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Negotiating gaps between interpretation and practice of cultural traditions in Bengal Renaissance through the lens of New Historicism

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Abstract

The very essence of New Historicism lies in the historicity of texts and aligning it to the literary value system of the times. Every literature can be contextualized according to the fashion of the times and in it, they hold a larger part of the socio-cultural traditions. Thereby, New Historicism has skillfully rejected the perpetuity of texts emphasized by the Liberal Humanism and autotelic features in New Criticism and presents it like a mirror of the times. The idea of self fashioning has been emphasized to the greatest degree in the works produced during the Renaissance in Italy and to a greater extent in the Bengal Renaissance as well. Thus it is efficiently based on the idea of the disconnected conversations, interrupted histories of the times and the fact that modern history is a “*co-text*” and fiction of the times the author is living in. Thus Stephen Greenblatt’s work on the Renaissance namely *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980) is important to understand the basis of utilizing his own theory to the Renaissance plays and the similar can be extended to the foyer of the material study of texts during the Bengal Renaissance and the reflection of the social constructs during the times in literature of the times and beyond. This is what I attempt to reflect in my paper through a brief disconnected history of the Bengal Renaissance and attempt to disintegrate the time according to the demand of the literary theory of New Historicism. According to Louis Montrose, New Historicist reading of any Renaissance literature is a sort of “textuality of history and the historicity of texts”. Thus this true identity quest shall be done in this paper.

Keywords: New historicism, imperial dilemma, deconstructivist dialogism, renaissance

Introduction

The poetic symphony between the theoretical framework of New Historicism laid down by Greenblatt and Foucault is nothing short of surreal. What intrudes in the space that demonstrates history is a fact that the continuity of history is a myth in itself and thereby cannot allude to the truth of all events that have occurred. While understanding the true essence of Stephenian or Foucauldian methods of historical discourse, the understanding of knowledge and power stands supreme.

According to Gavin Kendall and Gary Wickham, “the Foucauldian method's use of history is not a turn to teleology, that is, it does not involve assumptions of progress...it involves histories that never stop; they cannot be said to stop because they cannot be said to be going anywhere. To use history in the Foucauldian manner is to use it to help us see that the present is just as strange as the past, not to help us see that a sensible or desirable present has emerged ^[1].”

Thus any history that we read and understand is an understanding of the present in itself and helps in looking at multidimensional problem structures of the times, like Foucault talks about the “models of economic growth, quantitative analysis of market movements, accounts of demographic expansion and contraction, the study of climate and its long-term changes, the fixing of sociological constants, the description of technological adjustments and their spread and continuity” ^[2] in his work. The Derridean principle of breaking a text according to the necessary interpretation is also central to the development of reading Renaissance text in a manner detached from its own history, thus paving way for the dialogic deconstructivism that is also a part of New Historicism of the literary texts. Thus the literature and culture are central to the knowledge epicentre and comes through the practice of history not as a continuous reservoir of material discourse, but a slow release of the idea that power alone does not corrupt, but absolute power, especially in the imperial dilemmas that frame the

historical narratives, corrupt absolutely. So the idea of power in the New Historical sense is a means not to bow down to the powerful, but to liberate from the oppression and violence, thereby the very essence of the dualism works here that even the Bengal Renaissance deals through its body of texts, which were often falling in the gaps between reality and textuality.

Background of the Bengal Renaissance

Bengal Renaissance was an "intellectual development of the people on an entirely new line" [3]. The social, cultural, psychological and political and intellectual developments that happened in Bengal in the nineteenth century because of the emulation of British rules, education system and law and order led to the rise of this Renaissance. The intellectual liberation is thus expressed through the enlightenment attained through Bengal Renaissance which Kant expressed as "man's emancipation from his self-incurred immaturity". So it was a cultural liberation from the past of stringent social conditioning.

Calcutta, which was the capital of British Empire, was known as the *Mecca* of this new wave of Renaissance in India. The leaders of this movement were from various fields and included stalwarts like Rabindranath Tagore, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Bipin Chandra Pal, Keshub Sen, M.N. Roy among others. Several parallel movements ran alongside during this period that helped in bringing about the modern age in India very fast. However, the contribution of Raja Ram Mohan Roy is to be dealt with more extensively because without him, the awakening would have never been possible. The Bengal Renaissance brought about changes in the status of women-or at least led to an opening in that direction, brought about changes in the education system, tried to abolish dowry, caste system and hence brought about a new direction in the social order and the functioning. What is most important in this regard is to see how the movement operated towards a new awakening. Where there were a group of people who wanted to break away from the British rule to severe oppression, this movement grasped what is called the best feature of the foreign rule-thereby incorporating their progressive policies-the awakening could only come when there was a complete snap of memories of the past. Thus the movement aimed to study religion, philosophy and ethics from a contemporary stand point, not entirely going by the stringency of the Vedic commandments.

