Title: The Counter-Culture of *Abol Tabol* Relative to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's Idea of Nation-Building

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It is a great pleasure that the Department of Rabindra Sangit, Dance and Drama, Sangit Bhavana, Visva-Bharati, has invited us to publish selected paper of the conference **"CREATIVE-2024: A Long Journey Begins"** held on 26 to 27 March 2024 at Sangit Bhavana, Visva-Bharati. We are honoured that Mohan Kumaran P., Associate Professor of Kathakali Dance, Department of RSDD, has kindly consented to edit and Dr. Mrityunjay Prabhakar, Assistant Professor, Department of RSDD co-edit the issue AUTUMN EDITION'24 of *Thespian Magazine*. The issue is peer-reviewed by esteemed academicians from different universities, and the department conducted the peer review process.

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The Counter-Culture of *Abol Tabol* Relative to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's Idea of Nation-Building

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Abstract

Bankim, in many of his essays, laments Bengal's lack of history, raising key questions—why does Bengal, and by extension India, lack a history? If true, then what history is being propagated when Bankim is engaging in history creation, inciting us the rediscover the "real" history of India? Tagore in his essay, "Bharotborsher Itihash", says that the mundane history of "real" India, has been vanquished due to a lack of written records and has been replaced by a history of wars, which detaches the common man from the roots of what is, as Anderson puts it, the imagined community of India, causing degradation of the inter-religious communal idea that has always enveloped India. But Bankim's goal in constructing a new history of Bengal and India is quite different - to reawaken, an idealistic, romanticized regeneration of the Hindu ethos to construct a national identity and a collective memory that serves to expound a nationalistic ideal that, arguably, finds its place within the religio-political discourse. *Anandamath* showcases that while both the Muslims and the British are the enemy, Bankim often places the British on a pedestal of racial superiority. What we wish to explore here is this religious othering, presented in the garb of nationalism. And while there is the creation of the demonic other, there is also the creation of the pure self that is, for Bankim, an ideal national identity. This very construction of the self and the other is then, questioned by Sukumar Ray in his *Abol Tabol* collection of poems and illustrations. This paper seeks to understand Ray's counter-culture to Bankim's established national memory. We will also contrast the function of Ray's work to the function of manga[1], an intellectual state apparatus that, like Ray's poetry, strives to establish narratives and counter-narratives regarding Japan's national identity and memory.

Dinesh Chandra Ray has clearly showcased Bankim Chandra's insistence on the lack of accessible history in Bengal in "Stimulation of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee & Rabindranath Tagore in Establishing Historical Research Institutions in Bengal: A Case Study of Varendra Research Society," wherein he cements the fact using the following lines:

> There is no accessible history of Bengal, whatsoever is there is not history, but rather fictions—only some narratives of the alien, invaders of Bengal and their biographies. We claim for the history of Bengal, else Bengal will be short of conviction. Who will write?
>
> You will write, I will write, all of us will be writing it. Anyone who is a Bengalee needs to scribble it down. Even if the mother is dead, yet what delight in retelling her accounts? And since this Bengal, the land of our birth is our universal mother, and then is there no obvious enjoyment in chronicling about her? (D. Ray 32-34)

But this statement in itself raises some poignant questions - why does Bengal and by extension India, not have a history, if the former is to be considered true, then what history is being propagated when Bankim is embarking on a journey of history creation, hence, inciting us the rediscover the real history of India. Tagore works towards a similar goal when composing essays pertaining to the idea of nationalism and the history of India. This is especially apparent in works like "Nation Ki" and "Bharotborsher Itihas."

Thus, it can be clearly seen that there had been an impetus towards the creation of a national history within the works of literary giants in Bengal during British rule. But one

must remember that when certain stakeholders move forward with the creation of a certain history, which can also be interpreted as collective national memory, there is a simultaneous memory suppression, or alteration. We can loosely refer to the idea behind Hegelian dialectics and treat the newly created memory as a form of thesis. Thus, there is a natural emergence of an antithesis. Now the question arises, what sort of history rose up as an antithesis to the kind of history that Chatterjee had propounded? This becomes a central idea of this paper, as we explore this antithesis, in other words, counter-culture through the works of Sukumar Ray, with special reference to *Abol Tabol* - a collection of, what one may identify as nonsense poetry.

