

The 'Alternate Nation' in Abanindranath Tagore's *Khiner Putul*

Dr. Indrani Datta (Chaudhuri)

Assistant Professor,

Department of English,

Vidyasagar University

Email: indranidatta71@gmail.com

Abstract:

Many critics and scholars view Abanindranath Tagore's works, even his writings for children, as the representations of the nationalist art of colonial India that was created to counter the homogenous, linguistically unitary, monolithic Western nation-state. This article explores the 'heteroglossia' beneath the apparently seamless monolithic idea of the nation-state in Abanindranath's seminal work *Khiner Putul* in which the voiceless is given voice and the fabula is taken from folk art (lok Shilpa) and not the Sanskritised mainstream. The novel, meant for the education of children, betrays a palimpsest ideologue founded not merely on the essence of Hinduism but more firmly upon folk-cultures and folklores of various communities, regions and provinces. The text, I argue, has the potential to cut across caste and class that became vigorously entwined with the idea of the *Bharat Ma* as the embodiment of the nation. I read into the text a kind of cultural 'hybridity' that not only interrogates the virtual homogeneity of the nationalist nation-state but engages with the 'real' community called India. Here, the *dukhini* ma and the *banar* son remain as central as the prince and princesses of the fables and allegories of the country.

Key words:

Abanindranath Tagore, *Khiner Putul* (*Condensed Milk Doll*), Children's Literature, Prof. Debashish Banerji, 'Alternate Nation', Hybridity, Heteroglossia, Bengali novel for children.

At a time when colonized India was countering British imperialism with the newly formed concept of the *Bharat Ma*¹, a form of *Shakti*, that emerged as an antithesis to the Western concept of the homogenous nation-state, even children's literatures, containing folk and rural elements, contributed to the idea of a nation that would, upon gaining independence, rise above its own ashes to regain its glorious place in the world. It has now become possible for critics and scholars of these children's literatures to locate in them such porous sites that are open to a multiplicity of discourses having their own histories, epistemologies and ontologies. If the present was too shabby to be glorified, the legacies of the past were enough to add glory to the iconic representation of the nation which the Mother embodied. Like many other stories written for children Abanindranath Tagore's *Khiner Putul* (*Condensed Milk Doll*) creates an alternative to the Western nation-state in its espousal of a *dukhini* (poor and struggling) mother waiting to be rescued by her valiant sons. It is worth

mentioning, here, that Abanindranath Tagore was the first artist to paint the iconic painting of the *Bharat Ma*, with four hands like other Hindu deities, which can be defined as a representation of the 'alternate nation'².

Khirer Putul, a story written for children, like many other tales as in Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Thakurmar Jhuli*³, is a retelling of a culture-specific fairy tale in which a king has two wives, one good and the other bad. The older queen or *duo rani* is a simple woman who has disenfranchised her own desire and is living a marginalized life within the royal household. She has sacrificed her ambition and passion and all she prays for is the well-being of her husband, the king, the very same person who has thwarted her desires, has thrust her into the periphery and has replaced her with a beautiful young woman capable of gratifying his libido. She neither feels betrayed nor complains. She longs for that one day in a year when the king, quite dispassionately, would visit her modest home and would engage in a short and formal conversation with her. The younger and more seductive queen or *suo rani* occupies the central position in the royal palace and to her the probably middle-aged king has gifted his heart, his treasures and all his devotion. She embodies the realm of the forbidden, uncontrollable and uncontrolled desire sans any anxiety over not being able to deliver the heir-apparent. It is obvious that with her the king lives a sexually gratifying life. The king embarks upon a voyage and before going asks both the queens about the gift he would bring them. The *suo rani* demands precious ornaments and dresses which, when given to her, ill-fit her.

