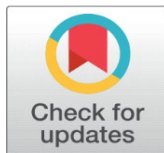
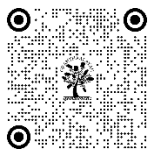


THE EARLY WRITINGS OF MADHUSUDAN DUTTA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Dr. Sudipta Sau  

¹ Assistant Professor, in Bengali Nagar College, Murshidabad



Corresponding Author

Dr. Sudipta Sau,
sudiptasau.bengali@gmail.com

DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i2.2023.2610](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i2.2023.2610)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2023 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

Dutta was a prolific writer and a poet. His early works include 'The Captive Ladie' (1849) and 'The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu' (1854). In his early literary career, Dutta exclusively wrote in English, a decision that can be contextualized within the British colonial education system in India. The poem is set against the backdrop of a well-known historical event in India: the expedition of Mahmud of Ghazni and subsequent political dynamics among Indian rulers. Macaulay's advocacy for the promotion of English literature and education in India had a profound impact on his contemporaries, who found themselves at the crossroads of multiple cultural influences.

Keywords: Madhusudhan Dutta, the Captive Ladie, the Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu, Bengal Renaissance, Multiple Cultural Influences, Bohemianism, Romanticism, Colonialism

1. INTRODUCTION

Madhusudan Dutta, a key figure in the Bengal Renaissance, is commonly celebrated for his substantial contributions to Bengali literature. Nevertheless, his early literary endeavors were characterized by an exclusive engagement with the English language, a choice that was influenced by both the colonial context of his time and his intellectual inclinations. This essay critically examines Dutta's early writings, focusing on 'The Captive Ladie' (1849) and 'The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu' (1854), while highlighting his stylistic influences and thematic preoccupations. In his early literary career, Dutta exclusively wrote in English, a decision that can be contextualized within the British colonial education system in India. This system placed a considerable emphasis on English literature and language, often to the detriment of native languages and literature. For Dutta, English was not merely a means of expression but served as a conduit for engaging with the intellectual and literary traditions of the West.

2. ANALYSIS

Dutta's choice of English also reflects his desire to situate himself within the broader framework of romantic literature. His early works evidenced a profound engagement with the literary canon of English Romanticism, particularly the works of William Wordsworth and John Milton. These influences are discernible in his thematic preoccupation with nature, emotion, and individualism, as well as his stylistic preference for ornate and elaborate prose.

Madhusudan Dutta occupies a central position in Bengali literature, renowned for his sonnets and plays that embody the spirit of nationalism and progressive thought. However, his English work, particularly 'The Captive Ladie,' remains underexplored despite its significant artistic and thematic depth. This critical analysis aims to elucidate the importance of 'The Captive Ladie' within Dutta's oeuvre and posits its inclusion in scholarly discourse. Dutta's corpus is characterized by a notable innovation that challenges the traditional confines of literature in his era. 'The Captive Ladie' exemplifies this, demonstrating his ability to infuse classical forms with modern sensibilities. His utilization of the sonnet form, typically associated with love and beauty, is repurposed here to address the broader themes of captivity, social injustice, and the human condition. This innovative approach reflects Dutta's capacity to transcend personal and cultural boundaries, positioning his work as a critique of a feudal society. Dutta's poetry is imbued with a sense of national consciousness, resonating with the sociopolitical climate of 19th-century India. 'The Captive Ladie' can be interpreted as a metaphor for the colonial experience, where the "captive" symbolizes not merely a woman, but the very nation held under the yoke of oppression. His portrayal of struggle and yearning evoked a profound sense of patriotism, allowing the poem to transcend its immediate narrative. Dutta's foresight in articulating these themes demonstrates a remarkable understanding of the societal forces at play and his work serves as an early call for liberation and reform. Madhusudan Dutta's values and vision resonate with a modern, democratic ethos that was ahead of his time. In a society steeped in superstitious and feudal hierarchies, he emerged as a beacon of progressive thought. His work often grapples with issues of identity, freedom, and social justice, topics that remain relevant today. Dutta's ability to articulate the struggles of the individual against societal constraints firmly places him within the canon of modern literature and warrants a more thorough examination. Despite the richness of *The Captive Ladie*, it has not received the academic attention it merits. This oversight is symptomatic of a broader trend where non-Bengali works by Indian authors are marginalized in favor of more well-known texts. A critical exploration of 'The Captive Ladie' could illuminate not only Dutta's artistic prowess, but also the complexities of colonial identity and resistance. Madhusudan Dutta's 'The Captive Ladie' is a vital work that encapsulates his innovative spirit, nationalistic fervor, and progressive ideals. The poem serves as a testament to his artistic vision and social consciousness, offering insights that are both historically significant and contemporary in relevance. Neglecting this work in the discourse surrounding Dutta overlooks a crucial aspect of his legacy. As scholars delve into the richness of his English poetry, *The Captive Ladie* deserves to be at the forefront of these discussions, highlighting Dutta's role as a pioneering voice in the evolution of Indian literature. T. O. D. Dunn told in essay titled 'Bengali Writers of English Verse' that 'In Madras, in 1849, long before his visit to England, he published his best known English poem, *The Captive Ladie*, and at once demonstrated the ability of the Bengali educated in Bengal to capture the elusive spirit of English metrical form. This demonstration has been repeated time and again; but the honour of its first performance rests with Michael Madhusudan Dutt. *The Captive Ladie* has the type of heroic theme that Scott and Coleridge loved. Its period is that of Mahmud of Ghazni, and its subject the jealousy existing between the King of Delhi and the King of Kanoje.'