But in order to develop this idea, we must first explore some key concepts. We first need to identify, in brief, the history that Bankim Chandra attempted to establish. In this regard, we will be using *Anandamath* as a narrative discourse concerned with creating a history for Bengal. Next, we need to justify the selection of *Abol Tabol* as a valid medium for the establishment of a counter-narrative to *Anandamath*. Then, we will be exploring how, as a piece of nonsense literature, *Abol Tabol* secures itself in the negotiation of national memory creation, suppression, and alteration. Simultaneously, we will be taking a look at the visual elements present in *Abol Tabol* and contrast them to one of the most prominent visual cultural currencies of our contemporary global framework, i.e., the manga.

The Significance of the Prologue in *Anandamath*

The essence of a text may often elude the reader, who flips through the pages, unaware of the discourses central to the work. While Roland Barthes clearly states that the

author dies after the work enters the public sphere and any attempt at an excavation of intentions becomes an exercise in futility, it is also true, that when engaged in an exercise as paramount as nation-building, construction of national identity and collective memory, or other similar socio-political endeavours, any author would take some measures to convey to the reader, what the text wishes to represent. Prologues are simply one of these instruments; they are meta-artistic texts announcing what is to come. The Prologue of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Anandamath* ventures out to serve the same purpose but drowned in the pursuit of an aesthetic enigma, or perhaps, purposefully, Chatterjee presents to us a mystical narrative invoking many emotions in the reader and conjuring images that may assist in our endeavour to decipher the text.

Let us first undertake a text-based thematic understanding of the Prologue while situating it in the historical location of its inception. The setting of the Prologue is instrumental as it acts as a foreshadowing of the forest location where most of the important events of the work transpire. But there exists a deeper and much more complicated implication of this location which is quite political in nature. The dark forest acts as a symbol for India or rather Bengal under the rule of the British. This arises from the nationalist sentiment and is supported by Gellner who states that there needs to be a congruence between the political unit and the national unit. He goes on to that the national sentiment is especially sensitive to the rulers belonging to a nation that is separate from the national identity of the majority that is being ruled. It is the greatest trigger of nationalist sentiment - a breach of political property, which is a very problematic concept in itself but we shall refrain from digressing any further as it lies beyond the scope of this paper.

In the prologue, we can interpret that the dark forest is a symbol of a Bengal whose masses are not satisfied with the rule they are placed under and their desire for self-rule shall be elaborated on in the analysis of the later paragraphs. Another interesting interpretation can be drawn from the darkness of the forest and the sleeping creatures residing within it. This interpretation leads us down to a study of history - the history of Bengal and consequently, the overarching history of India, or rather, an absence of it. This line illuminates discussions on the lack of a history and the necessity of it. Bankim has stated that India does not have a history not because we lack one but because we never recorded one, but the meaning behind a lack of historical records is a lack of history which is later discussed and lamented by Tagore in his essay "Bharotvarsher Itihash", which may be translated to "The History of India" as he discusses that the real history of India has been replaced by the history of wars and Arabian and Persian tales. Bankim, in a similar fashion, equates the darkness of ignorance of one's own history, which is a major hindrance to the construction of a national identity and a collective memory, and hints that he has embarked on the quest to create national myths which will act as national histories, enabling the national consciousness of the peoples of India.

