The Making of Michael Madhusudan Datta's *Meghnādbadh Kavya* (1861): Little Traditions and other Influences

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Michael Madhusudan Datta's[1] (1824-1873) drawing upon European classics and mythology while fashioning the stories and characters of his Bengali works have been extensively discussed, the poet himself admitting to such influences no less. An extensive discussion and sample translations of Datta's works, particularly in the context of postcolonial studies, by classicist turned Barrister, Alexander Riddiford in *Madly After The Muses* is perhaps till date the single most comprehensive work bringing out the details of such influences. Moreover, it is widely known that in writing his *piece de resistance*, the *Meghnādbadh Kāvya* (*Ballad of the Slaying of Meghnāda*), a modern *Rāmkathā*,[2] Datta drew upon the Sanskrit *Vālmiki Rāmāyana* as also the popular Bengali Rāmāyana, the *Krittivās Rāmāyana*, even though the latter radically departed from the former at times. Less explored, however, is the influence on him and his works of other Indian vernacular Rāmāyanas and of the ballads of eastern Bengal, now Bangladesh. In this paper we shall briefly discuss these influences.

Notwithstanding the school of thought that puts the Buddhist stories ahead of the *Vālmiki Rāmāyana* on the *Rāmkathā* timeline, the broader consensus accepts Vālmiki's as the first written version of the Rāmāyana. Since then, the *Rāmāyana* has been widely rewritten and more often, repeatedly sung all over the country as a travelling ballad, thus creating new versions of this ancient story. This evolution, of the 'meta-Rāmyana', as A.K. Ramanujan calls it in his controversial article,[3] has led to remarkable changes to the original Rāmāyana story in different regions, though, in effect, only a few *Rāmkathās* achieved this distinction. Some, like the Tamil *Kamba Rāmāyana*, the Telugu *Ranganātha Rāmāyana*, the Bengali *Krittivāsa Rāmāyana*, the north Indian *Rāmcharitmānas* and the various Jain Rāmāyanas became part of the mainstream lore, and yet, the mass of such strikingly different *Rāmkathās* continue to remain in the lesser known and localized, Little Tradition world, both oral and written. To give a few examples from the mainstream *Rāmkathās*: the *Kamba Rāmāyana* introduced the courtship of Rāma and Sitā, Ahalya's turning into stone (in Vālmiki's work, the sage Gautama had cursed her with invisibility) and the wooing of Kumbhakarna by Bibhishana; the *Ranganātha Rāmāyana* (not Vālmiki or Krittivāsa) mentioned 'Lakshmanrekhā' perhaps for the first time: *Krittivāsa Rāmāyana* gave us the episode of the Gandhamādana Parvat (Vālmiki had called it the Drona or Aushadhi Parvat) and the *Rāmcharitmānas* gave us the four-armed newborn Rāma and the toddler Bālagopāla. Michael Madhusudan Datta's name too is taken as the creator of the only Rāmāyana of the Indian Renaissance. I have thus chosen to call it the "Nobo-Rāmāyan" (Neo Rāmāyana) of Bengal in my book *Meghnāda-Rāmāyani*, a Bengali annotated prose rendering of the epic. (Dasgupta, 2019: 292)

Although educated in western thought and classical literature, self-taught in the Indian epics and mythology, proficient in several languages and an acknowledged poet in English, belonging to a well established Kāyastha family and networking with the educated elite of the time, yet Datta relied not only on mainstream literature but on little traditions of Bengal to publish in 1861 his seminal work, the *Meghnādbadh Kāvya (*hereafter *MBK)*. A poem composed in blank verse of 14 character non-rhyming 8000 plus lines comprised in nine cantos, it describes the events of two nights and three days on Lankā's shores (but for the fourth canto, which is mostly a flashback with a dream sequence), rather unlike Indian epics, which traverse longer periods. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee called it the "nearest equivalent to the *Aeneid* in modern Indian literature" (Chatterjee, 1971: 20). It is a milestone in Bengali literature not only for its stylization by one considered to be the first modern poet of Bengal but also because of its controversial content, the chief of them being the slaying of an unarmed Meghnāda by Lakshmana; the other incident being Meghnāda's wife Pramilā committing 'Sati' in the last canto. The first story he conceived; the

