

Gaining Imperial Paradise: Reading and Rewriting *Paradise Lost* in Colonial Bengal.

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The establishment of British rule in India was contingent upon the reshaping of Indian society. The introduction of English literature in India became an important method for instilling British social ideals in Indian society, as literary study was an effective way of introducing imperial rhetoric in mainstream society. Though educational discourse was officially secular, the interests of British missionaries eventually coalesced with the colonial administration, leading to the insinuation of Christian ideology into British education. As a result, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* became an especially popular text in the colonial curriculum, as it presented a method for teaching tenets of Christianity through the English literary canon. Due to colonial discourse on race and education, this trend was most prominent in the Northeastern state of Bengal, which embraced *Paradise Lost* and integrated it into the colonial Bengali education system. In this paper, I will argue that imperial views on education, race, and conversion colluded with the esteem of the epic tradition in India to establish the popularity of *Paradise Lost* in colonial Bengal. In addition, I will demonstrate how the ubiquitous nature of *Paradise Lost* in Bengal influenced rewritings of Indian epic poetry, as *Paradise Lost* was regarded as a model for the rewriting of epic material. Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *The Slaying of Meghanada* and Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World* demonstrate that because of Milton's popularity in colonial Bengal, *Paradise Lost*'s model for rewriting religious material was replicated in the region.

In order to establish British rule in colonial India, it became necessary to present the culture of England as inherently superior to the local culture, and literary study became an imperative method of presenting this view. Thomas Macaulay, the most well known proponent of the institution of English literature into the colonial curriculum, wrote, "[I] have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is, indeed, fully admitted by those members of the Committee who support the Oriental plan of education ("Minute on Indian Education")." Macaulay's views were

foundational in the movement to prioritize the use of English literature in India's colonial education system, as its rhetoric was heavily repeated throughout the colonial rule of India. The role of English literature in the perpetuation of the goals of imperialism has been most clearly articulated by Gauri Viswanathan, who notes that knowledge of English literature soon became directly linked to examinations for the civil service and other administrative positions, as English literature was seen as representative of the ideals and qualities that should be replicated by the colonial subject (2). In addition, the discourse surrounding literary study was used to subjectify the colonized population, through the relationship between the colonial educator and the colonial subject who is to be educated. Viswanathan writes, "A vital if subtle connection exists between a discourse in which those who are to be educated are represented as morally and intellectually deficient and the attribution of moral and intellectual values to the literary works they are assigned to read" (4). English literature was thus utilized to further empower the civilizing mission of colonialism, thus enforcing the subjectification of the Indian.

The popularization of Milton in colonial Bengal was rooted the pseudo-scientific discourse surrounding race and martiality that characterized the ways that the British viewed various regional and religious communities. The colonial administration utilized subjective ethnographies to cement the British policy of "divide and rule", which sought to fragment India on communal lines. Anthropological discourse was used to declare certain communities, like Sikhs and Rajputs, "martial", thus targeting them for military conscription. Other communities were declared to be "feminine" and "non-martial" and placed in opposition to the other communities, and targeted as recipients of colonial education (Chowdhury-Sengupta 225). The characterization of a group of people as a "feminine" race was clearly pejorative and was most ubiquitously perpetuated in Bengal. The use of this rhetoric is clearly lacking in any grounding in reality, as it attempted to portray Bengalis, who are defined as a community by regional and linguistic categories, as somehow biologically predisposed towards cowardliness and bookishness (Bayly 201). This was likely a response to the fact that Bengal was seen as a site for potential subversive sedition, and was thus viewed as a threat to colonial rule (Pawha 285). Colonial anthropological discourse thus became a means of disempowering the Bengali population. This characterization of Bengalis made Bengal a prime target for the implementation of Macaulay's proposed education system, as Bengalis' supposed timidity

and fondness for education made them ideal subjects of the goals of the colonial education system.