'The Captive Ladie', published in 1849, is a long narrative poem that reflects Dutta's early fascination with epic form. Similar to Henry Louis Vivian Derozio's 'The Fakeer of Jungheera,' Dutta's poem employs the narrative structure of a historical romance, intertwining themes of love, honor, and heroism. The poem is set against the backdrop of a well-known historical event in India: the expedition of Mahmud of Ghazni and subsequent political dynamics among Indian rulers. Dutta's narrative revolves around the King of Kanauj's 'Feast of Victory' and the ensuing conflict with the King of Delhi. The story, as Dutta notes in his preface, is derived from a historical incident that had been recorded by European writers, albeit with his creative deviation. The narrative's central conflict arises from the King of Delhi's refusal to attend the Feast of Victory, an act that symbolizes his rejection of the King of Kanauj's claim to paramountcy. This refusal leads to a series of events culminating in the abduction of a golden image representing the King of Delhi and, in Dutta's version, the imprisonment and subsequent escape of the princess. The princess's plight and eventual rescue by the disguised King of Delhi forms the emotional core of the poem. "The Captive Ladie" is marked by its rich, descriptive language and exploration of themes typical of Romantic literature: the conflict between duty and desire, the heroism of individual

defiance, and the transformative power of love. Dutta's use of the epic form allows him to delve into these themes with a grandeur and scope that are reminiscent of Milton's 'Paradise Lost' and Wordsworth's 'The Prelude'. Madhusudan Dutta's *The Captive Ladie*, published in early 1849, alongside his blank verse work *Visions of the Past*, represents a significant milestone in the early history of Bengali literature in English. As one of the earliest major works of English verse by a Bengali writer, it warrants critical examination both for its place in the historical evolution of Indian literature written in English and for its literary qualities that demonstrate Dutta's early poetic aspirations.

The early 19th century witnessed the gradual emergence of English literary activity among Indian writers as a consequence of colonial educational policies that emphasized English as a medium of instruction. Madhusudan Dutta, who exhibited an early affinity for English literature, became one of the most distinguished figures in this movement. His 'Captive Ladie' stands out as the most substantial verse composition in English by a Bengali writer in his era, a distinction that positions the poem in the canon of early Indian English literature. This work is particularly noteworthy because it reflects the transitional period during which Indian intellectuals negotiated between the cultural heritage of their homeland and the dominant linguistic and literary forms of colonial power. Dutta's choice to write in English and the subject matter he selects in 'The Captive Ladie' reflect this negotiation. While Dutta later embraced Bengali as the primary medium of his literary expression, "The Captive Ladie" reveals his early desire to master and contribute to English literary tradition. Dutta's deep immersion in English literature—particularly his admiration for Romantic poets like Lord Byron and epic poets such as Milton—manifests in this poem both in form and theme. The poem is divided into two cantos and describes events rooted in Oriental history, a common preoccupation in contemporary literature, especially during the Romantic and Victorian periods. 'The Captive Ladie' follows a chivalric narrative revolving around themes of honor, captivity, and romanticized depictions of the East. The titular 'captive lady' becomes a symbol of Orientalized femininity, a trope often found in Western literary treatments of Eastern culture. Dutta's narrative draws upon elements of classical and medieval European literature, notably the knight-errant tradition in which a male protagonist embarks on a quest to rescue a damsel in distress. However, in Dutta's case, this narrative was reconfigured within the Indian historical framework. While this narrative structure adheres to the chivalric and Orientalist paradigms prevalent in 19th-century English literature, the significance of 'The Captive Ladie' transcends mere replication of Western literary conventions. Dutta, as a Bengali author, infuses the work with an awareness of his own position between the two cultural spheres, rendering the poem a nuanced exploration of identity. The poem reflects India's subjugation under colonial rule, with the captive lady potentially serving as an allegory for India itself. Consequently, the chivalric quest for liberation became metaphorically imbued with colonial politics, wherein the act of rescue had profound implications. Dutta's engagement with the Romantic literary tradition is evident throughout 'The Captive Ladie'. The poem is imbued with a Byronic fascination for exotic and melancholic yearning that reflects the Romantic sensibility of despair, loss, and unattainable ideals. Dutta expressed his admiration for poets such as Byron and Shelley, and this influence was particularly evident in the poem's emotional intensity and preoccupation with heroism, personal suffering, and existential isolation. Furthermore, Milton's influence is apparent in Dutta's utilization of epic conventions, particularly in his portrayal of the moral struggle and the tension between freedom and bondage. Analogous to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Dutta's poem addresses questions of power, submission, and the quest for redemption. The moral complexity of his characters, especially in the figure of the male protagonist, who is conflicted between duty and personal desire, demonstrates Dutta's attempt to create a work that resonates with the ethical gravitas of the Western epic tradition.

