ("The Poem of the Killing/Slaying of a Mole") was written with a view to lampooning the epoch-making Bengali epic; and even a juvenile essay of Rabindranath Tagore's did not find the poem agreeable, although he did revise his position later in his life. Be that as it may, since the beginning of the twentieth century, the poem has been given the rank of an artifice of eternity, a monument of Bengali modernity, a thing unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.

The transcreation, inversion, or sub-version – whatever be the term – of the canonical *Ramayana,* as engineered by the intrepid poet, can be understood if *Meghnadbadh kabya* is compared with some of its parent texts. Here is Seely making such a comparison:

> Certainly the greatest difference […] between Valmiki's *Ramayana* and the later epics by Krittivasa and Tulsidasa is found in a particular aspect of the

> characterization of Rama, who in the older text was essentially a mortal prince, a young warrior. The first and last books of Valmiki – considered by scholars to be later addition to the text – speak of Rama as one of the incarnations of Vishnu. In contrast, Krittivasa's and Tulsidasa's Rama has become inextricably the god Vishnu. No longer is the fight between Ravana and Prince Rama a fight between mighty warriors with god-given weapons and extraordinary powers. It has changed radically, into a fight between good god and bad demon. The demons become even further transformed, in these vernacular Rama tales, into devotees of sorts of Vishnu, the very god whom they battle. A transformation – transformations can be seen as part and parcel of the *Ramayana* tradition – takes place in Datta's Rama tale as well, but in the opposite direction. Rama, the apotheosized prince of Krittivasa's premodern text, returns to his mostly mortal persona and becomes a nineteenth-century Rama, a creation of the colonial encounter. (*The Slaying* 32)

How far is *Meghnadbadh kabya* an allegory of 'the colonial encounter'? The question has been variously answered, and now at the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century the answers can be reduced under two headings: traditional and novel. It is customary to turn to Pramathanath Bishi for a traditional answer:

> Disgust toward "Ram and his rabble," the sparking of one's imagination at the idea of Ravana and Meghanada – those attitudes were not peculiar to Datta. Most of his contemporaries had the very same feelings. […] Ravana and his son stood as the symbolic embodiments of such a scenario. Ravana's grandeur, Ravana's heroic nature, Ravana's golden Lanka, Ravana's animus toward Rama – all of these utterly captivated the educated elites. Though Datta may have written Lanka, he was thinking England. […] He built up Ravana to such proportions that none could be greater – hence, by comparison, Rama and Lakshmana appear diminutive. (Bishi 25)

A novel kind of interpretation is offered by Radice who has traced a mix of xenophilia and xenophobia:

> The shift from the reformers of the first half of the nineteenth century in Bengal to the nationalists of the second, which occurred largely as a result of the Mutiny and the change from East India Company rule to full imperialism, has been described as an antithesis between xenophilia and xenophobia. Madhusudan, in his personality and in his writing, is on the cusp: xenophilia was there aplenty […] but xenophobia, 'fear of the stranger', was there too. (Radice, *The Poem* lxxxiii)

In Radice's opinion, the xenophilia was due to the view that the West could civilize the East, and that the more of Englishness the better. The xenophobia, on the other hand, was an offshoot of nationalism. In Radice's reading, Lanka is 'home' with the Rakshasas as 'us' or 'insiders', 'Ram and his rabbles' are 'them', the 'outsiders'. 'The insiders' means the Hindu India whose surrogate is Meghnad who is dastardly killed while worshipping the Hindu god Agni. To quote Radice again:

> We have, in short, in Book VI of Madhusudan's masterpiece, an intense and impassioned projection of the shameful and humiliating defeat of the champion of the 'insiders' by the dastardly and immoral tactics of the 'outsiders'. Is it too far-fetched to suggest that this reflects the shameful subjugation of Hindu India by the alien, outcaste British? (qtd. in Seely, *The Slaying* 56)

Allegory or not, *Meghnadbadh kabya* lent a unique voice for the defeated. So long the canon would roar in the active voice: 'Ram killed Ravan'; the Milton of Bengal altered the focus, and recast the voice into the passive: 'Ravan was killed by Ram'. Ravan was made more important than Ram, and the way the canon was fired would go a long way to foster the colonial and early postcolonial tristesse.

In a secondary epic *what* is narrated gains in weight by virtue of *how* it is narrated. The grand style of a literary epic is so language-specific that it may often look untranslatable. How can the sonority of a language be caught in another? The task of the translator becomes all too heavy if the SLT bears some special metrical features which are very conducive to the meaning of the SLT but are insuperably difficult to be transferred to the TLT. The biggest impediment for any translator of *Meghnadbadh kabya* is the Bengali blank verse which Dutt invented and named 'amitrakshar chhanda' / 'amitrakshara chanda' ('unfriendly letter meter' i.e. unrhymed meter). It will be our task in a later chapter to see how both Seely and Radice negotiate with Dutt's blank verse.

