

The First Indian English Drama : Krishna Mohan Banerjea's *The Persecuted* ¹

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Abstract

The essay discusses Krishna Mohan Banerjea's play *The Persecuted*, the first drama written in the Indian English language. Authored in 1831 by Krishna Mohan Banerjea of the Young Bengal Movement, the essay argues that a textual analysis of the play reveals the contradictory impact of 'modernity' upon the Indian mind. An autobiographical account by all reports, Krishna Mohan's play reveals how the ideals of modernity, despite being relegated to the public world, had an inescapable impact upon the private. With the discourse of modernity remaining at the level of the public discourse, the conflict between the home and the world, the private and the public, was bound to surface. The essay situates the play in its socio-cultural con-text of the tumultuous 1830s to explore the material/spiritual dichotomy that was to become so significant in the quest for the Indian identity and to locate the beginnings of the Indian nationalist discourse that was to be articulated about half a century later.

Key words: Indian, postcolonial, nationalism, public-private, Krishna Mohan Banerjea, Young Bengal Movement.

The first drama written in the Indian English language was authored in 1831 by Krishna Mohan Banerjea of the Young Bengal Movement. Largely forgotten by both literature-enthusiasts and historians, this drama is remarkable because it gives us an insight into the tumultuous decades of the early nineteenth century. Narrating the near-autobiographical story of a young Brahmin who converted to Christianity, and the uproar that ensued consequent to that, the play reveals the conflict of cultures that marked the era. These were early years of British imperialism, and the modernity and liberalism ushered in by the British were yet to lose their sheen. The elite Hindu Bengali society with its respect for the caste system, its gender differentiation, and its reverence for tradition appeared, to the Young Bengalis², narrow and archaic beside the ideals that the European brought to India, that of liberty, equality and fraternity. In Bengal, the then centre of the British East India Company and subsequently that of the Empire, dissatisfaction with the Hindu religion prompted many to attempts at

reform, others to formulate new faiths, and yet others to convert to the more 'modern' religions. These years marked by conflicting attractions and aversions, were eventful and historical. Ram Mohan Roy had founded the Brahma Samaj three years earlier, in 1828, and the practice of sati had been outlawed by William Bentinck two years earlier, in 1829. A decade after the conversion of Krishna Mohan to Christianity in 1832, Michael Madhusudan Dutt would convert to Christianity at the Old Mission Church of Calcutta in 1843 and another decade later, in 1854, Michael would deliver the 'Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu' lecture at Madras. Hailing the Anglo-Saxon as having come to the shores of India with the 'glorious mission ... to regenerate, to renovate the Hindu race!,' Michael lamented the fatal flaws of the Hindu, trapped within the 'predominance of a superstition, dismal and blasting; a fatal adherence to institutions whose cruel tendency ever it is to curb and to restrain the onward march of man as a social, as an intellectual pilgrim, tracing round him a wizard ring, solemnly believed to be impassable....'. Yet the rejection of tradition and the embrace of all that was European were more complex than it has often been thought to be and Krishna Mohan's *Persecuted* reveals the conflict that the Young Bengalis experienced during these years. The play also presages the later material/spiritual dichotomy that was to become so significant in the quest for the Indian identity in the nationalist discourse.

The Bengali community with its proximity to the imperial British Raj was, in the early nineteenth century, largely appreciative of British rule, and still some decades away from anti-colonial nationalism. This was clearly true of the Young Bengali, with his severe rejection of the Hindu social system, and his tremendous admiration for Western philosophy and learning. Despite this, the foreignness and consequent unacceptability of Western culture coupled with the unequal power dynamics of imperialism would lead to difficulties regarding 'modernity' in the Indian mind. In this essay, I will attempt to explore these doubts which may be seen foreshadowed in this early play by the young Krishna Mohan. This marks the narrative of the play and articulates the quest for identity that would mark later Indian English writings.

Scholars have as yet been unable to come to an agreement upon this Young Bengal Movement that dominates early nineteenth century Bengal, and upon these Young Bengalis, figures who stand tall in the history of that era. Opinions have remained polarized, despite the passage of almost two

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centuries; the impression that we have retained of these Derozians² is that of a young, wild, rebellious group, with intemperate demands, creating a turmoil in a city just beginning to come to grips with imperialism. The impact which they left on history has largely been characterized by two elements: the arrogance of youth and the rejection of Indian tradition for Western modernity.

