

Michael Madhusudan Dutta's Use of Blank Verse as a Milestone in Westernized Modern Bengali Poetry and Drama

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Abstract: Michael Madhusudan Datta writes his major poems and dramas in aesthetic style which is the use of blank verse. He chooses a distinct medium of literary terms in the free verse and it delineates the features of uncommon preferences. He is highly subjective in the imagination of writing poetic quality of contemporary trends that precisely one of the issues for mediocrity in dramas and poetry. His use of blank verse is a milestone in Westernized Modern Bengali Poetry and Drama because he was the pioneer of writing his masterpieces under the influence of John Milton, Homer, and William Shakespeare. He also deviates from the Sanskrit sources containing both divine and demonic characters of Hindu mythology. Madhusudan's writings reflect the age of the Renaissance in Bengal which belonged to the young Bengal group for his social reform movement of the time, women's emancipation, colonial miseries, and the great intellectual awakening from British colonialism. The miraculous blank verse has gone to help Bengali beat the English from where he had borrowed it. He has nationalist zeal and a spirit of competition which was the driving force of his writings for Bengali literature. This research explores that Madhusudan's aim was to modernize Bengali literature in the light of Europe.

Keywords: *Blank verse, style, modern, driving force, Bengali literature*

Introduction: Michael Madhusudan Datta uses of blank verse are a milestone in Westernized Modern Bengali Poetry and Drama which has stern objectivity and realism ride on imagination. He started writing the *Magnadbadh Kabya* which was the steady decision to use blank verse. He has found the limitations of artistic writings in Bengali literature. His momentous revelation of the suitability of the blank verse in Bengali literature is inexorable. He also uses blank verse not only in poetry but also in drama which is a great achievement in Bengali drama. Madhusudan stumbles blank verse in his second drama *Padmabati* which was determined to facilitate the process to his advancement as a distinctive writer in the history of Bengali literature. Jatindra Mohan Tagore says, "That no real improvement in the Bengali drama could be expected until blank verse was introduced into it." [8]

Madhusudan uses efficient blank verse in his masterpiece *Magnadbadh Kabya* which is composed the slaughter of Maghnad the demonic Prince of Lanka in the Ramayana. This epic has nine cantos and takes nearly a year to be completed. Madhusudan is inspired by good companions and friends and the critics receive great shock because he starts writing the marvelous epic *Magnadbadh Kabya*. He says,

I am anxious that the work should be finished by the end of the year, and I am anxious to know how far I have succeeded in getting into the true heroic style. Besides, my position, as a tremendous literary rebel, demands the consolation and the encouraging sympathy of friendship. I have thrown down the gauntlet, and proudly denounced those, whom our countrymen have worshipped for years, as imposters [sic], and unworthy of honours heaped upon them! I ought to rise higher with each poem. If you think the *Meghanad* destitute of merit, why! [13]

However, in the epic *Magnadbadh Kabya*, Hindu mythology has described the tales of Rama, Lakshmana and Vibhishana which illustrates the story of the *Ramayana*. Madhusudan also says, "I have thrown down the gauntlet, and proudly denounced those, whom our countrymen have worshipped for years, as imposters [sic], and unworthy of honours heaped upon them!" [13].

Methodology: This study uses the content analysis method to analyse the contents of Madhusudan's works and the secondary materials. The research work is mainly based on content analysis. A detailed analysis extracted from the primary and secondary sources has been the process of reaching to a conclusion. Different techniques of historical methods have been applied to essential contexts sociological, anthropological and cultural analyses have been brought under observation. The data has been studied in three phases: preparation, organisation and reporting. In the first phase, the primary sources have been carefully pursued to understand the texts in detail. In the second phase, data has been categorized and organized in detail. In the last phase, the research report is prepared on the basis of the data assembled from both sources. For source citation, the Notes-Bibliography style prescribed by Kate L. Turabian has been followed. British English for spelling and simple transliteration rules for transliterating Bangla expressions are followed.

