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Unveiling Classical Reverberations in the Epic Narrative Poems of Michael Madhusudan Dutt – A Bicentennial Homage

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Abstract

Michael Madhusudan Dutt, a key figure in 19th-century Bengali literature, transformed the literary landscape with his epic narrative poems, merging classical Indian themes with Western literary traditions. This paper, written as a bicentennial tribute, examines the classical reverberations in Dutt's major works, such as Meghnad Badh Kavya, Veerangana Kavya, Tilottama Sambhava Kavya *and* Brajangana. *Drawing from the* Ramayana, Mahabharata, *and other classical Indian epics, Dutt reinvents traditional narratives of heroism, divine intervention, and love, reimagining them through a modern poetic lens. The paper examines how Dutt reinterprets classical themes—valor, divine intervention, duty, and love—through a modern lens, infusing them with emotional depth, tragedy, and an intense exploration of human psyche and devotion. Dutt's utilization of Sanskritic diction and poetic meter, alongside his adoption of Romantic literary techniques, exemplifies his profound command over both classical and contemporary modes of expression.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Michael Madhusudan Dutt was born during a period of significant linguistic and cultural transition in colonial Bengal. With the decline of Persian as the language of administration following the British consolidation of power, English emerged as the new medium of official and educational discourse. Dutt's father, Rajnarain Dutt, a successful lawyer, relocated the family to Calcutta to ensure access to English education, enrolling Madhusudan in an English-medium institution. In 1837, Dutt entered Hindu College, where the intellectual legacy of Henry Derozio still influenced the students. He became a Macaulayan Archetype; a direct product of this colonial education policy-someone who not only absorbed English language and literature but also internalized British literary aesthetics. His has a Byronic impression in his early writings, reflect romantic sensibilities and a nascent patriotism, illustrating the complex interplay between colonial education and emerging nationalist sentiment. He followed Ovid and composed his poems in blank verse or amitrakṣara

The Epic Narrative Poems of Michael Madhusudan Dutt:

As a profound learner and a polyglot, he knew English, Bengali, Hebrew, Latin, Greek, Tamil, Telugu, and Sanskrit. Deeply influenced by

Dante Alighieri, his narrative poems have spiritual regeneration, storytelling and justice as classical themes. His narrative poems include- *Tilottama Sambhava Kavya* (1860), *Meghnad Badh Kavya* (1861), *Brajagana Kavya* (1861) and *Veerangana Kavya* (1861).

Having read the Bengali version of *Mahabharata* by Kashiram Das, his interest towards narrative poems started developing. His ***Veerangana Kavya*** (*Birangana Kabya)* started a new literary trend of response-letter poems or reply poems-Uttara. First epistle of this epic is *Apurva Birangana* has voice of Kaikeyi to Dasharatha, featuring Kaikeyi's fierce and unflinching critique of King Dasharatha—particularly in response to his efforts to establish Ramrajya. Translated as:

Speaker of untruth, the Father of the Raghu race!
Shameless! He breaks his vows with such great ease
His mouth spouting words of dharma, he progresses on an immoral path.
If words that are not appropriate leave the mouth of
Kaikeyi, come now and cut off her head,
O King, or rub her face with lime and charcoal
(Dutt 1861)

Though *Veerangana Kavya* may, at first glance, appear as a poetic reimagining of voices drawn from Hindu mythology and epic lore, its soul bears the unmistakable imprint of nineteenth-century's domestic life—particularly the cloistered world of women. Beneath its mythic veneer lies a stirring undercurrent of protest and introspection, echoing the silenced sorrows and unvoiced desires of an era. In this remarkable sequence of imagined letters, Michael Madhusudan Dutt gives voice to the oft-forgotten or marginalised heroines of sacred texts—figures such as Shakuntala, Kaikeyi, Draupadi, and Jona—who write not with meek devotion, but with boldness, wit, and pain. Their words, brimming with grief, yearning, satire, and accusation, pierce the veil of tradition to question the very structures of patriarchy that bind them.