The second, and perhaps more pronounced theme which echoes throughout *Anandamath*, is the theme of devotion, which is inextricably connected to the image of Bharat mata. Let us directly look at some of the lines in the work by Bankim Chandra Chatterji. We will be using the 1992 translation by Basanta Koomar Roy from Bangla to English. The line "Shall I ever attain my heart desire?" (Roy 27) is answered with a demand of sacrifice. The former voice offers its life but is rebuked as the mystical voice states "Life is

so insignificant that it is the simplest thing for anyone to sacrifice!" (Roy 28) On being asked what more can the former voice provide, a demand of worship is made - a demand for devotion. This devotion is undoubtedly directed towards the nation, and more specifically the Hindu image of the nation in the garb of Bharat.

Mata, as is evident from the narrative and the animosity presented towards both the British and the Muslims in an attempt to secure the cultural history of Hindu Bengal. Some critics have argued that the image is actually that of Banga Mata (Mother of Bengal) and not Bharat Mata (Mother of India) but that is mostly a speculative discussion. This image transforms the nation, or Bengal, into a divine entity, thus fueling the national movement on the grounds of religion, which, as history tells us, provides great impetus to any movement, whether positive or negative.

Thus, *Anandamath*, as a whole, acts as an instrument for rebellion - one that is steeped in the Hindu tradition. It performs the task of constructing a national myth that becomes a part of the collective national memory acting as a substitute for the absent history of Bengal or India, overall. The Prologue serves as a gateway into the narrative as it lays down the foundational ideas that Bankim desires to propagate in order to rouse the people into revolt. The paratextual entity serves not only as an entry point but also as a compiler of the recurring symbols that Bankim plans to use within the narrative, hence making the reader aware of the intentions and qualities of the narrative.

The Critique of Nationalism in *Anandamath*

Now that we understand Bankim's intentions with the work, let us delve further into

the sort of nationalism he wanted to create through it. Bankim's goal in constructing a new history of Bengal and India is to incite - to reawaken, within the fertile grounds of an awakening country, a kind of idealistic, romanticised regeneration of the Hindu ethos. Bankim uses this opportunity to employ himself in the construction of a national identity and a collective memory that serves to first, encourage the youth into action, and secondly, expound a nationalistic ideal that coincides with, due to the lack of a better alternative, the ideals of Hindutva and secures itself a place within the Hindutva discourse. A close reading of the work showcases that while both the Muslims and the British are the enemy, Bankim often places the British on a pedestal of racial superiority. Now whether this reflects the values of the author, or if it is simply the ambivalence of the educated Indian under colonial rule, who cannot completely demonise their colonial masters, due to the positions they hold under them, is up for debate. Nevertheless, what interests us more is the religious othering, presented in the garb of nationalism. And while there is the creation of the demonic other, using Dower's terminology in War Without Mercy, there is also the creation of the pure self. This is best reflected in what is, perhaps, the most influential image emerging from the nationalist movement - the image of Bharat Mata. Now, whether Bankim wished to create a Bharat Mata or a Banga Mata is still debated. This distinctly Hindu image of the nation served to create a homogenous national identity. And the violent depictions of the Hindu riots, which are perhaps glorified, I say perhaps, because, at the end of the day, a literary work may be interpreted in several ways, but if we are to look at its proximal spatiotemporal and its present-day implications, the glorification of the violent nationalism seems to be what most readers latched onto. But one must remember that while it is evident that national traditions are invented as nations are imagined, there can be several contested inventions and

imaginations. The Hindu Right that Bankim invokes, not only leads to the creation of a unified historical memory but urges us to forget the submissive ideologies. The dominant ideology, that symbolically, butchers the rest, creates a hegemonic Hindu nationalist identity that consciously goes on to erase the other narratives. Its purpose - to allow the predominantly Hindu readers to emulate the selfless devotion showcased by the characters of the novel in an attempt to protect the communal integrity of the Hindu community while providing it consent to recognize itself as the rightful heir to the bountiful lands of Bharat mata, thus incorporating a custom of inheritance within it. The imbibing of Gellner's sentiment towards nationalism seems to be the final goal of *Anandamath* which inevitably leads to the recognition of India as a Hindu nation.