The turn in the story comes when the *duo rani*, upon the king's request, asks him to gift her a monkey. This gift is bestowed upon her and she raises the monkey as a son. The monkey (*banar*), unlike any human agent in the story, empathizes with the *duo rani* and, based on an understanding of the complexities of relationship between the king and his queens, advises his human mother to inform the king that she is going to provide him with a son, the heir to the throne. The *duo rani* at first protests, then accepts the advice and plays her role accordingly but takes an oath from the king that he would be able to see his son only on the day of the latter's wedding. The moment the king gets this news the picture of the entire household turns upside-down with the two queens changing places with each other. Upon hearing the news, the *suo rani* tries all her means to cause harm to the *duo rani* but, every time, the monkey who saves his adopted mother and restores her proper place in the palace. The clever monkey, then, in due time, asks the queen-mother to make a doll out of *kheer* (condensed milk) which would be wedded with a princess. By dint of a trick the monkey dupes "Shastithakuran"⁴, a localized, culture-specific Goddess of fertility, to eat the doll and, then, as a reward gets one of her sons. This son is then wedded to a nearby princess. The king becomes euphoric at having a son and

a daughter-in-law. He banishes the *suo rani* to perpetual oblivion and lives happily ever after with the newly formed family. The *banar* becomes not only an important member of the royal household but also the minister of the kingdom.

This text might be interpreted as an Orientalist⁵, and by extension a Hindu-nationalist, rendering of favourite and appreciative stereotypes like the self-sacrificing Indian mother, the virile and unfeeling father-king, the younger queen as the Lacanian as the *femme fatale* in the royal household, and of the exotic and ancient fable of a monkey (since natives were seen as descendants of apes in tandem with the Darwinian theory of evolution) controlling the private space of the ‘Other’ and the ‘Othered’ culture. It might also be interpreted as a native adaptation of the British fairy-tale of the ‘Ginger-bread Man’, with ethnic variations of course. The text, however, betrays a fact of the history-turned-myths of ineffective Indian monarchs furthering their pedigree by way of subcontracting their wives’ sexuality in lieu of an heir, definitely a son, and of the subaltern, represented by the monkey (*banar*), being included within the threshold. In this context, we can recollect how, in Ramayana, Rama and his brothers were born and how Hanuman turned into a God from a ‘sub-human’ species. We also know that one of the Indian *Puranic* tribes, the *Vanara*⁶, lived within dense forests from the time of the Ramayana and they have been described as monkeys or apes in some literatures.

In the introduction to *The Alternate Nation of Abanindranath Tagore* (2009), Prof. Debashish Banerji, while stating that “Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951) is recognized in mainstream histories as the founder of a ‘national’ school of early 20th-century Indian painting, known more commonly today as ‘the Bengal School’” contends that “the ‘national’ basis of this art, in its turn, has been read by several modern scholars as derived from Orientalist constructions of an Indian art history ...” (xv). Prof. Banerji argues against “such a perception” by drawing “a distinction between stereotypical and alternate forms of cultural nationalism in the process” (xv). Following his line of argument, I show that in Abanindranath’s *Khirer Putul* the central concern is not the normalization of nationalist or orientalist principles but is, to quote Prof. Banerji, “engaged in a process of hermeneutic negotiations between modernity and pre-modernity” (xvi) that ultimately gives rise to the concept of the ‘alternate nation’. This process Banerji theorises as an “alternate nationalism” (xvi). In this “alternate” vision of the nation the subaltern (both the *duo rani* and the *banar*) not only make place for themselves but help in forwarding the royal family-line of monarchs belonging to the mainstream culture by mingling their classical legacies with the masses, with those who remain on the periphery vis-a-vis the centre. The heir to the throne has neither any biological nor any ethnic connection with the king. The new prince has stepped out,

mysteriously, from *Shasti's* domain thus prioritizing the provincial and the folk-linguistic elements over the grand-narrative of the national imaginary.