second he borrowed from certain other Rāmāyanas. Interestingly enough, for all the scandal the *MBK* caused (perhaps contributing to excellent sales; there were six editions of the work in Datta's lifetime), the dramatic slaying of Meghnāda has become the overwhelmingly popular version in the Bengali oral tradition, superseding both Vālmiki and Krittivāsa. In the latter two works, as in other *Rāmkathās*, Meghnāda dies in furious battle with Lakshmana in the Nikumbhilā grove[4], both warriors being accompanied by their armies. Typical Bengali visualisations, on the other hand, are of an unshielded and unarmed Meghnāda bleeding to death, trapped in a locked temple inside the fort-city of Lankā, desperately hurling utensils at a fully armed Lakshmana lunging at the Rākshasa scion with sword, shield and spear, the exit door guarded and blocked by Bibhishana, the sibling of Rāvana who had treacherously led Lakshmana into the impregnable regal chambers through a secret passage known only to members of the royal family. Though this is not precisely what Datta narrated,[5] the fact that only this version is recalled by Bengalis establishes it as his enduring contribution to the Bengali oral tradition.

Datta's two younger brothers died early, effectively making him the only child. When he came to Calcutta from his village in about 1834 with mother Jāhnavi, he was already familiar with the Indian epics and *Purānas*. He joined Hindoo College, now Presidency University, in 1837, where, introduced to English poets and European classics, he displayed his talent by publishing prose and poetry in local newspapers, repeatedly expressing his desire to migrate to England to earn fame as a poet. By 1839, he had switched to European attire and acquired a reputation as a spendthrift and colourful exhibitionist. In 1843, he became a Christian and consequently had to leave home and the Hindoo College, which, at the time, admitted only Hindu boys. Sometime later, he joined the Bishop's College at Shibpur, Howrah, as a paying resident student and by the time he left had acquired a good knowledge of Latin and Greek. Meanwhile, his father married three times for an heir (in vain) during Jāhnavi's lifetime and eventually stopped financial support to Datta. Unable to find employment in Calcutta, Datta moved to Madras where he had some friends. Here, other than teaching in schools, he wrote for and edited English newspapers for a living. He married the Anglo-Indian Rebecca, a student at the school he was first employed. His significant works at Madras were the poems *Captive Ladie* and *Riziā* and a speech/essay, *The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu.* He learnt Tamil and Telugu and brushed up on Hebrew, Greek, Latin and Bengali and on the popular Bengali versions of the two Indian epics. Towards the end of his stay at Madras, he started an affair with Henrietta, also of mixed descent. In January 1857, he returned to Calcutta after learning of his father's death and in search of a patrimony. There is no record of his being in contact ever thereafter with his first wife, Rebecca, and his children by her. Henrietta joined him at Calcutta in late 1857.

In the 1840s, it was unimaginable that Datta would ever write in Bengali, given the intellectual milieu in colonial Bengal and his self-confessed "contempt for Bengali" (Dasgupta, 2019: 117). But when he returned from Madras in 1857, he found that Bengali theatre had become popular, so much so that he was himself inspired to write five plays, all commissioned. Exposed to English fiction, Indian authors were becoming bolder in experimenting with new literary forms. In 1857, his classmate Bhoodev Mukhopadhyay published a novel *Anguriya Binimay*. In 1858, Dinabandhu Mitra published *Nil Durpan*, Pearey Chand Mitra published *Alāler Ghorer Dulal* and Michael debuted with the play *Sermistā*. Kaliprasanna Singha published the satire *Hutum Pyanchār Nakshā* in 1861. Before publishing the *MBK* Datta had already written the plays *Padmāvati* and *Krishnakumari,* two farces,[6] and a four-canto poem *Tilottamāsambhav Kāvya* (his first blank verse work). He also published two collections of odes and epistles in verse, *Brajanganā Kāvya* (1861) and *Biranganā Kāvya* (1862). Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's first Bengali novel *Durgeshnandini* appeared in 1865, his only English novel, *Rājmohan's Wife,* being a washout. In fact, colonial rule was a deterrent to writing in Bengali and had it not been for the severe criticism that the *Captive Ladie* faced in the Calcutta press and from John Drinkwater Bethune,[7] Datta may not have attempted switching to Bengali; just as the failure of *Rājmohan's Wife* led Bankim to attempt *Durgeshnandini*.