Bankim's use of a reinvigorated, elite, masculinist Hindu nationalism to fight ideologies of domination, as Chandrima Chakraborty says in her article, needs to be contextualized and seen as an individual act of assertion and resistance and not as exemplifying prescriptive practices, whether the author intended it to be so or not, for we are the bearers of the text. It allows us to illustrate the politics of canonization - exclusion, selection, and appropriation and should be used as an instrument to interrogate contemporary militant, masculine, Hindu nationalism in India. That is the legacy of the nationalism that was propagated in *Anandamath* - a weapon in its own time and a deterrent in ours.

Situating *Abol Tabol* as Creator of a Nationalist Narrative

Abol Tabol, the collection, is a pillar of nonsensical literature within both the Indian and the global context. Wim Tigges in An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense defined literary

nonsense as "a genre of narrative literature which balances a multiplicity of meaning with a simultaneous absence of meaning." (Tigges 47) We can also situate the role that *Abol Tabol* plays in the endeavour of establishing a national identity within this negotiative framework of multiplicities.

Abol Tabol, the poem itself highly resembles a prologue and acts as one as well. It serves to give the reader a glimpse into the nonsensical world of Sukumar Ray. In a sense, it sets out to define that which is undefinable. But that is not all this poem is, although that in itself is a Herculean endeavour. It also functions as an invitation to readers, but an interesting point to note here is that it is not a universal invitation, which is a clear indication that this poetry is not for all. And I think the poet puts more focus on defining the audience throughout the poem rather than defining the poetry itself. There has been a common tendency to place literary nonsense under the macrocosm of children's literature. But by now, we know that 'nonsense' is but a veil for the genre that is studied and analyzed with reference to the socio-cultural and political history of the age. It enables the writers to indirectly criticize the various shortcomings and limitations of contemporary society, as Eliot remarked on Lear's poetry, as it being, "not a vacuity of sense, but a parody of sense, and that is the sense of it." (14) Nonsense can be described as a kind of writing that draws attention to and takes advantage of the arbitrary nature of language. Nonsense has a kind of anarchic potential because it questions the materialistic reality and deals with the factors that the everyday world considers to be impossible and improbable.

Ray's poetry shows an extremely poignant ridicule of the rising Bengali middle class and their pseudo-bourgeois ways. Let us explore the titular poem first. The first line calls out

to the reader and identifies the type of reader the poet wants - "Ayere bhola, kheyal khola" - Bhola means - someone who is foolish/ careless, but those traits stem from a place of innocence. And as for the phrase "kheyal khola" - it could mean many things - someone with a lot of imaginative power, someone who daydreams, but the most appropriate meaning of it would be someone with an open mind - a very literal translation - yet very fitting.

The second line - "shopondola nachiye aaye" - rock the swing of dreams and come. The poet is still concerned about the type of readers and the mental state of his readers before actually jumping into his world of nonsense.

The third and fourth lines are very similar - they call to the mad - to come while playing an intoxicated instrument - "Aye re pagol - abol tabol, motto madol bajiye aaye."

Now, finally, in the fifth line, we get a glimpse of the world we are being called into - "aye jekhane khepar gane, naiko mane naiko shur" - come where the lunatic's songs have no meaning nor melody - and if we actually study the poems, we will inevitably come to the conclusion, that this is a lie since the poems in the collection are rife with both meaning and rhythm. But what the poet wanted to convey is perhaps, the essence of the garb that is nonsense - a song for the mad - sung by the mad and the mad. Foucault describes the mad as something that the mainstream, with the aid of the medical gaze, has separated from themselves - a sort of counter-culture, at best, and an anarchic force of destruction at its most

powerful.

