

DEAR READER, GOOD SIR: THE BIRTH OF THE NOVEL IN NINETEENTH-  
CENTURY BENGAL

by

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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My dissertation traces the formation and growth of the reader of the Bengali novel in nineteenth century Bengal through a close study of the writings by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay that comment on—and respond to—both the reader and the newly emergent genre of the Bengali novel. In particular, I focus on the following texts: two novels written by Bankim, *Durgesnandini* (*The Lady of the Castle*) (1865) and *Bishabraksha* (*The Poison Tree*) (1872), literary essays published in nineteenth century Bengali periodicals, personal letters written by Bankim and his contemporaries, and reviews of the novels, often written and published anonymously. I suggest that by examining the reader of the Bengali novel it becomes possible to understand how the individual Bengali negotiates the changes occurring in nineteenth century Bengal—an era in which traditional beliefs collide with the intellectual and technological innovations brought on by colonial modernity. As my dissertation shows colonialism is far from being a disembodied institution operating at the level of governments and ideologies. Instead, it becomes evident that with the novel, colonial modernity enters the Bengali home in the form of changing moral paradigms. What the Bengali reader chooses to read, and how she performs her reading come to have a real import in her quotidian life.

The three sites of reading I examine—the reader as a textual event in the novels, the reader as imagined in the literary essays, and the anthropological reader writing and responding to the reviews of the novels—revitalises the overdetermined field of the postcolonial novel by shifting the focus from the novel as a stable literary object being consumed by a relatively passive reader, to an active reader whose reading practice shapes both the genre and the subject reading it.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

“*Nabel pari āpan mane cāinā kārō pāne,/ Nirab prāner bhāshātuku nibhe jāy nirab prāne./ Āpni hānsi āpni kāndi,/ Āpan prān āpni bāndhi*” (“I read the novel by myself, I look at no one,/ The language of the silent heart dies within itself./ I laugh by myself, I cry by myself,/ I brace my heart myself”), sings Rukmini, the “Novel Heroine.”<sup>1</sup> The centrepiece of a late-nineteenth century Bengali satire, she is the archetypal novel reader, thoroughly immersed in the imaginative landscape of the text and defined exclusively by the act of reading the novel. The satire, aptly titled *Nabhel nāyikā bā śikkhita bou* (*The Novel Heroine or the Educated Wife*) is set in Basudebpur, presumably a suburb of Kolkata, as it narrates the story of Rukmini who is so besotted with reading romance novels that she is unwilling to tend to either her ailing mother-in-law or her husband, Haradeb. Her devotion to novels jeopardises the conventional family structure, ultimately leading to its dissolution, and the play closes with Haradeb directly addressing his audience, warning them to not buy useless novels for their wives and thus save themselves from a fate worse than death.

Rukmini herself is a novel phenomenon in nineteenth century Bengal as the first Bengali novel is published only in 1865, a little over half a century after the establishment of the Mission Press in 1800 in Serampore, a suburb of Kolkata. In this fairly short span of time, print literacy grows and the average Bengali reader becomes acquainted with a range of Victorian genres, including self-help books, domestic

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<sup>1</sup> *Nabhel nāyikā bā śikkhita bou* (*The Novel Heroine or the Educated Wife*), 717, translation mine

manuals, religious treatises, and the novel.<sup>2</sup> By the time Thakorelal M. Desai writes of the Indian reading public in an 1919 essay in the *Calcutta Review*, he reports what extant trading records already make commonplace—“A majority of those who read, read fiction even if they read something else, and a majority of those read fiction, read very few other things except it.”<sup>3</sup> The popularity of fiction is reflected in Macmillan’s Colonial Library catalogue in which the bestsellers are novels by now largely forgotten Victorian authors, such as F. Marion Crawford, Mrs. Humphrey Ward, and H.S. Merriman.<sup>4</sup> In the 1850s, the subscription run Calcutta Public Library responds to a complaint regarding the paucity of fiction in the Library’s holdings by adding more works of fiction to its catalogues.<sup>5</sup> In Bengal, the reader has access to both English as well as Bengali language novels, and that the latter is consumed with just as much voracity as the former becomes evident when one considers the print run of *Durgesnandinī* (*The Chieftain’s Daughter*). Published in 1865, the novel is Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay’s first attempt at the genre in Bengali, although his first published novel, *Rajmohan’s Wife* (1864), is in English. During Bankim’s life, *Durgesnandinī* has thirteen editions, closely followed by *Bishabr̥ksha* (*The Poison Tree*, 1873) with eight, and *Ānandamath* (*The Abode of Bliss*, 1882) with five editions.<sup>6</sup> Both *Bishabr̥ksha* and *Ānandamath* are also serialised in the Bengali literary periodical, *Bangadarśan*, prior to being published as stand-alone works. Bankim, though popular, by no means monopolises the Bengali novel market as the

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<sup>2</sup> Priya Joshi, *In Another Country: Colonialism, Culture, and the English Novel in India*

<sup>3</sup> As qtd in Joshi, *In Another Country*, 36

<sup>4</sup> Joshi, *Print Areas*, 36

<sup>5</sup> Joshi, *In Another Country*, 55

<sup>6</sup> Jogeshchandra Bagal, 30-45

reputation of authors such as Shibnath Sastri, Mir Mosharraf Hossain, Troilokyonath Mukhopadhyay, and Lal Behari De, to name only a handful, shows. The practice of novel reading becomes so overwhelmingly popular by the 1870s that authors of the cheap Battalā publications—the anonymous author of *Nabhel nāyikā* being one such—regularly choose the novel reader as their subject of satire, confident of an appreciative audience.

This desire for fiction, as captured in *Nabhel nāyikā*, causes quite a stir in traditional Bengali society. How does one trust a reader who approaches texts of often questionable morality with such undisguised pleasure? Anindita Ghosh, in her study of the Battalā farces, suggests that these popular texts express the lower classes’ dissatisfaction with their social superiors, in terms of sexual and familial morality;

they conveyed a social message: the total moral and physical degeneracy of the bhadralok [...] The desirable code of social behaviour was inherent in the plot: honesty, decency, and fortitude of simple folk [...] alongside [...] a demand for a human and moral explanation of oppression, injustice, and unsettling social change.<sup>7</sup>

They criticise novels for leading to a social crisis, and in particular, the object of scrutiny is the Bengali novel. The novel in Bengali poses a greater threat than in its English counterpart primarily in terms of access—the number of readers able to read Bengali far outnumber those able to read in both languages. Thus a middle class housewife, like Rukmini, can now read narratives of unbridled desire and sexual passion even without knowing English, which is still very much the language of the elites. The more implicit argument suggests a corruption of social values made possible given the reader’s

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<sup>7</sup> *Power in Print*, 198

comfortable familiarity with Bengali. By presenting narratives of lax morality in the language inhabited by the reader, the novel stands a greater chance of encouraging her to identify with what she reads, and whom she reads about. This same relationship of the reader to Bengali is later employed by nationalist authors, such as Bankim, in order to articulate visions of a Hindu nation in a language closest to the reader’s heart.

Yet one reminds oneself—all this happens within the space of half a century, and within three decades for the Bengali novel. What happens during the publication of *Durgeśnandinī* in 1865 and Bankim’s death in 1894 that leads to the emergence of such fully formed novel readers as Rukmini, and how does she learn to read the Bengali novel so effectively as to become a subject for entertainment and pedagogical practices alike? Is it merely a case of the colonised being fed on a steady diet of novelists such as Marie Corelli and George W.M. Reynolds, and thus reading like her Victorian counterpart, or does she learn to read in ways that respond to the particularities of colonial modernity in nineteenth century Bengal? I take as my point of departure this set of questions, and trace the formation of the Bengali novel reader during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. The dissertation examines the reader primarily in relation to Bankim’s literary output, including his seminal novels, essays, editorial remarks, and letters, as in him are crystallised the anxieties and ambitions of the modern Bengali novel and its consumer. Along the way, I place Bankim and his reader in dialogue with colonial policies of education and the ensuing tussle between Sanskrit and English fought over the battleground that is the Bengali language. In order to understand how the reader consumes the genre at the moment of its inception, this study documents Bankim’s meteoric rise to fame and equally rapid descent into linguistic and thematic obsolescence.

My implicit premise is that while the genre itself is brand new, both its creator and reader draw on existing modes of literary consumption so as to provide themselves with familiar points of reference. The Bengali novel appears on an incredibly sophisticated literary scene and has to compete with popular and more accessible forms of literature. If one has to explain why it flourishes, one must take into account the possibility that it is malleable enough to accommodate existing reading practices, thus providing the reader with a heady mix of the new with the comfortable familiarity of a safety net. Once the form becomes well established—and the British novel becomes more widely accessible—these points of reference are discarded in favour of what I term as Anglicist reading practices, and the *bankimī* (lit. in the style of Bankim) novel gradually goes out of fashion. These novels then come to stand for social revolution and nationalist thought, but their relationship with the reader in terms of reading practices is lost.

In examining the Bengali novel reader, I situate this work in conversation with two seminal texts in Postcolonial Studies—Gauri Viswanathan’s *Masks of Conquest* (1989) and Priya Joshi’s *In Another Country* (2005). Both Viswanathan and Joshi are interested in understanding the influence of British literature on the colonised individual, and if I were to impose a genealogical relationship, Joshi follows Viswanathan’s study by looking at the “*actual* responses of Indians” to the introduction of literatures and literary forms in English, while the latter reads the pedagogical framework meant to mould these responses.<sup>8</sup> As Viswanathan charts the colonial impulses driving the introduction of British literature to nineteenth century India, she rightly points out that the texts are accompanied by a rigorously defined policy of educating the natives, and it is this policy

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<sup>8</sup> Joshi, 6

that dictates how the works are meant to be read. While she herself does not use the phrase reading practice, implicit in her argument is the idea that the coloniser passes on to the colonised a particular mode of reading that places a premium on reading as prescribed by the *sāhib*<sup>9</sup>. Viswanathan notes the process by which the colonised reader is guided away from her own literature at the same time as those texts are being consumed by Englishmen since the former lacks “the prior mental and moral cultivation required for literature.” Instead, this reader is instructed in Western literature so as to be raised “to the intellectual level of [her] Western counterpart,” with the full understanding that she lacks the preparedness required to actually read this literature. The paradox of educating the Indian with the same literature for which “preparation [is] deemed necessary” is evident but, as in so many moments of colonial history, largely ignored.<sup>10</sup> The Indian, then, is expected to read Western texts in a particular way—one which requires her to read them for moral and intellectual guidance, pleasure being a unimportant outcome.

Masterful though Viswanathan’s study is, I take issue with it on two fronts, the first being largely a question of numbers. The British policy of providing their colonised subjects with Western literature is restricted to the elites living in the Presidency towns of Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras. The vast majority of Indians have no access to this form of education and are deliberately discounted from being its target audience. That her study is not about the average Indian—or in this case, Bengali—reader becomes evident from her examination of the “brown *sahibs*” or the Westernised natives mimicking their colonial overlords. Viswanathan consciously brackets her scope to include only those members of the colonial society who go on to serve as literate cogs in the administrative

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<sup>9</sup> A colloquial word in a number of Indian languages to refer to a white man.

<sup>10</sup> Viswanathan, “Introduction,” 4

machinery. As even a cursory look at the records of the Indian Civil Service, from which these men were drawn, reveals, the Indians capable of practicing the prescribed reading were from the highest echelons of colonial society. Turning to the Bengali novel allows this dissertation to broaden the scope of study and address the average Bengali reader not necessarily included in that class of trained native subjects. I am by no means claiming to incorporate the majority of colonised individuals, the rate of literacy and accessibility to reading material severely limiting any such possibility. The dissertation is, however, able to examine a significantly large body of readers who can read Bengali, which includes women, and men who do not necessarily have access to anything but basic formal education. Bankim, as a Civil Servant himself, is posted to several *mufassil* (hinterland or district) towns and has access to readers living outside the presidency city of Calcutta. As I discuss in Chapter One, his novels gain considerable popularity among readers from the *mufassils*, with little or no knowledge of the English language or its literature, and Bankim himself is interested in improving the reading practices of his rural readers.

My second point of contention is related to the first, and it is one I share in part with Joshi. As Joshi suggests, in discounting Indian responses to Western reading practices, Viswanathan gives in to “the tempting and often easy Manicheanism that accounts for empire and its complex, clotted history with the disarming simplicity of ruler-ruled, colonizer-colonized.”<sup>11</sup> The result, for Joshi, is that the work does not adequately examine the points at which the colonised inserts herself into, and subverts, the seemingly straightforward discourse of a dominant culture being telescoped onto the subjugated one. For the purposes of this study, I resist the impulse to see the Western

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<sup>11</sup> Joshi, *In Another Country*, 6-7

reading practice as the only available, or even the dominant approach, especially during the second half of the nineteenth century in Bengal. It is one of at least two available elite reading practices—the other being what I term the Sanskritist reading practice—not to mention possible popular, and non-Hindu forms of reading which are beyond the scope of this dissertation. The image I wish to pursue is removed from the hallowed and disembodied level of colonial policies and institutions of higher education such as the Presidency College in Calcutta. Instead, it is located at more intimate and quotidian sites, such as the suburban housewife with her novel reading friends, or the *tols* or centres of Sanskrit pedagogy consciously situated away from Calcutta, or even the private reminiscences of Bankim’s acquaintances. At most of these sites, the novel must compete with existing practices of literary consumption, and win its reader by insinuating itself into these practices, and it is the possibility of multiple methods of reading that fascinates me.

This work shares a greater affinity with Joshi’s approach in that it looks exclusively at the consumption of prose fiction, and like her, I take seriously the reader consciously choosing novels over other available forms of texts. More significantly, however, I am interested in a somewhat subordinate thesis present in her work, namely that;

[d]espite its colonial legacy, when the Indian novel emerged, it did so in forms that successfully subverted earlier colonial policies and radically reversed the priorities of Englishness and empire within the once foreign form of the novel.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Joshi, *In Another Country*, 8

My contention is that this subversion occurs successfully, at least during Bankim's lifetime, at several intentional and unintentional levels, always in relation to the reader. As a form of deliberately undermining colonial pedagogical policies, Bankim relies on his reader's knowledge of Sanskrit literature and modes of consuming the same more often than on her familiarity with texts sanctioned by the British government. Thus when discussing *Durgeshbandini*, the novelist actively dissuades his readers from perceiving in it the shadow of Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1820), suggesting that they read it instead as a product of oral narratives inherited from his family elders.<sup>13</sup> However, to some extent the confrontation between colonial and traditional powers is less deliberate and more pragmatic. As I mention above, it is simply easier for the nineteenth century novelist to draw on existing practices of reading in order to ingratiate his works with his available readers. The reader of the Bengali novel necessarily cannot exist at the moment of the genre's inception, but readers of other genres do, and relying on their expertise and levels of familiarity with reading practices is a matter of convenience.

When Bankim writes *Durgeshbandini*, the reader of the Bengali novel is a figment of his imagination, but the Bengali novel reader with a clearly developed taste for British sensational novels quite evidently exists. If I may return to one of my original questions—what does the nineteenth century Bengali novel reader read that converts into such a competent reader within such a short span of time—I find Joshi's study to be particularly useful in understanding the foundation leading to the success of Bankim's novels. As she demonstrates, by the 1860s, the indigenous reader has considerable familiarity with the form of the British novel, and reading fictional prose gradually

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<sup>13</sup> Bagal, 30-32

becomes more accepted as a practice. Most of these texts, however, are either in English or in rudimentary Bengali translations. Modern Bengali prose is itself in its infancy, though thanks to the efforts of intellectuals such as Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, the language is beginning to transition from its pre-print and Sanskrit heritage into the form recognised by most Bengali speakers today. One of the notable tasks undertaken by Vidyasagar is the introduction of punctuation marks into Bengali, which allows for the composition of prose and poetic texts legible to non-specialist readers. The earlier form of textual transmission, the *pothi* or palm leaf manuscripts continued the tradition of classical Sanskrit in composing without punctuations, thus often leading to lines of text with no clear demarcation between words. As primarily an oral tradition, Sanskrit texts relied on the learned reader capable of articulating word compounds and knowing from experience and expertise of *chhanda* or metre, and of rhetorical conventions, and employing the same to intuit the pauses. It is also perhaps the case that etching hard punctuation marks damaged the leaves and so scribes tended to avoid them, even when available.<sup>14</sup> Early printed texts in Bengali often follow similar conventions, leading to blocks of texts which are incomprehensible to all but experts. The introduction of punctuation provides the authors writing in Bengali a greater degree of control in distinguishing one word from the next, and one section of text from another, while assisting the reader of printed texts in terms of legibility. It is perhaps no coincidence that the efforts to standardise Bengali culminates in the publication of one of the first Bengali primers, the *Barna Paricay* by Vidyasagar in 1865, the same year that Bengali readers are

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<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed analysis on the relationship between the *pothi* and the evolution of languages such as Bengali and Tamil, see Abhijit Gupta, “Popular Printing and Intellectual Property in Colonial Bengal,” and A. R. Venkatachalapathy, *The Province of the Book: Scholars, Scribes, and Scribblers in Colonial Tamilnadu*

presented with *Durgeśnandinī*. Thus if institutions such as the Calcutta Public Library and businesses such as the Macmillan Colonial Library prepare the Bengali reader in the consumption of novelistic prose, then authors and scholars like Vidyasagar, Madan Mohan Tarkalankar, and Akhsay Kumar Datta prepare the ground for serious experiments in Bengali prose.

Of these, some of the most notable are what I call proto-novelistic texts being published in Bengali from around the 1850s, and while they are significant in their own right as literary and cultural objects, my interest lies in their creating a stable foundation for *Durgeśnandinī*. I term the Bengali texts published prior to *Durgeśnandinī* as proto-novelistic since they are mostly straightforward imitations of English prose fiction or written exclusively for the purposes of religious indoctrination. Thus, a work such as *Phulmani Ō karunār bibaran* (*The History of Phulmani and Karuna*, 1852) by the daughter of a Scottish missionary, Hana Catherine Mullens, is less a novel and more a religious tract aimed at converting women to Christianity. The far more popular *Ālāler Gharer Dulāl* (*The Pampered Brat*, 1857) by Tek Chand Thakur, the pseudonym of Pearychand Mitra, and Kaliprasanna Singha's *Hutam Pyancār Nakśā* (*Sketches by Hutam, the Owl*, anonymously published in 1863) introduce the Bengali reader to the possibility of novelistic prose in Bengali, even though both texts are far less concerned about this reader and her practice of reading than *Durgeśnandinī*. To complement this growing body of prose fiction in Bengali and English, there emerges a series of literary periodicals, such as *Bangadarśan* (1872), which both discuss the reader of the novel as a subject of intellectual curiosity, as well as provide the reader with a collection of genres to choose from, including reviews, critical essays, short stories, and serialised novels. The

reviews in particular seek to provide the reader with an aesthetic and ethical compass, while inducting her into what I go on to discuss as Sanskritist and Anglicist reading practices. Colonial educational policies provide a backdrop to this emergent print literacy by encouraging a shift away from traditional forms of literature towards more Anglicised texts. The latter becomes a synecdoche for modernity, and the novel serves as the fashionable portal into a world of intellectual and technological innovations.

How the Bengali reader of this period learns to read the novel, and the exact contours of her reading practice are more difficult questions to answer. They, however, form the productive framework for this dissertation as I delineate my arguments against the perception that there is a dreadful secondariness to the (post)colonial novel and its reader, both of which are assumed to be broadly modelled after their British counterparts. This comparative argument has a long lineage, beginning, not surprisingly, with the publication of *Durgesnandini*. Readers, both Bengali and British note the narrative's affinity with *Ivanhoe*, and the novel earns its author, Bankim, the moniker "Scott of Bengal," which persists late into the twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> If these readers constitute the more elite end of the social spectrum, then the Battalā authors and their readers occupy the popular end, and they too perceive Bengali novels as dryly imitating British ones. Thus the anonymous author of *Nabhel nāyikā* despairs of Bengali novelists merely substituting Bengali names for English characters and aping the stories slavishly, leading to readers encountering preposterous scenarios in which neither the habits nor the customs narrated fit their Bengali protagonists. The (post)colonial novel in India, first in the vernaculars and later in Indian English, are thus imagined as perpetually striving

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<sup>15</sup> See chapter 1

towards the original form of the British novel, and this narrative of historically conditioned lack owes its roots to the civilising myth attached to the novel by the event of colonisation. As Joshi argues, the novel comes to the colony primarily in order to provide reading material to the British, and to allow them to partake of the cultural activities of the mother country. As it arrives in the British colonies, the genre carries with it the hallmarks of the Imperial and the culturally superior, and like cricket and tea, the form is perceived to be quintessentially British, its rapid infiltration of the reading market speaking to the rise of Imperial power in India.

However, it is not just the form that is perceived as mimicking Victorian novels, but Bengali readers, too, are seen as following in the footsteps of British readers, even while reading the Bengali novel. To a great extent, this is an unavoidable consequence of the genre's affiliations with the West, but more importantly a result of colonial pedagogy inviting the colonial reader to find herself, in the words of Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, as the “contradictory implied reader of the imperial text.”<sup>16</sup> Spivak's reading of Binodini Dashi's reading of both English and Bengali (notably by Bankim) texts captures perfectly this assumed impetus on the part of the colonial reader to read with the British *bhāb* (mood or essence). I quote at length from Spivak who bases her analysis on Binodini's autobiography *Āmār Kathā (My Life)* in which the latter chronicles her journey towards becoming one of the most renowned theatre performers on the Bengali stage during the late-nineteenth early-twentieth century;

Binodini was indeed receiving an education in English and European literature in a way that no university student does. To be sure, to learn to read well is to say

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<sup>16</sup> Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Age of Globalization*, 47

“yes, yes” to the text, if only in order to say “no,” in other words to perform it, if only against the grain. But between that general sense of performance and the narrow sense of performing in order to stimulate there is an immense difference in degree. Binodini was not obliged to get her information right; the proper names are often askew. (Ellen Terry comes out as “Ellentarry” in Bengali, a single word, and “Ophelia” inhabits the same register of reality as Mr. Bandman and Mrs. Sidnis.) Yet here we see the difference between knowing and learning. She identifies with Bankim, the master-creator recognized as the successful colonial subject by the [...] babu-culture of Bengal [...] If Bankim had taken the *bhab* of British Literature, so would she; he to write, she to interpret through performance.<sup>17</sup>

This, then, is the Bengali reader admitting to reading Bankim in the vein of Western literature because she understands the author as assuming the same *bhāb*. She is not formally inducted into classroom pedagogy, but so pervasive is that mode of learning—and not, as Spivak astutely distinguishes, of knowing—that it colours all available genres, and creates, as it were, a single plane of reading.