Dutt's blank verse was born out of his deep dislike for the medieval Bengali *payar*. Arguably the commonest metre of the time, the *payar* was a rhyming couplet with fourteen syllables in each line. The manacled nature of the *payar* is registered in the fact that caesuras or pauses are fixed: they come after the eighth syllable and at the end of the line. Dutt's blank verse allows for constant enjambment or 'a striding-over' of the lines (often termed run-on lines). An enjambment occurs "because the pressure of the incompleted syntactic unit toward closure carries on over the end of the verse-line" (Abrams 115). The first and foremost feature of Dutt's blank verse is that pauses or caesuras do not control the idea and the sentence; the case is just the other way round: caesuras remain under the control of the idea/emotion and syntax. Hence, the variety of caesuras in the verses.

It is indeed difficult to fully analyze Dutt's blank verse, but it should be remembered that fourteen *matras* (as defined by the Bengali letters) may be there instead of fourteen syllables. The celebrated opening lines show the matter clearly:

sammukh(a) samare paṛi, bīr (a) -cūṛāmaṇi

in open combat having fallen, the crest-jewel of heroes

bīr (a)bāhu, cali yabe gelā yam(a)pure
Virbāhu, when he went to Yama's city
akāle, kaha, he debī amṛt(a) bhāṣiṇī,
untimely, say, O ambrosia-speaking goddess,
kon(a) bīr(a)bare bari senāpati-pade,
which hero of heroes having appointed as general
pāṭhāilā raṇe punaḥ rakṣaḥkul(a)nidhi
did (he) send once more into battle the fount of the
Raksha race
rāghabāri?
Rāvan (the enemy, *ari*, of the descendant of King Raghu,
i.e. of Rām) (Radice, *The Poem* xxxvi-vii)

Any attempt to analyse Dutt's Blank Verse has to overcome such factors as have been outlined by Radice:

> […] the 'holding' of double or conjunct consonants in Bengali (as in *sa<u>mm</u>ukh*, the very first word of the poem) to produce a syncopated effect, the way some vowels are longer than others, the way in which some syllables in Bengali words are stressed more than others, and the way the meaning of a phrase or sentence will also impose stress on particular words. (*The Poem* xxxvii)

The main vigour of *amitrakshar chhanda*, therefore, lies in the phrasing and pausing. On being requested by his friends to explain the structure of the new verse, Dutt said, "[…] I find that the *yati* [caesura] instead of being confined to the 8th syllable, naturally comes in after the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 10th, 11th and 12th" (Murshid 145). Seely has excellently summarized the tradition and the individual talent that gave birth to Dutt's Blank Verse:

> Datta took [the] basic *payar* structure, retained the fourteen-syllable line, discarded end rhyming, and allowed for enjambment. That is to say, his poetic lines flow across the weak boundaries within a line […] not just at the end of one. (*The Slaying* 64)

Dutt was ever confident that the use of Blank Verse in Bengali poetry was not a mere possibility but only a matter of time, and also that the glory of Bengali poetry would reside in the proper deployment of this novel metre. The quick, sudden genesis of the metre at the hands of the prodigious poet is as fascinating as his supernova-like life and career. It first came to him as a challenge. Raja Jatindra Mohan Tagore, one of the founders of Belgachia Theatre, took note of but objected to Dutt's stray remark that Bengali drama would not really improve without the introduction of Blank Verse in it. Jatindra Mohan Tagore was rather skeptical about it and argued that Bengali still seemed to be a weakling though born of a healthy and robust mother, that is, Sanskrit. Dutt at once took up the gauntlet. This is how Radice reproduces the wager scene as reminisced by the Raja:

> 'Write me down as an ass,' said he laughingly, 'if I am not able to convince you of the error within a short time.' Then looking sharply at me he added 'and what if I succeed in proving to you that the Bengali is quite capable of the blank verse form of poetry?' 'Why then,' I replied, 'I shall willingly stand all the expenses of printing and publishing any poem which you may write in blank verse.' 'Done' said he, clapping his hands, 'you shall get a few stanzas from me within three or four days', and as a matter of fact within three or four days the first canto of *Tilottamāsambhab kābya* was sent to me. (qtd. in Radice, *The Poem* xxxv-vi)

Great poetry is not for our eyes or brains alone; it is for the ear as well, even when read silently: the sound supplements the meaning. Dutt's Blank Verse, along with his a-

typical use of words and phrases including coinages, contributes to the poem's 'grand style' through our reading experience. Dutt's advice to one of his friends was categorical:

> […] Let your friends guide their voices by the pause (as in English Blank-verse) and they will soon swear that this is the noblest measure in the Language. My advice is Read, Read, Read. Teach your ears the new tune and then you will find out what it is. (Seely, *The Slaying* 63)

If proper attention is given to the sense and the punctuation of the lines the rhythm would come out as a matter of course. But this prosodic feature causes, as has been mentioned earlier, great problems for translators in their negotiations with the source text. It will soon be our task to see how Seely and Radice, in their translations of *Meghnadbadh kabya,* have striven to tackle the issue.