Review of Literature: William Radice in his article "The Significance of Madhusudan Dutt and his Epic" presents Madhusudan's achievement in modern Bengali literature. He writes Bengali modern poetry and drama on the influence of western literature. His use of language, subject, tone, structure and many subsidiaries are highly characteristic elements.

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He uses blank verse in linguistic flair, the subject matter is related to universal human experience, mythological and epic background is so artistic.

Aliza Amin's "Sculpting the self: Articulations of Indian Identity in Nineteenth Century Bengali Renaissance Literature" shows the Renaissance re-awakening of Bengali literature. He articulates his sense of identity and nationhood through English narrative forms. His revolting attitudes towards the colonial regime was strived to reconcile English and Bengali literature. The writer discusses some traits of blank verse.

Madhusudan's Uses of Blank Verse: He also determined to write a historical drama to some extent in prose and partly in blank verse. He says to Raj Narain, "When we meet I shall have to say a hundred thousand things to you relating to our literature. I have made up, my mind to write three short poems in Blank verse, and then do something in rhyme; don't fancy ...". [Letter no.59] [13] However, the plan requires many novelties, historical drama and Muslim subject but the blank verse was not authorized to materialize. He has passion in play that was refuelled by Keshab Chandra Ganguli in 1860. He investigates blank verse in *Krishnakumari* with good method but the Belgachhia theatre officials was agitated that the audiences may not be greeting the new style of writing. Madhusudan says to Gangooly, "Blank verse only in soliloquies? What say you? As this play will be full of acting and dialogue, there won't be many openings for Blank verse; but a little of it won't hurt anybody, I think." (Letter no.64) [13] Unfortunately, his request was not accepted and *Krishnakumari* staged without the use of blank verse. He says to Raj,

Blank verse is the 'go' now. As old Runjit Singh used to say, when looking at the map of India, "Sub lal ho jaga" I say "Sub Blank verse ho jaga." I had a long talk with Rungolal, last evening on the subject of versification in general and Blank-verse in particular: he said-"I acknowledge Blank verse to be the noblest measure in the language, but I say that no one but men accustomed to read the Poetry of England would appreciate it for years to come (Letter no. 68) [13].

He was disappointed to write in prose style, and he cannot get any consent to act a piece in verse. Thus, his attempt to use blank verse in play revolved to be a collapse. *Subhadra* has not been completed and what was composed has got lost later. In *Razia*, there are a few soliloquy lines in blank verse. He has completed writing *Krisnakumari* in prose style which means a defeat of his plan. He says to Raj Narain,

You are welcome to show them to your friends, who, I trust, are by this time, great admirers of Blank-Verse! In Calcutta, the sensation created is by no means inconsiderable. Hear what one critic says:- "I read your book with feelings of admiration and have no hesitation in affirming that its poetry is of such high order that I have never seen, anything like it yet attempted in Bengali" The writer is a Banian's assistant in a mercantile firm (Letter no. 64) [13].

He concluded in dissatisfaction because the age was the start of the drama. However, he refused to accept the defeat. He has confidence that blank verse was the best style of dramatic dialogue and for the advancement of Bengali drama, the change is important. Thus, *Krisnakumari* published after one year of writing, he comments: "Only blank verse is the appropriate verse for drama; but blank verse is not yet so much in vogue that I can venture to introduce it in my drama to the satisfaction of the public." [16] (Translated from Bengali text, *Madhusudan Rachanabali*) He decided to continue his writing poetry and drama of blank verse.