Binodini’s testimony presents a kind of reading that Bankim himself appears to endorse. *Indirā* is first published in the *Caitra* edition of the literary magazine *Bangadarśan* in 1873, then as a standalone volume later in the same year, and finally as a much longer version in 1893. The novella narrates the sensational story of Indirā who is taken captive by bandits on her way to her husband, Upendra’s home after several years of being married but still living with her parents. Even after she is rescued and her

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<sup>17</sup> Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Age of Globalization*, 47

benefactors locate her husband, they two are unable to be reunited since he does not recognize her (they were married when she was a mere child), and it is only through several interventions of fate and Indirā’s ingenuity, that the narrative reaches a happy ending. Bankim adduces stanzas from P.B. Shelley’s “Rarely, rarely comest thou” as the 1893 edition’s epitaph, urging his reader to locate in the poem an essence of the story, and also indicating that despite the seemingly dire circumstances, the lovers do finally achieve union as both Indirā and Upendra are able to “Make once more my heart thy home!”<sup>18</sup> This calculated move follows the edition’s advertisement in which the author plays on the idea that Indirā (both the eponymous protagonist and the text) has now grown, and it is left to the reader who has attentively (“*manasangjōg diya*”)<sup>19</sup> read both versions to judge whether she/it has grown up well. The tone of this section of text—the advertisement and the epitaph—is one of an intimate conversation between the author and the reader; the reader who identifies in Bankim the “*bhāb* of British Literature” will share with him the inside joke crystallised in the epitaph. The reader who cannot read in that manner will still find pleasure from comparing both versions, but miss the humour.

So what if the Bengali novel reader exists in comparison with either the devout colonial subject who needs to read Shelley’s poem in order to comprehend a Bengali novel, or with the Victorian reader who is assumed to be the fountainhead of good reading practices? Imitation is after all an accepted method of learning, and like the Englishman who must first imitate the style of classical Latin authors before proceeding to the next stage of scholarship, Bankim and his reader, too, learn by imitating British

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<sup>18</sup> Shelley, “Rarely, rarely comest thou”

<sup>19</sup> As qtd. in Bagal, 37

authors and readers. Allow me to pursue this line of argument a little further—admittedly using broad strokes—to demonstrate the profound consequences it has on understanding the Bengali novel reader. If Rukmini, the heroine of *Nabhel nāyikā*, or Binodini practice reading in the shadow of the Victorian reader, then it becomes possible to explain the former using the theoretical tools employed to study the latter. Take, for example, the scene of reading with which I open this chapter, and the fear that reading novels converts dutiful housewives into socially destructive heroines of romances. Or Binodini’s self-confessed inability to differentiate between characters from Shakespeare’s plays and those from popular Victorian novels. It can be argued that they are both bad readers in much the same way as Catherine Morland from Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1817) or Mrs Malaprop from Richard Sheridan’s *The Rivals* (1775)—they are either guilty of having bad taste in literature and of demanding that reality be like the fictive worlds they read about, or merely inattentive readers. Thus when the satirist accuses the Bengali novel of distorting Rukmini’s perception of ethics, he or she could be read as echoing Wilkie Collins’ criticisms regarding the “Unknown Public” in the latter’s eponymous essay. The threat posed by novel reading in nineteenth century Bengal becomes analogous to that in Victorian England, and the words of Margaret Oliphant appear to be as relevant to Rukmini as to a British reader. As Oliphant’s 1862 essay “Sensation Novels” makes apparent, novels affect the reader physically as she cannot help but suffer the shocks and surprises the narrative presents. Basing her argument on Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* (1859), Oliphant suggests that the effect of reading scenes of shock and surprise “is pure sensation” as the “reader’s nerves are affected like the hero’s.” This sensation is “totally independent of character, and involves no particular issue” but “the

thrill of the untoward mystery.”<sup>20</sup> It stands to reason, then, that the thrill of reading romances and mysteries affect Rukmini similarly, as she shivers when a heroine finds success in love or is cruelly thwarted. There is little to differentiate between Rukmini and Oliphant’s reader, and the former is subsumed entirely by the reading practice of the latter.

As one follows this narrative of the dominant, and seemingly only available, mode of reading being from the West, the world of the Bengali reader appears to become constricted in terms of choice. In order to emerge from the shadows of the Victorian reader, she is assumed to share for half a century her “common culture with readers in Europe,” till the process of decolonisation becomes a viable concept at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>21</sup> In the supposed absence of alternative modes of reading, the Bengali novel reader, especially as she exits the nineteenth century, is ascribed a practice of reading by a number of postcolonial scholars that yokes Bengali novels to British novels in a perpetually secondary relationship. This practice, termed “allegorical” by Frederick Jameson, and later expounded upon by Michael Denning and Joshi, among others, reduces both the (post)colonial reader and the literary productions of the (post)colony to cultural and political artefacts. For Jameson, the political system produces the literary, rendering “*the story of [...] private individual destiny [...] an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*”.<sup>22</sup> Denning and Joshi differ from Jameson in that their explanation of this reader hinges upon the role she plays in forming

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<sup>20</sup> Oliphant, as qtd in *A Feeling of Reading*, 572

<sup>21</sup> Joshi, *In Another Country*, 136

<sup>22</sup> Jameson, “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism”, 69

an international world of letters, but they also perceive allegorical reading as the only viable mode for the (post)colony. Indian readers, as Joshi summarises, read so as to;

[see] the plots of novels not as unique fictional representations of conflict and resolution, but as a general formula or type that was a “microcosm” of a world that the reader recognized or reinvented as his own. It was a form of reading through which readers could script themselves and their concerns into the narrative, in which readerly mastery and control in consuming the text inverted readerly impotence and powerlessness in the colonial world.<sup>23</sup>

For Joshi, the object of consumption in this passage is the British novel, but as the rest of the work goes on to discuss the production of Indian novels, beginning with Bankim, it stands to reason that this is the form of reading the study assumes the Indian reader to be practicing, whether it is for British or Indian novels. Despite the optimistic note in her introduction resisting the impulse to understand the Indian reader merely as reacting to the one-way street of colonial power, her work still codes the Indian response as one struggling with “impotence and powerlessness.” I am not naively asserting that the colonial world did not indeed render the colonised individual powerless and reactive in a number of brutal and profound ways, including through the study of literature. However, as this dissertation goes on to show, at least within Bengal, the novel reader exercised considerable choice in her reading practice, and by no means is the Western or Anglicised practice the single most dominant mode available to her. Neither is allegorical reading as championed as scholars later assume, if reviews and critical essays published during the second half of the nineteenth century are to be believed. Instead, what emerges

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<sup>23</sup> Joshi, *In Another Country*, 136

is a world in which the Sanskrit *bhāb* is just as powerful as the English *bhāb*, and the threats posed by the Bengali novel are particular to cultural and religious conventions of caste Hindu Bengali society.

If the above sections approach Bankim as somewhat secondary to the Bengali novel reader, the following makes him the object of study. In order to do so, I return to the theme of allegorical reading, only this time I narrow my field of inquiry to scholarship that reads Bankim as one of the earliest proponents of Indian nationalism. However, before I proceed further, I would like to take a moment to clarify a conflation of the terms Hindu, Indian, and Bengali which I perform intentionally both in the Introduction as well as the rest of the dissertation. For Bankim, the putative Indian nation is necessarily Hindu, constructed in opposition to Islamic and British rule, and although he speaks of the nation as *bhāratbarsha* or India, his imagined subject is almost always Bengali. This is most explicitly articulated in one of his last novels, *Ānandamath* in which the imagined nation appears in three states of being, each represented by a Hindu goddess, and the relationship posited between the subject and the nation is simultaneously one of child (*santan*) and mother, and Hindu devotee (*sanyasi*) and the goddess. Bankim's exploration of the religion in texts such as *Kṛṣṇacaritra* (*The Life of Kṛṣṇa*, 1886) or *Dharmatatwa* (*Principles of Religion*, published posthumously in 1900) is intricately associated with his examination of the Bengali *jāti* or race, in that the former provides the ethical framework for the latter. That this is not merely a matter of semantics is noted by most Bankim scholars who rightly identify in his interchangeable use of the words his affiliation with revivalist Hinduism. As Tapan Raychaudhuri points out;

There is some obscurity as to the ethnic identity and the social limits of the ‘nation’ (which he calls *jati*), whose cause he espoused so passionately. Sometimes it was coterminous with India: the unity of all the races of India, he wrote, was essential for the country’s progress. The referent is oftener the Hindus. His more immediate concern was surely with the Bengalis and even in the hymn, *Bande Mataram* [from *Ānandamath*], the reference to the ‘twice seventy million arms’ of the Mother’s children clearly equates the nation with that segment of the Indian people.<sup>24</sup>

He goes on to comment on Bankim’s literary and political output from 1882 onwards as being more overtly didactic and indicative of a desire to locate in “essential Hinduism” the “basis of national regeneration.”<sup>25</sup> Raychaudhuri is far from being alone in his assessment of Bankim, and Tanika Sarkar follows him in examining the novelist’s contribution to a particular brand of militant Hindu nationalism that in the early years of the twentieth century defines itself almost exclusively in terms of anti-Muslim sentiments. Providing a reading of his novel *Sitārām* (1886), Sarkar identifies in one of the text’s most iconic moments “a powerful visual image of communal violence [being given] the status of an apocalyptic holy war.”<sup>26</sup> As Shree, the novel’s heroine, incites a scattered mob to righteous anger and converts it into an “army with a single violent purpose,” she becomes symbolic of the nation as violated mother whose dishonouring must be avenged by her now politically impassioned children.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Raychaudhuri, “Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay,” 136

<sup>25</sup> Ibid 145

<sup>26</sup> Sarkar, “Imagining Hindu Rashtra,” 185

<sup>27</sup> Ibid 186

Examples of such scenes of national imagining abound in Bankim's novels, not to mention in his political and religious works, and they do solicit the kind of allegorical reading that scholars such as Joshi and Denning locate in the (post)colonial reader's relationship to his texts. The result, however, restricts Bankim almost exclusively to the domain of nation formation. Masterful studies of his novelistic and non-fictional prose by Sudipta Kaviraj and Partha Chatterji, for example, present a version of Bankim whose political desires colour all his writings, and most of his stylistic and linguistic choices are subsumed by this approach. One might argue that the body of scholarship I have referenced here are all from a single period in the field of postcolonial studies (1993-2002) and are thus, to an extent, products of their own time. Yet a search for the keyword "Bankimchandra" in the WorldCat catalogue for the last five years reveals sixteen entries, eleven of which are critical works on the author, and of these only two, Shyamali Chakrabarti's *Bankimchandra ebam Bhatpara panditsamaj* (2014), and Arindam Chakrabarti's *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* (2016) read Bankim's writings outside the explicitly articulated frame of nationalist thought. Why do I belabour this point? The most obvious response is that there is a certain kind of conservatism in Bankim scholarship that seeks to situate the majority of his texts, both fictional and non-fictional, under the umbrella of nationalism, which it identifies as the single most dominant ideology espoused by the author. This in turn leads to the few works by him that cannot be inserted into this narrative being ignored or dismissed as minor. Thus essays such as "Bānglār Pāthak Parana Brata" ("The Vow to Teach the Readers of Bengal") published in *Bangadarśan* in the early 1880s remain untranslated and largely unexamined. At a more conceptual level, existing

work on Bankim studies his writings through the frame of Hindu philosophy and Enlightenment thought without adequately addressing his relationship with Sanskrit aesthetics. This is perhaps most evident in the scant attention paid to the extent to which the theory of the *rasa*—Sanskrit dramatic and aesthetic principles—influences his novels, in terms of linguistic, thematic, and stylistic choices. As I go on to discuss this in greater detail in chapter three, Bankim’s romantic novels, such as *Durgesnandinī*, *Kapalkundalā* (1866), *Bishabr̥ksha*, and *Rajanī* (1877), are all informed by the *śṛngara rasa* (the erotic flavour) and the reader of these texts is expected to consume them as the *sahr̥daya pāthak* (the empathetic reader) following the conventions of Sanskrit drama. Thus when the lovers are introduced in these novels, they are usually accompanied by heightened language indicating the *rasa*, and certain words, such as those indicating virtue or beauty, recur at signal moments in the narrative to remind the reader of the dominant *rasa*. Given the degree of artistic skill, along with the double binds imposed on a Bengali intellectual trained in both Sanskritic and Enlightenment traditions, none of Bankim’s novels unequivocally embrace Sanskrit aesthetics as their sole structuring principle, but these are always present, often in a state of tension with the principles of Western aesthetics. Here I would contend that their presence indicates not so much a desire to provide the modern Bengali reader with a newly minted language that can compete effectively with English, but rather the belief that the reader and the author share a cultural past which they inhabit at the same time as the present. This is not a past that “perfumes” the present, to use Kaviraj’s words, as the present hurtles towards modernity, but rather one that is lived on a quotidian level through communal recitations of the epics the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata*, through an offhand knowledge of Kalidas’ poem *Abhigyanasakuntalā*, or

the poetic oeuvre of Vidyapati and Jayadeva.<sup>28</sup> By approaching Bankim’s relationship with his reader as more than one of training the future subject of the Indian nation, one is able to explore both his texts as well as his readers’ responses to them in light of alternate reading practices, ones which exist independent of colonial pedagogical policies or received reading from Britain.

A few words are perhaps in order on what I mean by the phrase “reading practice.” In the context of this dissertation, I suggest, perhaps somewhat simplistically, that a reading practice is a theory of interpretation driven by a set of beliefs which are located in the historical moment that produces the practice. Any given reading practice instructs its reader in *how* to read a text—an activity that is both physiological and psychological—and the method itself is undergirded by the worldview the practice ascribes to. The two practices I explore in this work, tentatively termed Anglicist and Sanskritist, each urge the reader to approach the texts both as means of learning as well as reinforcing a way of being in the world. Thus following the former practice, the newly westernised, English educated reader reads the Bengali novel for echoes of the Victorian novel—both approving and disapproving the presence of the same—while for the latter directs the reader to focus on Bankim’s composition, and the degree to which it deviates from the rules of Sanskrit rhetoric and poetics. The non-novelistic discourse surrounding the production and consumption of novels creates, to a great extent, these reading practices, and thus it stands to reason that reviews of novels, critical essays on the genre, and reminiscences of actual readers would serve as productive sites of research. In this I follow the example of scholars of the Victorian period, such as Nicholas Dames and

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<sup>28</sup> Kaviraj, “Perfumes of the Past”

Rachel Ablow, in their analysis of essays on good reading practices, and on the formation of the reading public. To broaden my understanding of what is in essence a difficult act to record, I draw on the various concepts of reading examined by Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best (symptomatic reading), Michael Warner (critical reading), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (paranoid reading), and Heather Love (close reading). As these works demonstrate, while there are cues to good reading embedded in a text, a practice of reading is more than merely identifying and deciphering those codes; it is also the degree to which the reader is willing or able to invest in those codes, which are often ethical and aesthetic guidelines. Thus, for example, the practice of reading embodied by symptomatic, critical, paranoid, or close reading, posits a relationship between the text and the reader in which the latter assumes the high moral ground of unmediated exposure, and is sustained by the belief that it is inherently powerful to uncover the ideologies lodged in a text's unconscious.

In conclusion, I would like to briefly summarise the following three chapters, the first of which places Bankim in the context of colonial educational policies by examining both official documents pertaining to pedagogical experiments and Bankim's own essays on reading and the importance of training the Bengali reader. I structure this chapter around the following related questions—why does Bankim feel the need to address a lack of a reading public? Is it because he identifies in Bengal the presence of literate individuals, untrained in the art of reading, lacking the aesthetic skills? In response, I demonstrate through my reading of these texts that for both Bankim as well as the colonial government, the understanding is that while there are readers in Bengal, a concatenation of circumstances prevents these readers from becoming members of a

reading public with cultivated literary tastes and opinions. Chapter two begins with an examination of the non-novelistic discourse surrounding Bankim's novels, with a particular focus on *Durgesnandinī*. As the first Bengali novel, it necessarily generates a considerable amount of curiosity in literate and non-literate Bengali society of its day, and I narrow my study to published reviews of the novel, and personal essays written on Bankim by his friends and acquaintances, most of which are written and published following Bankim's death. As mentioned above, I chart two distinct, yet related, practices of reading in this chapter—the Anglicist and the Sanskritist—before going on to explore their culmination in creating an archive of reading, meant to be *the* definitive practice of reading for the modern Bengali novel reader. The third and final chapter engages with Bankim's novels, with particular attention being paid to *Durgesnandinī*, *Bishabraksha*, and *Ānandamath* in relation to classical Sanskrit literature and literary aesthetics. I locate my arguments in the reader to suggest that Bankim's novels train her to read the Sanskrit past as encoded in the text, and coexisting with the modern present, albeit in a difficult relationship. The chapter claims that practices of Sanskrit *kāvya* literature are as dominant in the structural and aesthetic elements of the Bengali novel as Western forms of novel production, and demonstrates the same through an investigation of the *rasa* theory in relation to Bankim's novels. I pay particular attention to the novelist's adaptation of two forms of Sanskrit prose, the *kathā* and the *ākhyāyikā*, and the linguistic decisions informed by the same. The conclusion to the dissertation summarises my research and places nineteenth century Bengal in conversation with contemporary discussions on reading practices, while indicating possible avenues for further inquiry.

## CHAPTER II

### READERS IN BANKIM'S ESSAYS AND LETTERS

The first Bengali printer, publisher, bookseller, and editor, Gangakishore Bhattacharya set up his Bangal Gejeti Press in 1818, and inaugurated a trend of print entrepreneurship in colonial Bengal which saw the print industry flourish in the nineteenth century. The periodical *Friend of India* commented in 1820 that Gangakishore had successfully run his book printing and selling business first in Calcutta, and then in his native village, and that his agents had customers in both urban and rural Bengal.<sup>29</sup> Gangakishore's example is soon followed by indigenous printers, and by the time Rev. James Long undertakes his censuses of print books, there are at least 46 presses in operation during the year 1833-34.<sup>30</sup> With the exception of the few government or missionary aided presses, such as the Serampore Mission Press or the Calcutta School-Book Society, most of these presses, which include the more sensational Battalā (lit. under a banyan tree) book industry, aim at entertaining the average Bengali reader with a wide range of religious as well as secular texts. Unlike the colonial presses which do little to socialize the book, the Bengali book trade thrives on creating an ever-expanding reader base. As Abhijit Gupta notes, unlike the colonial presses, Bengali publishers such as Gangakishore and Bhabanicharan Bandopadhyay “keenly felt the need to socialize the book, not as an object of fascination and dread but one which could be familiarized with

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<sup>29</sup> “Native Press,” 123; Abhijit Gupta, “Popular Printing and Intellectual Property in Colonial Bengal,” 34

<sup>30</sup> Long performs three separate censuses between 1851-60, with the 1833-34 year showing the sharpest rise in the number of presses. For a detailed analysis of Long's census, and for a more complete list of presses operating in Bengal for the period 1801-67, see Abhijit Gupta's Bengali bibliography system and location register of Bengali books 1801–1867. Available at: [www.comcon-asso.in/projects/biblio/welcome.php?redirect¼/projects/biblio/index.php](http://www.comcon-asso.in/projects/biblio/welcome.php?redirect¼/projects/biblio/index.php).

use,” and their unquestionable success becomes evident in the popularity of the print book which overcomes deeply entrenched social barriers, such as caste, within a fairly short span of time.<sup>31</sup> The image thus provided by book historians such as Gupta is a vibrant one, and it appears as though colonial Bengal has a well-established body of sophisticated readers who are quite familiar with print culture by the middle of the nineteenth century.

A curious paradox emerges when one contrasts this with Bankim’s essays on the Bengali reader. In a series of essays both in English and in Bengali, published in the literary periodical *Bangadarśan* from 1872 onwards, Bankim laments the lack of suitable readers in Bengal. He accuses the Bengali reader of willingly participating in a cycle of bad literature in his essay “A Popular Literature for Bengal,” thereby undermining even those instances when this reader does knowingly consume texts. Set against Gangakishore’s world in which readers avidly buy and read books and have a productive relationship with the print industry, Bankim’s Bengal is far more static, set in its old ways, barely literate with no developed aesthetic sense. Neither is Bankim alone in his conclusion that the Bengali reader either does not exist, or even if she does, does not know how to read. British colonial policies, spearheaded by Baptist missionaries such as William Adam, find the Bengali to be distinctly lacking in the reading skills department, and seek to remedy the situation by establishing government aided missionary schools “conducted on the Bell and Lancaster system.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Gupta, “Popular Printing and Intellectual Property in Colonial Bengal,” 35

<sup>32</sup> Long, *Adam’s Report on Vernacular Education in Bengal and Behar*, 1868, 2

This chapter takes up the narrative created by Bengali intellectuals such as Bankim and the colonial government, and asks why, despite the volume of texts produced and consumed in Bengali during roughly the second half of the nineteenth century, does the Bengali intelligentsia perceive a critical lack of sophisticated readers? The question becomes better defined when placed in the context of essays published in the *Bangadarśan*—why is there a continued dearth of suitable reading material produced in Bengali, and who is the reader for whom this ideal literature must be produced? The problem is not, the critics conclude, that enough texts are being produced in Bengali, rather that so many are being produced so indiscriminately that there is no quality control. The Bengali reader, therefore, is left with little choice but to consume the material produced by the print culture of the time. In what follows, I examine the debates over British educational policies in colonial India to understand why the common Bengali reader at this time would be considered literate but not trained in the aesthetic appreciation of literature by those espousing the cause of modern Bengali literature. The chapter examines in particular Bankim’s own preoccupation with obscene popular literature in Bengali, and the effect he considers such texts as having on creating a cycle of bad readers. The final two sections of the chapter examine the lack of Bengali periodicals and journals suited to the creation of a Bengali reading public, and the need for cultivating a Bengali language to both attract and educate popular readers.

### I. Basic Literacy and Its Consequences

For most social commentators in the nineteenth century, the existence of basic literacy among a significant portion of the Bengali population is an accepted fact. Bankim, writing in 1880 in the *Māgh* issue of *Bangadarśan*, suggests that despite

obstacles such as the tortures of a *pāthśālā* (an educational institution, often at the local or the village level), a considerable number of people in Bengal are literate enough to count as rudimentary readers;

Bāngālāy pray duikōTī purush bās kare, tāhāder madhye kato lakhya parite sakhyam? Bingśati lakhya? Nā, ārō alpo? [...] jadi [grāmer] śatkarā calliśjan bālak pāThśālāy jāite ārambha kare tāhāder madhye akkharparichayer pūrbe kurijan pāThśālā tyag kare, bāki kurijaner madhye daśjan jatkinchit śikkhā kariyā bay:prāpte rāmāyan prabhṛti chāpār puNthi kashTe ekprakār parite pare, āir bāki daśjan apekkhākṛta bhālarūp śikkhā pāy. Keval ei śeshōkt byaktider ganya karile bāngālāy kurilakhya lōk parite sakhyam [...] jadi keha balen, bāngālāy pāThaksangkhyā eta haibe nā, tāhāteō āpatti nāi; kurilakhya pāThak kāTiyā daślakhya karate prastut āchi.