And coming back to the description of the world in the next couplet - and one must note that this nonsense, this abol tabol (directly translated to English as 'hodge podge') - is a shoddy rag-tag arrangement, as should be quite evident from this particular illustration.
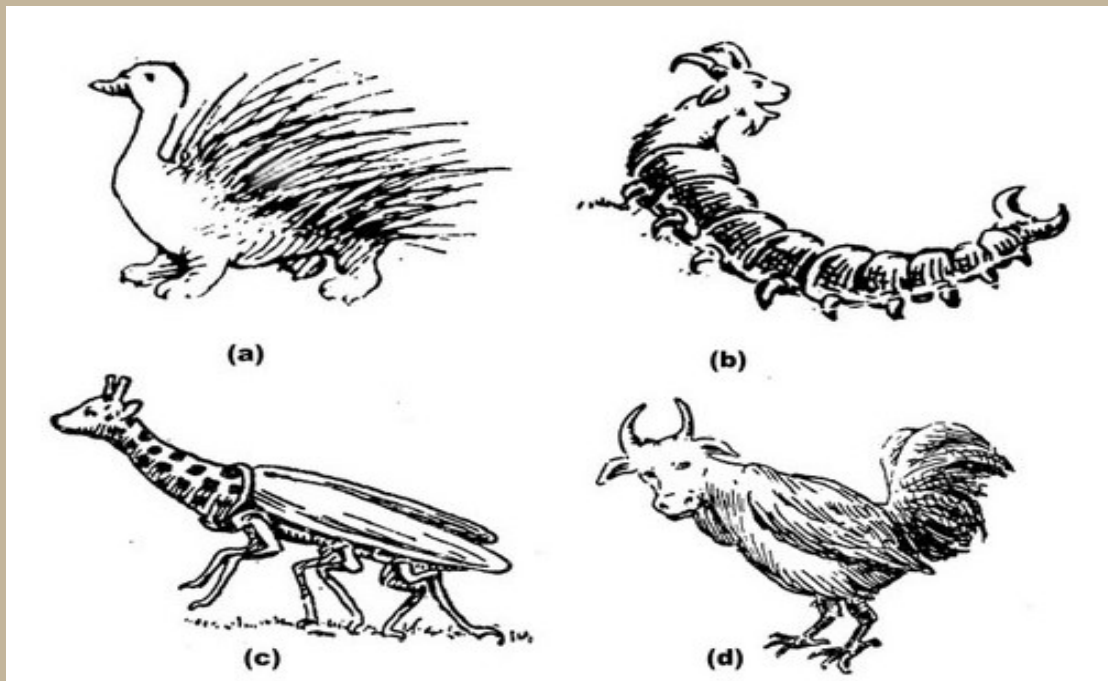
And in this world, the "udhao haowa" - the vanishing winds, interesting choice of words - make of it what you will - a few suggestions from my side - an illusion on which the mind floats far away, and well, if this world is one of illusion, what's stopping the "real" world from being an illusion as well, since language is the separator of these worlds - one claims to revel in the arbitrariness of it, while the other uses the arbitrary as an absolute - which world is an illusion then?

In the next 2 lines, we again focus on the readers, or more specifically, the mind of the reader - "aye khyapa mon, ghuchiye bandhon" - the word khyapa is used again before it was used for the mad singer, and now for the mad reader, the second part of this line - ghuchiye bandhon - means destroying restraints, can only the mad destroy the restraints put on us by a world that dares call itself "normal"? The second part of this couplet, tells the reader to awaken dance.

Then in the next couplet we get a barrage of adjectives for the reader, probably the reader who was mad enough to read till here - beyara (rebel), a word mostly used by parents for their children in a negative sense to rebuke them - I doubt it remains negative in the world of Ray, shrishtichara - someone who is outside the confines of the cosmos - niyomhara - one who has no rules and follows not the ones made by others, ishan-hin - now, ishan has a couple meaning - all of which give it word different directions and magnitude - one, direction - one who has no destination - or one who does not dwell upon an end destination - again an interesting parallel to absurdity, shiva - perhaps the representation of religion - one who is free of religion, for Ray was a man of science as well and an outspoken anti-suprestitionist, and lastly sun - the source of light for our world - the thing that gives everything meaning -a hint of Plato perhaps, so, a mind without light - without meaning, or rather - without the meaning that is only visible in the light.

