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Ethnography, Gender, and Nation

Even if the 'private' is as yet inaccessible in English, exemplary 'lives' can, nevertheless, be rendered into public narratives. Accordingly, the voice of the lowly peasant who finds himself in an awkward relationship to great historical events is what *Govinda Samanta or Bengal Peasant Life* claims to offer. Billed as an 'authentic history' of the life of a *raiyat*, or tenant farmer in Bengal, Lal Behari Day's novel proffers itself as a documentary that will educate a reader unfamiliar with is context and culture. Outlining, rather defensively, 'what the reader is to expect and what he is not to expect', Day's preface adumbrates the anxieties generated by the foray into European-style realist prose. Deploying something like Henry Fielding's famous 'Bill of Fare' metaphor, Day's first gesture—one that would have surely pleased Mill—is to distance himself from his 'great Indian predecessors' and their 'marvellous' creations that tell of:

> kings with ten heads and twenty arms; of a monkey carrying the sun in his arm-pit; of demons churning the universal ocean with a mountain for a churn-staff; of beings, man above and fish below, or with the body of a man and the head of an elephant; of sages with truly profound stomachs, who drank up the waters of the ocean in one sip ... The age of marvels has gone by; giants do not pay now-a-days; skepticism is the order of the day; and the veriest stripling, whose throat is still full of his mother's milk, says to his father, when a story is told him; 'Papa, is it true?' (1969: 5–6)

Day, a convert to Christianity and a minister of the church, also distinguishes his work from that of European masters such as Rabelais and Swift, insisting on a historicity that will emerge from a sober apprehension of the everyday. His 'unpretending volume' is not

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going to offer the pleasures of 'the sensational novels of the day': 'Romantic adventures, intricate evolutions of the plot, striking occurrences, remarkable surprises, hair-breadth escapes, scenes of horror' (ibid. 6). At the same time, the context of writing introduces particular constraints: 'I would fain introduce love-scenes; but in Bengal—and for the matter of that in all India—they do not make love in the English and honourable sense of that word.' As Mukherjee (1985: 8) has argued, in prose, love 'could only be shown in an indigenous setting where the demands of realism were absent'. As we shall see, however, it would not be long before questions of love and passion also became central to the novel in India, imbricated in complex ways with ideas about nation, identity, and belonging.

Govinda Samanta is itself the predecessor of the 'Indo-Anglian' novels of the 1930s and 1940s (discussed in Ch. 3) which, under Gandhi's influence, would attempt to give literary voice to rural India. For its time, it was innovative in content and form, drawing heavily on the disciplines of cartography, ethnography, travel writing, and even the classificatory systems of the natural sciences (detailing, for instance, the Latin botanical names of the plants that dot the Bengal countryside). The author's compendious knowledge of the Greek and English literary traditions as well as the work of Orientalists is also apparent, with epigraphs and quotations from various authors sprinkled liberally throughout the text, providing, one critic argues, 'the ideological frame through which we are asked to view the Indian village of the second half of the 19th century' (Mohanty 2005: 21).[1] A great deal of energy is devoted not only to translation of Bengali or Sanskrit terms, but also to finding philosophical and literary equivalents from gods and literary personages to domestic implements and folk genres. Day's bilingual sensibility also makes its presence felt in the rhythm of sentences and his deployment of onomatopoeia.

> The '*bhroor—bhroor—bhroor*' of the hubble-bubble kept time with the '*ghnan—ghnan—ghnan*' of the *charkha*, and the two together evoked a melody which the immortals might have heard with rapture. At last Badan broke the divine harmony.
>
> ... 'Don't you think, mother, it would be a good thing to give Govin his *hate khadi*? It is a great drawback that I cannot read a *pata* (pottah) or write a *kabuliyat*; I cannot even sign my name.' (1969: 43, explications in original)

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For all his confidence with the English language, Day is acutely conscious of the issue that would continue to generate a degree of anxiety in anglophone writers, famously described, decades later, by Raja Rao in the foreword to his novel, *Kanthapura*, of expressing 'in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own' (2004: p. vi). Day articulates it in terms of both class and culture:

> You perceive that Badan and Alanga speak better English than most uneducated English peasants; they speak almost like educated ladies and gentlemen, without any provincialisms. But how could I have avoided this defect in my history? If I had translated their talk into the Somersetshire or the Yorkshire dialect, I should have turned them into English, and not Bengali peasants.