Possibly the epithets Indian and Western were used in conjunction with each other for the first time around this period. The idea of the 'modern' was associated with the alien imperial civilization that reached us from across the seven seas, and tradition was associated with all the pre-colonial knowledge the Indians had had, scientific or otherwise. Belief in the relevance of this 'tradition' and of Oriental learning characterized the Orientalists, while the Anglicists were characterized by belief in the need for modernity and Western learning. The difference between the two points of view was not only on which medium of language should be used or which literature should be taught, but also on the more profound questions of which education would lead to 'true' knowledge. As Gauri Vishwanathan writes, the Anglicists won the debate by locating the 'conflict... not simply over language or literature, but the status of knowledge itself.' The lines were drawn accordingly, with supporters of either group believing in the value of either one or the other. The Young Bengal, 'cutting their way through ham and beef, and wading to liberalism through tumblers of beer'³ were the radical embodiments of one group.

Yet within four decades of the Young Bengal Movement, the lines were being drawn differently and in far more complex ways. By the 1870s, tradition and modernity could exist simultaneously in the Indian identity, divided along a private/public, home/world demarcation that Indians made when they structured the discourse of nationalism. To quote Partha Chatterjee's now-familiar words:

The material/spiritual dichotomy, to which the terms world and home corresponded, had acquired ... a very special significance in the nationalist mind. The world was where the European power had challenged the non European peoples and, by virtue of its superior material culture, had subjugated them. But the nationalists asserted, it had failed to colonize the inner, essential identity of the East, which lay in its distinctive,

and superior spiritual culture. Here the East was undominated and master of its own fate ... In the world, imitation of and adaptation to Western norms was a necessity; - at home, they were tantamount to annihilation of one's very identity ... It was not a dismissal of modernity but an attempt to make modernity consistent with the nationalist project.⁴

The phrase I want to draw attention to is that of 'spiritual culture': a phrase within which culture and religion blend seamlessly into one concept. It is through this dichotomy of the material and the spiritual, with the spiritual encompassing culture and religion, - 'superior spiritual culture,' that this essay will attempt to look at Krishna Mohan Banerjea's *The Persecuted*.

Krishna Mohan's play, like the impetuous Young Bengal which has been consistently described as being radically opposed to conservative Hinduism, and sometimes, to any form of religion itself, has been described by various scholars as 'monotonically critical of ... prevalent social practices,' as 'the moral crisis of an individual who had lost faith in Hinduism,'⁵ as exposing the 'practical heterodoxy of the orthodoxy,'⁶ and as dealing with 'the individual's loss of faith in his religion.'⁷ On reading the play, however, one is struck by the fact that it is not entirely a straightforward criticism of Hindu orthodoxy. There are too many nuances, too many complexities and aggravating these complexities are the hesitations, doubts, worries, fears that plague the hero, making the play a constant interweaving of advances and retreats. This play shows the early glimmerings of that huge problem that the Indians would face about four decades later regarding modernity, that import which was felt to be absolutely necessary by the progressive Indians, but that import which was at the same time tainted by the colonizer's touch and was therefore difficult to accept.

Before we go any further, let us look at the basic plot: a young man, Banylal, is caught with his friends at his own house, partaking of beef and alcohol. The shocking news spreads and orthodox Hindu society compels Banylal's father Mohadeb to renounce his son Banylal unless Banylal agrees to a *prayashchitta* (repentance). Banylal refuses rituals which he believes to be false, and Mohadeb is forced to disown his son who leaves the house.

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Even this very brief introduction to the play will reveal that the play is entirely autobiographical. Krishna Mohan himself was forced to leave his house after a similar incident. To quote Ramtanu Lahiri: ‘Having feasted on loaves from a Muhammadan bakery, and on roast meat from the butcher, the (Young Bengal youth) threw the refuse of the dishes into the court of an adjoining house, and bawled, “This is beef, nothing but beef.”’ The Hindu neighbourhood, scandalized, arrived at Krishna Mohan’s house and threatened to excommunicate Krishna Mohan’s grandfather if ‘he did not then and there expel his grandson from the house.’ This was 23rd of August 1831. The play was published in December that same year.