How many of the nearly two crore inhabitants of Bengal can read? Twenty lakhs? Or fewer? [...] If forty percent of the boys [in a village] attend the *pathsala*, twenty percent leave before learning the alphabet. Of the remaining twenty percent, ten percent learn the bare minimum, growing up to be able to read printed *punthis* such as the *Ramayan* with some difficulty. The remaining ten percent receive a comparatively better education. If one counts only this final ten percent, there are about twenty lakh people in Bengal who can read [...] Even if someone argues that the number of readers in Bengal cannot be this high, I have no disagreement; I am ready to slash twenty lakh readers to ten lakhs. There can be no doubt that five percent of the population can read.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> “*Banglar pathak parano brata*,” (“The Vow to Teach the Readers of Bengal”) *Bangadarshan*, vol. 7, no. 82, 433-4, translation mine

Bankim here creates a distinction between merely literate individuals and those who “receive a comparatively better education,” and are by implication on the path to being trained in literary aesthetics. Most of the readers, however, are those who are merely literate; they can read the printed text, but beyond this basic capacity to read, they lack any form of aesthetic training. Another distinction becomes apparent at this point, that between the supposedly true printed text, one that is designed exclusively for the medium, and the palm-leaf manuscript or *punthi* masquerading in print. The latter, given its origins in a non-literate—in terms of formal Western education—culture inculcate in its reader the same forms of unthinking rote memorization which the recitation of *punthis* is associated with. The image that Bankim is invoking here is later taken up by the twentieth century Bengali novelist, Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay in *Pather Pancālī* (*The Little Song of the Road*, 1929), where Apu, the protagonist, feels lulled into somnolence by the dull, uncritical approach to reading taught at the village *pāthśālā*. Like Bankim’s ideal reader, he rejects *punthi* learning in favour of science textbooks and novels given to him by the local school headmaster. However, before Apu can fully transform into the reader who has ethical and aesthetic knowledge, he remains locked along with the remaining ten—or five—percent who surpass the *punthi*-reading stage; in Bankim’s formulation, Apu is possessed of the ability to read but he is not necessarily a trained reader. These ten lakh readers, though literate, cannot distinguish good literature from bad, and lacking proper guidance are thus guilty of consuming all forms of low quality texts. The problem, Bankim implies, stems from the mistaken assumption that equates literacy with the ability to identify literary merit, and the consequence is a proliferation of substandard works of literature.

Bankim addresses the same problem in the essay “A Popular Literature for Bengal,” which he begins by further breaking down the broad category of Bengali readers into their social classes and distance from the metropolitan centre;

It may be that there are few systematic readers of Bengali, because there are so few Bengali books capable of being read through. But it is not altogether correct to entertain the idea that the absolute number of purely Bengali readers are in reality so few. The artizan and the shopkeeper who keep their own accounts, the village zemindar and the moffusil lawyer, the humbler official employé whose English carries him no further than the duties of his office, and the small proprietor who has as little to do with English as with office, all these classes read Bengali and Bengali only; all in fact between the ignorant peasant and the really well-educated classes.<sup>34</sup>

The “purely Bengali” reader is here identified as belonging mostly to the lower and the lower-middle class, often living in rural Bengal—in the village or the *moffusil*<sup>35</sup>. The “really well-educated classes,” belonging to the urban professional upper-middle class or the aristocracy, form one end of the spectrum, and are not a subject of discussion here. Presumably, the really well-educated individual, like Bankim himself, is a trained reader, fluent in both English and Bengali, and by means of her/his exposure to the West and to the best of Indic literatures, capable of both appreciating and creating good literature. The common Bengali reader, mostly from the rural parts of the region however, falls far short

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<sup>34</sup> Bankim, *Bankim Racanāvali*, 97

<sup>35</sup> A term used to denote rural or provincial parts of India, away from the Presidency towns of Madras, Calcutta and Bombay.

of this mark and reads indiscriminately, often favouring the entertainment provided by poor quality literature for the effort required to appreciate good texts.

The entertainment, not surprisingly enough, is identified by Bankim to be provided in large part by obscene and vulgar literature, popularised in Bengal by eighteenth century authors such as Bharatchandra Ray and Iswarchandra Gupta, or the early modern erotic poetry from the Vaishnava<sup>36</sup> tradition. I say unsurprisingly because Bankim occupies a moment of transition in Bengal when he finds himself confronted with the possibility of choice. As the son of a caste Hindu family, his initial training is in Hindu religious philosophy and classical Sanskrit literature, but he is also a member of the Bengal Renaissance which shapes itself according to Enlightenment and Utilitarian thought. He thus has access to two very different practices of reading, and it is a combination of these two that he seeks to cultivate in these early essays on literature and reading. In order to situate himself in the middle, he must effect a series of cleavages which allow him to clear a space for his understanding of how a reader should read, and associating popular Bengali literature with the uncritical acceptance of religious texts ensures that both those traditions are shelved in favour of a revitalised form of reading Bengali literature. If the popular and the quotidian religious can be conflated to appear vulgar and uninspiring, then the readers of the same, often in reality possessing considerable readerly sophistication, can also be jettisoned as the barely literate. The following section examines how Bankim performs this act of conceptual gymnastics using the Bengali reader as the site for experimentation.

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<sup>36</sup> Belonging to the Hindu religious sect devoted to the worship of Vishnu.

## II. Obscenity and the Cycle of Bad Readers

Bankim asserts that the average Bengali reader living in the villages of nineteenth century Bengal is only capable of basic literacy since he (the literate individual at this point would almost certainly have been male) is the primary consumer of obscene literature. The logic supporting this claim is that only a reader lacking aesthetic training would be drawn to obscenity repeatedly. To substantiate this claim, Bankim draws attention to Iswarchandra Gupta, editor of the periodical *Sambad Prabhākar* and a popular Bengali author during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Bankim's relationship with Iswar Gupta is worth noting in this instance—the latter was one of his literary mentors, and some of Bankim's earliest work was published in *Sambad Prabhākar*. However, it is Iswar Gupta's poetry that Bankim refers to when discussing the problem of obscene literature in the essay "Bengali Literature";

He was a very remarkable man. He was ignorant and uneducated. He knew no language but his own, and was singularly narrow and unenlightened in his views; yet for more than twenty years he was the most popular author among the Bengalis [...] Of the higher qualities of a poet he possessed none, and his work was extremely rude and uncultivated. His writings were generally disfigured by the grossest obscenity [...] We have purposely noticed him here in order to give the reader an idea of the literary capacity and taste of the age in which a poetaster like Iswar Chandra Gupta obtained the highest rank in public estimation.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Bankim, "Bengali Literature," *Bankim Racanāvali*, 106

Iswar Gupta's popularity becomes metonymic for the Bengali readers' lack of taste and the perpetuation of Bengali books that are too obscene to be read in their entirety. While at first glance it may appear that Bankim is objecting to the moral depravity of the reader who popularises Iswar Gupta, a juxtaposition of the two essays, "A Popular Literature for Bengal" and "Bengali Literature" reveals a very different argument. The Bengali reader, having grown up on a diet of popular Bengali poetry narrating Vaishnavite plots such as the extramarital love of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, and the crude *kabi*<sup>38</sup> songs of Ram Basu and Haru Thakur, does not know *how* to read the elevated moral sentiments expressed in a better class of literature. If such a reader prefers the crass poetry of Bharatchandra Ray or Iswar Gupta, it is because her/his literacy is limited to following a narrative plot, and does not encompass the training one requires to appreciate aesthetic—and by induction, moral—finesse. It would also be incorrect to assume that this reader's growth is stunted owing to popular Bengali literature's predilection for poetry; popular prose writers simultaneously reinforce the lack of aesthetic development. Bankim applauds authors such as Tekchand Thakur—the *nom de plume* of Pearychand Mitra—and Kaliprasanna Singha, or Hutam, for bringing Bengali prose to the modern age, but laments that they, too, have failed to adequately train the reader. Both Tekchand Thakur, best known perhaps for his parable-esque novel *Ālāler Gharer Dulāl* (*The Pampered Brat*), and Hutam, made popular by his *Hutam Pyāncār Nakṣā* (*Sketches by Hutam, the Owl*), are ineffectual owing to their use of obscene language. While both authors draw attention to the various evils and follies of contemporary Bengali society, they fall prey to "racy

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<sup>38</sup> A form of Bengali folk performance in which the emphasis is on a contest between performers who can compose and sing taunts and responses on the fly.

vigorous language, not seldom disfigured by obscenity,” thereby contributing little, if anything, to the education of the Bengali reader.<sup>39</sup>

Despite this plethora of bad books, there continues to exist in Bengal a class, if small, of well-educated individuals who are capable of identifying quality literature from its crass cousins. Bankim is himself a member of this community, as are some of his fellow periodical editors and contributors, and yet they are as much to blame for the common Bengali reader’s lack of reading ability, as the readers themselves. Those of this elite group who are Sanskrit pundits, may claim to demonstrate respect towards the Bengali language, but show no effort in the actual production of texts. Bankim’s sarcasm becomes evident as he describes the habits of the more pragmatic of the pundits;

Chele skule diyāchen, bahi parā ār nimantran rākhār bhār cheler upar. Sutarāng bāngālā granthādi ekkhane kebal narmāl skuler chātra, grāmya bidyālayer pandit, aprāpt-bay:-pōur-kanyā ebam kōna kōna nishkarmā rasikata-byabsāyī purusher kāchei ādar pāy. Kadācit dui ek jan kṛtabidya sadāśay mahatma bāngālā granther bignāpan bā bhūmikā parjantya pāTh kariyā bidyōtsāhī baliyā khyāti lābh karen. He has enrolled his son in a school so reading books and keeping social engagements is now the son’s responsibility. Hence Bengali books are now of value only to the student of the normal school<sup>40</sup>, the village school teacher, the adolescent urban girl, and a few useless men dealing in low comedy. Occasionally a few learned, magnanimous, great men earn the accolade of being a champion of

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<sup>39</sup> Bankim, “Bengali Literature,” *Bankim Racanāvali*, 112

<sup>40</sup> Teacher-training schools

education by reading merely the advertisement for, or the introduction to, Bengali texts.<sup>41</sup>

The pundit's lack of interest in Bengali works consigns them to the domain of uncritical readers. The student of the normal school merely mines such books for language skills, while the rest approach them unthinkingly, for pleasure or entertainment. Any serious discussion of the state of Bengali literature is inhibited by the attitude of its readers who are, in turn, helped in no way by the magnanimous men of learning. Bengali texts languish at the bottom of the literary pile because Sanskrit pundits do not consider the language important enough to merit scholarship or sustained training. So secure are these pundits in the primacy of Sanskrit, that they feel a Bengali book's blurb is all one has to read in order to know what the book is all about.

### III. Bad Readers and the Debate Over Education

If the Sanskrit scholar's lack of interest in the Bengali language is partly responsible for relegating books to untrained readers, those invested in English and in European modes of education, are no less to blame. In the Preface to the first issue of *Bangadarśan*, Bankim draws attention to the "filter down" policy of education, which argues that those at the top of the social ladder—and also conveniently located in the Presidency towns or in the *Sudder* (central) towns of districts—should be the ones to receive comprehensive schooling first. The argument is that not only would this save the government resources, but it would also provide them with a fairly small pool of students on whom they could apply the most current forms of teaching. The educated native could then be tasked to improve the moral and intellectual condition of the less fortunately

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<sup>41</sup> Bankim, "Preface," *Bangadarśan*, vol. 1, 1872, 2, translation mine

situated and impoverished natives, and proper education could filter down to the masses.

The following is Bankim’s tongue-in-cheek description of the process;

Ekkhyane ekTā kathā uThiyāche, edukeśan “filar dōun” karibe. E kathār tātparjya ei je, kebal uccaśrenīr lōkerā suśikkhit hailei haila, adh:śrenīr lōkdiger pṛthak śikhāibār prayōjan nāi; tāhārā kāje kājei bidwān haiyā uThibe. Jeman śōshak padārther upari bhāge jalsek karilei nimnastar parjantya sikta hay, temani bidyārūp jal, bāngālī jātirūp śōshak-mṛttikār uparistare dhālile nimnastar arthāt itarlōk parjantya bhijiyā uThibe.

Currently, there is talk of the “filter down” of education. What this means is that it is enough to educate the upper classes, without feeling the need to separately educate those belonging to the lower classes; they will become educated by the by. Like a sponge requires moisture only on the upper surface for its lowest strata to become wet, the educational waters can moisten the commonest classes of the sponge that is the Bengali race, by being applied only to the topmost layer.<sup>42</sup>

The elaborate metaphor used here serves merely to heighten Bankim’s distrust of governmental policy, and he uses as proof the common Bengali reader who remains untouched by the waters of education, and languishes in her/his bad reading habits. The educated upper classes, whether trained in traditional Sanskrit scholarship or in the newly imported Bell and Lancaster system, do little to pass on their skills to the lower strata of the social sponge and, as a result, those belonging to the latter groups of society, rarely receive the training they require.

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<sup>42</sup> Bankim, “Preface,” *Bangadarśan*, vol. 1, 1872, 3, translation mine

The debate over the possible trickle down effects of education can be traced to William Adam's *Reports on the State of Education in Bengal and Behar*, between 1835 and 1838, in which he argues for measures which would provide some form of state supervised vernacular education to the masses. In his *Report*, he notes that though most districts in Bengal and Bihar have native schools, these are ill-equipped, riddled with caste and religious prejudice, and while Bengalis are becoming more open to the idea of attending or sending their children to the Vernacular and Normal schools established by the British Raj, attendance is still fairly low. The printed textbook itself presents a challenge, firstly because it is expensive and not widely available, and more importantly because books are initially rejected by caste Hindus as a means of ensnaring children and destroying caste.<sup>43</sup> Adam's suggestion is to supplement existing means of education and harnessing "[a]ll means, all the languages of the country, all existing institutions" in order to ensure that the civil and moral liberties extended by the government are supported by a national system of instruction which allows such liberties to be fully appreciated.<sup>44</sup>

Tellingly, he refers to the spread of the printing press to substantiate his claim;

The press is in itself simply an instrument [...] [t]he capacity of such an instrument to subserve useful purposes is an exact measure of its liability to abuse; and the only effectual security against the possible abuse of its power must be sought in the intelligence and morality of those who wield the instrument and

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<sup>43</sup> Rev. James Long, *Adam's Reports on Vernacular Education in Bengal and Behar*, 4. This is also something most Bengali printers and publishers are acutely aware of, and go to great lengths to ensure customers of the caste purity of their products. Thus, it is common to note printers advertising their ink to be made with water from the Ganges, or to have caste Hindu individuals attest to the book's suitability for consumption on the title page.

<sup>44</sup> William Adam, *Report*, 340

in the check imposed on them by the intelligence and morality of the community which they address and to which they belong.<sup>45</sup>

For Adam, the “intelligence and morality” of those wielding the power of print and for the community they are addressing, can only be achieved through enlightened education, and such education, must necessarily be administered by the government. Like Bankim, Adam is in favour of educating the masses, albeit for very different ideological and political reasons, and like the novelist, Adam also suggests that the average Bengali’s inability to correctly read moral codes is intimately related to the latter’s inadequate education.

Although Adam’s *Reports* are initially dismissed by the Calcutta Council of Education because his methods are deemed “impracticable” and involving “more expense” that the investigator supposed, he continues to have the support of the educational reformists, and his plans are implemented, to a certain degree, in institutions outside Bengal. One of the most notable instances of the same is Dr Walker’s experiments, first conducted in the Manipur Jail, and then more successfully in the Agra Prison in 1851. The superintendent of the Agra Prison, Dr Walker, introduced a system whereby prisoners were taught basic vernacular alphabets and arithmetic, and they in turn instructed other inmates. The method was seen as so successful, that Frederic J. Mouat, secretary to the Calcutta Council of Education, commended its ability to turn the prisoners themselves into “chief agents in their own amelioration”<sup>46</sup>. A number of Walker’s recommendations are interesting for the way they echo the prevailing attitudes

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<sup>45</sup> Adam, *Report*, 341

<sup>46</sup> As qtd. in Long, 16

in favour of mass vernacular education, and both Walker and Mouat receive the full support of the Governor-General of India, Lord Dalhousie. A glance at Walker's prescribed syllabus helps explain why it is so desirable for the colonial government, and why it is partially at the root of Bankim's lament that the Bengali individual is improperly educated;

“Before a prisoner can pass the first examination, he must be able—

I.—To read the Surajpur kahani, (a Village Tale).

II.—To repeat the Multiplication Table up to 16x16.

III.—To repeat the Multiplication of Fractions up to  $6 \frac{1}{2} \times 25$ .<sup>47</sup>

The following examinations required prisoners to repeat the first examination, and be tested on additional texts such as *Patra Mālikā (Letter Writer)*, *The Kisām Opdesh (A Brief Explanation of the Revenue System and Village Accounts)*, *The Shudhi-Darpan (A Popular Treatise on Hygiene)*, *The Gyān Cālīsh Biburn (Forty Moral Maxims In Verse with Explanations and Deductions)*, alongside subjects such as simple and compound arithmetic, and geography.<sup>48</sup> With the exception of *The Gyān Cālīsh Biburn*, the concept of critically explaining a text does not feature in this syllabus, and even with this work, the focus is on memorising the maxims. The idea of learning by rote or repetition is deeply engrained in this system of education—a practice which continues to inform much of school and higher education pedagogy in India even today—and academic success is gauged by the student's ability to retain information, rather than analyse the same. In valuing repetition over analysis, Walker and his contemporaries are merely following the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 15

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 15

most innovative pedagogical techniques of their day, which encouraged the memorisation of facts, and following the teacher or the class leader in repeating phrases or multiplication tables. The other point to note in this syllabus is the attention it pays to the needs of the agricultural community; the *Kisām Opdesh* is supplemented by information pertaining to land revenue, measurement of agricultural land, and the basics of bookkeeping. However, the most telling factor of this syllabus, and of the system of education it represents, is the impetus on vernacular languages as the medium of instruction. As the Education Despatches of 1854 and 1859 reveal, there is a growing demand for educating the colonised in their own languages so as to ensure maximum reach of ideas at minimum cost to the government.

Walker’s pedagogical system goes on to be endorsed by the Lieutenant-Governor of the North-Western Provinces, James Thomason, the latter being famed for suggestion that existing vernacular education be supplemented by state-sponsored—or Western—education. Following Thomason’s death, Lord Dalhousie issues a Minute in October 1853, urging the Court of Directors of the East India Company to continue to implement Thomason’s Vernacular Education scheme in Bengal, despite its initial failure, because it is “the plan best suited for the mass of the people of Bengal and Behar.”<sup>49</sup> Dalhousie’s Minute, Thomason’s Vernacular Education plan, and later Charles Wood’s Despatches of 1863 and 1864 ensures that the Bengali masses are seen as fit subjects to be educated according to syllabi closely matching Walker’s experimental Agra Prison syllabus. The notion of trickle down education is emphatically rejected, with Wood going so far as to suggest that the government sponsor only the education of the general populace, and ask

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<sup>49</sup> Lord Dalhousie’s “Minutes on Vernacular Education,” as qtd in Long, 17

those belonging to the upper classes to pay for their own education. The argument Wood and his colleagues propose is that following the establishment of the universities in the Presidency towns, the government will have done as much as is possible to place the benefits of western education before the elite classes.

At this juncture, it is worth noting that the debate over educating the masses problematizes the perception that the colonial government primarily encouraged the introduction of English language and literature into colonial India. Scholars have traditionally read Thomas Babington, or Lord Macaulay's *Minute on Indian Education*, and the subsequent ratification of the English Education Act in 1835, as inaugurating a period during which were created "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect"<sup>50</sup>. Gauri Viswanathan, in *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, is one of the first to draw attention to the use of English as a tool for civilizing the native, and Priya Joshi's work astutely remarks on the particular role played by the novel in this process. The scholarly perception is that English is the favoured language of the colonising class, and an aesthetic appreciation of the novel genre is integral to the intellectual and moral development of the colonised Indian. Yet what both Viswanathan and Joshi's studies miss is that this kind of training forms only one part of the educational policy of the colonial government, and that it is meant to function alongside a more general form of education, targeting the masses and focusing on the vernaculars. The full extent of the educational gradient becomes evident in the sentence that follows the above-quoted portion of Macaulay's "Minute"—"To that class [of educated Indians] we may leave it to

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<sup>50</sup> Lord Macaulay's "Minutes on Indian Education," paragraph 34

refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population”<sup>51</sup>. Further up in the same document, Macaulay makes particular mention of the cost of an English education when he suggests that English be the chosen language of instruction for “those classes of the people who have the means of pursuing higher studies”<sup>52</sup>. English education, then, is not for the vast majority of Indians because not only can they not afford it, they are also not deemed fit to receive such learning. For them, the syllabus designed by Walker, emphasising basic literacy in the vernacular languages, is assumed to be the right starting point.

If, however, the masses in Bengal receive the same education as the prisoners in Agra, what might one deduce regarding the capabilities of the ten lakh readers Bankim identifies as being present in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal? What fraction belongs to the upper classes who received university education, and how well-educated are those who are capable of reading but are below the topmost layer? Given that the main focus of Walker’s syllabus is basic arithmetic and rudimentary knowledge of reading and writing, it is not too much of a stretch to assume that the average educated Bengali would not have been trained in the art of critical reading. The claim that the average Bengali reader possesses only basic literacy can be founded on this system of education that favours practical knowledge over literary competence; equip the masses with the ability to read, write, and perform basic arithmetic, and the job of the educator is thought to be

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, para. 34

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, para 8

successfully completed. Such a reader, in Bankim’s estimation, may certainly be a part of the majority of Bengali readers, but is not suited for the creation and consumption of good Bengali literature.

#### IV. Dearth of Suitable Periodicals and Newspapers

While the educational policies of the colonial government, and the general indifference of both the Anglicists and Sankritists, contribute in equal measure to the stagnation of the Bengali reader at the level of mere literacy, the lack of a culture of newspapers and periodicals also inhibit the development of the Bengali reader. In particular, the absence of newspapers invested in matters of interest to the local populace meant that the few newspapers that did exist catered mostly to the well-educated elite. That newspapers and periodicals are instrumental in cultivating literary taste is noted as early as 1711 in England in issue 10 of the *Spectator*, in which Addison, one of the editors of the periodical, extolls the virtues of weekly papers of such quality as the *Spectator*. He estimates the number of readers from newspaper sales to be about sixty thousand, and to these “Disciples” of the *Spectator* he promises agreeable diversions and useful instructions.<sup>53</sup> The paper, he claims, will bring “Philosophy out of Closets and Libraries, Schools and Colleges, to dwell in Clubs and Assemblies, at Tea-tables, and in Coffee-houses,” allowing the general public to “amuse [themselves] with such Writings as tend to the wearing out of Ignorance, Passion, and Prejudice.”<sup>54</sup> Addison posits the primary objective of the *Spectator* to be instructing the masses in the proper literary

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<sup>53</sup> Addison, *Spectator*, no. 10, vol. 1

<sup>54</sup> Ibid

ideals of wit and morality, and the extent of his success is documented in Q.D. Leavis' 1939 study, *Fiction and the Reading Public*;

To begin with, they [*Tatler* and *Spectator*] combined two hitherto separate reading publics (Aphra Behn's and Bunyan's), and gave it a code [...] Now in uniting the reading public by means of this code the writers of the *Tatler* and *Spectator* were putting into currency a certain set of terms. Or to put it more precisely, they were finding an idiom for common standards of taste and conduct. It is on the general recognition and acceptance of this particular idiom that the novelists from Richardson to Scott and Jane Austen depend.<sup>55</sup>

This code, as Leavis notes, allows the eighteenth century novelist to use phrases such as "manly virtue" and "honour", knowing that his/her readers would be fully equipped to understand the "urban shorthand."<sup>56</sup> What Leavis, via Addison, observes is the growth of a reader who, while belonging to the masses, has been trained to possess a well-developed literary sensibility, such that he/she is able to read between the lines and comprehend the moral and aesthetic codes embedded in a work of fiction.