Unlike many others writing in English at the time, Day is also insistent on using a clear and simple prose, in contrast to Young Bengal's 'literary Bombastes Furioso [and] Johnsonese run mad' which entails the 'use of English words two or three feet long' (ibid. 7) The peasant, as subject matter, generates 'a plain and unvarnished tale'.

Clearly intended though it is for the European reader, *Govinda Samanta* is no simple paean to the British presence in India or even, indeed, to English education. Contrasting the village 'pathshala' favourably with English schools and colleges in Bengal, Day suggests that an education that sacrifices 'utility to ornament' must have in it 'something vicious, something essentially wrong' (ibid. 82). In the last third of the novel Day crafts a surprisingly fierce critique of zamindari or landlordism under the Permanent Settlement of 1793, which enabled the British administration to extract revenue indirectly, thus 'in consulting its own interest ... [consigning] virtually the entire peasantry of Bengal to the tender mercies of a most cruel and rapacious aristocracy' (ibid. 244). The villain of the piece is the venal and tyrannical zamindar, Jay Chand, who is described as not 'having had the benefit of an English education, unacquainted with Sanskrit, and possessing only a smattering of his mother tongue ... an ignorant man' (ibid. 178). But as it gathers political speed, the narrative turns its ire on an iconic figure, the British indigo planter, already the subject of anti-colonial literature.[2] Murray in Day's novel is an extraordinarily unpleasant character, and the author is quick to forestall his being read as an exception: 'Some planters are benevolently disposed but the system which they follow being pernicious in the extreme, is sufficient to convert the gentlest of human beings

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into ferocious tigers' (ibid. 208) Commenting on the distortions that colonialism produces in the colonizer's psyche, Day suggests that what makes the latter susceptible to such a 'metamorphosis' is that 'their only object is to make money and then run away to merry England as fast as steam can carry them' (ibid. 208) As with the two texts discussed in the previous chapter, rebellion remains a fantasy, an event that does, however, take place in the future when Murray's 'oppression created universal disaffection among the peasantry, and produced an outbreak' (ibid. 235).

At the same time, English education can foster the right kind of 'liberal and patriotic sentiments' (ibid. 212). Day, the Christian minister, cannot help but praise the changes in social conditions that British rule has brought about, an ambiguity many educated Bengalis would experience and express. The narrative contains the obligatory lurid account of a 'sati', though one that takes place in the past, for in the present, such customs, 'thanks to the enlightened humanity of the British Government, have altogether been suppressed' (ibid. 83). Even so, Day is reluctant to allow himself to be easily appropriated by those 'civilizers' who would speak in the name of Hindu women. His, he stresses, is an emphatically rooted perspective, free of the distortions of colonial discourse: 'It is impossible not to sympathise with a Hindu widow. It is not that she is persecuted and tormented by her relatives and friends—that is *a fiction of foreign writers*, of people unacquainted with Hindu life in its actual manifestations—but the peculiar wretchedness of her condition lies in this, that the fountain of her heart, with its affections and desires, is forever dried up' (ibid. 92–3, added emphasis). A long and somewhat defensively overstated account follows, of the far from wretched life of the Hindu widow, beyond the 'supreme privation' of losing a companion to love.