Though postcolonial cultural studies on colonial India have partially conflated the complex movement of cultural politics, that is known as the Bengal Renaissance, by emphasizing hegemonic Orientalism as determinative in the production of homogenized models of nationalistic resistance and though they have reduced individuals, localized schools of discourse, regional, national and transnational movements into stereotypical collusive agents of Orientalism, it is now necessary to critique the intellectuals of the Bengal Renaissance as creative agents who had tried to produce cultural artefacts within inter-subjective contexts of community, locality, regionality and nationality. Their works engender an “alternate nationalism”. Often thought as an Orientalist construct by the follows of Edward Said, Bengal Renaissance is a much more complex movement that was geared not only towards a national identity but also cultural and linguistic identities that were regional and provincial in nature. There was, however, no absolutist doxa that critics often link to “Swami Vivekananda’s Neo-Vedantic inclusivism” and to “Bankimchandra’s Neo-Tantric invocations of unconditional surrender at the altar of the nation envisioned in the image of the Mother Goddess” (Banerji xix). The ruptures within the apparently homogenous and homogenized movement show that it posed a challenge to stereotyping India in the pan-Indian mode with monolithic structures yoked together by an illogical force that was given the nomenclature of ‘Hindutva’. Thus, the cultural and revolutionary politics that constitute the discourse of the Bengal Renaissance should be and ought to be read more carefully in their regional and communitarian contexts as distinct from the national ones.

In *Khiner Putul* the locus of the “alternate nation” is created by a number of distinct domains ranging from the fairy-tale (*rup-katha*) to the allegory and the fable. On the one hand it charts an indigenous discursive field of Bengali folk-culture and on the other it fashions a communitarian dialogic space within the discourse of modernity. Prof. Banerji writes that in Abanindranath’s “art” there is also a “challenge to factual history posed by interpretive ambiguities of allegory and fable” (xxx). He quotes Benodebehari Mukherjee who, in turn, quoted the artist saying “if words were pictures spoken, where sound weld themselves into form, then painting is story in form (*rup-katha*) told by color and line” (xxx). Banerji adds: “The word *rup-katha*, which the artist uses in Bengali, can better be translated as fairy-story, fable or allegory” (xxx). Such text less of “a standardized nationalist canon”, rather it is “an open-ended exploration of allegorical and untold possibilities within a mythic terrain...” (xxx).

This kind of fable or allegory turned history of the nation has a fluidity to incorporate change and new additions and, hence, nurtures the possibility of retelling as opposed to the grand narrative of “history as a national myth” (xxx) which is closed to mutability. The traditional Indian *rup-katha* of ‘a king having two queens, one good (*duo*) and one bad (*suo*)’, re-worked within the framework of the folk-fable of monkey-son (*banar-putra*) and in the context of localized cultural practices (as of the *Shasti* myth and the problematic of producing a male heir to the throne), focuses on the “creative and performative social choices” which exist “outside of and alongside the institutional space of the emerging nation-state”. Representations of such subjectivity are deliberately ambiguous in their reprioritization of regional discourse(s) and exploration of untranslatable liminalities and refractions arising from the pre-modern past embedded in oral and folk cultures.

As the author of this fiction Abanindranath seems to swivel between his elite *bhadralok* identity and his passion for the *kathak / kathashilpi*⁷ (some kind of a minstrel in folk culture). He engages with the cultural dichotomies of an alien civilization in the stereotyping of the ‘Other’ (the *banar* as also the *suo rani*) yet, at the same time, operates from within the liminal layer of the native society by acting as an informant of indigenous allegories, fables, myths and norms. In order to understand such representations that have exercised an ambiguous relationship with the connotations of Orientalism a disciplined avoidance of mono-cultural readings is absolutely necessary. As Prof. Debashish Banerji argues:

The textual serves less the function of the monumentalization of standardized nationalist canon than an open-ended exploration of the allegorical and untold possibilities within a mythic terrain, still wrapped in ambiguity and inviting the reader to extend them in new directions. In this we may recognize the difference between history as national myth as against history as fable and allegory. National myths populate the national imaginary with crystallized images which impress themselves through repetition into the canonical fixity of facts; fables and allegories belong to a popular communitarian fluidity which appropriates the “facts” of history into lived spaces and times in the collective experience of locality, infusing them with a creative ambiguity which lends itself to reconstitution with changing experience. Thus, allegories, in this sense are stories which are not patented, not authored or authorized, and which yield themselves to change in the retelling. Abanindranath often uses canonical texts of Orientalist or nationalist discourse, juxtaposing these with images and thereby setting a dialectic between the two, which effects a commerce between imagined and lived communities, humanizing the abstract spaces of Orientalist and nationalist stereotypes. (xxx)

A postcolonial reading of Abanindranath's *Khirer Putul* might reproduce the Saidian perspective of the nationalist voice being an extension of the Orientalist. But building upon the ideas of Wilhelm Halbfass⁸ who has examined the Bengal Renaissance not as a dialectic but as a dialogue between fragmentary, disruptive, open-ended voices that longed to survive through innovation and not through the construction of another monolith, I critique *Khirer Putul* not through the Saidian binary of the Orientalist and its 'Other' in the nationalistic enterprise but through a dialogic attempt to see the text as an instrument used to initiate the young mind into an alternation concept of the nation. Disagreeing with the followers of Edward Said, Halbfass has argued that the notion of a Hindu "tradition" was a nineteenth century Orientalist construct, rather a (mis)understanding which now reveals an inadequate study of the history of self-identification in India. Taking the cue from Halbfass Prof. Banerji argues that the political and cultural context that went into the making of the elitist *bhadralok* Abanindranath should be interpreted through "the hermeneutics of hybridity" arising out of "intersecting domains of culture" (xxxix). Such contextualizing alone can reveal the intimate dialogic negotiation, intrinsic to folk art, which goes on in *Khirer Putul* between the *kathak/kathashilpi* and the reader/hearer. It is a negotiation that "works against the isolated specialization of modern writers rooted in European Enlightenment" and poses a "challenge to factual history" (xxxix) through the interpretative ambiguities of allegory and fable.

The issue of hybridity in Abanindranath's works can be addressed through Bhabha's concept of the "interstitial space" and of the subjectivity fashioned out of that space. Homi Bhabha has introduced the conception of 'hybridity'⁹ in order to elucidate more effectively the subtleties and their effects of the colonizer-colonized relationship. By challenging straight-forward Orientalist readings Bhabha re-evaluates this relationship and its conflicting nature which betrays the fact that this relationship is not as simple as the Saidian binary of the Us/They. Thus, the Orient is approached, on the one hand, through systematic acquisition of knowledge for its mastery, and on the other, as paranoia and fantasy in its irreducible alterity. Thus, the general act of imitation or mimicry on the part of the colonized becomes an anonymous destabilizing agent for the colonizer and thus lodges in itself the potential for anti-colonial resistance. If imitation haunts with its otherness, hybridity explicates the source of subversion by estranging identity through the sunken or denied aspects of the 'Other'. Mikhail Bakhtin precedes Bhabha as a modern theorist of hybridity and its political implications. For Bakhtin Bhabha's subversive hybridity was deliberate. Contrasted to this Bakhtin identified another type of hybridity which he defined as "organic" (Quoted by Banerji xl). Bakhtin's view is that this

“organic” hybridity which is open to changes of language and other kinds of mutations, in turn, gives rise to “heteroglossia”¹⁰. It is this “heteroglossia” that becomes evident in Abanindranath’s *Khirer Putul*.