Having changed the course of Bengali literature and going from obscurity to fame in just five years, at the peak of unprecedented literary success, Datta sold his Khidirpur house in 1862, leased out his *zamindāris* (all part of his patrimony) and departed for England to become a Barrister. Facing severe financial crisis at London due to the lessee's default, he reached out to Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar who arranged bailout loans. Nevertheless he had to shift residence to Versailles for a couple of years because of low funds, delaying his being called to the Bar. In spite of penury, he did not lose spirit. As in Madras, he acquired a reputation in Versailles as a scholar, learning French, Italian and German while composing 100 Bengali sonnets on a variety of subjects, published in Calcutta as *Chaturdashpadābali*. The French interregnum could have been a preparatory period like Madras but an immoderate lifestyle and failed law practice after returning to Calcutta ruined all chances of that. A maker and a product of the Renaissance, he had called himself a tremendous comet. He died a burnt out star. His last creative work

was a commissioned play *Māyākānan*, where, as in *MBK*, destiny rules over the lives of the protagonists.

In hindsight, Datta's brush with the little traditions of Bengal appears as significant as his familiarity with European classics and the mainstream indigenous traditions. At this point we can examine some specific sources outside these genres that influenced him and his writings.

Influence of *Chandrāvati Rāmāyan* and Women-Centric Ballads of Bengal

Brought up in a remote village of the Mymensingh region of East Bengal, Chandrāvati (seventeenth century) had a tragic personal life. She lost her lover and fiancé to a Muslim rival. Having high self-esteem, she spurned the lover when he tried to return to her, leading him to commit suicide. Among other tragic poems, she wrote a Bengali Rāmāyana in which women were primary characters – Rāvana's wife Mandodari, Kaikeyi's daughter Kukuā (a new, improvised character) and of course Sita. Although Kukuā is portrayed as a villain, being the cause of Sita's banishment, yet the punishment meted out to her of being scorched while lighting Sita's pyre is dealt with some empathy by the poetess. In fact, in the whole poem there is a lot of grace and forgiveness by Sita, the main protagonist, towards all and also resigned acceptance of Destiny's workings. And yet she comes out as a bold and confident woman. Rāvana and even Luv-Kush, the sons of Sita, get more space in this Rāmāyana than Rāma himself. On the other hand, though extolling his wealth, glamour and valor, Chandrāvati berates Rāvana as a bad husband, with Rāma faring no better. Lakshmana gets more importance than his brother, as does Hanumān, whereas the war is barely mentioned, with the slayings of the Rākshasas stalwarts getting literally a line each. However, it is believed that in all probability, the extant version of this work is only a section of the lost original.

This being one of the lesser-known Rāmāyanas of Bengal, its influence on Datta has been ignored. Sen had pointed out a couple of similarities between it and the *MBK*. At his time, however, the *Chandrāvati Rāmāyana*, an oral tradition, had not been fully recovered; it is not certain if the full text has been found even till date. With a fuller text of the *Chandrāvati Rāmāyan* available today, through my researches, I have been able to locate comparable examples from both works to demonstrate (Dasgupta, 2019: 325) how Datta relied on his memories of *Chandrāvati Rāmāyan* while composing *MBK*. Before going to specifics, two points deserve mention. First, a large section of the *Chandrāvati Rāmāyan* is narrated in first person by Sita, the style adopted by Datta in his fourth canto, where Sita narrates to Saramā, Bibhishana's wife, the backdrop to the invasion of Lankā.[8] Secondly, for such narration by Sita, Chandrāvati used the devices of flashback and dreams for those events that are unknown to Sita after her abduction. Datta replicates.

To mention only a few specific examples: both poems have Sita praising brother-in-law Lakshmana for looking after her in the forest, both describe her joy in being surrounded by the birds and beasts of the jungle, both speak of how Sita received instruction in the holy scriptures – in *MBK* it is from Rāma, in the *Chandrāvati Rāmāyan* it is from Vālmiki. In the latter, there is a description of the miseries that befell Ayodhyā when Sita was banished; a similar description appears in MBK when Goddess Lakshmi withdraws her protective shield over Lankā prior to the ingress of Lakshmana and Bibhishana into the city to slay Meghnāda.