As an epistle of ***Veerangana Kavya*** he wrote *Dhritarashtrer Prati Gandhari* which covers the story of Gandhari and her decision to blind herself because of her marriage to a sightless king, Dhritrashtra. Her drastic step was lamented through the central character in the later part of the verses. Dutt's passion as a writer is reflected in his character of Gandhari, yearning for identity and dissociation from worldly aesthetics. He introduced Humanism, a trait of Reniassance in his work through Gandhari, shifting human from periphery to centre. In *Arjuner Prati Draupadi*, Dutt has showed love and worries of Draupadi as a wife of Arjun. She recalls her Swayamvara Sabha, act of choosing a groom in which Arjun, a dusky complexioned and lotus-eyed warrior performed wonders to win her. Dutt's depiction of Draupadi is dissimilar to Vedavyas's, as he uses epical traits of tender and dutiful wife, distinctive of a Bengali woman. Translated as:

Without the company of Arjuna whose dusky complexion is just like a cloud saturated with water and who is as vigourous as a must elephant and whose eyes are as beautiful as lotus, this Kamyaka forest is not befitting enough to allure myself. (Dutt 1861)

Dutt's peom re-narrate women of epics by emerging not as passive symbols, but as articulate, bold and impassioned beings. They lament betrayal, interrogate male authority, and mock the gods and kings who abandoned them. Poem begins as an epistolary engagement with myth becomes a resonant critique of contemporary gender norms. Thus, while the form clings to the familiar robes of epic and Puraṇic tradition, the spirit of Kavya pulses with the rebellious breath of the nineteenth-century women. It is a luminous confluence of the classical and the contemporary—a poetic canvas where ancient heroines speak in voices startlingly modern.

For instance, in *Apurva Birangana* a letter from Kubja to Krishna has the story when Rukmini pens a heartfelt letter to Dwarakanath Krishna, fervently pleading to be taken away by him, not as a captive, but of her own volition. Another includes a letter from Supnakha to Lakshman; Surpanakha, captivated by the indifferent beauty of Lakshmana, writes to him. Michael, at the very outset of this letter, appeals to his readers to disassociate Surpanakha's horrific, disfigured image—so often portrayed in the

Ramayana—from their perceptions. Surpanakha, in Michael's portrayal, is both passionately fervent and wholly devoted.

In another striking tale, Tara—the wife of the sage Brihaspati—enchanted by the ethereal beauty of his disciple, Somadeva (likened to the moon itself), sheds all hesitation to confess her physical longing to one whom she had once regarded as a son.

Tilottamasambhab (1860) is a narrative poem about Sunda and Upasunda. It was the first Bengali poem written in blank verse to gain such critical acclaim. This included two social satires and colloquial Bengali dialogues, portraying his experimentations, which in turn uplifted the Bengali poetry all together. "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..." (Chaudhari 2008)

This work represents a major milestone in the evolution of modern Bengali literature, particularly due to Dutt's innovative use of blank verse—a form he introduced to Bengali poetics. Drawing upon classical Sanskrit mythology, the poem reimagines the story of the demon brothers Sunda and Upasunda, whose intense rivalry culminates in tragedy through their infatuation with the celestial nymph Tilottama. The narrative centers on the myth from the Mahabharata, wherein Sunda and Upasunda, blessed with immense power, become threats to cosmic order. In response, the gods create Tilottama, an enchantingly beautiful apsara, to sow discord between them. Dutt's rendering of the tale is not a mere retelling but a nuanced literary treatment that blends classical myth with Romantic and tragic elements.