M.N. Roy believed that the "the English system of education had brought into existence a small set of modern intellectuals who could be looked upon as the forerunners of the national movements of the subsequent epoch" [4]. What is more important here is the fact that the contradiction stands as a prominent feature because on one had the Indians were trying to throw the Colonisers off their stands and on the other they were busy in imbibing and incorporating features from their culture and governance that could in reality lead to the social progress.

The feudalism debate has been commented upon by M.N. Roy as well where he defines "feudalism as the basis of social economics that received the first death blow in the earlier years of British possession in the middle of the 18 century when political power passed into the hands of the representatives of a foreign commercial bourgeoisie" [5]. The masses during the said period engaged in revolt against the colonial exploitation that existed in pre-independence times.

The artists too preferred the landscape of feudalistic narrative than talking about the capitalistic society as the essence of New Historicism also briefly spoke about how the art and literature were not mere foundations on which history built up, but also largely refashioned the present times and helped in forming opinion as the feudalism debate also brought forward. However, another major problem was the internal conflict between the feudal lords and the common masses. Thus the problem that was marked here was two-fold. Several peasant revolts after the 1857 war of independence stand as a testimony to the fact that the colonial power was being subjected to resistance. The most notable revolt was the "Fakir-Sannyasi" [6] rebellion against the East India Company. It occurred in the Murshidabad and Jalpaiguri regions of Bengal. These revolts arose from the inability of the headmen and Zamindars to pay religious taxes to the ascetics after the East India Company started extracting the *Diwani* from the landowners. Hence, there was a clash between the company and the Fakirs because the Company prevented them from entering the province to extract the money. The mention of this rebellion has also been found in Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's notable work, *Anandamath*. The distress of peasants, therefore, led to a rise of a narrative of ordeal that also helped in the acceleration of the Bengal Renaissance.

Protecting the interests of the people from the lower economic zone stood very important at that point in time. The Renaissance needed to center on the unheard trauma and needs of the unrepresented and downtrodden sections of the society. Like for all awakening, a struggle against the established norms was required in the form of the Renaissance. M.N. Roy believed that the Revolt of 1857 brought the final haul to the confusion that India was still under a feudal setup. He also mentioned that feudalism had been undermined by a "peaceful and gradual process" [7].

The Marxist jurisprudence of the Bengal Renaissance

The controversy with regards to Karl Marx's idea of the Renaissance in India is significant for a mention. He believed that India was still in the framework of the "Asiatic Mode of Production" [8]. The neutral observation in this regard could be that agriculture back then was the backbone of India's economy back then and the movement showed that there is a rise in the class of intellectuals who also tended the land and revolted around the sentiments of protection and care for the same land. Thus Marx believed nonetheless that the British educated Indian could actually bring about a change like moving the government from their seat and forming their own government. He also said, "England has to fulfill a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating, the annihilation of the Asiatic Society and the laying of the material foundation of Western society in Asia" [9].

Too much stress has been given to Marx's concept of the "regenerating role" [10] of the British in India and some wrong notions have followed from it. The theory of regeneration as held by Marx serves any purpose-to identify that the nation-state is slowly progressing and thus its progress means a new Renaissance. The regenerating role can be closely associated with the chain of historical transactions. This historical transaction serves in a way of bringing forth the progress of the times within a frame work of the past developments.

The role of the Brahma Samaj is to be seen from close

quarters to understand the formula by which the Bengal Renaissance operated. It was started by Raja Ram Mohan Roy on August 20, 1828. Tarachand Chakravarti was the first secretary. The problem with the movement was however with the hypocrisy in the people. The Tamil Brahmins would read the excerpts from the *Vedas* before a Brahmanical audience; the general audience could adhere to the Upanishads. The reading however before a Brahmanical audience was very much against the universality of the movement. The problem with any movement lies in the way in which ideas are preached and practiced and there is a huge gap between words and their actions. It has been recorded that H.L.V Derozio, who founded the "Young Bengal Movement" in close association with this, was critical of such people and especially of those who believed in idolatry but denounced it in the intellectual sphere. The Brahma Samaj was one such movement that was against the practice of idolatry.