Other than such direct similarities in motifs and passages, clearly Datta was influenced by the personality of Chandrāvati's Sita and of the poetess herself. We will return to this later.

Influence of *Jagadrāmi Rāmāyan*

My *Meghnāda-Rāmāyani* refers to another Bengali Ramayan (other than that by Krittivāsa) that Datta drew upon the eighteenth century *Jagadrāmi-Rāmprasādi Rāmāyana*, written by the father-son duo of Jagatrām and Rāmprasād of the Bankura district of Bengal. One view (Chakravarti, 2009: 53) is that Jagatrām wrote the whole Rāmāyana and that Rāmprasād only elaborated certain sections. The other view is that Rāmprasād wrote the rest of this *Rāmāyana* after his father passed away while writing the *Yuddh-kānd* (the War Canto). This seems plausible as Rāmprasād adds his name as a *bhonitā*[9] to all the sections in the cantos from the middle of the War Canto till the end of this Rāmāyana, just as Jagatrām's name appears as the author of the previous sections. Be that as it may, I have found that Datta drew inspiration from certain portions of the War Canto, which in turn had in certain places drawn upon the fourteenth century Telugu *Ranganātha Rāmāyana*, to which we shall return.

Like the *Chandrāvati Rāmāyan*, the *Jagadrāmi Rāmāyana* is also localized and is barely known outside its geographical area of influence. So much so that I could only get a copy of the manuscript because it was uploaded on the Shodhganga website by Pankaj Kumar Bandyopadhyay, being part of his doctoral dissertation submitted to the Burdwan University in 1988. Bandyopadhyay conducted extensive research to locate original manuscripts lying with the heirs of Jagatrām in various places in Bānkura and Burdwan districts and from other persons else-

where such as in Dhanbad eventually leading to its publication.

While creating the character of Pramilā, Meghnāda's wife in the *MBK*, Datta drew partially on the character of Sulochanā [10] (again Meghnāda's wife) in the *Jagadrāmi Rāmāyana*, much of which, in turn, is a copy of the tale of the Sulochanā created by Gona Budha Reddy in the *Ranganātha Rāmāyana*. Prior thereto there is no reference to Meghnāda's wife in any other Rāmāyana. The author(s) of the War Canto of the *Jagadrāmi Rāmāyana* was/were clearly familiar with Reddy's Rāmāyana. When Reddy's Sulochanā was travelling to Rāma's court in the battlefield to plead for her husband's corpse, the ape-army mistakes her for Sita, imagining that a beaten, resigned Rāvana had released her from captivity after Meghnāda's death. Ramprasād's monkey army fall into exactly the same error in similar circumstances, that is, when Sulochanā comes to meet Rāma for the same purpose, that is, to recover the remnant of Meghnāda's corpse.[11] Datta does not use this story in *MBK*, which has shades of the *Iliad's* Priam seeking son Hector's corpse from Achilles although he does use the second part of the Trojan story, where Priam beseeches a ceasefire from Achilles to cremate Hector. In *MBK*, Rāvana prays for a week's cessation of hostilities to cremate Meghnāda. However, Datta does use the visualization of a striking woman walking through the amazed, transfixed monkey army. In the *Jagadrāmi Rāmāyana* it is Sulochanā; in the *MBK* it is Nrimundamalini.