Such “hybridity” of a colonized elite like Abanindranath comes out in his text through disruptive forces embodied by the *duo rani* on the one hand and the *banar* on the other. Both are the underdogs in an otherwise high-class, apparently homogenous, culture. But both are the most important agencies that work hand in hand to constitute the emerging nation. This kind of work is constantly engaged in arenas of transgression, translation and negotiation. These pasts of the nation are, nevertheless, present in the inter-subjective realities of both the imagined (nation, continent, world) and the lived (the home, region) communities, co-existing and converging different urban sites in India during the Bengal Renaissance. And these are presented in Abanindranath’s lived inter-subjective experiences and form the multivalency of the *bhadralok-kathak* in his work.

Kher Putul, then, becomes a hybridic dialogic site of this multivalence and ‘multi-consciousness’¹¹. Instead of structuring the nation as a monolith it reveals the inherent pluralism and plurality that is present in the real nation called India. It is true that Abanindranath, during the Swadeshi period in particular, excavated the sources of Sanskrit classicism as a normative knowledge, but these are rarely structured to form a monolithic national history or the grand infallible grand narrative of the nation. In other words, it is true that Abanindranath deliberately avoids the delineation of any unitary racial or ethnic reading. As Prof. Banerji states, his textual space is “more of a hybrid *heteroglossia* of related cultures with different histories attempting to unite at the communitarian level through dialogic creative agency and affective *communitas*” (xxiii) than an imagined homogenized national myth. *Khirer Putul*, then, turns out to be a fairy-tale in which Abanindranath juxtaposes nationalist archetypes with localized and culture-specific folk elements. In the end what is fashioned out is an “alternate” national allegory, one that shows an on-going praxis of “mutually transformative hermeneutics” which could not/cannot be restricted to a nationalistic power struggle achieving its end with the birth of a nation-state. Apart from it being a story meant for children *Khirer Putul* emerges as a critique of the West-centric concept of the monolithic nation-state viewed as a prime institutional site of modernity as also of cultural hegemony.

The rationale behind Abanindranath’s infusion of such subversive “alternate” vision of the national in a story meant to be read by/heard by children is to educate future citizens with fact and not fictionalized history. I argue that, since linguistic signs initiate the child into the Lacanian symbolic order with the aid of archetypal

images, Abanindranath's story attempts to lead the child into an alternate archetypal vision of the nation as opposed to the monolithic Sanskritised, classical construct of the Orientalists and their opponent Nationalists. This "alternate nation" is fraught with conflicting histories, mutable borders, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural pluralism and yet it is bound together by that voice of the *kathak* (as the *lokshilpi* or folk artist) who derives his sustenance from the populace of folk culture as well as of the subalterns. If the *Bharat Mata* is the paradigm of an imagined community called pan-India, then, the actual 'dukhini Maa' (the *duo rani* in *Khiner Putul*), residing inside millions of rural homes, is neither a figment of imagination or part of an 'imagined community'¹² but is the archetypal image of that 'real' conglomeration of diverse and plural geo-political provinces and regions that we call our India. About such cultural diversity, Françoise Král states:

It is precisely when a culture cannot be compared to others, when its singularity and difference asserts themselves more powerfully than the similarities with our own culture that we are on to something, that we start to grasp cultural differences, not the essence but the existence of cultural diversity. (25)

Notes:

¹ This concept was first forwarded by Bankimchandra as the iconic representation of the Mother Goddess as the nation. In this concept was entwined the image of Devi Durga and her strength as the ten Shakti Goddesses who nurture, protect, preserve and destroy, if necessary, Nature and the entire Universe inclusive of humanity.

² In his seminal book on Abanindranath Tagore's paintings, titled *The Alternate Nation*, Prof. Debashish Banerji propounds the concept of Abanindranath's painting of an "alternate nation" as an antithesis to the homogenized, monolithic structure of the European nation-state and its offshoot in the similarly monolithic nation of Hindu *Rashtra* nurtured by the extremist group of freedom fighters during the colonial rule in India.

³ This is a collection of folktales for children, highly popular for its innovative application of normative values within the structure of the folk-lore. There are many stories in this book about a king having two queens, *duo rani* and *suo rani*, the second being a *rakshashi* (demon) in disguise.