Tilottama, though a divine creation, is portrayed with both ethereal allure and symbolic gravitas, functioning as a catalyst for the brothers' downfall. Stylistically, the poem is distinguished by its use of blank verse—a radical departure from the traditional rhymed and metered forms prevalent in Bengali poetry of the time. Dutt's employment of this metrical innovation allowed for greater expressive freedom and narrative sophistication, thereby aligning Bengali literature more closely with European literary traditions, particularly those of Milton and Shakespeare, whose works Dutt deeply admired. Moreover, Tilottama Sambhav engages with broader themes such as desire, power, jealousy, and the inevitability of fate. The poem underscores the destructive potential of unbridled ambition and passion, while also exploring the fragility of human (and even divine) resolve in the face of temptation. The poem's cultural and literary significance is further accentuated by its historical context. Presented to Raja Bahadur Sir Joteendranath Tagore in 1860, it symbolizes the intellectual ferment of the Bengal Renaissance—a period marked by profound engagement with both Indian traditions and Western literary forms.. It exemplifies Michael Madhusudan Dutt's pioneering role in modernizing Bengali poetry, not only through formal experimentation but also through a reconfiguration of classical themes to reflect contemporary sensibilities.

The First Canto presents a richly symbolic and vividly imagistic depiction of a Himalayan mountain named Khaval, which functions as both a physical entity and a spiritual metaphor. The mountain is described in exalted terms—"sky-high," "divine-souled," and "unmoving"—evoking classical descriptions of the Himalayas as the sacred abode of Lord Śiva, the supreme yogi. Its natural features—snow-covered peaks, forests, flowers, and vines—serve not as symbols of beauty or sensual pleasure, but as extensions of its ascetic stillness and divine indifference to worldly life. Lines from Canto-1 is translated as-

> On the head of the Himalayas, the mountain named Khaval - Sky-high, divine-souled, and fearsome to behold. Always white-clad, unmoving, and steadfast; As if ever upraised arms, auspiciously adorned, Immersed in the sea of penance, the trident-bearing ascetic - The yogi meditated upon by the assembly of yogis. Groves, forests, Rows of trees, vines, buds, flowers - All that adorn the unmoving forehead of the mountain

Thematically, the passage aligns with classical Sanskrit literary and Purāṇic traditions, where the Himalayas often serve as a site of tapas (penance) and spiritual transcendence. In Kālidāsa's Kumārasambhavam, for instance, the Himalaya is personified as Himavān, the

father of Pārvatī and host to Śiva's austere meditations. The mountain, "white with snow and motionless," is depicted as a site of purity and renunciation, much like Khaval in the current passage (Kālidāsa 1.1–1.5). Similarly, the Śiva Purāṇa describes Mount Kailāsa as Śiva's divine dwelling—remote, serene, and inaccessible to beings bound by desire (Dimmitt and van Buitenen 167).

Notably, the absence of birds, bees, and wild animals—creatures typically associated with instinct and pleasure—underscores the spiritual isolation of the space. This motif of detachment (vairāgya) reflects a core tenet of yogic and ascetic ideals, where liberation is achieved through renunciation of sensual engagement and immersion in meditation. The mountain becomes a personified yogi itself, echoing Śiva's own role as the meditating ascetic, worshipped by sages and yogis alike.

It integrates natural imagery with metaphysical symbolism to elevate the Himalayas as not just a geographical entity but a sacred, mythopoetic space where the ideals of self-restraint, divine detachment, and spiritual mastery converge.

The Fourth Canto of the poem captures a striking tableau that exemplifies Dutt's vision of epic grandeur, martial valor, and mythic transcendence. Drawing upon classical motifs such as the heroic catalogue, divine ornamentation, and battlefield recollection, this canto reflects not only the narrative techniques of the Mahākāvya genre but also Dutt's conscious engagement with the epic as a tool of cultural and literary synthesis in colonial India.

The canto opens with a scene of serene intimacy—a woman, presumably a divine or noble figure, is seated on a lotus with her beloved, her ears adorned with blue lotus clusters. The image suggests tranquility and grace but is quickly offset by the sudden emergence of martial imagery: swords shine "like the sun's rays," and shields appear "like a dense forest within a cluster of clouds." This duality—between sensual calm and impending conflict—is a hallmark of epic structure, where personal intimacy exists alongside collective duty and cosmic stakes (Dutt).