Madhusudan has discovered and embraced blank verse in Bengali literary traditions. He learned this style from English literature which mingled with his studies in Greco-Roman and Sanskrit classics. He follows John Milton's use of blank verse in English literature. He writes to Raj Narain Bose,

Good Blank Verse should be sonorous and the best writer of Blank Verse in English is the toughest of poets-I mean old John Milton and Virgil and Homer are anything but easy. But let that pass. You no doubt excuse many things in a fellow's First poem. I began the poem in a joke and I see I have actually done something that ought to give our national Poetry a good lift, at any rate, that will teach the future poets of Bengal to write in a strain very different from that of the man of Krishnagat -the father of a very vile school of poetry, though himself a man of elegant genius. (Letter no. 55) [13]

However, Madhusudan was influenced by Virgil, Homer and Milton. He writes to Jatindra Mohan Tagore almost one year later Bengali people preferred blank verse instead of Sanskrit. He also has a good command of Sanskrit vocabulary in his major poems which presents his admiration of the melody and music of Sanskrit poetry in unrhymed. The unique style was undoubtedly praiseworthy and he wrote to Raj Narain,

I do not know what European told you that I had a great contempt for Bengali, but that was a fact. But now-I even go the length of believing that our Blank Verse "thrashes the Englishers" as an American would say! But joking apart is not Blank verse in our language quite as grand as in any other? (Letter no. 55) [13]

Historically, Madhusudan's artistic use of blank verse fulfilled the limitations of Bengali literature and represents a milestone in writing poetry, drama, and epics. Mohit Lal Majumdar, who was an early critic of Madhusudan's writings in the twentieth century, focused on Madhusudan's uses of blank verse played a revolutionary role in Bengali poetry in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. He is considered a rebel poet of Bengal in the era of the intellectual upheaval of Bengali literature. He presents the significance of the emancipation of the mind and society of poetry which was the prime art of human intellect from traditional to Westernized including rhyme. His choice and adaptation of blank verse was epoch-making and path-breaking which symbolized his rebellious instinct. He was eager to break the traditional style of writing that fulfilled the needs of the time.

Madhusudan uses blank verse in his epics, poetry and dramas, which was a milestone in measuring his success after a critical analysis. Kshetra Gupta was specialist also mentioned collectedly his vision of life and artistry reciprocated his revolutionary

zeal. His paramount talents of radical reformation of the Bengali language ingeniously represent the abundance of mind in poetry. He has a profound devotion to music to judge a synthesis of the dramatic and poetic components of literature. He has chosen blank verse for as the most perfect literary tool to flourish. *Padmabati* is his composition of contemplated blank verse which subsequently finds an integer of distinct reasons for its acquisition of his unique style of poetic and dramatic compositions. He says to Raj Narain,

We want the public ear to be attuned to the melody of the Blank Verse. When you read Kissen Kumari you will probably think that practice would make the author tolerable in that department also. But encouragement is the food that Practice grows upon. But where is that encouragement? However, I hope you will like the play, imperfect though it be for want of poetical numbers. I, a most hard hearted rascal, have cried over many scenes while correcting the proofs. It beats both Sermista and Padmavati (Letter no. 82) [13].

Blank verse and its melody are amazing which express the writer's infatuated devotion in drama. The blank verse has the strength and power that reflect Madhusudan's mind freely in its style, diction and fundamental concern in literature. His writing style reflects his mind and he has shared his experiences with his friend Gaur Das Basak. He says to Raj Narain,

The style is free from all those vices that disgrace the Bengali of the present day, and what is more, it shows that very unfashionable thing, mind! If I felt more interest in religious matters than, I am sorry to say, I do, this book would be my constant companion (Letter no. 59) [13].

He has profound imagination and innovative ideas to use the perfect style in his poetry and drama, which focused on the simple, bold and unfettered blank verse. He proclaimed that the true poet always be succeeded best in using blank verse but the inferior one in rhyme. The free thought is the most dominating characteristics of his writings. He says to Raj Narain, "Talking about Blank verse, you must allow me to give you a joy little anecdote" (Letter no. 84) [13.] Harish Chandra Mukherji laments on his death saying that his death would be a real loss, not in literature, for the writers Feringishly, but to the progress of independence of mind and thought. Madhusudan complained that rhyme certainly obstructed the spontaneous flow of language and points in a poem which reduced seriously the poet's liberty of self-expression. His dearest simile has been elucidated with the Chinese practice of foot-binding which impeded women born perfectly healthy. He says to Raj Narain,

I have certain Dramatic notions of my own, which I follow invariably. Some of my friends-and I fancy you are among them as soon as they see a Drama of mine, begin to apply the canons of criticism that have been given forth by the masterpieces of William Shakespeare. They perhaps forget that I write under very different circumstances. Our social and moral developments are of a different character. We are no doubt actuated by the same passions, but in us those passions assume a milder shape. But hang all Philosophy. I shall put down on paper the thoughts as they spring up me, and let the world say what it will (Letter no. 85) [13].