The play, written so soon after the event, reflects plainly the disturbance of

Krishna Mohan’s mind. The Young Hindoos of the play are against the corrupt and greedy Brahmins who have caused untold misery and suffering to the gullible people. And the play ends on a revolutionary note:

Bhyrub: I pledge, as long as I live, I will be a devoted servant to the cause of truth and Hindoo reformation.

Bany: Let us, friends thus go on – Let us be insensible to every consideration but that which may secure our object. Let us enter the field with fortitude and perseverance – Let us handle this sacred cause and desert it only in death. Our lives may be lost, but let us not shrink with fear ... Let us prove ourselves dutiful sons of our country⁸

It is not therefore a uni-dimensional case of rejecting a religion, but a more complex project built on social, religious and idealistic parameters. Though written by a distraught young man, driven out of his home for reasons he strongly believes are wrong, the story is not a simplistic conflict between good and evil. The semiotics of the novel quite clearly guide the reader towards a tragic clash between the father and the son, the rebellious Young Bengali Banylal and his aged, respectable father, Mohadeb. Reminiscent of tragic situations in European literature that Krishna Mohan must have been so familiar with, both father and son are trapped in their individual circumstances, true to what they believe is right, unable to comprehend the other’s ideals. The villains of the piece are those from outside, the corrupt Brahmins intent on making money or malevolent

newspaper-barons plotting revenge. The scoundrels who are to be fought against are not within the private space of the family, that is where the irresolvable tragedy is. The public and the private are neatly divided. The lines dividing the heroes from the villains highlight issues which hint at the trajectory that the quest for the Indian identity will gradually take. The son cannot and will not recant, not because he is rejecting his father, but because society must be reformed.

All the evil and the greed of the Hindu society are in the public domain, portrayed through characters that are more stereotypes than real: the corrupt Brahmins, the news-magnates. While these public heavyweights may interfere in and trouble the private world, the private world itself remains untainted by corruption. The evils of Hinduism are therefore distanced; the author does not deny them, but he positions them at a manageable distance. His protagonist's struggle is therefore with the corrupt forces of Hinduism but these forces are from outside the home, threatening the peace of the home, but not arising from inside it. If one were to narrate these ills, one would use a public discourse. This seems to me to be a significant component that Krishna Mohan uses, a technique that distances the evil the Young Bengal is fighting. The discourse of modernity that came with Western education could address these issues of superstition and false beliefs. It was therefore a fight that was limited to the public sphere because that is where the evil was placed; the ones who used the common man's belief in and fear of Hinduism to maintain their hold on society.

The real complexity is in the private sphere. There the issues are far too close for comfort; complexities of emotions and sentiments that cannot and will not be untangled through rationality; people you love and care for are hurt; your father kneels before you begging you to spare him this grief; the son expresses his fear that this blow may kill his aged father: issues that bar any possibility of logic or debate and these are left unresolved in the play. Krishna Mohan takes recourse to the discourse of modernity, a discourse of the public world, to slam the superstition and exploitation of Brahminical hegemony but leaves questions of emotion, which arise in the private world, unanswered:

Friend: What did they say?

Banylal: Why, a Brahmin came and was puzzling me to

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undergo a penance. ... But the fools could not appeal to my tenderest parts. The fellow talks of wealth, of consequence, of orthodox respect, as if I care a fig for them. They said nothing of the ties of affection between me and my father and of the duties I owe him as his son. ... Hallo! Who are coming? – I say Bhyrub and others are coming!⁹

The sudden movement from personal account to the public sphere speaks of emotions suppressed and questions left unanswered. While the author addresses confidently the reasons why the protagonist should not agree to the wily ways out of his predicament as the Brahmins suggest, he is at a loss to justify the suffering that the son causes the father. That the public narratives of rationality, free thinking and liberalism will affect the private space, and affect it so deeply that the losses may well be irreparable, is acknowledged by the author with no suggestion of any possible resolution. It is this inability to untangle the tangled strands of the private space at an ideological level that is fundamental to understanding the cultural-ideological struggle that was played out in colonial Bengal. Central to our understanding of the changing directions in the intellectual domain, is this cultural-ideological struggle that occurred on two planes: the first, against the ideological base of the traditional order, visible in Young Bengal's, and others like Rammohun and Vidyasagar's, critique of society, and the second, later, against the colonial hegemony, visible in the positioning of religion and culture as essential to the Indian identity.