Was Datta familiar with the *Ranganāth Rāmāyana*? While in Madras, Michael wrote to his friend Gourdas Basak at Calcutta to send a copy each of the 1805 Serampore Press version of the *Krittivāsa Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata* by Kashiram Das, both popular among Bengalis. He also referred to his packed schedules, spent in learning of several languages, including Sanskrit, Tamil and Telugu. It is, therefore, reasonable to postulate that he learnt Tamil and Telugu at Madras for being able to read their literature, particularly their Rāmāyanas in the original. Evidently, he drew upon the Sulochanā tales of the *Jagadrāmi* and the *Ranganāth* Ramayanas while dealing with Pramilā in the third and ninth cantos of the *MBK*. In the *Ranganāth Rāmāyana*, after Sulochanā recovers the corpse of Meghnāda from Rāma, she carries it in a procession of nobles, warriors, womenfolk and musicians to the funeral site on the seaside, where she ascends the pyre to be immolated with her husband. In the *Jagadrāmi Rāmāyana* too, there is a similar sequence, except that it is not on the seashore. Datta has his procession sequence in the ninth canto with the self-immolation being committed on the seashore. Also, in the *Ranganātha Rāmāyana*, Sulochanā and Meghnāda ascend to heaven in a chariot sent by the gods, replicated by Datta in the ninth canto. Then again, in the *Jagadrāmi Rāmāyana*, when Sulochanā is approaching Rāma, the monkey army is transfixed by her beauty and personality and involuntarily bifurcates to form a path to let her through. Datta uses this scene in the third canto of *MBK,* except that the protagonist is Nrimundamālini, the warrior captain of Pramilā's cavalry and her emissary to Ram. In the *Jagadrāmi Rāmāyana*, Sulochanā is piloted by Vibhishana; in the MBK, Nrimundamālini is escorted by Hanumāna. But there are differences too. In the *Ranganātha* and *Jagadrāmi* Ramayanas, Sulochanā begs for her husband's corpse; in *MBK*, Nrimundamalini challenges him to battle whereupon Rāma capitulates and grants Pramilā and her cohort safe passage to Lankā.

Rāmprasād was familiar not only with the *Ranganātha Rāmāyana* but also the twelfth century *Irāmavatāram* by Kambar (or Kamban), more popularly known as the *Kamba Rāmāyana*. For example, in *Kamba Rāmāyana*, Bibhishana approaches Kumbhakarna to join Rāma's forces but Kumbhakarna declines citing loyalty to his elder brother. A very similar conversation takes place in the *Jagadrāmi Rāmāyana* as well. One of the most striking similarities between the *Kamba Rāmāyana* and the *MBK* is the reprimand of Rāvana by his wife Dhānymalini (Kamban) and by Chitrāngadā (Datta). Another is the self-accusing speech by Rāma (Kamban) after Lakshmana is mortally wounded and a similar one by Sita (Datta) upon hearing that Pramilā is going to commit 'Sati'—inter alia, both indict themselves for the deaths of Dasarath and Jatāyu.

Influence of Women-Centric Works

Dinesh Chandra Sen was the first to bring the *Chandrāvati Rāmāyana* to the notice of scholars, having obtained it in 1919, by his own admission, from one Chandra Kumar Dey of the Mymensingh region who, at the time was ill and seeking medical treatment in Calcutta. Sen arranged for his treatment and also obtained a travel grant on his behalf from the Calcutta University to collect local ballads of the Mymensingh[12] and Chittagong regions. Dey toured these regions extensively to make these collections, reporting back to Sen from time to time. In his *Mymensingh Gitikā* and later his *Purbabanga Gitikā*, Sen reproduced not only the *Chandrāvati Rāmāyana* (such portion of it as was then known) but also many other ballads of weak and depraved men and of assertive women, a couple of them written by Chandrāvati herself. Many of these stories transcend class and religious barriers and in most of them, the protagonists are commoners. All the stories are tragedies, some being rejection of the woman, *à la Rāmāyan*. Sen points out that portrayal of strong yet gentle

women in these stories, the absence of child marriages and the disapproval of *talaak* (unilateral divorce) were truly remarkable and a special feature of eastern Bengal, where the penetration of Brahminism was relatively poor. (Sen, 2009: 20-21)