While the eighteenth and nineteenth century newspapers and periodicals strove in general to cultivate their readers' tastes, the literary review was the particular site through which the training of the lay reader was undertaken. Writing more than a century after Addison, Isaac D'Israeli, an English man of letters and the father of the later prime minister, Benjamin D'Israeli, comments on the peculiar power of the literary review in

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<sup>55</sup> Leavis, "The Growth of the Reading Public," *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 123-4

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 124

not merely forming public taste, but also keeping at bay bad authors of literature. In the essay aptly entitled “Literary Journals,” D’Israeli argues the following;

When writers were not numerous, and readers rare, the unsuccessful author fell insensibly into oblivion; he dissolved away in his own weakness [...] At length, a taste for literature spread through the body of the people; vanity induced the inexperienced and the ignorant to aspire to literary honours. To oppose these forcible entries into the haunts of the Muses, periodical criticism brandished its formidable weapon; and the fall of many, taught some of our greatest geniuses to rise. Multifarious writings produced multifarious strictures; and public criticism reached to such perfection, that taste was generally diffused, enlightening those whose occupations had otherwise never permitted them to judge of literary compositions.<sup>57</sup>

The literary journal both reigns in authors who stray beyond accepted literary standards, and contributes to the rise of some of the “greatest geniuses.” In order to accomplish such feats of aesthetic and moral standard control, the journals or periodicals brandish their most potent weapon—the literary review. According to D’Israeli, the literary review marks the epitome of the golden age of literature since it indicates a steady supply of criticism feeding the demands of critically astute readers. Like Addison, he too remarks on the reviews’ ability to produce strictures which modulate the readers’ opinions, and encourage them to read for the ethical codes championed by the age. The average reader can, then, rise above his/her non-literary pursuits and become part of a reading community with shared ideas regarding literary and moral qualities; such a reader could

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<sup>57</sup> Isaac D’Israeli, “Literary Journals” n.p.

progress beyond the basic literacy required of modern life and become a member of an informed reading public.

The “Literary Journal,” published in various revised versions between 1791 and 1807 as one of a series of articles for the first volume of D’Israeli’s *Curiosities of Literature* may well have been part of Bankim’s reading material, especially given the history of literary reviews traced in the essay. The idea of developing literary tastes through the reading of quality essays in newspapers and periodicals was very much in popular circulation during mid-nineteenth century Bengal, and D’Israeli’s claims regarding the same would have been a part of Bankim’s intellectual and social circles. Bankim’s essay “*Bānglār Pāthak Parana Brata*” (“The Vow to Teach the Readers of Bengal”), published in issue 82 of *Bangadarśan* reveals that like his English counterparts, he too was well aware of the need for a sustained culture of newspapers and periodicals in the formation of a critically informed reader. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, in “*Banglar Pathak Porano Brata*” Bankim presents his estimated number of readers present in Bengal; yet despite there being five or ten lakh readers, he bemoans the lack of a Bengali reading public. One of the primary reasons, he suggests, is the absence of newspapers and periodicals suitable for the cause of training readers;

Balite gele, āmāder sangbādpatra nāi; jāhā āche, tāhā ingrejipatrer anukaran, tāhā kōnakramei āmāder prakṛtibyanjak nahe. Bāngālā sangbādpatra katakta bijatīya baliya Bāngālirā tāhā parite pare nā; seijanya daślakhya lōker madhye ke balmātra daśhājār lōk sangbādpatrer grāhak. Ataeba sādhanānōpōjogī dui ekkhāni sangbādpatra Bange ābaśyak. [...] sangbādpatra, sāmāyikpatra bhinna ār ke ekhan bahulōkke ekbishaye ekdike bhābāibe, ekrūp ālōcanā karāibe? Sangbādpatrer

uddeśya adhikāᅅśa lōker man eksutre baddha karā, ekdike maner gati nirdeś karā.

We don't really have newspapers; the ones that exist are imitations of English newspapers and by no means are they true to our nature. Bengalis cannot read Bengali newspapers because of the foreignness of the form; hence of the ten lakh readers, only ten thousand subscribe to newspapers. A few newspapers are thus necessary in Bengal. [...] What, other than newspapers and periodicals, can now induce many to think about a certain idea in one particular manner, and to guide discussions? The goal of newspapers is to unite the thoughts of the many, and to channel their thinking in a particular direction.<sup>58</sup>

The newspapers and periodicals that exist in nineteenth century Bengal, claims Bankim, deal exclusively with foreign affairs—ranging from the politics of Germany to obscure Russian treaties—or European philosophy, thus alienating the vast majority of Bengali readers who lack either the knowledge or the interest required to follow these essays. So focussed are they on imitating their English counterparts, that these newspapers do not take into account the specific needs of the Bengali reader. The primary need of the Bengali reader is a newspaper that understands the reader to belong to the general population, and that undertakes the task of properly training him/her in the art of critical thinking. For the endeavour to be a successful one, the newspaper should breach the existing class division among readers and begin by addressing the lowest common denomination. Only after the average Bengali reader coming from the middle and lower

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<sup>58</sup> Bankim, “*Bāᅅglār Pāthak Parana Brata*”, 434-435, *Bangadarśan*, vol. 7, no. 82, translation mine

classes, both urban and rural, has been attracted, can the newspaper accomplish the task of creating a reading public with shared tastes and interests.

In suggesting that the primary objective of newspapers and periodicals is to create unified sentiments amongst their readers, Bankim is echoing ideas prevalent in eighteenth and nineteenth century England. His understanding of the role of periodical literature foreshadows Leavis' formulation of a code instantiated by the *Tatler*, *Spectator*, and their numerous imitations; such publications oriented their readers towards both comprehending and popularising moral and aesthetic values of the age. Bankim and his contemporaries—both English and Bengali—advocate such unification of opinions since the extent of agreement indicates how developed a group of people are. It is only the absence of newspapers that reveals how central they are to the formation of not merely a reading public but also the modern subject. To underscore the role played by newspapers in creating the modern Bengali reader, Bankim compares the sale of newspapers to that of clay dolls, and argues that despite the existence of ten lakh readers, more clay figurines are sold in Bengal than newspapers. What begins as a comparison between two objects, one of which is a mere child's plaything, quickly takes on a different note, and it becomes apparent that Bankim's choice of objects is not to show the importance of newspapers vis-à-vis clay toys. Rather, the clay figures are symbolic of the moulding of the Bengali individual into socially irrelevant objects, in circumstances when he/she lacks a moral guiding force. The Bengali, so Bankim's argument runs, who grows up playing with clay dolls, runs the risk of being transformed into such a doll, repeating traditions mindlessly, and never learning how to effectively challenge existing worldviews. The image of the

Bengali reader as childlike recurs in a number of Bankim’s essays, and forms a part of the popular imagination surrounding the act of reading and writing Bengali texts;

It is assumed that books intended for them [Bengalis] must contain childish stories and information suited for children only and treated in a childish style, or they will not suit the understanding of the adult reading population of Bengal. No kind of literary excellence—no sentiments of a manly and elevating character must be permitted to creep into such books [...] He will not understand them, he will not read books that contain such things.<sup>59</sup>

While in this essay Bankim is less willing to side with the perception of the Bengali reader as infantile—he goes so far as to suggest that the image is an erroneous one—he never quite discounts the possibility that unless this reader is provided with adequately stimulating reading material, he/she will continue to be influenced by ideas of little social value. It is only when there emerges a culture of reading good periodical literature—or good literature in general—that the Bengali can finally grow up and shed the perception that he/she is better at imitating clay dolls than forming their own opinion.

#### V. Reading in Bengali

However Bengali newspapers have to do more than incorporate topics of interest to the average reader; to fully accomplish their task as a moral and aesthetic guide, they have to create texts in a Bengali that is accessible to this reader. That language is central to Bankim’s project of creating a Bengali reading public is evident given his role in standardizing modern Bengali, but it becomes even more observable in his advice to the editors of Bengali newspapers and periodicals in particular, and to writers in general. To

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<sup>59</sup> Bankim, “A Popular Literature for Bengal,” *Bankim Racanāvali*, 101

return to “*Bānglār Pāthak Parano Brata*”, part of the need for good periodical literature for the Bengali reader is the cultivation of a simplified Bengali language unencumbered by the academese of both Sanskritists and Anglicists. On the face of it, this might appear to be a somewhat contradictory position for Bankim to occupy given the persistent view that his Bengali is far too inflected with Sanskrit to be the language of the common reader. However, it must be noted that till Rabindranath Tagore’s prose achieves popularity at the turn of the twentieth century, Bankim’s Bengali is that standard for formal prose writing. The speed at which Bankim’s prose becomes archaic, following his death in 1894, is itself worth further exploration, but beyond the scope of this chapter. In the mid-to-late nineteenth century, however, the Bengali of *Bangadarśan* is supposed to set the standard Bankim wants other periodicals to emulate. This language should be “simple, beautiful”, capturing the way the average Bengali thinks, and effortlessly leading him/her towards intellectual development.<sup>60</sup> The language Bankim chooses to denounce in this particular essay is that used by the learned because though it contains within itself only the illusion of learning, its very nature alienates the popular reader. It reinforces the policies of “filter down” education by privileging the elite, and restricting the reading public to just a handful of well-educated readers.

The goal of the alternative language should be to ensure that it can be read and comprehended by the masses, and convey information which the readers can align themselves with. The specific emotion to be aroused by texts written in this simplified form of Bengali is *sahanubhuti*, a word of Sanskrit origin, literally translated as sympathy. Yet in this instance, *sahanubhuti* implies not merely the sympathetic reader,

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<sup>60</sup> Bankim, “*Bangalar Pathak Porano Brata*”, 438, translation mine

but rather one who is accepting of the content, and this feeling of acceptance can only be encouraged if the language is accessible and inclusive. Bankim argues “why should the Bengali be accepting of newspapers which provide them with news of German politics” in language comprehensible only to the learned?<sup>61</sup> To accept, then, the moral and intellectual guidance provided by periodicals and good works of literature, the reader must be addressed in an accessible language. The literal meaning of *sahanubhuti*, sympathy, is, no less important given that Bankim perceives the average Bengali reader to be an emotional subject, moved by the Bengali language. As he says in “A Popular Literature for Bengal”;

And we Bengalis are strangely apt to forget that it is only through the Bengali that the people can be moved [...] To me it seems that a single great idea, communicated to the people of Bengal in their own language, circulated among them in the language that alone touches their hearts, vivifying and permeating the conception of all ranks, will work out grander results than all that our English speeches and preachings will ever be able to achieve.<sup>62</sup>

This particular essay, while ostensibly examining traditions of popular Bengali literature, draws attention to the language best suited for instigating in the average reader a desire for, and an appreciation of, good literature. The allusion to language sparking life in the reader is not an incidental one as it establishes a contrast central to Bankim’s project of creating the modern Bengali language. The language becomes the site where he reclaims the racial stereotype of the colonial Bengali subject; like its users, the Bengali language is

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<sup>61</sup> “Je sangbādpatra āche, tāhāte jarmmān desher rājnīti [...] likhita thāke, tāhāte bāngālir sahanabhūti kena janmibe.” “*Bānglār Pāthak Parana Brata*”, 437, translation mine

<sup>62</sup> “A Popular Literature for Bengal,” 97, *Bankim Racanāvali*

cast as more emotional and sensuous than the hard alien rationality of English. It is not a language intended for preaching and haranguing, but is rather the medium for creating literature which can be appreciated by the modern Bengali subject. However, it is also important for Bankim to distance this emergent form of Bengali from that used by the early Bengali poets such as Jayadeva<sup>63</sup> and Vidyapati<sup>64</sup>, and establish the moral superiority of the new language. The older kind of Bengali substantiates the coloniser’s perception of the Bengali as an ineffectual race because by reading works in that language—such as *Gītagōvinda* and *Bidyā Sundar*—the Bengali reader became a race lacking “manly feeling,” being instead “grossly sensual,” “inactive,” and “incapable of comprehending any other class of conceptions [than love songs]!”<sup>65</sup>. The obscene and constrictive language of popular Bengali literature pulled the reader into the morass of “his hookah and his love-songs”, and prevented him/her from seeing beyond the binds of tradition.<sup>66</sup> Unlike the Bengali of Jayadeva and Vidyapati, the Bengali championed by Bankim permits its reader to align him/herself with the finer expressions of sentiment in the form of aesthetically pleasing literature.

Yet if Bankim must distance himself from the crass Bengali of popular literature, he needs to do the same with English. To that end, he decries the absurd Anglicisation of the middle and upper class Bengali in “The Confessions of a Young Bengal”;

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<sup>63</sup> A 12<sup>th</sup> century Sanskrit poet, most famous for the epic poem *Gītagōvinda*, describing Kṛṣṇa’s love for Rādhā, while placing the latter as more important than Kṛṣṇa. For Bankim, this poem is emblematic of the effeminacy engendered in the Bengali reader.

<sup>64</sup> A 14<sup>th</sup> century Sanskrit poet, also known for his corpus of love songs, praising the love between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa.

<sup>65</sup> Bankim, “A Popular Literature for Bengal,” 98.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid* 99.

The stamp of the Anglo-Saxon foreigner is upon our houses, our furniture, our carriages, our food, our drink, our dress, our very familiar letters and conversation [...] book-shelves filled with Reynolds’ Mysteries, Tom Paine’s Age of Reason and the Complete Poetical Works of Lord Byron, English Musical-boxes compose the fashionable furniture of the sitting-rooms of Young Bengal.<sup>67</sup>

The group known as the Young Bengal were mostly followers of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, who rebelled against orthodox Hindu traditions while embracing European Enlightenment thought as the more rational and modern mode of being. A number of Young Bengal members later contributed to what is commonly known as the Bengali Renaissance, and despite Bankim’s apparent critiques, these same people produced some of the earliest forms of Bengali literature Bankim was to endorse. Here his point of contention, however, is their over reliance on English as the adopted language of the Bengali individual. The talented writers of the Young Bengal movement are not inclined to write in Bengali because it is “degrading for the dashing young Bengali who writes and talks English like an Englishman, to be caught writing a Bengali book.”<sup>68</sup> The Bengali language, and by extension the common Bengali reader, are perceived as vulgar and thus beneath the social standing of the Anglicised Bengali. In charging the English-like Bengali of neglecting his/her mother tongue, Bankim once again draws attention to the colonial stereotype symbolised by the Bengali language. It is a vulgar language because it is so intimately wrapped up in the very Hindu orthodoxies rejected by rational, Western science, and because it is used by the common shopkeeper and the village

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<sup>67</sup> Bankim, “Confessions of a Young Bengal,” 137.

<sup>68</sup> Bankim, “A Popular Literature for Bengal,” 100.

*zamindar* with no aspirations towards greatness. The Bengali fashioned by Bankim needs to compete with the fashionable library of the Anglicised gentleman, and be capable of producing literature as morally edifying as Tom Paine’s *Age of Reason* and as aesthetically sound as the *Complete Poetical Works* of Lord Byron. Even when a member of Young Bengal writes in Bengali, Bankim argues, his sense of shame prevents him from associating his name with the work, and so “many of [Bengal’s] best books are anonymous.”<sup>69</sup>

Given this low perception of the Bengali language, it is no surprise the urgency with which Bankim wishes to reclaim the language as one not just able but best suited, to educate the average Bengali reader. Writing to his friend Sambhuchandra Mookerjee, Bankim exclaims;

You rightly say that English for good or for evil has become our vernacular; and this tends daily to widen the gulf between the higher and the lower ranks of Bengali society [...] I think that we ought *to disanglicise* ourselves, so to speak, to a certain extent, and to speak to the masses in the language which they understand. I therefore project a Bengali Magazine.<sup>70</sup>

The magazine, of course, is *Bangadarśan*, but even more interesting is the reason Bankim supplies for the need to *disanglicise* the Bengali author. Once again, he has in mind the average Bengali reader whose knowledge of English is only rudimentary, and who can be addressed effectively only in Bengali. This Bengali reader belongs to the “lower ranks of Bengali society,” and if the “higher” ranks persist in outdoing the Englishman in their use

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 100

<sup>70</sup> Bankim, Letter to Sambhuchandra Mookerjee, *Bankim Racanāvali*, 170.

of English and their concomitant neglect of Bengali, the former will never be inducted into a Bengali reading public. What reading public does exist, is a mere imitation of its English counterpart, and thereby incapable of both demanding and consuming literature true to the nature of Bengal. The presence of these select few readers creates the impression that the Bengali author—writing primarily in English—has a responsive reading public, but it is false security provided by this very impression that prevents the author from venturing into the world of Bengali literature and creating an authentic Bengali reading public. For Bankim, the gulf between the ranks needs to be closed both for the sake of the common Bengali reader and the Bengali author, such as himself, who wishes to create a modern Bengali language suited for the modern Bengali subject.

Another interesting site on which the debate over linguistic superiority plays out is the Bengali primer, and in particular one such primer written by Bankim for the exclusive use of those Bengalis ill-trained in the art of writing in the language. *Sahaj Racanāśikkhā* (*An Easy Guide to Composition*) is one of two primers Bankim writes in a bid to train the Bengali author, and the Advertisement to the text reveals the extent of Bankim’s concerns regarding an accessible Bengali language. While the primer itself is written in Bengali, relying upon “no English model,” the Advertisement is in English, ostensibly to attract even those students with very little experience in Bengali;

It is a standing reproach against the educated Bengali that he cannot write in his mother tongue. The reproach has perhaps an application still more forcible in the case of those who receive only an elementary education in the Vernacular schools than in the case of their more educated brethren turned out of the colleges [...] In the second chapter he [the writer, Bankim] has explained the existing practice of

the best writers under three heads, (1) Correctness, (2) Precision, and (3) Perspicuity.<sup>71</sup>

The student of the vernacular schools is as important to the project as college educated Bengalis, because it is the former who is the common Bengali reader for whom Bankim wishes to create a better class of literature. This student, unlike her/his “more educated brethren” would have received the kind of elementary education advocated by Adam’s *Report on Education* and Walker’s experiments in Agra Prison. By addressing the reader as a potential author, Bankim further narrows the gap introduced by the colonial state’s educational policies, while simultaneously encouraging the reader to understand the so-called behind-the-scenes of producing good literature. This second task becomes evident from the description of the second chapter, alerting the reader/writer to the hallmarks of good writing—not only must the language be grammatically correct, it must also be precise and clear. Bankim demands the same qualities from editors of newspapers and periodicals, and from authors writing in Bengali because, for him, only by constructing itself as such can the Bengali language rid itself of the vulgarity of popular Bengali, the fake learning of the Sanskrit pundits and the foreign ways of the anglicised Bengali.

The following chapter picks up the narrative from the perspective of the two available practices of reading alluded to above—a modified, sincere Sanskrit approach, and the Anglicised one, buttressed as it is by Bankim’s decision to write fictional prose in the form of novels. The reader, seen here almost exclusively from the perspective of Bankim and the colonial government, reappears both as an object of intellectual curiosity as well as the author of reviews and personal reminiscences. Left alone with the novel,

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<sup>71</sup> Bankim, “Advertisement,” *Sahaj Racanāsikkhā*

this reader appears to chart several conflicting paths, often choosing to read against the author's expressed intentions.

## CHAPTER III

### THE READER IN REVIEWS

In a remarkable passage in his essay “*Bankimcandra o Dinabandhu*” (“Bankimchandra and Dinabandhu”), Purnachandra Chattopadhyay writes of the first time *Durgesnandinī* was presented before an audience. As the first Bengali novel, *Durgesnandinī* occupies a near-mythic position in the history of Bengali literature, and Purnachandra’s account contributes actively to the project of eulogising the novel, and its author, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. The event Purnachandra narrates occurs towards the end of 1864, when Bankim gathers in his Kanthalpara home friends, fellow intellectuals, and Sanskrit *pundits* from Bhatpara<sup>72</sup>, and reads to them from the manuscript of his first novel. The reading lasts two days, and such is its mesmeric power that members of the audience addicted to tobacco forget to call for their hourly dose of the hookah. For Purnachandra, narrating the occasion serves two related purposes—it establishes his claim that he, as the novelist’s younger brother, is part of an elite circle that has access to facts regarding both Bankim and *Durgesnandinī*, and dispels rumours that Bankim had any qualms about the novel’s literary merits.

My interest in the event, however, has little to do with the ins and outs of nineteenth century Bengali literary society, or indeed the legendary nature of *Durgesnandinī* and its creator. Rather, I wish to focus on what Purnachandra glosses over somewhat briefly—Bankim performs a *reading* of the novel. The first encounter the Bengali novel reader has with *Durgesnandinī* does not even accord him<sup>73</sup> the status of the

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<sup>72</sup> Locality in Bengal known for being a seat of Sanskrit learning

<sup>73</sup> During the reading, the audience is exclusively male.

reader; he is a listener being *read to*. The sitting room of Bankim's ancestral home hosts what can only be called an inauspicious beginning for the Bengali novel reader, as he is turned into an audience before he has the opportunity to perform the act of novel reading. I belabour this point not merely for its anecdotal quality, but to draw attention to the fraught relationship between the novelist and the reader at the moment of inception of the Bengali novel. What Bankim's intentions are for performing the reading is a task best left for his biographers, but that he does indeed select a representative audience to whom he reads out *Durgesnandinī* reveals his uneasiness with the reading skills of his potential readers. I use the word uneasiness advisedly because included in Bankim's audience are well known scholars of Bengali, Sanskrit, and English, all of whom could be assumed to be competent readers of the novel in their own right. Tellingly, they also go on to be some of the most popular reviewers of Bankim's novels. What, then, is the purpose of reading them *Durgesnandinī* rather than providing them with the manuscript (which is the course Bankim adopts following the initial reading)? Here I would claim that by providing a reading—perhaps the proper reading?—to such an assembly, the novelist seeks to assure its transmission to the less illustrious Bengali reader, and to actively undertake the project of training this reader in the art of reading a Bengali novel. The role of the Bengali reader is undermined even before being fully established by a novelist for whom the existence of this reader is primarily theoretical because the genre to be consumed has barely made an appearance.

However, Purnachandra's version of the story, and its implications, presents a misleading picture of the readers existing in Bengal at the time of *Durgesnandinī*'s appearance. If the Bankim of this narrative envisions a role for the reader of the Bengali

novel that commences from the reading he performs, the actual readers present in Bengal carve for themselves a very different identity, as becomes evident from the reviews of first *Durgesnandini*, and then some of Bankim's early novels. In what follows, I argue that the reviews of Bankim's early novels reveal his readers, often deliberately, ignoring or misreading the codes of reading carefully embedded in the texts. It is not merely that existing nineteenth century Bengali readers the novels against the grain, but, and more significantly, they read against the author. The tension between Bankim, the novelist with a missionary zeal, and his readers is unique to this moment in Bengali literary and colonial history given the former's meteoric rise to the status of the man who single-handedly creates modern Bengali literature. That Bankim is a cult figure, and the origin of modern Bengali literature is a narrative produced simultaneously with the novels, and what he has to say about how to read novels is more than mere suggestion. Thus when his readers choose to read his novels badly, they seek to redefine both the form of the Bengali novel, and question the role ascribed to them by the central literary figure of the era. The contest between the novelist wishing to train his readers, and the actual readers is not merely one of ego. At stake is what I would describe as the desire to create an archive of reading, and with it, a vision of the modern Bengali subject. At a material, and somewhat simplistic level, it is an existing archive one can access—this is the same archive, or set of archives, I cull the following reviews from. However, it is also an archive that seeks to create a trace of readings. More ambitious than a community of readers, the archive of reading founds itself upon the idea that encoded in it are transmittable concepts—how one reads reflects who one is, and this notion can be accessed by later readers who learn from it how to be.