There are two characteristics of blank verse in which Madhusudan reveals freedom in a broad view of the capabilities of the measurement. He has discovered to be genuine synthesis of the dramatic, poetic and prosaic structures of diction through the use of blank verse in his dramas, epics and poems. It also ignores their limitations of retaining the graces. His tenacious advocacy for the use of blank verse in drama amalgamates the qualities of both prose and verse. He used extraordinary blank verse in the noblest measure in the drama *Subhadra*. He believes that poetry was the soul of good drama and the good use of blank verse in the dramatic poem *Subhadra*. He expressed that elegant language and musical verse are mandatory parts of any successful book of the contemporary time.

He has chosen blank verse in lyrics on a number of didactic poems, such as *Brajangana* [Odes on Radha's Loneliness], and the sonnets of the *Chaturdaspadi Kabitabali* [Fourteen-lined Poems]. Madhusudan's blank verse has familiar features including irregularity of pauses; sonority directed ample use of complex lettered Sanskrit lexicon and stress on "accent and quality". *Tilottama*, *Maghnad* and *Birangana* are three poetic monuments of the use of blank verse. His blank verse produces significantly more in *Tilottama* than the meagre starting in *Padmabati* which endures initially lyrical, lacks of dramatic strength and dignity to epic. *Maghnad* has all three important characteristics –music, vigour and solemnity with a thorough range generate a surprise in the history of Bengali literature. There are overindulgence rhetoric and excess imagery in this epic that the critics mention. These weaknesses have been eliminated in the elegant epistles of *Birangana* which shows the balance of the lyrical drama and epic elements. Blank verse extends the excellence in the grand synthesis of Madhusudan's *Birangana*. Madhusudan says to Raj Narain,

If it hadn't been for the extraordinary success, the new verse has met with, I should have certainly delayed my departure. Or not gone at all. I should have stood at my post manfully. But an early triumph is ours, and I may well leave the rest to younger hands, not ceasing to direct their movements from my distant retreat. *Maghnad* is going through a second edition with notes, and a real B. A. has written a long critical preface, echoing your verdict-namely, that it is the first poem in the language (Letter no. 89) [13].

He becomes frustrated by the response of the dramas but his attempts at poetry have given dazzling success above all his predecessors and contemporaries in the history of Bengali poetry. In the publication of *Tilottama*, Jatindra Mohan Tagore argued with Madhusudan about the feasibility of blank verse in Bengali drama though he has provided publication money to him. Madhusudan says to Raj Narain,

I am going to print a plain edition of *Tilottama*. I wish to try and improve the text. The versification in many places is rather defective. A demand for that work is also increasing daily. You must wait for an edition with notes. Let the text be settled first (Letter no. 82) [13].

Later, *Tilottama* achieved huge popularity which also drew the recognition of the literati and the book sold rigorously. Dvaraka Nath Vidyabhushau and Vidyasagar were enchanted by the great merit in *Tilottama*'s melody and they appreciated its contempt in the *Somprakash* [Monday Herald]. Rev. John Long a progressive English journalist in Calcutta praised Madhusudan's revolutionary zeal in the use of blank verse. Madhusudan says to Raj Narain,

My printer Baboo I. C. Bose (a very intelligent man and once a most warm admirer of Bharat 1) and his friends stick out for the 1 Book. Comparatively speaking the work is wonderfully popular and commands a very respectable sale. It has silenced the enemies of Blank verse. A great victory that, old boy (Letter no. 82) [13].