For some time, the *Chandrāvati Rāmāyana* was looked at with suspicion by scholars, so much so that Sukumar Sen doubted its very existence, let alone its genuineness. However, after Kshitish Moulik collected some other portions / recensions in 1966, Suniti Kumar Chatterjee got the same published. The Bengali novelist and literary scholar, Nabaneeta Dev Sen calls this 'silencing' of the other, arguing that this tendency for refutation could stem from the patriarchal and traditional social reluctance to acknowledge a *Rāmkathā* in which Rāma plays second or third fiddle to Sita and Rāvana (Dev Sen, 2016: 42). Datta performed a similar inversion in the *MBK*, where Meghnāda, Pramilā and Rāvana are feisty, noble and glorious and the sons of Dasaratha are dishonourable, colourless and muted, and where the Gods are downright diabolical. Sita escapes criticism, for in Datta's eyes, wronged women or women in distress in particular, could not be in the wrong themselves. Possibly, such feelings were rooted in his disapproval of his father remarrying repeatedly during his mother's lifetime and his guilt about his own abandonment of wife Rebecca.[13]

Datta spent the first 10 years of his life in his village, thereafter shifting to Calcutta. His father Rājnārāin Dutt mostly stayed away at Jessore town with his brothers for their law practice, before he migrated to Calcutta to set up practice there. Thus, Datta was brought up by his mother and other women of the family during his village years and would certainly have been exposed to the female-centric ballads, including the *Chandrāvati Rāmāyan*. These songs were at his time sung, and are still sung, by women in *baithaks*, probably beyond the Mymensingh region and possibly in the Jessore region as well. They appear to have shaped his approach towards women and their innate strength. But would he have remembered the songs that he heard in his village so long ago as these works had not been printed then? The literary critic, Syed Mujtaba Ali, has demonstrated in an essay how, 30 years after leaving his village, Datta was able, in his farce *Buro Sāliker Ghāre Ron* (The Ways of the Old Wren, 1860) to have half a dozen characters speak different types of Bengali depending upon his/her station in life, proving the statement of a contemporary of Datta, the famous actor Keshab Chandra Ganguly that Datta had a tremendous memory and recall and could draw upon several sources at once so that "from a trivial incident he could mature a gigantic plot" (Dasgupta, 2019: 314). As his friend and distinguished educationist Bhoodev Mukhopadyay reminisced – "He was by far more brilliant than me, his intelligence was like a flash of lightning. I always bettered him in examinations. But then examinations are not tests of talent – he was much more talented than all of us" (my translation).

Datta's works are replete with independent, strong-willed women. The main characters in *Sermistā*, *Padmāvati*, *Krishnakumāri* and *Tilottamāsambhav* are women. The *Birānganā Kāvya* (1862), fashioned on Ovid's *Heroides*, is a set of epistolary poems of women from the Indian *Purānas* and epics, including one from Surpanakhā to Lakshmana. The *MBK* not only has strong male characters Rāvana and Meghnāda but also prominent women protagonists such as Chitrāngadā, Pramilā, and Nrimundamālini. The poem has more Goddesses than Gods. Other than the wives of Siva, Vishnu, Indra and Madan, there are Vāruni, Mahāmāyā, Vasundharā, Muralā and Bijoyā. It is reasonable to postulate that the songs that he heard regularly at his village associated with women-centric stories left a lasting influence on him. But it was not only such childhood impressions of songs but also his direct familiarity with *Jagadrāmi Rāmāyana* that would have had an effect on him in this respect.

Following a storyline from the Sanskrit *Adbhuta Rāmāyana*, Rāmprasād venerated Sita in the *Jagadrāmi Rāmāyana* by adding a new canto called the *Pushkar-kānda*, where Sita joins battle to slay a thousand-headed Rāvana after a seriously wounded Rāma faints, all his brothers and prominent warriors such as Hanumān and Sugriva having been defeated and the entire army routed – an interesting innovation that Datta would not have missed, regardless of whether he got it from the *Adbhuta Rāmāyan* or the *Jagadrāmi Rāmāyan*. The *Pushkar-kānda* begins with Sita laughing out aloud when Rāma boasts of the Lankā exploits to the sage Agastya, taking all the credit for them. Upon being questioned, she says that so long as the thousand-headed Rāvana lives in Pushkar island, nothing has been achieved. In this canto, Sita is the Mother Goddess coming to the rescue of her devotees repeatedly —including Rāma who worships her as such (Bandyopadhyay, 1988: 702) —eventually taking the form of the four-armed demon-destroying Kāli in order to slay this Ravana. Sita's description matches those of Chandi or Chamundā's cruel, bloodthirsty images that Bengalis are familiar with, a far cry from the docile, gentle Sita of most Rāmāyanas. After killing Rāvana, Rāmprasād's Sita strings and wears a garland of his thousand heads and drinks his blood. (Bandyopadhyay, 1988: 695) Intriguingly, this particular Rāvana's most valiant son is named Yavana (also slayed by Sita), prompting the question if this was meant to be a reference to the erstwhile Muslim rulers. The *Vālmiki Rāmāyan* and a few subaltern Rāmāyanas