What, one might ask, is the purpose of naming this set of readings an archive? Why choose the term archive in a discipline already so burdened with the *mal d'archive*? Why not choose to perceive these readings as the production of a literary community responding to texts engendered at a particular moment in Bengal's history, which, at first glance, they do indeed appear to be? The reason, I would argue, is twofold. The first concerns the object of analysis. By naming it an archive of reading, the focus is no longer on readers as responding to texts and their authors, but rather on readers and their practices of reading. The reviews, which I claim bear traces of these practices, instead of being responses to Bankim's novels, are ways of aligning the texts to the prejudices held by the readers. My second reason finds itself upon the oldest trope in Postcolonial Studies—power. This archive, by virtue of being an archive, houses the privileged, the objects worthy of preservation. It is an archive in the Derridean sense of the word, in that it is structured by the principle of guardianship. As such, it is a contested space, because different groups of readers, including the author himself, consider themselves to be propagators and guardians of those practices of reading worth transmitting to the Bengali of the future. To return to what is at stake for the readers challenging Bankim's performed reading of *Durgesnandinī*—it is the power to create and interpret the archive. The readers whose reviews construct the archive are, in Derrida's words, “the superior magistrates, the *archons*”. Derrida goes on to describe the intersection of the *archons* and the archived material thus;

the meaning of “archive,” its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded. The citizens who thus held and signified

political power were considered to possess the right to make or to represent the law. On account of their publicly recognized authority, it is at their home, in that *place* which is their house (private house, family house, or employee's house), that official documents are filed. The archons are first of all the documents' guardians [...] They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence. They have the power to interpret the archives. Entrusted to such archons, these documents in effect state the law: they recall the law and call on or impose the law.<sup>74</sup>

Here I wish to draw attention to two related strands Derrida mentions in the quote—the right and the power the archons have to interpret the archive, and the archive itself having the power to state the law. This is a point to which I shall return later in the chapter, but for the moment, it is important to note that the readings in the archive compete to be the one most representative of that version of Bengali modernity which stands the clichéd test of time. The reviews seek to be *the* perception of social and cultural being to be handed to the Bengali learning to read Bankim's—and subsequent—novels as guided by them. Should one read in Bankim the shadow of Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, thereby proving oneself learned in the tenets of Western Enlightenment—and thus a particular *kind* of Bengali individual—or should one choose instead to identify in the novels linguistic anomalies that mark the Bengali as a vulgarisation of Sanskrit?

However, does according a reading practice the power to define an individual's mode of being in the world, overstate the case? To answer this question, the phrase reading practice needs to be elaborated upon, particularly in the context of this argument.

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<sup>74</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25.2, 9-10

To reiterate the definition I provide in the Introduction, a reading practice is a theory of interpretation driven by a set of beliefs which are located in the historical moment that produces the practice. Any given reading practice instructs its reader in *how* to read a text—an activity that is both physiological and psychological—and the method itself is undergirded by the worldview the practice ascribes to. But reading is a difficult act to record, and theorising reading runs the risk of becoming vague and overgeneralised, so founding my claim in a few examples is perhaps in order. Let me begin in the nineteenth century, but shift the focus to Victorian England. As Nicholas Dames’ masterful study of the reading practices of the period suggests, Victorian England is an age obsessed with the reader and her habits. According to Dames, physiological novel reading defines the reading practice of nineteenth century novel readers most accurately, and he summarises the questions asked by this practice;

What transpire[s] in mind and body as reading occur[s]? [...] What quality of attention do certain texts or genres demand and receive? What rates of consumption and comprehension are normative for given genres? How does the mind make sense of elongated narrative forms? How does the eye traverse different texts differently?<sup>75</sup>

The reader, as part of a world that is becoming rapidly industrialised, is conceived as being primarily an entity with a nervous system performing the act of reading which is itself understood as a mechanical activity. Thus, published reviews and commentaries on novel reading in Victorian England train the reader “to consume texts at an even faster rate, with a rhythmic alternation of heightened attention and distracted inattention locking

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<sup>75</sup> Nicholas Dames, *Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction*, 6

onto ever smaller units of comprehension”<sup>76</sup>. The emphasis placed by the practice of physiological novel reading on mechanising the act of reading, and on consuming texts results from the age’s cultural, political, and technological concerns. The novel, in dialogue with the consumption practices of nineteenth century England, solicits a reading practice attentive to the temporal rhythms of industrialisation, and the practice in turn prepares the reader to inhabit a mechanised world.

Following the trail of the novel, one arrives at the second half of the twentieth century, and to a reading practice sustained by the Anglo-American academy—a practice which this chapter, both explicitly and implicitly, performs. This practice, which Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best term symptomatic reading, relies upon its reader playing the role of the detective to solve the mystery that is the novelistic text. In their essay “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” Marcus and Best trace symptomatic reading to the 1970s when close reading and interpretation become the dominant form of literary criticism;

One factor enabling exchanges between disciplines in the 1970s and 1980s was the acceptance of psychoanalysis and Marxism and metalanguages. It was not just any idea of interpretation that circulated among the disciplines, but a specific type that took meaning to be hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter. This “way” of interpreting went by the name of “symptomatic reading.” We were trained in symptomatic reading, became attached to the power it gave to the act of interpreting, and find it hard to let go of the belief that texts and their readers have an unconscious.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

<sup>77</sup> Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” 1

The reader is thus trained to read a text for what it does not say in order to then decipher what it means; the ability to disclose the absent marks the reader's level of competency, and the bad reader is quickly identified when she takes the text at face value. At its heart, symptomatic reading carries a deep suspicion of the text because the latter is perceived as trying to continually thwart the reader's attempts at demystifying it. Michael Warner's description of critical reading<sup>78</sup> is, in essence, the same as Marcus and Best's symptomatic reading—a practice of reading driven by the assumption that the surface of the text merely provides the raw data, and meaning making must begin by plumbing its depths. The descriptors for this particular reading practice can be proliferated—to add to Warner, Marcus and Best, there is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's paranoid reading<sup>79</sup>, Heather Love's close reading<sup>80</sup>, and Sharon Marcus' just reading<sup>81</sup>, to name only three—but they all appear to stem from a faith in exposure. In perhaps an ironic turn, symptomatic reading practice can itself be read as being founded upon the high moral ground of unmediated exposure, and the belief that it is inherently powerful to uncover the ideologies lodged in a text's unconscious.

If physiological reading dominates novel consumption in Victorian England, and symptomatic reading is the hallmark of the Anglo-American academy's approach to novels in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, nineteenth century Bengal is divided between two distinct, and equally powerful practices of reading. As mentioned above, the newly westernised, English educated reader reads the Bengali novel for echoes of the

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<sup>78</sup> Michael Warner, "Uncritical Reading"

<sup>79</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You," *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*

<sup>80</sup> Heather Love, "Close Reading, Thin Description"

<sup>81</sup> Sharon Marcus, *Between Women*

Victorian novel—both approving and disapproving the presence of the same—according to the reading practice I shall term Anglicist, for the purposes of this argument. Its competitor is the Sanskritist reading practice which urges the reader to focus on Bankim’s composition, and the degree to which it deviates from the rules of Sanskrit rhetoric and poetics. I should clarify that both Anglicist and Sanskritist are terms for two reading practices that encompass broad swathes of cultural, historical, and political imperatives that are often intertwined; I use the terms as nominative rather than descriptive. However, I hope to demonstrate through the chapter, that as reading practices they are distinct, and the demands they place upon the reader may be traced to an understanding of literature driven by two very different ways of being in the world.

One final note before embarking on an examination of these two reading practices, and of the archive of reading they seek to create. I base my argument on two related sets of documents—published reviews of Bankim’s novels (primarily of *Durgesnandinī* though by no means exclusively), and first hand recollections of reading and encountering these novels written and published by Bankim’s contemporaries. The second group of essays, written over a period of about ten years after Bankim’s death in 1894, couch their reviews of his novels in predominantly eulogistic prose, but are the more interesting of the two sets because of the way they draw authority for their readings from their authors’ personal relationships with Bankim. In each of these essays, Bankim is more of a character playing the role of the novelist rather than an actual person the essayists encountered in their lives—he is larger than life, of almost mythic proportions, although remarkably consistent in his views, given the diversity of the essayists. I find this collection helpful in understanding the motivations certain nineteenth century

Bengali novel readers have for what I call deliberate misreadings of *Durgesnandinī* in particular. The figure of the novelist prescribing a specific kind of reading appears frequently in the recollections, and as such, becomes the counterpoint to the readings performed by the essays themselves. Purnachandra's anecdotal narrative, with which I begin this chapter, is a case in point. He is at pains to describe the particularities of the reading Bankim performs of *Durgesnandinī*, only to call into doubt the reading later in the essay and elsewhere. Perhaps two of the most interesting recollections are written by Rabindranath Tagore, arguably the most prominent figure to dominate the Bengali literary scene after Bankim, and Kalinath Datta, the novelist's junior colleague during the period of *Durgesnandinī*'s composition. Datta's account is important for the attention it draws to Bankim's writing of the novel, and for suggesting that very early readers of the manuscript may have already brought to the author's notice the narrative's similarities with Scott's *Ivanhoe*. Tagore, on the other hand, as Bankim's reader provides the necessary link to encountering the Anglicised reader as embedded in later Bengali novels. As becomes evident in Tagore's novel *Gōrā*, the Anglicist practice of reading comes to dominate much of Bengali thought during the early years of the nationalist movement in the region. The archive of reading this practice seeks to establish thus contributes to a particular strand of Indian nationalism, and affects the life of the average Bengali reader far beyond the pages of the book.

The reviews, of both the Anglicist and Sanskritist variety are telling as much for the readings they present of the novels as for the venue in which they are published. For this chapter, I choose to avoid reviews published in the Bengali literary journal *Bangadarśan* given its editor, Bankim's free handed approach to reworking

contributions. When the first issue of *Bangadarśan* appears in 1872, Bankim’s reputation as a literary godfather is already well established, and the journal draws on both the novelist’s popularity as well as the standards of literary quality he is associated with. As a result, the essays solicited, submitted, and published in *Bangadarśan* are all decidedly *bankimī*<sup>82</sup> in nature, and predominantly extensions of opinions expressed by Bankim.<sup>83</sup> The reviews examined in the chapter are from a number of Bengali literary journals, including *Āryadarśan*, *Sāhitya Parishat Patrikā*, *Bhārati*, *Sādhanā*, and *The Calcutta Review*. While some of these journals—notably *Āryadarśan* and *Sāhitya*—have close ties with Bankim, the reviews are published independent of his supervision, and in some instances, are decidedly non-*bankimī*.

The following two sections of the chapter analyse the reviews and essays in order to establish Anglicist and Sanskritist as two distinct reading practices, and the final section returns to the idea of an archive of reading, taking up the question of what is at stake for the nineteenth century Bengali novel reader in crafting and propagating these reading practices.

### I. Reading Bankim as the “Scott of Bengal”

One of the earliest epithets Bankim earns is the “Scott of Bengal,” owing, presumably, to the uncanny resemblances his readers notice between his first novel *Durgeśnandinī* and Scott’s *Ivanhoe*. The moniker long outlives both the novelist and the

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<sup>82</sup> Espousing Bankim’s style of writing Bengali, and often his ideas. The adjective *bankimī*—in the fashion of Bankim—has come to stand for an archaic kind of Sanskrit inflected Bengali expressing ideals of chivalric love and heroic valour, but in the second half of the nineteenth century it was quite the *avant garde* style which many aspiring writers sought to recreate.

<sup>83</sup> Sureshchandra Samajpati, in his essay on Bankim, “Bankimchandra,” writes of the editorial advice he receives from the novelist; the latter urges even young editors, such as Sureshchandra, to not hesitate from editing and rewriting contributions as that is the prerogative of the editor.

popularity gained by his creations, and marks a peculiar strand in Bankim scholarship—that of proving or disputing the validity of the claims of some of his earliest readers that *Ivanhoe* is indeed the text *Durges̄nandinī* is in conversation with. However, before proceeding further, it is interesting to glance briefly at the history of the novel in Bengal prior to the publication of *Durges̄nandinī*, given that both print technology and the genre are relative newcomers to the region during the period under discussion. The story of the novel's importation into Bengal is by now a well-rehearsed one. As Priya Joshi aptly summarises the moment of contact—“[t]he British novel of ‘serious standards’ was introduced in India in the nineteenth century as a means of propagating and legitimating Englishness in the colony.”<sup>84</sup> This figurehead of “Englishness” soon finds itself being consumed for less educational purposes, and as lending library records and trade figures of book imports show, by the second half of the nineteenth century the novel outstrips all other forms of fictional and non-fictional texts in English.<sup>85</sup> The bulk of the novels imported make their way to the two presidency towns of Calcutta (Kolkata) and Bombay (Mumbai), given the degree to which they are anglicised and the principle centres for experiments in Anglophone education. In Calcutta, a lending library called the Calcutta Public Library (later known as the Imperial Library, and then the National Library of India post-Independence), along with a host of other privately funded libraries, supply the growing demand for popular fiction. As Joshi notes;

Inspired by the success of this (the Calcutta Public Library) institution, a number of wealthy *zamindars* started libraries modeled on it in their rural estates around

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<sup>84</sup> Priya Joshi, *In Another Country: Colonialism, Culture, and the English Novel in India*, 4

<sup>85</sup> Priya Joshi, *In Another Country: Colonialism, Culture, and the English Novel in India*, 38-41

Bengal, and substantial public libraries, patronized exclusively by Indian users, soon appeared in Midnapore (established 1851), Jessore, Rangpur, Bogra, Barishal and Hoogly (all established 1854), Krishnanagar (established 1856), Konnagar (established 1858) and Uttarapara (established 1859) [...] Institutions such as the Burra Bazar Family Literary Club (established 1857), the Chaitanya Library & Beadon Square Literary Club, the Hindu Literary Society (established 1876), the Mahomedan Literature Society (established 1863), and the Bagbazar Reading Library (established 1883), were some of the many new libraries and reading rooms serving Indian users exclusively that had begun to flourish.<sup>86</sup>

The proliferation of libraries and reading societies within Bengal reveals the ease with which the Bengali novel reader could access texts by authors such as George W.M. Reynolds, Rider Haggard, and Marie Corelli. Although the books are imported into Calcutta, their reach is by no means restricted to the urban centre. Midnapore, Jessore, Rangpur, Barishal, Hoogly, Krishnanagar, Konnagar, and Uttarpara are *mofussil* or district towns, often at considerable distance from Calcutta, and they too have lending libraries meeting the demands of the rural reader.<sup>87</sup>

This Bengal-wide demand for fiction, however, countermands the directives of the British policy of colonial education which insists on more didactic texts, presumably in aid of self-improvement. Once again, the records of the Calcutta Public Library reveal the sharp divide between official policy and the readers' demands, as the Library decides to cut back on prose fiction in a bid to compel its readers to form better reading habits.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 54-59

<sup>87</sup> Bankim himself notes the presence of rural readers in his essay "A Popular Literature for Bengal," in which he enumerates both the kinds of literature existing in nineteenth-century Bengal and its consumers.

The readers respond by withdrawing subscription, and moving to competing libraries—such as the Burra Bazar Family Literary Club—which, unhindered by government intervention, continue to satisfy an appetite for eighteenth and nineteenth century British novels. The Bengali reader, as Joshi's study, and extant records show, exercises considerable choice; her taste is not governed by the desire for self-improvement, but rather a willingness to be entertained. The picture that emerges is that of a sophisticated reader of the British novel, albeit of questionable taste according to colonial and Victorian morality. In this she calls to mind Wilkie Collins' "Unknown Public" whose deplorable taste in literature hinders the rise of great authors. Collins describes such readers in no uncertain terms;

Having, inferentially, arrived at the two conclusions that the Unknown Public reads for amusement, and that it looks to quantity in its reading, rather than to quality [...] it is perhaps hardly too much to say that the future of English fiction may rest with this Unknown Public, which is now waiting to be taught the difference between a good book and a bad.<sup>88</sup>

Like her Victorian counterpart, the Bengali reader may not know how to choose between a good book and a bad, but both readers appear to be making conscious choices at least in terms of favouring entertainment over education.

Q.D. Leavis, remarking on public tastes and the consumption of novels nearly half a century after Collins, is more generous and suggests that readers gradually learn to identify codes such as "manly" and "virtue," as "an idiom for common standards of taste

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<sup>88</sup> Wilkie Collins, "The Unknown Public," *Household Words*, 21 August 1858

and conduct” develops.<sup>89</sup> However, for the nineteenth century Bengali reader, the ability to identify the codes of a Victorian novel signifies more than an awareness of common standards—it denotes a familiarity with an alien worldview. To be able to successfully read a novel by G.W.M. Reynolds or Marie Corelli suggests that not only is the reader privileged enough to have received an Anglo-centric education, but is a participant in the version of western modernity represented by these novels. The reader’s participation in this modernity is dependent upon literature’s pedagogical role in the colonies, but is more than her reading the text as symbolic of the west; as she reads, she assumes the position of the text’s implied reader. True, the novels buy her assent of the value systems encoded in them, and thereby educates the reader to view a particular subject position as civilised and morally desirable, but the reader also gives her assent because she perceives herself to *be* in that position. What the reader reads in the novels is far from a self-representation—the colonised cannot become the coloniser, the Bengali reader is not encouraged to become Marie Corelli’s heroine in *A Romance of Two Worlds*—but a desire for identification contributes to the pleasure of reading.

In *An Aesthetic Education in the Age of Globalization*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak begins with the reader of English literature in the postcolony, and the stakes involved in teaching literature to a student outside a text’s “consolidated system of cultural representation.”<sup>90</sup> While Spivak’s reader is predominantly of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, studying English at Indian universities and colleges, her claim applies equally well to the reader in nineteenth century Bengal, not least because the

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<sup>89</sup> Leavis, “The Growth of the Reading Public,” *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 123-4

<sup>90</sup> Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Age of Globalization*, 36

“appropriate culture [...] supposedly indigenous to the literature under consideration [is] [...] the culture of a vague space called Britain, even England, in its transaction with Europeanness.”<sup>91</sup> For Spivak, key to this pedagogical practice is the implied reader;

The implied reader is imagined, even in the most simple reading, according to rudimentary or sophisticated hypotheses about persons, places, and times. You cannot make sense of anything written or spoken without at least implicitly assuming it was destined for you, that you are its implied reader.<sup>92</sup>

As the novel reader in nineteenth century Bengal imagines and identifies with the implied reader of the texts she is consuming, she takes on the cultural specificities of the latter; she makes sense of what she reads by assuming that there are no inherent racial and social divides between her and the text. The reader practices what I suggest is an Anglicist reading because by imagining herself as a Victorian novel’s implied reader, she assents to those values the reader in England (presumably British) would subscribe to. As she buys into the story, she also buys into the value system necessary to identify with the story. By no means is this a wholesale assent—the reader does not become British by proxy. Rather, she places herself so as to comprehend—and, thus be free to choose from—the cultural systems indigenous to the text. Seen this way, the threat posed by Victorian novels becomes all the more imminent; if the reader consumes the novels such that she not only learns of the lax morals of the west, but also imagines herself as a possessor of the same, the text assumes dangerous proportions.

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 36

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 37

When *Durges̄nandinī* appears in 1865, its form is as alien to Bengal as is its use of the regional language, and it seems only natural that the existing novel reader, being used to a diet of Victorian novels, read Bankim's novel in terms of the European genre. The plot contributes in some measure towards this endeavour as *Durges̄nandinī* and *Ivanhoe* are seen to bear an uncanny resemblance. To me, as the reader of Bengali novels in the twenty-first century, the connections seem plausible but not necessary. Both are historical romances, set in a past that clearly serves as an allegory of the novelists' present, and have a love triangle as the key narrative device. Both novels are narratives of nation formation, allegorized through the romantic fortunes of the warrior hero. The relationships sanctioned by marriage at the end of the novels—Ivanhoe and Rowena in *Ivanhoe*, and Jagatsingha and Tilōttamā in *Durges̄nandinī*—represent the national identity championed by Scott and Bankim respectively, while the unrequited loves of Rebecca (and the Norman knight, Bois-Guilbert) and Āyeshā (and the Pathan, Ōsmān) come to stand for the exclusions necessary for any conceptualization of the nation. Like *Ivanhoe*, Jagatsingha abides by the rules of chivalry, and though the battle during which the latter is seriously injured is a real one, and not a jousting tournament as is the case in Scott's novel, Jagatsingha receives his reward in his union with Tilōttamā. Their marriage symbolizes the consolidation of Mughal power in Bengal—both Jagatsingha and Birendra Singha, Tilōttamā's father, support the Mughal emperor Akbar, but are on opposing sides at the start of the novel—but importantly, the unification occurs through the marriage of two Hindu individuals. Initial responses to *Durges̄nandinī*, however, do not identify the theme of nation building as the most remarkable similarity between these

two novels; the relationship between the romantic leads, and how these characters are written from the points of comparison.

As becomes evident from a number of essays, *Durgesnandinī* is seen to work as a novel because it emulates Scott's narrative—both formally and thematically. Writing nearly one hundred and twenty-five years after the publication of *Durgesnandinī*, Sisir Kumar Das returns to the popularity of Bankim as the “Scott of Bengal”;

The available evidence indicates that he was received with enthusiasm by the Bengali reading-public since the publication of *Durgesnandinī* about one hundred and twenty-five years ago and his popularity was never in question. At the initial stage of his literary career he faced the charge of plagiarism from Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* on the one hand, and was crowned with the sobriquet ‘the Scott of Bengal’ by his admirers on the other. The epithet both eulogistic and derogatory, soon became the disgustingly predictable parameter of Bankim criticism.<sup>93</sup>

For Das, the sobriquet is a positive one, and Bankim earning one in the first place is a testament to the novel's success, since a great work of art needs to “accommodate the response of the readership,” both contemporary to the work, and in the “periods following it.”<sup>94</sup> Yet my point of interest lies in the phrase “disgustingly predictable.” The persistence of the moniker demonstrates a continued interest on the part of Bankim's readers in the author's relationship with the British novel in general, and with Scott in particular, but it also points to this comparison as overshadowing Bankim scholarship. The predictability of Bankim being hailed and denigrated as the “Scott of Bengal,”

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<sup>93</sup> Sisir Kumar Das, “Bankimchandra and the Modern Reader,” *Essays in Perspective*, 442

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, 443

according to Das, demonstrates that the majority of readers, try as they might, cannot read *Durgeśnandinī* but as modelled on *Ivanhoe*.