The last 4 lines are a combination of the reader and the world - the things the reader would engage in that world of nonsense - strange ways of moving, bethik, betal - bethik is not right, and do note the subtle nuance that something that is not right, is not always wrong; bhuler bhob - the world of wrongs, a sort of smug pride in that phrase - oshombhober

chondete - the rhyme of the impossible - not impossible rhymes.

Thus, *Abol Tabol* does not take us to the world of absurdities, it rather makes us face the 'reality' we live in. Through these numerous tides of truth, Ray takes us to "Bhuler bhobe" (The world of mistakes). In this "Shibthakurer aapon desh" (the land owned by Lord Shiva) the only rule is "Ekushe aain" (the Laws of 21)- rules that make no sense. Here people hide their scary face behind the assurance of "Bhoy Peona" (Don't be scared).

Simply through the prologue and the above-mentioned supporting poems, we can find that Ray is attempting to paint the portrait of an India that is homogenous, only in name. By deploying what one can only identify as grotesque amalgamations of creatures that do not blend well together, it can be argued that Ray is creating a staunch opposition against the homogenous Hindu national narrative that Bankim attempted to establish. We must note that Ray devotes a considerable amount of time to defining his readers in the titular poem, and then moves on to the world he is trying to create. This indicates that he is equally concerned with creating an identity for his readers while creating the nonsensical world he takes the readers to. The question then arises, what is this nonsensical world? The answer becomes obvious on further studying his poetry, especially "Ekushe aain," wherein he talks about the country of Shiva, and sarcastically so. Here too, we see a direct counter to the Hindu masculine identity that Bankim tried to paint over the Indian nation-state. We can further delve into numerous examples of the same happening throughout his collection. However, the common factor here is the idea of non-conformity. He is trying to break away the national identity from the mainstream - exposing the flawed homogeneity, the problematic colonial appropriation, the depiction of the colonial master as superior, and the overarching religion-

tinted narrative of a unified nation.

Establishing a Connection Between the Visual Narratives of *Abol Tabol* and Post-War Manga in the Context of Their Attempt at Defining the Nation

One might say that drawing a parallel between these two art forms is quite far-fetched. But we must understand that despite the geographical, temporal, contextual, and historical divides, the two forms of media share some deep commonalities. The visual aspect comes out to be the most striking and obvious one. Simply speaking, the focus on the visual aspect comes from what illustrative narratives usually share among themselves. They are often a part of popular literature, meant for the masses. Both works have also been primarily recognized by this popular gaze as something that is meant for a younger audience. Thus, we see that both manga and Ray's nonsensical narratives are situated in a position where the medium itself is infantilized, especially in the global sphere when it comes to manga. However, we can also find the common factor where both genres of work have escaped their niches and have gone on to become texts of national importance equivalent to what *Anandamanth* is for India's national sentiment.

The Japanese popular medium is constantly seeking to create and define the Japanese identity in the post-war period, which is marked by discontinuity. In an attempt to do so, it has been creating, destroying, and altering the history and identity of Japan itself.

All of this boils down to the power that illustrative narratives hold to construct personal histories that eventually are accepted within the collective memories of a nation. Studying them gives us an idea of how the dominant narratives are often prescribed by the

state and even counter-narratives are allowed to flourish only when approved by the repressive state apparatus. The control which the government wishes to have on the ideological state apparatus; on literature and art is a direct showcase of the power of those forces, which often surpasses historical and academic records. Fiction, especially illustrative popular narrative, becomes a defining factor in making a nation and this study of a body of fiction showcases the varying identities present within a nation that may appear to be an undivided form, as Renan would define it, but yet has cracks that cannot be bridged – perhaps a truth that hits much closer to home than any reader would like to acknowledge.

Endnote:

[1] Manga: Manga may be defined briefly as graphic novels originating in Japan, carrying a common aesthetic while simultaneously harbouring many different artistic styles and themes.

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