Over time, as the colonial system of education became well engrained in colonial Bengali society, the interests of colonial missionaries influenced the colonial education system, which led to the prioritization of John Milton in the colonial curriculum. In the early days of the East India Company, though chaplains were appointed to serve the needs of Europeans in India, missionary work was banned, as officials feared that it would antagonize local religious leaders. Eventually, colonial India was opened to missionaries, who soon became optimistic that their new legal status was a sign that their evangelization would soon be officially supported (Viswanathan 36-37). Though missionaries lacked official administrative capabilities, their social influence soon became visible in the colonial education system, especially as rhetoric of the colonial “civilizing mission” had decidedly evangelical undertones. Missionaries propagated the notion that English literature could not be effectively taught secularly, which eventually began to affect the colonial educational curriculum (47). As arguments against secular education grew, John Milton emerged as an important figure in the colonial education system, though he was introduced into the colonial system as secular literature. Charles Cameron, Thomas Macaulay’s successor as the head of the Council on Education, used Milton as an example of how English literature was inherently superior to Sanskrit literature. Cameron argued that Sanskrit literature was entrenched in the principles of Hinduism, while “Milton assumes the truth of Christianity, his works do not bear the same relation to the doctrines of Christianity as does Oriental literature to the tenets of the native religious systems” (95). Thus, Milton’s placement in the secular curriculum was justified by way of a comparison to native literature, despite the fact that Milton’s writing could be easily viewed as unambiguously religious in nature. As educational administrators became more sympathetic to the demands of missionaries, Milton was popularized, as “government institutions officially committed to secularism realized they were in effect teaching Christianity through Milton, a ‘standard’ in the literary curriculum whose scriptural allusions regularly sent students scurrying to the Bible for elucidation (The Bible was in every library and was easily accessible to any student who cared to read it)” (85). Since the education system was particularly well established in Bengal, the relationship between the

popularity of Milton in the colonial education system and that system's potential to act as a catalyst for conversion could be most unequivocally noted within this state.

While colonial educators encouraged the teaching of *Paradise Lost* in Bengal, the popularity of the poem was not one-sided. Indian students popularly embraced *Paradise Lost* as the educated population was already well versed with the Indian epic tradition and readily consumed the poem. The poem's success as a tool for conversion was attributed to its complex portrayal of Satan, which provided a less Orthodox view of Christianity, which was more desirable to individuals who were used to Hinduism's flexibility and rejection of strict fundamentalism (Joshi 179). For converts, *Paradise Lost* became an alternative introduction to Christianity that allowed for a flexible view of faith that they might not find in straightforward readings of the Bible, as Indian readers were able to find qualities of their own epics in the poem. M.V. Rama Sarma notes that *Paradise Lost* has numerous thematic similarities with *The Mahabharata*, as they both contain "[the concept of heroism, ethical idealism, aesthetic appeal, and [...] insistence on implicit faith in God...Both epics concentrate on the conflict of good and evil and end on a lofty note of idealism and serenity]" (124). These resemblances between the two poems encouraged the consumption of *Paradise Lost* in colonial India.

Furthermore, the portrayal of Adam, Eve, and Satan simultaneously presents faults and heroic qualities to both sides of the conflict between good and evil, which is reminiscent of the portrayal of the struggle between the Pandavas and Kauravas, two groups of cousins who are at war for control of the kingdom. Though the Pandavas are supposedly on the side of good, and the Kauravas on the side of evil, neither characterization can be easily contained to just one of these qualities. During the war, Bhima, a Pandava, brutally kills Dushasana and drinks his blood, while members of the Kaurava clan are portrayed as skilled and dedicated warriors, qualities that the poem's readers are meant to praise (Tickell 46). Those on the side of good are portrayed as capable of terrible violence, while those on the side of evil are given noble qualities. Like *The Mahabharata*'s portrayal of the Pandavas and Kauravas, *Paradise Lost* allows for the attribution of positive qualities to Satan, which contrasts with more simplistic views of good and evil. In Book II of *Paradise Lost*, Satan is described as sitting upon a regal throne, thus ascribing noble qualities to Satan that complicate the way that he was commonly portrayed (Milton 142). This tolerance of a complex view of good and evil

allowed for a more popular view of Christianity in colonial India, as it replicates the existing framework of India's epic tradition.