The poem's two-canto structure also reflects the Romantic preoccupation with fragmentary forms often employed to convey a sense of incompleteness or yearning for something beyond the grasp of the poet or his characters. This formal choice may indicate Dutta's ambivalence toward the literary world he was attempting to navigate, a world in which he was both a participant and an outsider. It is essential to contextualize 'The Captive Ladie' within the broader framework of Orientalist discourse, which influenced much of the European literary production in India during the 19th century. In composing an 'Oriental' history in English, Dutta inevitably participates in the Orientalist tradition, which exoticizes and romanticizes Eastern cultures for Western consumption. However, Dutta's position as an Indian writer in English complicates his relationship to this tradition. While *The Captive Ladie* employs many Orientalist tropes typical of the period, it also critiques them subtly. For instance, Dutta's portrayal of Indian characters does not reduce them to passive or exoticized figures devoid of agency, as is frequently observed in European Orientalist literature. Instead, his protagonists are imbued with dignity, moral complexity, and emotional depth, challenging the Western conception of the 'mystical' or 'backward' East. This suggests that Dutta was not merely replicating Orientalist stereotypes, but reworking

them in a manner that gave voice to Indian characters, who became active participants in their own narratives rather than objects of Western curiosity.

Moreover, the theme of captivity functions as a metaphorical critique of colonialism. The captivity of the lady may be interpreted as a reflection of India's political situation under British rule, with the quest for liberation paralleling the broader Indian aspiration for independence. While the poem is not explicitly political, its allegorical elements suggest the poet's awareness of the tensions between the colonizer and the colonized. Madhusudan Dutta's 'The Captive Ladie' remains a seminal work in Indian English literature, not only because it represents the early efforts of a Bengali writer to master and contribute to English literary traditions but also because it reflects the complexities of writing in a colonizer's language during a period of political subjugation. The poem's engagement with Oriental history, its chivalric narrative, and its romantic sensibility renders it a significant work in its own right, warranting a more extensive critical examination than it has typically received. Although 'The Captive Ladie' may not exhibit the linguistic and thematic sophistication of Dutta's subsequent works in Bengali, it demonstrates his ambitious endeavor to navigate and synthesize diverse cultural and literary influences. The significance of this work lies not only in its magnitude—being one of the most substantial verse compositions in English by a Bengali author—but also in its symbolic function as a reflection on identity, colonialism, and the poet's early literary aspirations at the intersection of multiple cultural spheres. Sajal Nag told that 'In Madhusudan we can see the encounter of two sets of politics - one, of Madhusudan himself and two, of the others around him. In the first kind of politics, Madhusudan perpetuated the tradition of the Derozians of making an explicit political intervention by denationalising himself to denounce the pre-modern elements in the Hindu identity. It aimed at demonstrating that there was nothing worthwhile in perpetuating medieval practices in the name of Hindu identity. It was a protest against the duplicity between the private and public practices, which had become the hallmark of the followers of Rammohan Roy after his demise. The other set of politics centred on Madhusudan was an endeavor started by his contemporaries and then followed by apostles of the Hindu identity, to persistently show that the tragedy in the poet's life was a perfect nemesis for a renegade who dared to denounce the identity bestowed on him by his ancestors through birth - the Hindu identity. In the ensuing encounter of these two sets of politics, Madhusudan emerged victorious proving the triumph of modernity over medievalism, the superiority of a liberal, secular, democratic and cosmopolitan Indian identity over the parochial, sectarian and communal identity. In his own life however, his Bengali identity was overwhelming'.²

'The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu' was produced during his Madras years. Dutta's essay 'The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu', published in 1854, is a notable example of his prose work. Written in a florid, even purple, prose style, the essay reflects Dutta's engagement with the intellectual debates of his time, particularly those concerning the cultural and literary exchanges between the East and the West. The essay is notable for its extensive references to and quotations from a wide array of European literary works. Dutta draws heavily on Thomas Babington Macaulay's writings, which were instrumental in shaping British educational policy in India. Macaulay's advocacy for the promotion of English literature and education in India had a profound impact on Dutta and his contemporaries, who found themselves at the crossroads of multiple cultural influences.