Das is one in a long line of Bengali critics to note in Bankim's first novel the contours of Scott's text. Rameshchandra Datta, one of Bankim's contemporaries, and the first president of the Bangiya Sāhitya Parishat (the Bengal Academy of Literature), is an early proponent of the Anglicist reading practice. In a review published in the journal *Wednesday Review* in August 1905, Datta comments upon the relative merits of European and Asian literature, philosophy, political economy, and religion. The range of subjects discussed in a relatively short essay necessitates a number of broad generalities, but it is worthwhile looking at two particular sections of the work;

Sir Walter Scott was my favourite author forty years ago. I spent days and nights over his novels; I almost lived in those historic scenes and in those medieval times which the enchanter had conjured up. Scott has, in fact, created a world of his own—a somewhat idealized, but a vivid and, on the whole, faithful picture of the medieval world in Europe.<sup>95</sup>

And of Bankim, he writes in the same essay;

Bankim Chunder is wiser [than Michael Madhusudan Datta] in drawing from nature, and his portraiture of modern Bengal life is as vivid, as powerful, and as true as the creations of the greatest masters in fiction.<sup>96</sup>

Comparing Bankim to the “greatest masters in fiction”—in this case with the obvious reference to Scott—is hardly coincidental; the move allows Rameshchandra to advance

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<sup>95</sup> As qtd. in *Life and Work of R.C. Dutt*, 383

<sup>96</sup> As qtd. in *Life and Work of R.C. Dutt*, 388

the Anglicist reading practice. For Rameshchandra, this kind of reading, though augmented by learning, comes naturally, even to a Bengali like him. A few pages into the essay, he recalls the opening line as he adds Byron to the list of his “favourite poets forty years ago”—he suggests their appeal lies in their style, simple and lucid enough to be “intelligible even to boys.”<sup>97</sup> Rameshchandra weaves this thread of texts which are natural and depict life-like characters—adjectives he employs first to describe Scott’s novels, and then Bankim’s—to create an image of this reading practice as being organic to the Bengali. If one accepts this as the essay’s framing narrative, the diversity of subjects mentioned begins to make sense. It is not merely Rameshchandra the England-returned<sup>98</sup> member of the Imperial Civil Service showing off his knowledge, but rather it is the author’s attempt to construct the colonised as comfortably inhabiting European texts and ideas. Thus the exposition on European history is balanced by the discussion on Indian epics, and no distinction is drawn between the Hindu boy who learns of Hindu myths and reads the religion’s sacred texts, and the Christian child who reads the Scriptures sacred to his religion. The Anglicist reading practice is not divorced from Indian (read Hindu) thought; rather, it is one which places Europe and India in a continuum. The reasons for establishing this unbroken connection between the two nations as necessary and inevitable have been dealt with masterfully by scholars of the postcolonial condition. What interests me is the way in which Rameshchandra, as the reader, conceives of both Europe and India as being organic to him. His reading of Byron and Burns, and being moved by them, occupies the same position as his mother telling

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 385

<sup>98</sup> *Bilet* (broadly referring to Europe, but usually understood to be England) *ferot* (returned)—a peculiar turn of phrase quintessential to the Bengali notion of associating status with England.

him Hindu myths in Bengali, and his father and uncle—though not Christian, as he is quick to remind his reader—narrating tales from Christianity in English as soon as he is old enough to know the language. These experiences construct him as a successful reader possessing taste and the ability to discern good literature from bad, but more importantly as a reader unique to this moment in Bengal’s history who has simultaneous access to both cultures.

Rameshchandra’s review of *Durgesnandinī*, when read along with the essay published in the *Wednesday Review*, explains the nineteenth century Bengali reader’s propensity to perceive in Bankim the shadow of the Victorian novel. The review titled “*Bankimchandra Ō Ādhunik Bānglā Sāhitya*” (translated by Indrani Halder as “Bankimchandra and Modern Bengal,” which, interestingly, replaces “Bangla Sahitya” or “Bengali Literature” with simply “Bengal”) is ostensibly an eulogistic piece on Bankim, and the author offers his reading of *Durgesnandinī* merely as an example of the novelist’s talent. The structure of the review is a familiar one—Rameshchandra begins with the influence of Hellenic thought on Christianity, and subsequently on western culture, and argues in favour of such influence. The impact of Scott upon Bankim is not a matter of concern for Rameshchandra since those “who say that these outstanding men are totally free from the influence of their times and derive strength from within, are in error.”<sup>99</sup> The inspiration is not a slavish one, but rather a creative process of one culture informing another. This conceptual framework is central to understanding his reading of Bankim as incorporating the alien into the Bengali in a bid to enhance the greatness of the Bengali race. Scott’s novel, or as Rameshchandra names it, “foreign sentiments,”<sup>100</sup> is metonymic

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<sup>99</sup> Rameshchandra Datta, “Bankimchandra and Modern Bengal,” *Essays in Perspective*, 73

<sup>100</sup> Rameshchandra Datta, “Bankimchandra and Modern Bengal,” *Essays in Perspective*, 76

of Western education, and Bankim's ability to profit from this relationship and raise the Bengali from being "a puny frail people,"<sup>101</sup> demonstrates that the education has "not been a futile exercise"<sup>102</sup> for the Bengalis. Rameshchandra's critical intervention hinges upon an acknowledgment of readings that castigate Bankim for imitating Scott;

Captious critics raised a clamour of censure. *Durgesnandinī* was filled with foreign sentiments, Bankimbabu had incorporated foreign ideas, Bankimbabu was crazy. But this censure was drowned in a country-wide acclaim that rose to the skies. There is evidence enough of foreign influence in *Durgesnandinī* [...]  
Having received a foreign education and profited from many branches of learning, Bankimchandra has nurtured native literature. This is the spirit of the modern age and it is this spirit that has found full expression in Bankimchandra. Is this censurable?<sup>103</sup>

If *Durgesnandinī* reads like *Ivanhoe*, he claims, it is because Bankim has imbibed the best of Western education. However, implicit in this claim is Rameshchandra's own position as a reader attuned to the same education he praises Bankim for having utilized well. The reviewer, as the reader who can spot in Bankim the influence of Scott deserves accolades for his proper reading of *Durgesnandinī*, unlike the critics who, though they too identify the foreignness of the novel, are unable to rise above censure. These critics are "captious" raising a "clamour" of censure because they fail to appreciate the importance of Western education, and by implication, the modernity ushered in by this

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 74

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 75

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 76

form of pedagogy. The role of the reader becomes even more apparent towards the end of the essay when Rameshchandra speaks of the growth of Bengali literature, and its role in modernizing the Hindu religion. Nowhere is this more evident than in Bankim since he is able to buttress the tenets of the religion with foreign education in the form of his novels, and it is only the educated reader who can identify the novelist’s contribution.

The debate surrounding *Durgeśnandinī* and *Ivanhoe* starts even before the Bengali novel is published, if one is to believe Bankim’s junior colleague Kalinath Datta. Kalinath, working under Bankim during the latter’s tenure as Deputy Magistrate in the Baruipur *mahakuma*<sup>104</sup> in 1864—the year before *Durgeśnandinī* is published—recalls seeing volumes of the *Waverly* novels on the author’s study table as he is composing his novel. His narrative is interesting not only because he is one of the first readers of *Durgeśnandinī*—though not of the manuscript—but also since he provides a glimpse into Bankim’s insecurities as a relatively unknown novelist. Writing eleven years after Bankim’s death in the Bengali literary magazine *Pradīp*, Kalinath relates his early encounters with the novelist;

“Durgeśnandinī”r lekhā samāptaprāy haile, kingbā mudrita haibār prākkāle, āmi t̄hār pāThkakkher tebile kayak bhalum Skater Ōyebārli upanyās sajjita dekhi. Tini hay tō kōnō bandhuke t̄hār “Durgeśnandinī”r pāndulipi pāTh karate den, bandhu t̄hāke Ivanhoe’ upakhyan-bhāger anek bishaye sōusādṛṣya āche, baliyā thākiben. T̄hāte tini kōutuhālākṛānta haiyā sambhabata: nūtan Ōyebārli upanyāsābali bājār haite kray kariyā āniyāchilen. Durgeśnandinī racita haibār pūrbe tini “Ivanhoe” pariyāchilen ki nā, t̄hā āmi Thik balibār adhikārī nai. Āmi

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<sup>104</sup> The subdivision of a district; Baruipur is in the 24 Parganas (South) district

jāhā dekhīyāchi, tāhā satyer anurōdhe abikal prakāś karilām. Āmi agre  
 “Durgeśnandinī” pāTh kari tāhār anekdin pare Ivanhoe’ Adhyayan kari. Balite ki,  
 āmi ubhayer sōusādrśya dekhīyā abāk haiyāchilām. Āmi ihūdī ramanīr (Rebeca)  
 citra pāTh karibār samay Āyeshāke ekaTi muhurtō bhulite pāri nāi. Anyānya  
 pāThakerā Durgeśnandinīr citrābalīke “Ivanhoe”-r chāyā baliyā graham kariyā  
 thāken. Ivanhoe-r chāyā laiya “Durgeśnandinī” racita hai nāi, ihā Bangkimbābu  
 nija mukhe śatabār byakta kariyāchen. Āmār nijer jāhāi dhāranā hauk nā, āmi  
 Bangkimbābur kathāye biśwās kariyā se dhāranāke apasṛta kariyāchi. Kena nā,  
 āmi tāhār Honesty unimpeachable baliyā biśwās kari. Bastuta: e bishye tāhār  
 kathāy biśwās bhinna upāyāntar nāi.

Around the time that he [Bankim] was completing “Durgeśnandinī” or right  
 before it was published, I saw a few volumes of Scott’s Waverly adorning his  
 desk in his study. He may have given a friend the manuscript of “Durgeśnandinī”  
 to read, and this friend may have told him of the many similarities between the  
 narratives of Ivanhoe and his text. This may have piqued his curiosity, and he  
 possibly bought new copies of the Waverly novels from the market. I do not have  
 the authority to comment on whether or not he read “Ivanhoe” prior to composing  
 Durgeśnandinī. In the interest of truth, I can only narrate exactly what I saw. I  
 read “Durgeśnandinī” first, and Ivanhoe much later. In fact, I was amazed at the  
 similarities between the two. Not for once could I forget Āyeshā while reading the  
 character of the Jewess (Rebeca). Other readers accept the composition of  
 Durgeśnandinī to be a shadow of “Ivanhoe”. That “Durgeśnandinī” has not been  
 composed in the image of Ivanhoe is something Bankimbabu has himself

repeatedly said. Whatever my own opinions may be, they have been retired based on my belief in Bankimbabu's words, because I believe his honesty to be unimpeachable. In reality, there is no alternative to having faith in his words in this matter.<sup>105</sup>

Let me begin by drawing attention to a number of interesting phrases Kalinath employs, the first being a belief in Bankim's honesty to be "unimpeachable." This is the crux on which the argument, and indeed the whole essay rests, for Bankim is, to quote Mark Antony, an honourable man. To substantiate his claim that despite appearances, Bankim did not recast Scott's story in a Bengali setting, Kalinath constructs the character of a friend who may have been lent the manuscript version of *Durgesnandinī*, and then may have informed Bankim of the apparent similarities. Bankim himself is much perturbed by the suggestion of literary borrowing and rejects even the mere possibility. I am, however, less concerned with either Bankim's character or claims; the intriguing question is why does Kalinath feel compelled to mount a defence? What is it in his reading of *Durgesnandinī* that prompts him to create this elaborate construction of an unimpeachable character when his language indicates otherwise?

The answer to this lies in Kalinath noticing the similarities between the two novels almost despite himself. That Rebecca and Āyeshā are alike is less a matter of Bankim's composition than the reader being unable to ignore the resemblance. Later in the essay, the author describes reading yet another text by Bankim, *Kṛṣṇa Caritra* (*On the Nature of Kṛṣṇa*), and the experience documented is in stark contrast to that of reading *Durgesnandinī*. The former is a religious treatise examining the figure of Kṛṣṇa,

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<sup>105</sup> Kalinath Datta, "Bankimcandra," *Bankim Prasanga*, 131-2. Translation mine.

and Kalinath finds himself on surer ground when discussing it since he considers himself to be well versed in the study of religion—not necessarily as a scholar or an expert, but rather as a practicing Hindu with deeply held beliefs. Yet with *Durgesnandinī*, Kalinath has no points of reference given the genre’s newness in the Bengali language, and the discomfort that becomes evident in his reading of the novel can be understood as a form of disorientation. Written from the vantage point of the early twentieth century, Kalinath’s essay provides a unique perspective—there is present the simultaneous belief in Bankim’s literary greatness and the desire to read his first novel as representative of that merit, and the problem of having to contend with that same novel being an imitation. As a reader in 1865, even without having read *Ivanhoe*, Kalinath’s awareness of the English “flavour” of Bankim’s language demonstrates his familiarity with both the English language and its literature, and this familiarity inflects his practice of reading *Durgesnandinī*. Unlike Rameshchandra, he is far less comfortable in performing an Anglicist reading of the novel, but he is unable to go beyond it.

On April 13, 1894, a few days after Bankim’s death, one of the English language dailies of Kolkata, *The Statesman*, published an obituary which spoke of his novels as designed to encourage “a taste of reading [...] among the educated native classes.”<sup>106</sup> This sentiment is echoed by a number of Bankim’s contemporaries, the most famous of whom, arguably, is Rabindranath Tagore. The most successful Bengali author in the post-Bankim era—and perhaps the most influential in the construction of modern Bengali literature as an institution—Tagore begins his review of Bankim’s novels with an analysis of its reception. He bemoans the early readers’ castigation of Bankim’s works,

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<sup>106</sup> *The Statesman*, April 13, 1894, as qtd. in *Bankim Prasanga*, x

and later readers' lack of appreciation for the same, and then proceeds to set the novels in the context of indigenous literature;

We could experience at once what had been there in the past and what we gained now, as we stood on the thin line that divides darkness from light. Where was gone the darkness, the chaos and torpid delusion, *Vijay Vasanta* and *Gole Bakawali*, all that puerile stuff? Whence sprang all the light and hope and harmony, this variety that seemed inexhaustible? *Vangadarsan* appeared like *Asadh*, the month that ushers in rains. It arrived like a monarch announced with a flourish of sounds that burst in thunder above [...] The many poems, plays, novels, essays, reviews and periodicals that were produced filled the land as with loud twitterings of the alert dawn. At one bold leap, the Bengali language sprang from infancy to youth.<sup>107</sup>

Tagore identifies two strands of reading existing in Bengal at the time of Bankim's rise to fame, and he categorises both as childlike and designed only for readers who are themselves children or possessing their reading capacities. *Vijay Vasanta* exemplifies the kind of reading steeped in Hindu mythology, and explicitly targets children—young boys, to be more precise—in an attempt to educate them. The author of *Vijay Vasanta*, Harinath Majumdar, or Kungal Harinath (Impoverished Harinath) as he styles himself, writes in the text's advertisement of children's tendency to become bored with studying subjects such as grammar, physics, and geography. *Vijay Vasanta* is offered as an interesting alternative to stimulate young minds and teach them morals and the highest of Sanskrit *rasas*—*karunā* or compassion. The narrative is conceived as a *rūpak itihās*

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<sup>107</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, "Bankimchandra," as translated by Arun Kumar Das Gupta, *Bankimchandra: Essays in Perspective*, 7

(literally translated as historical allegory) or a novel, and is to be preferred against the existing vulgar examples of the genre. For Tagore, *Vijay Vasanta* is a relic from a time he equates with somnolence and boredom—adjectives which inform his understanding of the reading of this text. A tale of Hindu sages and *pourānic* kings written in an archaic and stilted Bengali represent the kind of texts the reading of which Tagore wishes to abjure because it has no place in the new, youthful, and now adult Bengali literature. If reading an arcane Hindu narrative is considered childlike, then so is consuming the Perso-Arabic *Gule Bakawali*. Written in the seventeenth century by the Bengali poet Nawazish Khan under the patronage of the local *zamindar* Badyanath Roy, *Gule Bakawali* is a reworking of a popular early modern romance narrating the love story of Prince Tajulmulk and the fairy Bakawali. Like *Vijay Vasanta*, this narrative too is left behind by the “loud twitterings” emanating from Bankim’s literary output.

Tagore effects a series of cleavages through the essay, creating a binary between good and bad readings, but nowhere is the space clearing mission as visible as the above paragraph. After both the Hindu and Islamic reading practices have been rejected as torpid delusions, that which emerges is Bankim’s rational prose; *Bangadarśan* comes to stand for a new reading practice dictated by western Enlightenment. This practice is not dependent upon the reader preferring texts written in English, but rather on the reader following Bankim in bringing to bear upon Bengali an imagination tempered with reason. This repeated invocation of the rational marks the reading practice as distinct from the precolonial mire of myths and legends, as the novels come to represent controlled and measured reading. The competent reader, as Tagore envisions her, finds in Bankim’s works prose that is as free of the excesses of early Bengali texts as it is of the

superstitions and ignorance producing those texts. The distance he effects between this new kind of reading and its predecessor becomes most evident in the brief discussion of *Krishna Charitra*. While the work is religious and distinct from the novels, Tagore's critique of its key elements provides an insight into how he suggests the Bengali reader approach the act of reading;

In a land where unrestrained fantasy reigns, the example set by Bankim is of great value. In *Krisnacaritra* ('The Character of Krishna') he never lets his fancy run wild, swept away by the tides of wild passion. From start to finish, he holds firmly to the clearly defined path of reason exercising self-control at every step. What he has written reveals his genius. Not a little of his power was revealed in what he left unstated.<sup>108</sup>

That this extends to more than Bankim's treatment of the Hindu scriptures becomes apparent from the final section of the essay in which Tagore positions himself as the novelist's disciple and a *sāhityabyāsayī* or a "trader of literature." He learns his trade from Bankim, and as a novelist, his task is to emulate the clear reason expressed by the latter's prose. Tagore's review of *Kṛshna Caritra* has much in common with the obituary written in *The Statesman*—they both praise Bankim for cultivating cultured prose, and, by induction, training the reader to develop a "taste in reading."

While Bankim, the "Scott of Bengal," maintains his distance from western influence in the context of *Durgesnandini*, his early readers perceive in a number of his novels not only the shadow of Scott, but of other Victorian novelists such as Edward

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<sup>108</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, "Bankimchandra," as translated by Arun Kumar Das Gupta, *Bankimchandra: Essays in Perspective*, 12

Bulwer-Lytton and Wilkie Collins (with reference to *Rajani*), and of Shakespeare's Miranda in *Kapalkundalā*. As his friend and another nineteenth century man of letters, Chandranath Basu recollects, “[o]n perusing *Durgeśnandinī*, it seemed to me that Bankimbabu had read Scott's *Ivanhoe* before writing it,” despite the claim being denied by the author.<sup>109</sup> For these readers, the novels come to symbolise a way of reading distinct from those already existing in nineteenth century Bengal and driven by predominantly Hindu texts and scriptures. That the Bengali reader finds family resemblance between the early Bengali novels and those being written around the same time in England causes some discomfort, but no apparent surprise because this reader associates the form with more than just the narrative. Reading Bankim's novels comes to stand for reading—and inhabiting—a rational position informed by western thought.

## II. “Beautiful, despite the linguistic anomalies”—Bankim and the Sanskrit Pundits

If the Anglicists focus on narrative and character in Bankim's novels, the readers more familiar with Sanskrit rhetoric and prose comment on the novelist's use—and often misuse—of language. Purnachandra's account of Bankim reading *Durgeśnandinī* to an audience perhaps best captures the Sanskritist reader's concerns;

“*Durgeśnandinī*”r ābirbhābe prathamata Kalikātār Sangskṛta ōwālārā khargahasta haiyāchilen. Ingreji ōwālārā abaśya duhāt tulyā bāhabā diyechilen [...] Bangkimcandrer pratham haite dhāranā chila je “*Durgeśnandinī*”r bhasha byākaran dōshe dushita [...] kintu Kalikātār je sakal pandit bānglā bhāshāy

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<sup>109</sup> Chandranath Basu, *Bankimchandra: Essays in Perspective*, 16

sangbādpātra cālāiten, tāhārāi kebal nabīn lekhaker bhāshār abatāranā karibār  
asamasāhase khargahasta haiyāchilen.

When “Durgeśnandinī” first appeared, the Sanskrit-walas of Kolkata were all up  
in arms. The English-walas were of course copious in their praise [...] From the  
very beginning Bankimchandra was worried that the language of “Durgeśnandinī”  
suffered from grammatical flaws [...] However, it was only the pundits of  
Kolkata who ran Bengali newspapers who took offence at the young writer’s  
temerity in linguistic devaluing.<sup>110</sup>

The author distances the Sanskrit pundits of Bhatpara from those of Kolkata to draw  
attention to the latter’s intolerance of any experimentation with language, but both  
groups, along with Bankim himself, appear to have similar reservations. In this context,  
the attention is not so much on the genre as new and alien, but on Bankim’s refashioning  
of the Bengali language. The Bhatpara pundits, of whom Purnachandra writes more  
generously, are present at this first reading of the novel, and they too are aware of the  
flaws in the novel’s language; only, unlike their urban counterparts, they are supposedly  
so moved by the narrative that they are prepared to overlook the linguistic anomalies.

Akshaychandra Sarkar, a late nineteenth century Bengali poet and the editor of  
the literary magazine *Sādhāranī* traces the problematic nature of Bankim’s prose to one  
of the first pieces the latter publishes. In a peculiarly passive aggressive review of  
Bankim’s linguistic habits, Akshaychandra draws attention to an 1856 collection of  
poems published by Bankim—“*Lalitā, Purākālik Galpa, Tathā Mānas*”—and in

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<sup>110</sup> Purnachandra Chattopadhyay, “*Bankimcandra Ō Dinabandhu*,” (“Bankimchandra and Dinabandhu”),  
*Bankim Prasanga*, 42-44, translation mine

particular, to the book’s advertisement. Having quoted the text in full, the reviewer proceeds to a detailed analysis of its language;

B.A. parīkkhār praśnapatre uparer oi bignāpanTi thākile, sakalei hai tō mane kariten je oTi parīkkhakdiger man-garā sadōsh lekhā. Tāhā nahe. ŌTi pare gadya-lekhār samrāT Bangkimcandrer swaracita bignāpan [...] Bangkimbābur bignāpan lekhār samay bāngālā gadya banga-rangmance abatīrna haiyā apūrba ranga dekhāitechila. Bāngālār gadya, ekTā śikkyār upāy ebang upabhōger sāmagrī haiyāchila [...] 1856 sāler Bangkimbābur bignāpan-pāThe mane hay, ei gadya-sampat Bangkimbābu ekānta upekkhyā kariyāchilen.

Had the above advertisement appeared as a question on a B.A. exam, everyone would have assumed it to be an invention of the examiner to deliberately provide a grammatically incorrect composition. But that is not so. It is written by Bankimchandra himself, the same who goes on to be the king of prose [...] By the time Bankimbabu composed this advertisement, Bengali prose was already on full display in Bengal, and it had become a pedagogic instrument as well as a means of entertainment [...] Reading this 1856 advertisement by Bankimbabu, one gets the feeling that Bankimbabu had completely ignored this treasure trove of prose.<sup>111</sup>

Akshaychandra’s criticism of Bankim’s early prose rests on the latter’s propensity for removing Bengali from the sphere of everyday life. The deliberate flaws he identifies in the advertisement result from what he perceives to be either excessively pedantic or dry legalese—both of which, according to the reviewer, demonstrate a certain desire to show-

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<sup>111</sup> Akshaychandra Sarkar, “Bankimchandrer Pratham Gadya Rachana,” (“Bankimchandra’s First Prose Composition”), *Bankim Prasanga*, 79-80, translation mine

off on Bankim’s part, but not necessarily his artistic talent. Akshaychandra does not provide a reading of the poems themselves because they are, for him, of a much better quality than the prose. Bankim, he feels, fails to inspire life into his prose at this early stage because he is embroiled in, ironically, archaic practices of grammar that rob the text of its lucidity.