Both *Paradise Lost* and *The Mahabharata* urge their readers to maintain strict faith in God and present dire ramifications for the failure of characters to fulfill this imperative. Adam and Eve's inability to follow the command of God to never eat from the tree of knowledge is responsible for the fall, and was meant to teach a Christian audience that they must obey divine law. Similarly, Vyasa, the writer of *The Mahabharata* seeks to demonstrate that acting in line with divine sanction is a guarantee of success, while those who act without divine support are not destined for success. When Duryodhana, the leader of the Kauravas, the losing side of the poem's epic war, asks Bishma, the oldest warrior why they are losing despite the fact that they are better prepared for war, Bishma responds, "They must win who, strong in virtue, fight for virtue's stainless laws[.] Double armed the stalwart warrior who is armed in righteous cause" (Qtd. in Sarma 125). Like *Paradise Lost*, *The Mahabharata* teaches that if you are aligned with divine law, you cannot fail, which similarly encourages obedience to the notion of god's will. This didactic commonality allowed for the reading of *Paradise Lost* alongside the local canon, which contributed to the acceptance of the poem.

The portrayal of divine imperative and the fulfillment of God's will in *Paradise Lost* allowed for Indian readers to view the poem in terms of Sanskritic concepts of morality and justice. The Hindu concept of *dharma* became essential to Indian readings of *Paradise Lost*, as it was possible for Indian readers to find their own concepts within the poem, despite its foreign origin. *Dharma* is best described as one's individual sacred duty, and is presented in the two great Indian epics, *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana*. Barbara Stoler Miller argues that heroism in Indian tradition is characterized by strict adherence to one's *dharma*, and writes "The rituals of warrior life and the demands of sacred duty define the religious and moral meaning of heroism throughout the *Mahabharata*. Acts of heroism are characterized [...] by the fulfillment of *dharma*, which often involves extraordinary forms of sacrifice, penance, devotion to a divine authority, and spiritual victory over evil" (Miller 3). This is a concept that was heavily instilled into Indian concepts of the hero, as India's most revered heroes exemplified the notion of *dharma*. Rama, the hero of *The Ramayana*, embodies dedication to *dharma*, a principle that would be expected by Indian readers of *Paradise Lost*. Sarma writes of Rama, "Rama views *dharma* as the highest truth and in following *dharma*

rigidly he exposes himself to suffering. Rama's steadfast resolve to respect his father's promises to Kaikeyi, his ideal of monogamous marriage his unhesitating acceptance of responsibility to protect the Rishis from the Rakshasas, all these make Rama an exemplar of *dharmā*" (Sarma 33). In *Paradise Lost*, the failure of Adam and Eve to obey God's command can be viewed as a failure to fulfill their *dharmā*, a lesson with which Indian readers were already familiar and which they were willing to accept. In Book V of *Paradise Lost*, Raphael reminds Adam in line 501 to remain obedient to God, as he has been given the potential to both carry out this responsibility and to deviate it from it, which Indian readers of the poem could clearly read in terms of *dharmā* (Milton 232). This event was an original creation of Milton's and was not present in the Bible, which is part of why *Paradise Lost* was often prioritized above the Bible itself as an example of Christian ideology. The ability of readers to view *Paradise Lost* in terms of local views of morality and responsibility.

The popularity of *Paradise Lost* in India's education system, and in particular, in Bengal, paved the way for Milton's paradigm for the rewriting of religious material to be applied to Indian religious epics. Michael Madhusudan Dutt wrote *The Slaying of Meghanada*, a Bengali poem that is simultaneously a rewriting of *The Ramayana* and *Paradise Lost*. Dutt exemplifies the notion of a colonial hybrid, as it was likely that he grew up hearing stories from the Indian epics, but it is also likely that as an upper class Bengali whose family is the product of the colonial education system, his first language might have been English (Seely 17). Dutt was a convert to Christianity, and considering the tactics of conversion that operated within the colonial education system, it was likely that he read *Paradise Lost* before his conversion during his youth. *The Slaying of Meghanada* was originally written in Bengali, and was both a tribute to *Paradise Lost*, and the rejection of the rhetoric of figures like Macaulay and Cameron, who articulated that Indian languages were incapable of producing literature that was comparable to English literature. By rewriting *The Ramayana* in Bengali, but using the paradigm set forward by Milton in *Paradise Lost*, Dutt clearly articulates the potential for Indian languages to rival the creations of the English language. Dutt's use of *Paradise Lost* demonstrates the influence of the poem, but it also demonstrates the potential for dismantling the English canon. John Marx writes of *The Slaying of Meghnada*, "Through [...] cutting and pasting, Dutt shows that to appropriate Western canonical literature one must first unwrite it, dismantle it, and come to see it less as

an inviolate whole than as a collection of parts suitable for recycling (89). The use of *Paradise Lost* by a Christian convert to rewrite sacred material clearly demonstrates how strongly *Paradise Lost* was engrained into colonial Bengali culture.