The first anglophone novel: *Rajmohan's Wife*

Written with an implied European or English reader in mind, many early Indian English novels offered themselves as guided forays, not just into Indian life, but more specifically, into a domestic sphere largely hidden from the European and colonial gaze. As Mukherjee (2000: 14) points out, their titles often 'promise an unveiling of

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some mystery ("A Peep into", "Glimpses of", "Revelations", etc.) pertaining to a presumably homogeneous space called India... inhabited by an undifferentiated "Hindu" community'. Perceived as the space of the feminine, the domestic sphere was not just incomprehensible, but hidden tantalizingly from the scrutiny of outsiders.[3] As with *Govinda Samanta*'s foray into peasant life, novelistic excursions into the domestic worked well with the imperative to write realistically and from experience. So it is with the first known anglophone Indian novel by an Indian writer, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's (or Chattopadhyaya's) *Rajmohan's Wife* (1996), which also undertakes to delineate the contours of village life with a particular interest in women's lives; the inevitable chapter headed 'A Visit to the Zenana' devotes itself, with no little prurience, to elaborate descriptions of women going about their noisy business, their bodies in free and sensual movement. Elsewhere, elaborate architectural descriptions of inner and outer household spaces converge with the evocation of a Gothic atmosphere as the reader is invited to 'ascend in our company through a flight of dark and narrow stairs of solid brickwork to the upper story of the andarmahal', the women's quarters.

Written in the manner of a Gothic novel and serialized in 1864 in the short-lived weekly, *Indian Field*, *Rajmohan's Wife* is both a tragic romance and a study of an unhappy marriage. It tells of the dutiful but passionate Matangini whose father marries her to the venal and jealous Rajmohan although she is in love with Madhav, who, meanwhile, marries her sister. When she discovers a plot against Madhav, in which Rajmohan is involved, Matangini risks her husband's wrath and her own life in a night-time journey to the former's house to inform him about impending danger. After a series of mishaps, including Matangini's incarceration, the British administration intervenes to foil the plot and Rajmohan commits suicide. Matangini returns to her father and dies an early death. Though described by Salman Rushdie (1997: 57) as a 'dud... a poor melodramatic thing', this early novel by Chatterjee—while no dazzling debut—is a reasonably well-paced read, a thriller of sorts, set in the context of changing fiscal and familial relations in nineteenth-century Bengal. New wealth generated by changes in property law, English education, and migration to the city had generated a new urban culture which was very different from agrarian life. Unsurprisingly, familial and gender relations were also changing in this transitional period and in this

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light, Bankim's use of the protagonist's relational status—as a wife—rather than her own name in the title of his novel is significant. *Rajmohan's Wife* does attempt to 'foreground the ways in which the home and the world are inextricably linked . . . by locating the drama within the conjugal and domestic space in relation to the external arena of property, legality, crime and the colonial administration' (Mukherjee 2005: p. vi). Meenakshi Mukherjee (1985: 8) has also suggested that in a social milieu where 'marriage was a social institution rather than an act of individual choice, there was very little scope for romantic pre-marital love of the kind depicted in the English novels being read by the educated urban Indians'. In *Rajmohan's Wife*, premarital romance, rather than being absent altogether, haunts the edges of the narrative, a ghostly presence that will explain the suffering of Matangini who must give up the man she loves in order to become 'Rajmohan's wife'.

For all its staged coyness about sensual matters, the novel returns persistently to questions of desire and, more boldly, female desire, neither of which were, of course, absent from Bengali or other Indian literary traditions, even if they had not been evoked in prose yet. The virtuous Matangini, stoic and faithful in an arranged marriage with the tyrannical Rajmohan, who is consumed by sexual jealousy, is the first to speak—in 'the passionate language of English Romantic poetry' (Mukherjee 2005: 149) of her illicit desire for her brother-in-law:

> Then, as if under the influence of a maddening agony of soul, she grasped his hands in her own and bending over them her lily face so that Madhav trembled under the thrilling touch of the delicate curls that fringed her spotless brow . . . [T]he wild current of passion had hurried her to that region where naught but the present was visible and in which all knowledge of right and wrong is whirled and merged in the vortex of intense present felicity. (1997: 54)

While it shies away from foregrounding this romance as its theme, *Rajmohan's Wife* raises the possibility that thwarted desire—the 'brightness of the impure felicity'—will return to haunt the space of the familial. In this case, the only resolution is the inevitable exile and Victorian 'early death' of the heroine. In later works such as *Anandamath*, as we shall see, passion and desire are sublimated by the demands of nation.

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