⁴ Possibly a localized folk-deity of Bengal worshipped as the Goddess of fertility. Her pet animal is the cat. She is worshipped by women, especially married, through her *brata* and there are several interesting *bratakothas* to eulogize her power and geniality.

⁵ As "the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony" (5), in *Orientalism* Edward Said has argued:

As a discipline representing institutionalized Western knowledge of the Orient, Orientalism ... comes to exert a three-way force, on the Orient, on the Orientalist, and on the Western consumer of Orientalism. It would be

wrong ... to underestimate the strength of the three-way relationship thus established. For the Orient (“out there” towards the East) is corrected, even penalized, for lying outside the boundaries of European society, “our” world; the Orient is thus *Orientalized*, a process that not only marks the Orient as a province of the Orientalist but also forces the uninitiated Western reader to accept Orientalist codifications ... as the *true* Orient. Truth, in short, becomes a function of learned judgment, not the material itself, which in time seems to owe even its existence to the Orientalist. (67).

⁶ *Vanara* were supposed to be a tribe found in parts of the forests of South Asia, particularly South India. Many critics and scholars trace the lineage to the time of the *Ramayana* and is related to King *Sugriv* and his generations. *Vanara*, thus, is not equivalent to the monkey, rather they were forest dwellers staying away from urban-life and ought to be read metaphorically. They were also seen as a highly intelligent group of people.

⁷ This opens the text up to orality and oral culture which is fluid, open to mutability and change.

⁸ Wilhelm Halbfass is known for his interrogation and oppositional readings of Orientalism. Though he was primarily engaged in philosophical and religious thought, he saw the “selective acceptance of Orientalist ideas by Bengali Hindu thinkers, such as Vivekananda, as dialogic strategies aimed at a mutually transformative enterprise of survival through innovation” (Banerji xxi).

⁹ The concept of hybridity in the colonizer-colonized relationship was introduced by Homi K. Bhabha in order to understand the working of this relationship suitably. This concept interrogates the simplistic Orientalist binary of US/They and contends that such relationship is not as straight-forward as it is seen and is more contentious where “hybridity” not only explains the source of the subversion but also betrays the destabilization of the colonizer’s identity/ This, Bhabha argues, is one of the foundations of colonialism.

¹⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin argues that “heteroglossia” is brought through a codified and/or stratified diversity that exists within the apparently homogenous concept of the nation-state. It is integrated but shows a conglomerate of a plurality of cultures where each culture struggles to survive and express itself against the “posited unitary language” of the nation.

¹¹ By using Stuart Hall’s concept of the “politics of identity” as the “politics of position” (226), Françoise Král asserts that the “multi-situatedness of diaspora implies a duplication of patterns of referentialities, whereby a ‘multi-consciousness’ becomes not only possible but highly probable (15). Taking the cue from Král I argue, here, that the same kind of ‘multi-consciousness’ develops in a pluralistic culture and it was Abanindranath’s aim to highlight both the pluralism and the multi-consciousness that is created as a result.

¹² The “imagined community” (25), a concept developed by Benedict Anderson, in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983) states that a nation is a community socially constructed, that is, it is imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group. Anderson states that the “novel and the newspaper” provided/provides the “technical means for ‘re-presenting’ the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation” (25). An imagined community is different from an actual community because it is not (and cannot be) based on quotidian face-to-face interaction between its members. Instead, members hold in their minds a mental image of their

affinity. Imagined communities can be seen as a form of social constructionism on a par with Edward Said's concept of imagined geographies. Anderson is not hostile to the idea of nationalism nor does he think that nationalism is obsolescent in a globalizing world. He sees the novel (literatures by extension) as "clearly a device for the presentation of simultaneity in 'homogeneous, empty time,' or a complex gloss upon the word 'meanwhile'" (25).

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