Discourse in the latter part of the movement

After the departure of Ram Mohan Roy to England, the movement would have died a natural death had it not been for Devendranath Tagore. The *Vedas* were given a very important position by Tagore and hence the staunch Hindu character that it assumed came back, which was a hindrance in the way of the reawakening. Akshay Kumar Dutt however made sure that the movement did not assume a Hindu label. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar played a major role in bringing about widow remarriage and other developmental work. The second wave of the Brahma Samaj came with the joining of Keshub Chandra Sen who became the comrade to Devendranath Tagore and both of them went on a field tour to the presidencies in India thereby giving the movement a fresh air. However both of them were of different temperaments and hence the Brahma Samaj later split into the Adi Brahma Samaj led by the old man, and the Brahma Samaj of India led by the radical Keshub Chandra Sen. Sen took the charge of spreading the movement in the far West. After the segmentalization in the Samaj, Keshub Chandra and his followers could bring about some radical reform movements. They emphasized female emancipation, female education, and were against caste discrimination vehemently. Also, an important element was that Keshub Sen was the first non-Brahmin to take charge of one of the wings of the Samaj that was previously criticized for its Brahmanical outlook. The coming of the Indian Marriage Act of 1872 that advocated inter-caste marriage was one of the greatest achievements of Keshub Sen.

Religion and the Renaissance

However the religious beliefs that crept up later in the functions of the Samaj because of the inclusion of the Christian elements led to the diluting of the radical mindset of the workers. They believed in the ideas of sin, repentance, confession, prayer for the healing of the soul as basic principles to help them go on with the movement. Besides Hinduism, elements from Islam, Christianity, and other great religions were incorporated into their agenda. The Hindu idea of the "Bhakti " or Devotion and "Kirtan" or Spiritual Prayer was important for them. Vijaya Krishna Goswami, a Vaishnavite helped Keshub Sen to spread it among the Vaishnavites. Finally, Keshub incorporated religious and spiritual doctrines from all these religions thereby removing any kind of contradiction between

religion and practice as I have mentioned before. The idea of the "God in Conscience" and "God is Conscience" helped them to be motivated towards a better future. Thus he brought all these ideas of spiritual freedom under the term of *Navavidhan* or the "new doctrine". However, there was a huge difference that lurked among the followers of Keshub Sen. The problems were as stated- their demand for the introduction of a democratic constitution in the church was not conceded; they did not believe in the Divine Command or *Adesha*; thirdly they objected the marriage of Keshub's daughter to the prince of Cooch Behar which violated the provision of the Indian Marriage Act of 1872. Thus Keshub's followers left him later, to start the "Sadharan Brahma Samaj " in 1878. The new wing worked for more important issues like striving for a welfare state, independence, and democratic republicanism. Ananda Mohan Bose led the movement from here and strongly condemned the removal of Surendranath. Ananda Mohan Bose along with Surendranath later started the "Indian Association "(Bharat Shava) in 1876 of which Ananda Mohan became the first secretary.

This was a major step as it led to the growth of nationalist sentiments amongst the young workers of the association. What we need to look into for further development of the Brahma Movement are the articles and the periodicals that came out during this period. They mainly dealt with the emancipation of women and the laborers from the clutches of exploitation. The highly radical middle-class activists found a new motivation to work towards the welfare of the people and in a way that started the long struggle against our oppressors. The tea estates, the factories, the Indigo plantations, and the other workplaces that witnessed the worst form of torture had found their place in these writings. The most important among these writers were Sivnath Shastri, famous for his poem *Sramajibi*, translated as "laborers" where he does not only speak about their plight but also asks them to free themselves from their condition. Muzaffar Ahmed saw him as one of the first to organize a movement for the working class. Others like Dwarkanath Ganguly wrote in *Bengalee* and *Obolabandhob* and Ramkumar Vidyaratna wrote *Satyasrabar Assam Bhraman* and *Kuli Kahini* which speak about the laborers and coolies in the tea plantations of Assam. He wrote in *Bengalee*, "the position of the laborers in many tea gardens is almost as bad, if not worse, than the condition of the American Negro slaves before their emancipation ^[11]." I would also like to mention Dinabandhu Mitra's *Neel Darpan* (1858-59) which focuses on the plight of the Indigo planters in Bengal. Though it does not strictly fall under the new enlightenment, it is very important for the current discourse. H.L.V Derozio also played a significant role in being an upright liberal intellectual who contributed majorly to the literature of the era. His sonnet titled *To the Pupils of Hindu College* ^[12] holds a significance in broadly defining the necessity of the new voice and ideas in the face of an intellectual and cultural awakening:

"Expanding like the petals of young flowers
I watch the gentle opening of your minds.
And the sweet loosening of the spell binds,
Your intellectual energies and powers"

The narrative of gaps and failures

The Bengal Renaissance however had its gaps in the same

strength they had build their cultural empire on to form a narrative of defiance to the Western canon. The major failure of the Samaj however lies in the fact that the activists themselves could not really come out of their class consciousness and neither did the workers understand the importance of such a movement which was basically for them. The social and political reforms therefore could not lead to the freedom of the workers, women, and other subjugated classes of people. Economic stability could not be brought about by the movement and therefore the movement failed on grounds of effectiveness, but on ethical grounds, it definitely paved a way for people to carry forward the need for a Renaissance through reawakening.

The Problem that was also not addressed was the communal tension that existed in Bengal. The Hindu leaders of the Renaissance did not care about the financial problems of the Muslim peasants, the ill representation of the Muslims in the government offices among other places of public importance. With the Local Self Government Act (1815-87), the election procedure was confined to the Zamindars, leaders and government servants, and other important people of the local and district bodies who were generally Hindus. Thus there was ostracization of the Muslims. In spite of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar trying to combat these religious tensions with his social reforms, he was a lone soldier as the movement by then had already taken a religious shape and India's struggle for freedom was more religious than politically motivated. In this regard, he was a notable exception among the 19th-century social reformers. Thus, Vidyasagar gave the most secular voice in this struggle against social injustice and prejudices. However, he was also held by the liberals as someone who did not pay much heed to the peasants and their grievances and was concerned with only reforming the middle class to which he belonged. The problem with the leaders lay in the fact that they were class conscious and could not really bring the movement to the easy access of the poor masses, because the final outcome of the movement was a label that was given to these enlightened, intellectual activists called the *bhadrakols* or the "*respectable men*". Renaissance taught the men compromise, however, the inactivity later led to extremism in the Freedom Movement. The Gandhian philosophy however later shaped the Indian Political struggle and the breaking off before the compensation point which Gandhi proposed can be drawn as a parallel idea to that Ram Mohan used when he kick-started the Bengal Renaissance.

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay was one of those people who challenged the threats on religious sentiments with his intellectual prowess. His *Vandemataram* was a war cry in the face of oppression, the mantra that kept the nationalist movement alive. However he also could not bring out the universality of religious sentiments and through his works, revived Hinduism only. Aurobindo Ghosh is also to be mentioned when we talk about the Renaissance in Bengal. Aurobindo Ghosh says in his book *Nationalism in India*, "Perhaps there was too much of religion in one sense; the word is English, smacks too much of things external such as creeds, rites, external piety; there is no one Indian equivalent. But if we give rather a to religion the sense of the following of the spiritual impulse in its fullness and define spirituality as the attempt to know and live in the highest self, the divine, the all-embracing unity and to raise life in all its parts to the most divine possible values, then it

is evident that there was not too much of religion, but rather too little of it and in what there was, a too one-sided and therefore an insufficiently ample tendency."^[8] Hereby, the very essence of a history that served as the continuous train of event and sequencing the same failed in the course of archiving a body of historical narrative and literature and it failed to uphold the real set of events that have plagued the society for long. Thus the New Historical reading effectively enforces the real red flags in constructing a body of literature during the times of Bengal Renaissance, which definitely is not a real mirror of the society.

Conclusion

Thus understanding Renaissance as a solitary and objective social movement cannot be done. This idea is efficiently amplified through Greenblatt's theories of "*abjurations*" and "*generative principles*"^[14]. This only meant that the individual approach to one's own historicity cannot be the answer and the Bengal Renaissance has to be understood from the point of view of its failures because of the subjective connection to the past^[15]. The author cannot ignore the new beginning which is a result of the past grievances and desires and that the text or literature holds the desire, besides improving the society in which one desires. Thus the dichotomy is also well contained. The past of the Renaissance thus need not be re-ordered but the social energy must be re used to understand the trajectory from the history to the present, along with the failures of the movement that is Bengal Renaissance. The objective lies in such a discovery^[16].

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