other than those referred to in this paper also portray Sita as a woman of considerable personality. In at least one of them (Dev Sen, 2016: 87), a Maithili one, she is also physically strong, lifting the bow of Siva with her left hand daily while sweeping the floor under it with the other. Datta chose to follow the *Krittivāsa Rāmāyan*, portraying Sita as a gentle woman devoted to her husband and completely dependent on him. However, Datta refers repeatedly in his works to Shakti or the Mother Goddess and the imagery of the Kali manifestation of Sita must have remained with him when creating the character of Nrimundamalini (literally, one who wears a garland of human skulls), Pramila's friend and attendant.

The 'Sati' Question

In the last canto of the MBK Pramilā joins her husband on the funeral pyre. This had, as had his 'disrespectful' treatment of the Rāghava brothers, raised a few hackles during his time as it does even today. In his defence I may say that his heroine possibly took this step as a romantic and heroic step on the lines of Shakespearean tragic-romantic lovers. Also, Datta would certainly have read in Colonel Tod's works of the Rajput ladies who committed *jauhar* as an act of bravery. He was aware of the political goings-on of Punjab and could very well have been aware as well of the north Indian stories of unrequited love, all ending in death. And although he drew from the *Ranganātha* and *Jagadrāmi* Rāmāyans for the 'Sati' story, it fitted in very well with his story as a tragic ending. In his imagination, he must have seen Andromāche ascending the funeral pyre of Hector.

One reason for the timelessness of *MBK* is in its being a tragedy. The literary historian, Sisir Kumar Das felt that though Milton was popular, it was Shakespeare who had influenced "the emergence of a tragic vision which made the nineteenth century Indian literature distinct from its earlier traditions" (Das, 1991: 110). Datta realized that he was writing his masterpiece and that virtually all enduring pieces of literature were tragedies. He took the glorious Rākshasas and Rāvana from South Indian Ramayanas, the trope of the 'valiant yet graceful' woman from the local and little known ballads of Bengal, and various other motifs and incidents from European and Indian mythology.[14] He then narrated a story in typically Greek style of cowardly immortals sending heroic mortals to battle and suffer tragic consequences. "I shall not borrow Greek stories but write, rather try to write, as a Greek would have done."

And let us not forget that in the whole of *MBK*, Datta brings out so well how totally in love and how inseparable Pramilā and Meghnāda really were. In the very first canto, Pramilā pleads with Meghnāda not to leave her behind but to take her with him to Lankā. In the third, she gets desperate enough to take on Rāma's army in order to enter Lankā to reach Meghnāda. In the third itself, in replying to Meghnāda's banter, she says that she can vanquish the whole world but not the God of love, that she had no fear of the fire of battle but was scared of the fire of separation. While writing the third canto itself Datta had decided on Pramilā's fate, as Durga tells Bijoyā that she would fetch Pramilā after Meghnāda's death. Then came the fifth canto where the romantic rising from their bed at dawn, their adulatory reception at Mandodari's Siva temple and Pramilā's desire to join Meghnāda in worship at the Nikumbhilā temple all build up to her saying in the ninth canto that there was no point in continuing in this world without her husband. The couple remained united in life and death.

Henrietta and Datta remained inseparable too, in joy and sorrow, success and misfortune. Worn out by illness and malnutrition, much as her husband was, Henrietta died three days before him. Datta learned of her funeral shorty before passing away.