This final objection appears to introduce a contradiction in the reviewer’s perspective—does Akshaychandra criticise Bankim’s prose for failing to be grammatically correct, or is there an overabundance of grammar thus rendering the text pedantic and stilted? The above quote is from a review Akshaychandra publishes in the magazine *Sahitya* in 1901, and one finds an explication of the conundrum in his “*Bankimcandra Ō Bangadarśan*” (“Bankimchandra and Bangadarśan”) published three years later in *Bangabhāshār Lekhak*. In this essay, he implicitly states that the faults present in Bankim’s first prose composition reoccur in his early novels. *Durgeshnandinī* and *Kapalkundalā* suffer because the prose distances itself from living Bengali by focussing too much on following the conventions of Sanskrit grammar. The question of being grammatically incorrect thus takes on a new dimension—Bankim’s prose in these novels is grammatically flawed from the perspective of the kind of Bengali accessible to the ordinary reader. This language, which Akshaychandra claims appears only when Bankim begins to write *Bishabr̥ksha*, combines the high seriousness of Sanskrit grammar with the colloquial vernacular, without either being overtly in awe of the first or indulging in the vulgarity of the second. This middle language—Akshaychandra defines it as “*madhyabartinī bhāshā*” or language which occupies the middle position—becomes evident when Bankim relinquishes his Sanskrit-oriented Bengali. The prose, free from

linguistic pretensions, appeals to the common reader and captures the poetry of the ordinary;

Je kabitā buker bhitar diyā hṛdaye basiyā jāy, tāhā bāngālīr pakkhye bāngālātei  
haōyā sambhab. Sādhāran barnanāy sādhanā kathāy jeman bhāb parishfuTa hay,  
Sangskṛtānusārīnī haiye teman hay nā [...] Bangkimbābu Bishabṛkshye “garu  
Thengāite” lāgilen. Bishabṛkshye ubhayrūp bhāshār samābeś haila. Takhan  
Bishabṛkshya hāter lekhāy, chāpāna hay nāi.

Poetry that can touch the Bengali’s heart must be in Bengali. The capacity  
ordinary descriptions and words have to express emotions is denied to one who is  
a devotee of Sanskrit [...] In Bishabṛksha, Bankimbabu began to use [colloquial]  
phrases such as “herding cows,” and both kinds of language [the Bengali  
modelled after high Sanskrit, and that of everyday use] met. This was while  
Bishabṛksha was a handwritten, unpublished manuscript.<sup>112</sup>

As a scholar of Sanskrit, Akshaychandra is acutely aware of the incongruency of a phrase  
such as “herding cows” in serious prose; the word *goru* or cow is intrinsically Bengali,  
and herding barely captures the latent vulgarity of “*thyāngāite lāgilen*”. Yet it is this  
incongruity that marks the prose as accessible because “*goru thyāngāno*” has no  
aspirations to be Sanskrit, it appeals to an activity familiar to the Bengali—herding  
cows—in a language that is unambiguous. All at once, the reader is removed from the  
grandly descriptive opening paragraph of *Durgesnandinī* in which the hero rides across a  
vast open plain, seeking shelter from an imminent thunderstorm, or the description of  
Kapalkundalā heavily inflected with rules of Sanskrit poetry, into the mundane and

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<sup>112</sup> Akshaychandra Sarkar, “*Bankimcandra Ō Bangadarśan*,” (“Bankimchandra and Bangadarshan”),  
*Bankim Prasanga*, 87, translation mine.

recognisably Bengali world of landlords and peasants. This is certainly not to suggest that *Bishabr̥ksha* lacks high prose, but the novel makes a conscious attempt at tempering Sanskritised Bengali with the colloquial.

However, both reviews by Akshaychandra serve a purpose other than underlining the minutiae of Bankim’s prose style—they represent a reading practice that asserts Bengali as a respectable literary language while simultaneously demonstrating its evolution from Sanskrit. However, the Sanskritist reading practice, though concerned primarily with language, does not restrict itself to linguistic studies, as a number of reviews from *Āryadarśan* show. The journal with a predominantly Bramho focus, publishes reviews and essays aimed at reviving the status of the Arya or the caste Hindu, and the bias is evident in the responses to Bankim’s novels. The reviews, which often span several issues of the magazine, provide detailed character sketches, and the emphasis is often on the women in these novels and Bankim’s talents at constructing them. The following anonymous review, signed “*ekjan cāshā*” or “a farmer”—the moniker being a variation on the theme of the reviewer’s obvious attempt at self-deprecation—captures the journal’s manifesto in the opening lines. The review of Bankim’s first social novel *Bishabr̥ksha* begins thus;

Je gune Bangkim bābu bangīya ākhyāyikā-lekhakdiger śīrshsthānīy haiyāchen, je gune tini banger prati grher prati hṛdayer upāsya debatā-swarūp haiyāchen, tāhā caritra citran. Ābhyantarīn caritra citrane tāhār khamatā asīm. Bālmīki ō Byās, Bhababhūti ō Kālidās, ebang BānbhaTTer par bhārate erūp citrakar alpai janmiyāchen [...] Bangkim bābu Sek Pīyār, Silār, Fīl Ding prabhṛtir nyāy pratihingsā, dwesh, durākāngkhā prabhṛti asangkhyā nikṛshTaprabṛttir; ebang

swajātiprem, mānabprem, dayā prabhṛti utkr̥shTa prabr̥ttir, uttejanāy  
mānabhṛdaye je asangkhya bibarta utthita hay, mānabkartṛk je sakal kārya  
anushThita hay, tāhār citra dekhān nāi bate; kintu pranayke Bhāratcandrer  
jaghanya indriyaparata haite uttōlita kariyā ati ucca ō pabitra swargīya singhāsane  
sangsthāpita kariyā, bangadeśe atarkitabhābe ekaTī camatkār naitik biplab  
anushThita kariyāchen.

Bankim babu’s talent at drawing characters has made him both the foremost  
among novelists in Bengal, and a name worshipped in every household, in every  
heart. His prowess in drawing the interior world of the character is unparalleled.  
There have been very few such artists born to India after Balmiki, Byas,  
Bhababhuti, Kalidas, and Banabhata [...] True, Bankim babu has not depicted the  
low propensities of revenge, hatred, and unrealisable desires, or the higher  
tendencies such as love for one’s own kind, love for humanity, and mercy  
following Shakespeare, Schiller, and Fielding. Nor has he depicted the myriad  
transformations caused in the human heart by excitement, or the many deeds  
effected by humankind. But he has unknowingly created a wonderful moral  
revolution in Bengal by raising love to a higher station from the depths it was cast  
into by the disgusting sensuality of Bharatchandra.<sup>113</sup>

The allegiances held by this author are unambiguously presented—Bankim follows in the  
footsteps of classical Sanskrit authors from the supposed golden past of India, and,  
despite the depiction of higher human qualities in the works of European authors, the  
Bengali novelist does not use them as his models. The canon of which Bankim is a part

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<sup>113</sup> Anonymous review, “Bishabr̥ksha,” *Arya Darshan*, Magh 1284, 436

consists of Sanskrit epics—Balmiki is credited with the composition of the *Rāmāyana*, and Byas authors the *Mahābhārata*—and classical poetry, and represents the best India has to offer. The nation thus constructed is Hindu—given *Āryadarśan*'s explicit religious bias—and there is little doubt that the moral revolution Bankim's novels have brought about is religious in nature. A curious move can be observed in the last sentence of the above quote, in which the reviewer distances Bankim from existing Bengali literature in general, and Bharatchandra in particular. The objection against excessive sensuality is one which Bankim himself shares, and it suggests a puritanical reading whereby sensuality is equated with vulgarity and moral deprivation. Bharatchandra, an eighteenth century Bengali poet, is best known for *Annadāmangal*, which is itself a part of the *mangal kāvya* tradition in Bengal in which are narrated the lives of various deities indigenous to the region. The reviewer, along with most conservative Bengalis of the age, probably has in mind the second part of *Annadāmangal*, in which Bharatchandra narrates the love of Vidya and Sundar in what is considered to be graphic details. The distinction between Bharatchandra's treatment of love and Bankim's approach to the same is necessary given the content of *Bishabr̥ksha*. It is a tale of a married man's (Nagendra) illicit attraction towards a beautiful young widow (Kundanandinī), and his wife's (Suryamukhi) self-sacrifice in bringing the two lovers together. The presence of the cad (Debendra) who tries to unsuccessfully lure Kundanandinī, and successfully trap Hīrā, a maid in Nagendra and Suryamukhi's household, not only creates narrative tension, but brings the novel perilously close to depicting moral vices. The review, like the novel, has to assure its reader that woven through this tale of love and betrayal is a lofty moral position. To accomplish this, the review draws upon Bankim's ability to create believable

characters, and the rest of the text is dedicated to carefully unravelling each character in the novel to show that despite appearances, it is only Debendra who is an unreformed soul; the novel's protagonists, Suryamukhi, Kundanandinī, and Nagendra are merely misguided till the narrative's end brings Kunda to her death, and reunites the married couple.

The nature of the moral revolution is further clarified if one takes into account the Sanskrit poets the reviewer likens Bankim to. These poets provide points of reference for the reading practice performed by the reviewer—they are all noted for composing love stories, but each of these stories represents a virtuous mode of being in the world. Bhababhuti, whose *Mālati-mādhava* serves as a model for Bankim's eponymous heroine in *Kapalkundalā*, presents the perfect amalgamation of the various *rasas*, such that the predominant erotic or *śṛṅgāra rasa* is both complemented and highlighted. Similarly, Banabhatta's *Kādambarī* and Kalidasa's *Abhijyanaśankuntalam* narrate tales of love that transcend all obstacles, but do so only because of the virtuous nature of the lovers. The reviewer urges his reader to keep in mind this illustrious lineage not only to receive a purified vision of love, but to perceive herself as being an inheritor of the Sanskrit (Hindu) worldview. Like the Anglicist reader, she is asked to inhabit the world she reads about, but unlike her Eurocentric counterpart, she is not encouraged to identify with the characters. They are either so elevated or denigrated as to be beyond human reach; rather, the reader approaches them as one would gods and monsters. Thus, Suryamukhi's love for her husband is mythic, and the reader worships her (in much the same way, she worships the author of the novel) and buys into the purity of her love, while Debendra

comes across as too far fallen to be worthy of redemption, and Hīrā, perhaps the only accessible character, serves as warning for women straying from the path of virtue.

The reasons for reading Bankim as one in a continuous line from classical Sanskrit to modern Bengali are as well-documented as those prompting an Anglicist reading, but perhaps a brief glance at some of the available texts on colonial education is necessary to provide a context. Both Akshaychandra and the anonymous reviewer of *Āryadarśan* share an interest in the Bengali Bankim employs in his novels, and this is the predominant characteristic of what I suggest is a Sanskritist reading practice. The language used by the novelist is seen as productively reworking the rigidity of Sanskrit rules of composition, while never straying too far from this originary language. Like the classical Sanskrit poets, the language itself is perceived as providing Bengali with a cultural heritage rivalling that of the west. The Sanskritist reading practice seeks to wrest Bengali from Anglophone influences, and to establish Bengali as a Sanskritic language. To one using Bengali in the twenty-first century, this seems an unnecessary battle—after all, Bengali uses the Indic script, and its root language is very clearly Sanskrit. However, the nineteenth century Bengali reader does not have the luxury of certainty that I do, given the emphasis placed by the colonial government on anglicising the language. Charles Trevelyan, a British civil servant posted in Kolkata in the mid-nineteenth century, is instrumental in propagating a policy of supporting European learning over Sanskrit, Arabic, and vernacular education. In his treatise *On the Education of the People of India*, Trevelyan founds his arguments on the “Resolution of Government, dated 7<sup>th</sup> March 1835,” in which the colonial administration states its desire to promote “European

literature and science amongst the natives of India”.<sup>114</sup> This, by itself, is not entirely novel, although the proposed plan of not supporting indigenous students financially if they pursue any form of schooling other than European causes some resentment in both European and Indian circles.<sup>115</sup> The threat posed by the new policies concerns the relationship between the vernaculars and English. Sanskrit and Arabic, Trevelyan acknowledges, are languages of some historical merit—mostly because they are studied as such by European scholars of the time—but, Sanskrit, being a dead language, has little practical utility, and neither of these two languages can be considered fit vehicles for imparting European learning. However, Trevelyan also points out the problem of first teaching indigenous students English before they can be exposed to higher forms of learning. Like most educators of his generation, Trevelyan believes in the Indian (and, peculiarly enough, the Russian) student’s ability to learn languages, but this extends only to being able to parrot the most rudimentary forms of English. The actual learning, if it is to be imparted, can only be comprehended by the Indian student in his or her vernacular, and the government’s goal, then, becomes the anglicisation of regional languages. The vernaculars themselves offer no resistance since they are seen to have “nothing [...] fixed; every thing is yet to be done, and a new literature has to be formed, almost from the very foundation.”<sup>116</sup> The blank spaces left in the vernaculars cannot be occupied by Sanskrit, because the language contains no useful learning, and the only logical

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<sup>114</sup> Charles Trevelyan, *On the Education of the People of India*, 13

<sup>115</sup> Under the old system, students are provided a stipend in order to encourage them to attend schools funded at least partially by the government, whether they be Hindu *pathshalas* or Islamic *madrassas*, and teachers in both forms are salaried employees of the colonial government.

<sup>116</sup> Charles Trevelyan, *On the Education of the People of India*, 122

alternative is therefore English. What Trevelyan proposes is a hollowing out of vernaculars such as Bengali, and filling it with English; the resulting language is Bengali only in name as the ideas it conveys, and many of the words it uses, are English in nature.

Akshaychandra's somewhat petty quibbles with particular words used by Bankim suddenly takes on a new meaning. For the Sanskritist reader, the very existence of Bengali as a language is at stake, and in order to oppose the gradual anglicisation of Bengali, he must invest in Sanskrit grammar and rhetoric. The decision to use *upākhyān* or *kābya* in the place of novel is no longer a matter of linguistic preference, but rather the act of claiming literature being produced in Bengali as having a heritage of its own, and thus being fixed, contrary to Trevelyan's claims. When the anonymous reviewer refers to Bhababhuti, and by induction *Mālati-mādhava*, he is asking for a reader familiar with the references, and also for one willing to read *Mālati-mādhava* as Bankim's source text rather than *Ivanhoe*. This is perhaps closest to the reading Bankim himself embeds in his novels, as I discuss in the following chapter, but he is by no means a wholehearted champion of the same. The Sanskritist reader still reads Bankim's novels against the grain because she wishes to distance the texts from European influences, while the texts themselves advocate a more nuanced position. For this reader, the novels' primary task is to allow her to cultivate a viable Bengali Hindu persona, by simultaneously modernizing the values of the Hindu scriptures, and creating a continuous link between pre-colonial and nineteenth century Bengal.

### III. An Archive of Reading

However, what prompts this wish to designate one particular practice as the dominant way of reading? After all, Bankim is a major literary figure during the second

half of the nineteenth century, but he is by no means the only one. Nor is literature the only domain in which the fight over colonial identity is fought. What justifies my suggestion that the Anglicist and Sanskritist reading practices stand for more than pedagogical attempts at cultivating particular tastes? Perhaps the answer is in Derrida's conception of the archive;

The dwelling, this place where they dwell permanently, marks this institutional passage from the private to the public [...] The archontic power, which also gathers the functions of unification, of identification, of classification, must be paired with what we will call the power of *consignation* [...] the act of *consigning* through *gathering together signs*. *Consignation* aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration. In an archive, there should not be any absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity or *secret* which could separate (*secernere*), or partition, in an absolute manner.<sup>117</sup>

The rationale behind the reviews consistently propagating either one of the two available reading practices is to create a single system of reading driven by a particular mode of being in the world. The discomfort expressed by a reader such as Kalinath Datta when he perceives, despite himself, the influence of Scott in Bankim's *Durges'nanadini*, must be suppressed so as to achieve the unified image of the Anglicist reader. The reader, whatever his personal reservations may be, acquiesces to read as though he is willing to inhabit the position of the Bengali who believes in the values of western Enlightenment. The reviews, recollections, once published, become part of the archive, thus granting

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<sup>117</sup> Derrida, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," 10

their authors the power to dictate what the archive itself means. The archive institutionalises the reading practice and grants it a legitimacy unavailable to isolated readings existing outside the archive. Most significantly, however, the archive imposes an order on the readings, marking certain readings as off limits while placing others in a continuous chain which is often causal. If the archive is controlled by the Sanskritist readers, Bankim's novels are, by definition, modelled after classical Sanskrit poetry, and are thus beyond the claims exerted upon it by those who read in them characteristics of the Victorian novel instead.

I am well aware that in casting the archive of reading as a location of coherent narratives consigning meaning to sets of reviews and recollections capable of being accessed—indeed designed for access—by future generations flies in the face of emerging trends in archival studies. For scholars such as Gayatri Spivak and Anjali Arondekar, the precise myth of the archive which needs dismantling is that of coherence and accessibility, and such readings are necessary if one is to question the archive as the repository of verifiable truth. Thus for Spivak, the vast body of colonial documents constitutes an archive whose sole purpose is to render voiceless indigenous actors in order to become a *historical* source. Using the particular case of the rani or queen of Sirmur, Spivak demonstrates how the colonial archive systematically produces the rani as the invisible “other” and imposes narrative coherence on available documents to tell the true history of the Hill States in India.<sup>118</sup> Arondekar follows Spivak in destabilizing the postcolonial fetish for archival veracity as she uses the frame of histories of sexuality in

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<sup>118</sup> Gayatri Spivak, “The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives,” 257

South Asia to question “the guarantee of recovery” promised by an archive.<sup>119</sup> However, the genealogy of the archive I trace does precisely what Arondekar and Spivak contest—it seeks to fix, to produce a trace through reading such that the trace is recoverable. This turn to coherence, if unfashionable, is justified by what it reveals about Bengali modernity and its conversation with the formation of the nation. The two dominant strains competing to form this archive—the Anglicist and the Sanskritist—have traditionally been viewed as having diametrically opposed agendas.<sup>120</sup> Yet, the narrative both kinds of reading practices wish to assert is the same; they both want to train their reader to be competent, modern subjects. For the Anglicist, this subject aligns herself with liberal ideas imported from the west and customized to suit the context of nineteenth century Bengal, while the Sanskritist wishes to place the Bengali as teleologically developing from a Hindu past. The imperative for creating a modern subject can itself be traced to the construction of the nation following the Indian Revolt of 1857. The Revolt, which results in one of the earliest iterations of India as a nation united against the colonial rule imposed by Imperial Britain, leads to a drastic reorganization of affiliations. As Tanika Sarkar remarks;

The rhetoric of Hindu nationalism gradually came into its own in the decades after 1857. As the panic of the revolt receded and colonial repression began to be cast in unmistakably racist and authoritarian terms, the loyalist Bengali

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<sup>119</sup> Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India*, 4

<sup>120</sup> A persistent strand of Postcolonial scholarship on nineteenth century Bengal has examined the influence of Anglicisation as suppressing indigenous, namely Hindu, traditions. Thus for scholars such as Dipesh Chakrabarty and Partha Chatterjee, modernization and westernization are intimately related during this period in Bengali history, and those wishing to draw on a mythic Hindu past as an alternative are contaminated by their exposure to Enlightenment rationality. That which is not the west is perceived to be inaccessible, and at any rate, desirous of preserving existing traditions rather than modernizing them.

intelligentsia was faced with the moral implications of its own complicity with alien rule, and beset with doubts about the progressive potential of such complicity. It is perhaps no accident, then, that the economic critiques of colonial rule in terms of drain-of-wealth, deindustrialization and immiserization began to be worked out only by the post-1860s generations.<sup>121</sup>

This Hindu nation, of which Bankim is conceived of as being a founding member, requires subjects competent enough to occupy its physical and, more importantly, imagined space, and one of the means of creating the subject is through the ideological power of literature. The archive of reading thus becomes one of the means of harnessing the pedagogical potential of the Bengali novel, and of communicating to the readers the mode of being desired for this nation.

The archive of reading is the location where a reading practice becomes an ideology, and in the context of nineteenth century Bengal, this ideology is in the service of the emergent nation. The reader accessing the archive learns from the readings how to be a modern subject—whether following the tenets of Enlightenment rationalism, or the Hindu codes of conduct embedded in Sanskrit rhetoric and poetics—and the image of the nation she occupies is decided by her choice. What India looks like—Bengal and India, like Hindu and India are routinely conflated in the discourse surrounding the nation in the nineteenth and twentieth century—depends upon the kind of reading dominating the archive since those would be the ones most accessible to the reader. The archive serves to transform the literary object, Bankim's novels, into an ideological instrument by dictating the position from within which the text should be read. It privileges this position at the

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<sup>121</sup> Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism*, 142

cost of other available ones, and provides the reader with a clearly signposted map. The archive creates a narrative using the readings, thus articulating the kind of subject it wishes to engender in terms of the novels, and all at once the quibble over originality or linguistic anomalies becomes part of a larger project of subject construction. Each review or recollection within either the Anglicist or Sanskritist reading practice rises above textual particularities to reveal as it were its ideological motivations to the reader, and urge her to share in its vision of the nation.

If the archive is conceived thus, the association between Bankim and the construction of the nation becomes clearer. The relationship is one which Bankim himself contributes to actively through his fictional and non-fictional prose, and despite demonstrating a marked shift from imagining the nation in terms of Victorian liberalism to a reformist Hindu idea of the nation, he remains committed to the cause of nation building.<sup>122</sup> My interest, however, lies less in exploring Bankim's own nationalist zeal than in the readiness with which his contemporaries and twentieth century nationalists conscript him as an early Indian nationalist. The impact his novels have in this process is magnified by the reviews published of them and collected in the archive of reading. The result, even when studying Bankim over a century after his death, is apparent in the body of scholarship surrounding him. As I mention in the Introduction to the dissertation, the bulk of the work done on Bankim's oeuvre in general, and on his novels in particular, situate it in conversation with his nationalist ideologies, overshadowing the other avenues of questioning afforded by these texts. However, during the turn of the twentieth century

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<sup>122</sup> Of the numerous studies exploring Bankim's commitment to the nation, most notable are Tanika Sarkar's *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism* and Sudipta Kaviraj's *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India*.

the archive has a far more immediate effect in that it serves as a practicum for the modern subject of this new nation. Thus the novels, when united under the banner of the Sanskritists becomes crystallised in the hymn *Bande Mātaram* (“I bow to thee, Motherland”) from one of Bankim’s final works, *Ānandamath* (*The Abode of Bliss*), and the vision of the Hindu nation is channeled through a reading of the hymn that notes the resonances of classical Sanskrit word play (in the form of *samās* or compound words) as symbolizing the subject successfully bringing the classical into the modern world. For the Anglicist, a very different Hindu nation is being imagined, one which is led by the couple Mahendra and Kalyani whose notions of ethical behaviour are conditioned by their monogamous relationship made manifest through the institution of the companionate marriage. Neither reading is reductively allegorical because they do not stop at the reader identifying the narrative as a type to be reinvented as her own; rather it is a reading that is particular to the text, and in perceiving the text as espousing the desired world view. Given the didactic tone Bankim adopts in his later writings, the archive is perhaps an idea he would condone, although whether he would choose either iteration alone is a matter for pure speculation.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE READER IN BANKIM'S NOVELS

Sudipta Kaviraj opens his chapter on Bankim, Rabindranath, and Abanindranath Tagore with a reference to Rabindranath's comic poem "*Sekāl*" ("The Past") which encapsulates the colonial Bengali's difficult relationship with Sanskrit and literature in that language. As Kaviraj rightly notes, the second half of the nineteenth century sees the production of a "new aesthetic [...] in an astonishingly short time" that irrevocably shifts the paradigms of textual production and consumption from what can be loosely classed as drawing on Sanskrit and pre-modern Bengali literary practices to ones which are deliberately modern or Western.<sup>123</sup><sup>124</sup> Rabindranath signals that moment when the literary past afforded by Sanskrit, though still to be yearned for, is abjured in favour of a robust engagement with modern sensibilities; Kalidasa, the great Sanskrit poet, may be metonymic of a golden, idyllic age of leisurely romance, but the modern poet can survive just fine with his shoe-clad, straight-backed heroines.<sup>125</sup> However, if Rabindranath's generation is more secure in its relationship with the West at the turn of the nineteenth century, Bankim is far less so, and for Kaviraj, this uncertainty reveals itself in a "sharp sense of historical rupture" in Bankim's "reflections on the discourse on literary taste."<sup>126</sup>

As an intellectual acutely conscious of the need for *the* Bengali reader possessing

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<sup>123</sup> Kaviraj, "The Perfume from the Past: Modern Reflections on Ancient Art", 167

<sup>124</sup> The modern and the Western are synonymous terms for this period of Bengali history, and I use the terms interchangeably to indicate the impossibility of disentangling the two.