In 'The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu', Dutta attempts to draw parallels between the literary traditions of the Anglo-Saxon world and those of ancient India. He posits that both cultures have a rich literary heritage that, despite their differences, shares a common humanistic ethos. Dutta's comparisons are often elaborate and imbued with a sense of reverence in both traditions. His prose, while ornate, is also analytical, reflecting his attempt to bridge the cultural divide between the colonizers and the colonized. The essay also serves as a platform for Dutta to express his own literary ambitions. This essay presents a comparative analysis of Anglo-Saxon and Hindu cultures, asserting that the latter has been characterized by fanaticism and oppression. Michael Madhusudan Dutt's essay 'The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu' has been subject to criticism for its perceived self-contradictory and inconsistent nature. By aligning himself with the intellectual traditions of both the East and the West, Dutta positions himself as a cosmopolitan thinker, capable of synthesizing diverse cultural influences into his own unique literary voice.

Dutta's early works were heavily influenced by the literary contributions of William Wordsworth and John Milton, two prominent figures in English literature. Wordsworth's emphasis on nature, the sublime, and the exploration of individual emotions and experiences are evident in Dutta's poetry. In particular, Dutta's descriptions of the Indian landscape, his portrayal of the inner lives of his characters, and his meditations on the themes of love and loss are all reminiscent of Wordsworthian Romanticism. Milton's influence on Dutta's work is also significant, particularly in his use of the epic form and his grand, elevated style. In 'The Captive Lady,' Dutta's narrative structure, heroic characters, and

exploration of themes such as honor and rebellion are reminiscent of Milton's 'Paradise Lost'. Dutta's prose, particularly in 'The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu,' also reflects Milton's complex syntactical structures and penchant for rhetorical flourishes. Madhusudan Dutta's early writings are characterized by a bohemian and Romantic spirit that is both reflective of his personal ethos and indicative of the broader literary trends of his time. Dutta's bohemianism is evident in his rejection of conventional norms and his embracing of a more liberated, individualistic approach to life and art. This spirit of rebellion and nonconformity is a hallmark of Romantic literature, which celebrates the primacy of individual experiences and the quest for artistic and personal freedom.

Dutta's Romanticism is also evident in his thematic preoccupation. His works often explore the tension between societal expectations and personal desires, the conflict between tradition and modernity, and the search for meaning and transcendence in a rapidly changing world. These themes, coupled with his rich, evocative language and deep engagement with both Indian and European literary traditions, make Dutta's early writings a fascinating study of cultural and literary synthesis. Madhusudan Dutta's initial writings, solely composed in English, are a lasting testament to his profound engagement with the literary and cultural trends of his era. 'The Captive Lady', and 'The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu' epitomize his aptitude to harmonize the intellectual customs of the East and the West, producing works that are both deeply ingrained in Indian history and influenced by European literary conventions. By means of his early works, Dutta emerged as a spirited bohemian and Romantic, whose writings exemplify his pursuit for artistic and personal liberation. His early affiliation with English literature established the groundwork for his subsequent contributions to Bengali literature, distinguishing him as a crucial figure in the cultural revival of 19th-century Bengal.

3. ENDNOTE

- 1) Sajal Nag, Modernity and Its Adversaries: Michael Madhusudan, Formation of the Hindu 'Self' and the Politics of Othering in 19th Century India, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 42, No. 5 (Feb. 3-9, 2007), p. 435.
- 2) T. O. D. Dunn, Bengali Writers of English Verse, The Calcutta Review, July 1918, p.266.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Chaudhuri, Rosinka. 'The Literary Thing: History, Poetry and the Making of a Modern Cultural Sphere'. Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Das, Sisir Kumar (ed.). 'A History of Indian Literature, 1800-1900', 'Western Impact: Indian Response'. Vol. VIII. New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 1994.
- Dutta, Michael Madhusudan. 'The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu'. 1854.
- Dutta, Michael Madhusudan. 'The Captive Ladie'. 1849.
- Macaulay, Thomas Babington. 'Critical and Historical Essays'. 1843.
- Milton, John. Paradise Lost. 1667.
- Mukherjee, Meenakshi. 'Early Novels in India'. Sahitya Akademi, 2002.
- Ray, Bharati. 'Early Feminists of Colonial India: Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain'. Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Sen, Amiya P. 'Explorations in Modern Bengal: Essays on Religion, History, and Culture'. Primus Books, 2010.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. 'The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore'. Vol. 1. Sahitya Akademi, 1994.
- Tharu, Susie, and K. Lalita, eds. 'Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present'. Vol. 1. The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1991.
- Wordsworth, William. 'The Prelude'. 1799.