As the scene develops, the warrior camp becomes the site of narrative reminiscence. The warriors recount previous feats in battle: one claims to have struck Yama, the god of death, with a mace and driven him away; another boasts of having pierced the trunk of a war elephant with an arrow. These acts transcend human capacity and situate the characters in the semi-divine realm, akin to the heroes of the Mahābhārata, where figures like Arjuna and Karṇa regularly challenge gods and supernatural forces. Such boasting, or epic aristeia, is a common device in narrative epics, used to glorify individual heroism and establish martial identity. Similar techniques are found in Homer's Iliad, where warriors recount or perform acts of valor before and during battle (Nagy 102–04).

Dutt further reinforces the epic mode through the catalogue technique, a hallmark of Sanskrit and Western epic traditions. The listing of weapons, armor, and divine insignia—like the "Devaravi-crest"—serves both to aestheticize war and to sacralize the warriors. In classical Sanskrit kāvya, catalogues function not only to amplify grandeur but to reinforce dharma and cosmic order (Pollock 237–40). Here, they elevate the warriors beyond mere mortals, casting them as embodiments of celestial force and sacred duty.

This canto also highlights the epic setting of liminality. The battlefield camp, much like the Achaean camp in The Iliad or the Pandava encampment in the Mahābhārata, exists in a temporal and spatial threshold—between peace and war, speech and action, the earthly and the divine. Dutt's camp is a narrative site of anticipation, memory, and myth-making. The recounting of past deeds, display of divine weapons, and donning of sacred ornaments emphasize the performative and ritualistic aspects of war, where the battlefield is not merely a political stage but a cosmic theater.

What distinguishes Dutt's work is not only his adaptation of epic conventions but his use of those conventions to articulate an Indian literary modernity. Writing in a colonial context and drawing on both Sanskrit and European epic forms, Dutt reclaims the authority of Indian myth for a modern readership. As Sudipta Kaviraj argues, Dutt "sought to recreate an epic imagination that could rival Milton and

Kalidasa, simultaneously claiming the prestige of both traditions" (Kaviraj 185). The Fourth Canto, therefore, becomes a site of literary negotiation, where the heroic past is resurrected not just for narrative pleasure but for cultural assertion. Lines from Canto-4 is translated as-

Seated on a lotus seat with her beloved,

Adorning her earlobes with blue lotus clusters.
Swords gleam in heaps, like the sun's rays
Erupting like fire, shields in rows, like a dense forest within a cluster of clouds.

Bows, arrows, countless. Trident-shaped helmets everywhere.

Surrounded by them, Hundreds of warriors engaged in conversation. He who was turned away in fierce battle, Speaks of that. (Dutt 1860)

Meghnad Badh (1861), an epic on the Rāmāyaṇa theme. Meghnad Badh Kavya illustrates Michael Madhusudan Dutt's synthesis of classical Sanskrit epic tradition with Western poetic style, particularly the Miltonic epic form. The poet begins with a deeply personal and devotional invocation to the goddess Saraswati, positioning himself as a humble and undeserving devotee seeking divine inspiration. His emphasis on the goddess's special compassion for even the least gifted of her children metaphorically reflects his own insecurities and aspirations as a poet writing in a newly emerging literary idiom. Translated as:

Yet, to the child devoid of virtue or grace,

Whose mind is dim—more tender still
Is the mother's love for him.
So, have mercy, O Universal Mother!
I shall sing, bathed in the valorous spirit,
A mighty song—grant me, Mother, your shadow beneath your feet.

And you too, come, O Goddess of Fancy—
Madhu-kari of the poet's grove!
Gather nectar from the blooming forest of imagination,
And weave a honeycomb of verse
That the sons of Bengal may drink in joy,
Ambrosia without end. (Dutt 1861)

The passage then transitions to a grand, visual description of Ravana's court, rendered in highly ornate and imagistic language. This section is notable for its vivid visuality, baroque detail, and symbolic richness. Dutt constructs a lavish setting—"a court of unmatched splendor built of crystal"—embellished with gems, lotus motifs, and richly adorned pillars that allude to cosmic harmony and divine order. The architecture and decor evoke the grandeur of mythical or divine realms, reinforcing Ravana's elevated status, not merely as a demon king, but as a complex, majestic figure rooted in epic dignity.