Notes

1. He wrote thus to the educationist Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar after being called to the Bar – "I am 'published' Barrister as Michael Madhusudan Datta Esquire. You might drop the vulgar form Dutt".
2. India has numerous (some estimate thousands) versions of the Indian epic Rāmāyana, the story of the journey of the prince and king Rāma, many of them yet oral. In some, he is aware of his own divinity, in others not. In some, his arch enemy Rāvana is glorified; in others, women characters hold sway. Some are *Sampoorna*, that is, complete stories of Rāma's life and times, some are only partial. All of these can be bunched as *Rāmkathās*. The *Meghnādbadh Kāvya* is one such short version, being primarily a narrative spread over just three days describing the conspiracies of the gods for the slaying and the cremation of Rāvana's most valiant and famous son Meghnāda.
3. *Three Hundred Rāmāyanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation*
4. Vālmiki and Krittivāsa refer to a battle held at the Nikumbhilā grove outside the fort city of Lanka. Datta does not have a grove in his story, where a fire-rite called Nikumbhilā takes place in a temple inside the city. So he refers to the *"Nikumbhilā-yagna"* and the *"Nikumbhilā-yagnāgār"*. Goddess Chandi tells Lakshman in the fifth canto of *MBK* – *"Jā choli nogor-mājhe, jothāye Rāboni, Nikumbhilā yagnāgāre, puje boishānore"* (Go forth thou into the heart of the city, where Meghnāda worships the God Agni in the Nikumbhilā sacrificial temple).
5. In Datta's narration there are no secret passages —

Lakshman and Bibhishan walk through Lankā fully armed, having been rendered invisible by the goddess Mahāmāyā. Most Bengalis, if asked, would however, refer to a passage.

6. The Plays *Ekei Ki Bole Shobhyotā* and *Buro Sāliker Ghāre Rõn* (named *Bhogno Shibmondir* at writing). Though commissioned by the owners of Belgachia theatre, these were not staged there. Sukumar Sen feels they are among the best Bengali farces.
7. Clinton Seely, however, feels that Bethune was prone to undue criticism and the *Captive Ladie* was fairly good poetry.
8. This backdrop was required partly because the main story is only of events of two nights and three days immediately before and after the slaying of Meghnāda and Datta may have felt that the reader would not be able to digest that format without a backdrop. Also, he may have felt a need to give a breather to a rapidly moving plot that was a shocker in many respects. The fourth canto is the only one that readers of that time would find familiar.
9. A kind of colophon. A *bhonitā* was a medieval literary custom of Bengal where the name of the author was stitched into the last two lines of each section.
10. The character of the aggressive warrior princess Pramilā is a far cry from the Sulochanā of either Rāmprasād or of Reddy or even the Pramilā of the Mahābhārata and is an amalgamation of many Indian and European characters that requires separate examination.
11. To cite another example of Rāmprasād's familiarity with Reddy's work, there is a description in the *Ranganāth Rāmāyan* of Rāvana and his retinue displaying themselves on the fort-palace's roof decked in all the wealth plundered by Rāvana in his military exploits, when Rāma shoots an arrow from the battlefield slicing off their crowns and ornaments without hurting them. A similar story appears in *Jagadrāmi Rāmāyan* where Rāvana is sitting on his rooftop with wife Mandodari.
12. Mymensingh district now is a fraction of the vast area of that name in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
13. It is not certain if it was abandonment by Datta or rejection by Rebecca, because it is reasonable to presume that Rebecca may have become privy to his affair. He could not get married to Henrietta as he was not divorced. There was not, and still is not, any law for 'mutual consent' divorce among Christians in India, which meant that they would have had to set up a collusive case. It is not unreasonable to speculate that Rebecca did not agree. Datta's very eminent biographer Ghulam Murshid postulates that some of Datta's works hint at a bad conscience. Hence I have chosen to go with 'abandonment'.
14. For example, Pramilā is built on her namesake in the *Mahābhārata*, who is the queen of a city of women warriors who seize Yudhishtira's *Aswamedh Yagna* (horse sacrifice) steed that is being led by Arjun. Sisir Kumar Das believes her to have been structured on Clorinda of Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*. I beg to point out that Clorinda is only a warrior and not the queen of a state of female warriors as the Pramilā of Mahābhārata. Datta's Pramilā also lives in a city of female Daitya (her clan) warriors. She leads a cavalry of a hundred women armed to the teeth to challenge Rāma to be permitted to enter Lankā to be united with her husband, rather reminiscent of the Amazonian fables.

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