The oppressive present of the colonial age, as Sudhir Chandra calls it, had only begun to initiate the epistemological changes in the Indian mind. 'Tradition' as a concept that was distinct and different from European modernity was beginning to take shape in these years - a process that would soon be catapulted into the main arena of colonial politics. 'At the plane of collective cultural life, time was fractured into past, present and future; and tradition, plucked out of this continuum, was created selectively out of different points in time past. Alienation from tradition -from one's own culture- lay in a consciousness of the need to belong to this newly constructed tradition.'¹⁰

Krishna Mohan's play, *The Persecuted*, was written at that juncture when he was threatened with alienation from his tradition. Cast off by his family and community, Krishna Mohan experienced the chaos, the cries and tears that his alien modernity caused within his private space even

before he had converted to Christianity.¹¹ The echo of this loss is left unresolved in *The Persecuted*, where the playwright moves abruptly into the public discourse of modernity and rationality, unable to answer his own questions about filial duty and obligation. Mohadeb, the father of the Young Bengal hero, Banylal, is portrayed as the hapless, tragic father, a *victim* to the malevolent world of intrigue and greed. The social reform that the band of Young Hindoos planned was armed with the discourse of rationality and egalitarianism. While this was very effective in the public sphere, it was unable to address the needs of the private sphere. This ineffectuality of the public discourse of modernity to address the private issues of the Indian context is revealed in all its hollowness in *The Persecuted*.

Post-1860s, as the nationalist discourse began to use idioms and metaphors from Hinduism, the modern Indian English writer began to feel the need to retrieve the culture that he could view as his. This desire was, in the colonial context, born out of a love for the culture that was theirs by birth, as well as out of the cultural nationalism that characterized the times. The difficulty of harmonizing his mental convictions to his culture posed, as SukumarSen writes, 'the most acute problem facing the young recipients of English.'¹²

Just as Bankimchandra's goddess needs to be relocated in a new narrative, a secular context of colonisation and exploitation, revealing the nation to the mind's eye as something more than a stretch of earth or a group of individuals, the modernity that the Indian had borrowed needed to be given a character, a life. This life could not be that of the alien coloniser's, and hence the need to breathe life into the discourse of modernity with Indian culture/religion, thus making it our own. As Aurobindo writes: 'it is not till she takes shape as a great Divine and Maternal Power in a form of beauty that she can dominate the mind and seize the heart ... and the patriotism that works miracles and saves a doomed nation is (then) born.'¹³

Endnotes :

- 1 The Young Bengalists were a group of radical young Bengali Indians, who were students of Hindu College, Calcutta, in the early nineteenth century. They were inspired by their teacher Derozio who encouraged them to think rationally, an exercise that frequently brought them into headlong conflict with the established traditional society.

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- 2 The Young Bengalis were known by this name because of the tremendous influence their teacher Henry Louis Vivian Derozio had over them. Derozio, an Indian of mixed Portuguese descent, was a poet and a powerful teacher at Hindu College, Calcutta.
- 3 This oft-repeated description originally appeared in *The Oriental Magazine* , Ed. Subir Roychoudhury, vol. 1. No.10. October, 1843.
- 4 Partha Chatterjee, ‘Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?’ in *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 121.
- 5 Sisir Kr Das, *History of Indian Literature: Western Impact, Indian response, 1800-1910* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2005), p. 80.
- 6 T. Jacob Thomas, ‘Interaction of the Gospel and culture in Bengal,’ *Indian Journal of Theology*, 1. http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ijt/36-2_038.pdf. Accessed 12th August, 2012.
- 7 Arvind Mehrotra, *An Illustrated History of Indian English Literature* (New Delhi : Permanent Black, 2003), p.6.
- 8 Banerjea, *The Persecuted*.
- 9 Banerjea, *The Persecuted*. p. 34.
- 10 Sudhir Chandra, *The Oppressive Present: Literature and Social Consciousness in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.5.
- 11 Many other Young Bengalis left, or were forced to leave their homes too, such as Rasik Krishna Mullick and Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee over such incidents that angered the orthodox Hindu society.
- 12 Sukumar Sen, *History of Bengali Literature* (New Delhi : Sahitya Akademi, 1960), p.185.
- 13 Sri Aurobindo, 16th April, 1907, *Bande Mataram, Selections from the Works of Sri Aurobindo* , vols. 6 and 7 (Pondicherry: Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 2002), p. 319.