Meghnadbad Kabya was the masterpiece epic which overstepped *Tilottama*. It has been considered as "a real epic poem" which admired enthusiastically and grew to be a splendid poem from the very beginning. Before finishing writing *Meghnadbad Kabya* he was frustrated because he was misunderstood by the readers and the new style of blank verse was not welcomed. Madhusudan says to Raj Narain,

I am anxious that the work should be finished by the end of the year, and I am anxious to know how far I have succeeded in getting into the true heroic style. Besides, my position, as a tremendous literary rebel, demands the consolation and the encouraging sympathy of friendship. I have thrown down the gauntlet, and proudly denounced those, whom our countrymen have worshipped for years, as imposters, and unworthy of the honours heaped upon them! I ought to rise higher with each poem. If you think the Meghnad destitute of merit, why! (Letter no. 59) [13]

The poetic style is elegant in the Bengali epic of creating such kind of wonderful poem. Digambar Mitra also admired the epic that he is compared with Kalidasa and Milton. Madhusudan says to Raj Narain,

I have already called both "Milton and Kalidas". How far I deserve the compliment, I cannot say, but it is certainly flattering. I think if spread some years, yet, and allowed to go on my own way I shall do better; for in nothing else, between *Tilottama* and *Meghanad*. But I supposed I must bid adieu to Heroic Poetry after *Meghanad*. A fresh attempt would be something like a repetition. But there is the wide field of romantic and Lyric Poetry before me, and I think I have a tendency in the Lyrical way (Letter no. 82) [13].

Madhusudan has got a formal reception by a literary association of the author, philanthropist Kali Prasanna Simha with a "splendid silver claret jug" and an excellent congratulatory address. This was especially noted in his genius of *anuttam asrutapurba* [excellent and unheard of before] blank verse attended by Madhusudan in Bengali. He is considered the *Adi Kabi* [First Poet, the epithet first used for only Valmiki – the composer of the hallowed grand epic, the *Ramayana*] of the Bengali language and his writings *Aloksamanya* [above ordinary wordly things] and *Alaukik* [superhuman].

The complete work of *Meghanad* has aroused curiosity among commentators from intellectuals throughout the whole of Colonial Bengal. Raj Naraian Bose labelled *Meghanad* as "the first poem in the language" and Hem Chandra Banerji wrote "a long critical preface" to a quick second edition of the epic. Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar praised Bengali blank verse, and the great work was fascinated by its uniqueness. Madhusudan says to Raj Narain,

The poem is rising into splendid popularity. Some say it is better than Milton-but that is all bosh-nothing can be better than Milton; many say it licks Kalidasa; I have no objection to that. I don't think it impossible to equal Virgil, Kalidasa and Tasso. Though glorious, still they are mortal poets; Milton is divine (Letter no. 74) [13].

The wonderful popular epic has effectively silenced the enemies of Blank verse. Madhusudan has been compared to Kazi Nazrul Islam as poets and rebels. Madhusudan's rebellion was significantly against the Sanskrit Brahmanic literary tradition of Bengal. His main aim was to liberate Bengal from foreign colonial and imperial rule, although he would also revolt against traditional literary genres.

Conclusions: Madhusudan's uses of blank verse signified to synthesize romantic lyricism and epic classicism. The romantic lyricism increased the freedom of music, and restricted Bengali "apostate" to the doctrine of accent and quality. The blank verse represents Madhusudan's rebellious spirit and his conscious innovative efforts to produce "elegant language". His poems are presented in gallant blank verse which has achieved popularity. His writings immensely reflected his age in the Renaissance Bengal in the second and third quarters of the nineteenth century. He was regarded as the bard of the great urge for emancipation in the social spheres and intellectuals which projected his literary creations in the heroic sentiments. He has nationalist zeal and a spirit of competition which was the driving force of his writings for his country and Bengali literature. This address demonstrated the hope of Madhusudan's literary approach perfectly carried later writers would in future free Bengali from its service to English. Madhusudan was the poet of the Renaissance, as reflected in his writings of the age of the Derozians and Vidyasagar.

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