Furthermore, the poet uses similes drawn from both Indian and Western traditions—e.g., comparing the pillars to the thousand-hooded serpent (Shesha), or imagining himself as a parasol-bearer in Ravana's court—to interweave Indian mythological references with a Romantic, self-reflexive voice. There is also an underlying irony when the speaker, overwhelmed by the vision of Ravana's magnificence, expresses both awe and self-effacement, humorously fearing punishment for imagining himself worthy of that royal presence.

The presence of mythological figures such as Rudra (Shiva) as a gatekeeper, and the eternal spring breeze filled with birdsong, signals a poetic fusion of the celestial and terrestrial, suggesting that the court of Lanka mirrors or perhaps even transcends the imagined heavens. Through this, Dutt elevates the Rakshasa (demon) world from its traditional vilification in the Ramayana to a more nuanced, majestic portrayal. Translated as:

One holds the royal parasol aloft—
Ah, let not the fire of Shiva's wrath burn me
For daring to dream myself that parasol-bearer
In that glorious assembly! At the gates stand fearsome doorkeepers—
Like Rudra at the gates of the Pandava camp,
Trident and spear in hand! (Dutt 1861)

In *Meghnad Badh Kavya*, Michael Madhusudan Dutt subverts traditional epic conventions by imbuing the Rakshasas with profound humanistic qualities, often surpassing those attributed to the ostensibly righteous figures of Rama and his army. The character of Meghnad (Indrajit) emerges as a true epic hero, defined not only by his martial prowess but also by his emotional depth, loyalty, and ethical conviction. He exhibits a dignified pride in his Rakshasa

heritage, displays genuine affection for his wife, and adheres unwaveringly to the heroic code of honour and national duty.

Dutt foregrounds the moral complexity of his characters, particularly through Meghnad's commitment to the collective good of his people, even in the face of ideological and martial opposition. This perspective is crystallized in the lines from Canto VI (ll. 584–86): *"Shastre bole, gunaban jodi/ porojon, gunoheen swojon, tathapi/ nirgun swajan sreyo, poroh poroh sada!"* Translated: "The scriptures say, even if others are more virtuous than our own, we must always side with our own kin, and however flawed they may be." This passage reflects a deeply rooted ethical stance grounded in communal loyalty and a sense of identity that transcends individual merit.

Through such portrayals, Dutt challenges the binary of good and evil typically found in the *Ramayana* tradition, offering instead a nuanced vision of heroism that emphasizes moral ambiguity, cultural pride, and human empathy. In doing so, he repositions the Rakshasas not as mere antagonists, but as complex, valorous beings capable of deep emotional and ethical engagement.

Brajangana (1861) is a cycle of lyrics on the devotion, spirituality and emotional depth based on Radha and Krishna. This resplendent poem, rich in devotion and longing, is a vivid tapestry woven with the threads of divine love, eternal yearning, and spiritual separation. At its heart, Brajangana breathes life into the poignant and sacred love between Radha and Krishna, portraying Radha's deep, soulful ache in the absence of her beloved Krishna. With masterful elegance, Dutt paints Radha's heartache as a reflection of the soul's infinite yearning for divine union. Her longing transcends mere mortal desire, becoming a spiritual quest, an unspeakable devotion that defies the boundaries of the earthly realm. Through this stirring narrative, the poet illuminates the aching beauty of unfulfilled love, where every beat of Radha's heart echoes with the profound sorrow of separation.

Dutt's genius lies not only in his exploration of love's emotional depth but also in his ability to elevate the eternal theme of spiritual devotion. His language, lush and evocative, elevates the story beyond the mundane, transforming it into an ode to the divine that transcends time and space. Brajangana is not merely a tale of unrequited love; it is a testament to the power of the soul's devotion and the relentless, almost tragic, pursuit of the divine. In this remarkable work, Dutt marks a new chapter in Bengali literature, blending classical themes with the emotional intensity of personal devotion, thus forging a path toward a more expressive, modern literary voice. His Brajangana endures as a luminous beacon in the landscape of Bengali poetry, a timeless meditation on love, separation, and spiritual transcendence.

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