The Slaying of Meghanada tells *The Ramayana* from Ravana's perspective, similarly to how Milton revises the role of Satan in the Genesis story. Ravana is often perceived as the villain of *The Ramayana*, as his kidnapping of Sita sets into motion Rama's war in Lanka. Dutt borrows Milton's technique of connecting Satan's existence to god by linking Ravana to the god Vishnu. In Book IV of *Paradise Lost*, Satan plans to fight the angel Gabriel, but a divine image of a scale in the heavens reminds him of the futility of this action and the fact that he is still part of God's universe, which is seemingly contradictory, as he opposes God (217). This reevaluation of Satan is replicated in Dutt's revision of Ravana and his Rakshasa clan, as these demons are transformed into Shiva and Vishnu *bhaktas*, or devotees, and are portrayed as deeply dedicated to these gods (Seely 49). This, like Satan's opposition to God in *Paradise Lost*, should be paradoxical, as Rama is an *avatar*, or incarnation of Vishnu, and thus Ravana is seemingly opposing the same divine figure that he derives his power from. It is clear that the institution of *Paradise Lost* into the colonial Bengali education system allowed for this rewriting, as the intellectual questions of Milton's rewriting of the Genesis tale are integrated into Dutt's rewriting of *The Ramayana*.

Dutt's rewriting of *The Ramayana* paved the way for future rewritings of the poem by Bengali authors, which also turned to *Paradise Lost* for thematic inspiration. Rabindranath Tagore, who is largely considered the most prolific and celebrated Bengali author, followed in Dutt's tradition to loosely adapt *The Ramayana* and thematically draw from *Paradise Lost*. Tagore's novel *The Home and the World* deals with a woman's growing involvement in the Indian independence movement in Bengal. Bimala is encouraged by her husband Nikhil to work with his friend Sandip, who is a nationalist leader. Tagore sets up the story as a loose retelling of *The Ramayana*, as Bimala is compared to Sita, Nikhil to Rama, and Sandip to Ravana. Bimala is drawn to Sandip, who frequently characterizes his relationship with Bimala in terms of entrapment and directly likens himself to Ravana (Tagore 83). Throughout the story, Sandip praises Bimala for her intuitive views on independence, while Nikhil, in his quest to introduce his wife to modernity, relies only upon discursive reasoning. This gendering of these two types of reason is one of the most important aspects of *Paradise Lost*,

and is clearly mirrored in this novel. In addition, Bimala's temptation to deviate from her marriage for Sandip eventually leads to the destruction of the idyllic marriage, a domestic fall that mirrors Adam and Eve's fall from paradise. The integration of these thematic aspects of *Paradise Lost* into this loose adaptation of *The Ramayana* follows Dutt's example. Tagore, like Dutt, was an educated Bengali who was product of the colonial education system that greatly valued *Paradise Lost*. In addition, Tagore was a colleague of Dutt who was also familiar with his views on writing and *Paradise Lost*. The insinuation of thematic material from *Paradise Lost* into this rewriting of Indian epic material suggests that Milton's project of rewriting religious material was so engrained into Bengali culture that it served as an important model for Bengali rewritings of the Indian epics.

The British colonial administration's establishment of English literary education in India was fundamental to the prominence of *Paradise Lost* in colonial Bengal. Colonial prioritization of English literature ensured that the British canon was taught in the colonial curriculum, and colonial ethnographic discourse argued that such education should be emphasized in the region of Bengal. The influence of missionaries on the colonial education system led to the rise of *Paradise Lost* in Bengali education. Thematic similarities between *Paradise Lost* and the Indian epics helped enforce the poem's popularity in Bengal, as Indian readers were able find elements of their religion and epic traditions within Milton's poem. The popularity of *Paradise Lost* led to Bengali rewritings of the poem, which demonstrated how influential Milton was on this region of colonial India. Milton's transnational influence demonstrates that though Milton wrote about Christianity for a European audience, his writing can be successfully transplanted in other cultural contexts.

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