<sup>125</sup> It can hardly be coincidental that lines from Rabindranath's poem ("*catā ṛtu purna kare ghatto milan stare stare*") call to mind Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress", both ascribing to an idyllic past the opportunity to woo at a leisurely pace.

<sup>126</sup> Kaviraj, 170

cultivated taste and literary judgment, Bankim begins the shift towards this new aesthetic while occupying an uneasy position vis-à-vis both Sanskrit and Bengali literary traditions as well as European Enlightenment. Kaviraj compellingly argues why Bankim can neither claim the past as unequivocally his own, nor celebrate the modern wholeheartedly, thus effecting a radical rupture between the two. Bankim's exposure to colonial modernity mediates—and effectively destroys—his access to the world of Kalidasa's *Śakuntalā* since he must now inhabit a comparative reality in which Shakespeare's Miranda and Desdemona are required in order to translate Kalidasa's heroine. The present, though cruel in its destruction of Bengali sovereignty, is undeniable and, if one follows Kaviraj's argument, instrumental in Bankim's artistic decisions. According to Kaviraj, “[t]he past in all his novels is a past that is woken out of its sleep, infused by the troubled yearnings of the present, a past in which his readers were trained to seek shadows of a present in disguise.”<sup>127</sup>

The above arguments, nuanced though they are in their reading of Bankim's novels and religious-ethical texts, are symptomatic of a conventional line of thinking in Postcolonial Studies. The radical break Kaviraj implies situates the Bengali novel—of which Bankim is assumed to be one of the earliest practitioners—as an off-shoot of the Victorian form, and inherently distant from Sanskrit and pre-modern Bengali aesthetics. The Bengali novel thus imagined is a creature incapable of productively engaging with its past, and the Bengali novelist is restricted to being the “Scott of Bengal”. However, in this chapter, I argue against this strand of criticism to reclaim Bankim as signalling a unique moment in Bengali colonial history when the traditional and the modern are both

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<sup>127</sup> Kaviraj, 176

viable aesthetic options, and indeed when the practices of Sanskrit *kāvya* literature are as dominant in the structural and aesthetic elements of the Bengali novel as Western forms of novel production. I locate my claim in the reader to suggest that instead of seeking a masked present, Bankim's novels train her to read the Sanskrit past as encoded in the text, and coexisting with the modern present, albeit in a difficult relationship. She is a reader who has more than a passing familiarity with the aesthetic principles of traditional Sanskrit literature, the *rasa* theory. To further assuage her anxieties over reading a foreign genre, Bankim structures his novels as a combination of the *kathā* and the *ākhyāyikā*—two closely related genres of prose narrative in Sanskrit—and uses a form of Bengali that continues in the tradition of Sanskrit-inspired Bengali fiction of the pre-modern era. The argument I present here is not so much a complete rejection of the modern in favour of a mythic indigenous past. Rather, I suggest that the traditions of *rasic* (the adjectival form of *rasa*) principles and a linguistic fluidity between Bengali and Sanskrit are a part of the lived experience of both Bankim and his nineteenth century reader, and their presence in the novels is only to be expected. If one follows the line of existing scholarship on the colonial Bengali novel in claiming the genre to be so novel as to mark a moment of radical discontinuity in Bengali literature, then the pace and extent of Bankim's popularity becomes difficult to account for. His novels retain enough of the familiar to provide the reader with points of reference, both in terms of aesthetics as well as structure, and are thus new enough to be attractive and fashionable but still bearing the marks of the comfortably known.

I divide the chapter into two sections, the first being an examination of the *rasa* theory, with particular attention paid to *Durgeśnandinī* (*The Chieftain's Daughter*, 1865)

and *Bishabr̥ksha* (*The Poison Tree*, 1873). I anchor the argument in an exploration of the *śrngāra* (erotic) *rasa* (broadly translated as sentiment) and Bankim’s use of the words “*su*” (auspicious) and “*sundar*” (beauty) in evoking this *rasa*, both being performed for the pleasure of the *sahr̥daya pāthak* (empathetic audience). I return to *Bishabr̥ksha* in the following section, and along with a study of his final novel, *Ānandamath* (*The House of Bliss*, 1882), suggest the *kathā* and the *ākhyāyikā* as possible structural guidelines for these texts.

### I. The *Rasik Pāthak*

*Durges̥nandinī* occupies a mythic position in the canon of modern Bengali literature for a number of reasons—it is the first self-consciously crafted novel in the language and in a remarkably short span of time grants its author, Bankim, the honour of being something of a superstar in the intellectual life of nineteenth century Bengal. Tilōttamā, the novel’s heroine, however, is largely overshadowed by Bankim’s later female protagonists; she has none of Kapalkundalā’s enigmatic charm, nor Kundanandinī’s ill-fated passion, nor is she as fully formed a character as Prafulla. For most early readers of Bankim, she is a mere shadow of Walter Scott’s Rowena—a signpost indicating the Bengali novel’s successful imitation of Scott’s *Ivanhoe*, and therefore of a modern genre. A version of her reappears in Rabindranath’s short story, “*Kabuliwalā*” (1892) as the stereotypical *bankimī* heroine, forgotten by her creator even as she is trying to make good her escape from the window of her prison on a stormy night. Yet Tilōttamā has one feature that few other characters in Bengali literature can lay claim to—she is the first character to appear as a reader in the genre, and through her practice of reading, Bankim seeks to guide the readers of *Durges̥nandinī* in particular,

and of the Bengali novel in general. As she reads, the invoked reader—addressed simply as *pāthak* (the masculine for “reader” in Bengali)—occupies a voyeuristic position and learns that this strange new genre can, after all, be read in a comfortably familiar way. Through her, the reader is invited to note in *Durgeśnandinī* the evocation of the *śṛṅgāra rasa* that orders the novel’s narrative and stylistic contents in accordance with classical Sanskrit aesthetics, and situates the text not as recklessly moving towards an unorthodox modernity, but rather as comfortably reworking elements of a traditional past and present. Bankim’s technique of enframing Tilōttamā before presenting her as a reader of a deliberately chosen set of Sanskrit texts, isolates her as the ideal reader who inhabits the *pāthak*’s psyche both as a guide and as a dimly recollected past. This invoked reader is urged to fall in love with Tilōttamā both because of her own allure and her ability to remind the reader of someone he has intimately loved in the past, but also because of the familiarity of the reading she performs. As I argue in this section, this love for Tilōttamā depends upon the reader deciphering the code embedded in her practice of reading—the *rasik pāthak* will understand that she is formed after Kādambarī, Vāsavadattā, and Rādha, and like these women, can only be truly appreciated if she evokes the sentiment of *śṛṅgāra* in the *pāthak*. The reader, then, has to read like Tilōttamā so as to be able to fully comprehend her charm, and by induction the beauty of *Durgeśnandinī*. To return briefly to Kaviraj’s suggestion that for Bankim the Sanskrit world is irreversibly lost, bounded as the experiences of the nineteenth century reader are by modernity—the relationship between Tilōttamā and the reader invoked in *Durgeśnandinī* marks anything but such a historical or aesthetic rupture.<sup>128</sup> Rather, it indicates Bankim constructing a genre that

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<sup>128</sup> Kaviraj, “Perfume from the Past,” 170

assumes his reader consciously inhabiting both the Sanskrit and the modern world, and using the aesthetic and literary traditions of the former to read this new form with its stated allegiance to the latter.

## II. Tilōttamā, the model reader

At first glance, Tilōttamā is little more than the quintessential romantic heroine, primarily intended to be the object of the male gaze of the author, the hero, and the invoked reader. We first see her inside a Hindu temple on a predictably stormy night, framed by the light of a lamp and her veil, when she encounters the novel's protagonist, Jagatsingha. It is love at first sight for both, but she must return to her father's castle with her chaperone, Bimalā, and he must away to defend Bengal against the Pathans, acting on behalf of the Mughal emperor Akbar. Following a brief foray into the history of the region in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century—the novel's temporal setting, referred to as the *ākhyāyikābarnita kāl*<sup>129</sup>—the narrator returns the reader to Tilōttamā and the prospect of learning more about the romance. Tilōttamā continues to be enclosed in frames as she is seen sitting by the window looking out at the sky, and its reflection in a nearby river, all three of which repeat the motif of framed paintings and mirrors. Bankim paints her as lovesick and distracted, and invites the addressed reader to recall his love from his adolescence to fully experience Tilōttamā's beauty. The passage, redolent in its use of *alamkāra* (ornamental figures of speech), describes the archetype of innocent, youthful, feminine beauty, and leaves both the invoked and the actual reader in no doubt of the author's intentions—to underscore that Tilōttamā is, indeed, beautiful (*sundar*). This

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<sup>129</sup> The phrase literally translates to “the time described in the *ākhyāyikā*” but given the complex relationship between history and imagined narratives in the *ākhyāyikā* and the *kathā*, I explore this phrase more fully later in the chapter (*Durgesnandinī*, chap. 1).

beauty, however, is both seen and experienced by the reader<sup>130</sup>, and these are as central to the passage as the descriptions of the protagonist herself. The passage commences with the phrase “Tilōttamā is beautiful” but it immediately transitions to the vocative case as the *pāthak* is asked if he has ever, in his youth (*kisōr bayese*), seen with/in his “eyes of love” (the phrase *premcokkhute* can be translated with both prepositions) such beauty as Tilōttamā’s.<sup>131</sup> The *pāthak*’s access to her is conditional upon an affirmative response to the above question—“Only if you have seen [such a figure]” the narrative claims, “can you feel in your mind the true nature of Tilōttamā’s form.”<sup>132</sup> This act of seeing is said to occur in a memory that is almost dream-like, as Bankim effects a curious conjunction of reading, remembering, and seeing. The reader is urged to both remember and dream the ideal that is Tilōttamā; the adjectives used to describe her call to mind something very familiar, yet there is a certain unknowability that places her in the realm of the reader’s dream.<sup>133</sup> By itself, the passage is far from extraordinary—by delimiting Tilōttamā to the reader’s dream and memory, the author ensures that, while enticing, she is preserved by her innate virtue for the sole consumption of the hero.

However, what Tilōttamā does immediately following this description undermines the apparently straightforward nature of the passage. It grows dark outside, and the return of the lamp (reminiscent of our introduction to her in the temple) compels

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<sup>130</sup> I advisedly conflate the invoked reader with the reader of the novel or the actual reader, as the former is meant to represent the latter. Using the figure of the invoked reader allows Bankim to keep the reader in close proximity to the text, and call on him at significant moments in the narrative. The goal is, what the *pāthak* learns under Bankim’s direct tutelage, the actual reader learns by proxy.

<sup>131</sup> *Durgeśnandinī*, chap. 7

<sup>132</sup> *Durgeśnandinī*, chap. 7, “Jadī dekhiyā thāken, tabei Tilōttamār abayab manōmadhye swarūp anubhūta karate paraben.”

<sup>133</sup> Tilottama is “serene, constant, soft-natured” (“sthīrā, dhīrā, kōmal-prkṛtir”) who travels the paths of the reader’s memory (“smaran-pathe”) like a dream (“swapnabat”) (*Durgeśnandinī*, chap. 7).

her to turn to her room, and to her books. This is a strange, even scandalous, action for a female character in the middle of the nineteenth century, and Bankim is acutely aware of that.<sup>134</sup> He hastens to add, “Tilōttamā knew how to read; Abhirām Swāmī [her father’s political and spiritual advisor] had taught her to read Sanskrit.”<sup>135</sup> Tilōttamā being a literate woman is a fairly novel concept for Bankim’s audience in an age when the education of women is far from an accepted norm, and later in the novel, Bimalā too must also explain her ability to write letters. Thus part of the sentence’s effect is to establish the plausibility of Tilōttamā’s action—she has had private tutoring, a believable if slightly unorthodox occurrence. Of interest to my argument is the language of instruction—she knows Sanskrit. This is not extraordinary in itself; Tilōttamā is the daughter of a wealthy landowner whose political affiliation with the Mughal court is distinct from his explicitly articulated Hindu identity, and Sanskrit is an integral part of that process of self-formation. Tilōttamā being a Hindu princess is as central to the narrative as Rowena being of Saxon descent is to Scott’s *Ivanhoe*, and so it is imperative that Bankim associate her with the language of the Hindu elite. The linguistic choice also results from the period in which the action of the narrative is set as Bengali remains a vernacular of the common people, not particularly suitable for either literary composition or formal instruction till as late as the eighteenth century. Thus it is only to be expected that if she reads at all, she must read Sanskrit.

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<sup>134</sup> Popular satires, such as “*Miss Binobibi B.A.*” and “*Novel Nayika*”, capture what was a commonly held belief—a woman ought not to be allowed to read works of fiction, novels and romances in particular, by herself in the seclusion of her room. In such a circumstance, the woman would be without supervision and free to indulge in the moral depravity encouraged by these texts.

<sup>135</sup> “Tilōttamā parite janiten; Abhirām Swāmīr nikaT Sangskṛta parite śikhiyāchilen.” (*Durgēśnandinī*, chap. 7, translation mine).

However, my contention is that the choice of Sanskrit allows Bankim to model through Tilōttamā a particular practice of reading which would be far more familiar to the *pāthak*—and by implication—the nineteenth century Bengali reader—than either the novel form imported from the West, or the particular example of *Ivanhoe*. Among other things, this practice assumes the reader’s knowledge of Sanskrit prose romances and the stylistic elements of the same. As Tilōttamā reads, the reading list becomes more than mere intertextual reference;

Dasīte pradīp jwāliyā ānila. Tilōttamā cintā tyāg kariyā ekkhān pustak laiya  
pradīper kāche basilen. Tilōttamā parite jāniten; Abhirām Swāmīr nikaT  
Sangskṛta parite śikhiyāchilen. Pustakkhāni Kādambarī. Kiyatkkhan pariyā birakti  
prakāś kariyā Kādambarī parityāg karilen. Ār ekkhān pustak ānilen; Subandhukṛta  
Bāsabdattā; kakhana paren, kakhana bhāben, ār bār paren, ār bār anyamane  
bhāben; Bāsabdattāo bhāla lāgila nā. Tāhā tyāg kariyā Gītagōbinda parite lāgilen;  
Gītagōbinda kichukkhan bhāla lāgila, parite parite salajja īshat hāsi hāsiyā pustak  
nikkhep karilen.

A maidservant lit a lamp. Tilōttamā left off worrying and sat near the lamp with a book. Tilōttamā knew how to read; Abhirām Swāmi had taught her how to read Sanskrit. The book was *Kādambarī*. After reading for a while, she expressed annoyance and rejected *Kādambarī*. She got another book; Subandhu’s *Vāsavadattā*. She read, thought, read again, thought distractedly; she didn’t like *Vāsavadattā* either. Setting it aside, she started reading *Gītōvinda*; she liked

*Gītīgōvinda* for a while. She smiled coyly while reading, then threw the book away.<sup>136</sup>

Bankim introduces three texts through his model reader—Bānabhata's *Kādambarī* (first half of the 7th century C.E), Subandhu's *Vāsavadattā* (also 7th century but before Bāna), and Jayadeva's *Gītīgōvinda* (12th century C.E.). Both *Kādambarī* and *Vāsavadattā* are prose romances in Classical Sanskrit, while *Gītīgōvinda* is in verse, and all three appear to have been inserted to inform the reader about Tilōttamā's romantic sentiments. The works by Bāna and Subandhu refer specifically to instances of well-known lovers, initially suffering *biraha* (separation owing to fate and circumstance) but ultimately achieving *milan* (united thanks to their virtue, faith, and divine intervention). *Gītīgōvinda* narrates the love of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa in the *Vaiṣṇava* tradition, celebrating the divine couple and rewarding Rādhā's devotion to the sometime unfaithful, yet eventually penitent, Kṛṣṇa. The thematic structure of these three texts prioritises *milan* following *biraha*; each couple must undergo separation and prove their fidelity through prolonged—often seemingly interminable—periods of waiting before experiencing *milan*. This echoes the narrative of *Durgeśnandinī* in which Tilōttamā and Jagatsingha are separated when the Pathans attack and capture her father's castle. Their reunion occurs only after a prolonged separation during which Jagatsingha must be convinced of her fidelity, and both must suffer physical and emotional privations.

The texts, however, stand in for more than a narrative foretelling owing to the dominant *rasa*—*śṛṅgāra*—evoked in each, and by implication in *Durgeśnandinī*. The *rasa* theory is an integral part of traditional Hindu/Sanskrit aesthetic experience, as it

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<sup>136</sup> *Durgeśnandinī*, chap. 7, translation mine

connects the work of art with the *sahr̥daya* (empathetic) reader or audience. According to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (composed orally and transmitted to writing between 100 B.C.E and 100 C.E) by Bhārata, there are eight dominant or fundamental feelings (*sthāyībhāva*) which exist in a latent form in all human beings. He names them as follows—Delight (*rati*), Laughter (*hāsa*), Sorrow (*śōka*), Anger (*krōdha*), Heroism (*utsāha*), Fear (*bhaya*), Disgust (*jugupsa*), and Wonder (*vismaya*). In life, these emotions are accompanied by three elements—causes (*kāraṇa*), effects (*kārya*), and concomitant aspects (*sahakārin*). When the *sahr̥daya* audience encounters the fundamental feelings in art, she feels particular pleasure, and it is this feeling that Bhārata names *rasa*. Aesthetic experience involves the audience tasting the *rasa*, which is born of the union of the text and its performance. Since there are eight *sthāyībhāvas*, there are also eight corresponding *rasas*. In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the *rasas* are the Erotic (*śṛṅgāra*), the Comic (*hāsyā*), the Pathetic (*karunā*), the Furious (*raudra*), the Heroic (*vira*), the Terrible (*bhayanaka*), the Odious (*bibhatsa*), and the Marvellous (*adbhuta*).<sup>137</sup> Later a ninth *rasa*, the Tranquil (*śānta*) is added to this list, probably by the theorist Abhinavagupta around the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and is gradually accepted as being the highest *rasa* an author must strive towards.

For Bāna and Subandhu, however, composing well before Abhinavagupta, the pinnacle of the *rasas* is *śṛṅgāra*, and this is reflected in their two texts mentioned in *Durges̥nandinī*. Their understanding of the *śṛṅgāra rasa* is based on Bhārata’s description of the same;

Of these [the *rasas*], the Erotic (*śṛṅgāra*) Sentiment proceeds from the Dominant State of love (*rati*) and it has as its basis (lit. soul) a bright attire; for whatever in

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<sup>137</sup> R. Gnoli, *Aesthetic Experience According to Abhinavagupta*

this world is white, pure, bright and beautiful is appreciated in terms of the Dominant State of love (*śṛṅgāra*). For example, one who is elegantly dressed is called a lovely person (*śṛṅgārin*) [...] Hence the Erotic Sentiment has been so named on account of its usually being associated with a bright and elegant attire. It owes its origin to men and women and relates to the fullness of youth.<sup>138</sup>

The text places as much emphasis on “a bright attire” (“*ujwalveshhātmak*”) as it does on love and the “fullness of youth”, and leaves open a considerable room for interpretation. This somewhat curious juxtaposition of the erotic with vibrant attire can be explained in part by the range of meanings encompassed by the word *śṛṅgāra*. As the entry in the *Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary* of 1872 indicates, *śṛṅgāra* simultaneously refers to love, amorous passions, sexual union, as well as elegant attire, and in particular, a dress suitable for amorous purposes or the act of dressing up for such an event. There is, however, another meaning, implicit in the rest, which I wish to dwell on; *śṛṅgāra* also connotes beauty (*soundarya*) and the beautiful (*sundar*). In a 20<sup>th</sup> century commentary on the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the classical Bharatnāṭyam dancer, V.P. Dhananjayan elaborates upon Bhārata’s cryptic passage as follows;

The common concept is that *śṛṅgāra rasa* refers to love between man and woman and its consequences. A much deeper sense is actually conveyed by this term. The meaning of this term, *śṛṅgāra* is beauty, *soundarya*. That is why *Śṛṅgāra Lahari* [a classical Carnatic song] is also known as *Soundarya Lahari*. Beauty is that which attracts the mind or appeals to a particular penchant of the mind. That is love; love is not just *rati* the amorous attitude [...] Hence love is beauty, that is,

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<sup>138</sup> *Natya Sastra*, chap. 6, verse 45

*śṛṅgāra* is truth and naturally it is considered to be the king of the *rasas*; not because it is seductive, passionate or amorous love, though the general belief is so.<sup>139</sup>

By equating *śṛṅgāra* with *soundarya*, Dhananjayan is able to uncover that which is implicit in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*; amorous love based on physical attraction can only serve as the initial moment of the *rasa*, but for the work to achieve the culmination of the *śṛṅgāra rasa*, there must be an exploration of that which is truly beautiful, both in the mind as well as the body. According to this commentary, the love thus born between two individuals is able to overcome any obstacles, and because it is another form of truth, it is suitably elevated to be the subject matter of great art.

Here I would claim that is it this definition of the *śṛṅgāra rasa* that colours both Bankim’s description of Tilōttamā as well as the *pāthak*’s perception of her. If one keeps in mind Dhananjayan’s commentary, then Bankim’s repetition of the word “beautiful” in relation to Tilōttamā becomes more than mere word play. To return, then, to *Durgesnandinī* with the question—why is Bankim so anxious that his reader understand that Tilōttamā is beautiful?—and revisit his description of the lovelorn princess;

Tilōttamā sundarī [...] Tilōttamār śarīr sugaThan haiyāō pūrnāyata chila nā;  
bayeser nabīnata prayuktai hauk bā śarīrer swābhābik gaThaner janyai hauk, ei  
sundar dehe khīnata byatīt sthūlatagun chila nā. Athaca tanwīr śarīrmadhye sakal  
sthāni sugōl ār sulalita. Sugōl prakōshThe ratnabalay; sugōl bāhute hīrakmandita  
tār; sugōl angulate angurīya; sugōl ūrute mekhalā; sugaThan angsoṅpare  
swarnahār, sugaThan kanThe ratnakanThī; sarbatrer gaThan sundar.

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<sup>139</sup> Dhananjayan, *A Dancer on Dance*

Tilōttamā was beautiful [...] Tilōttamā’s body, though beautifully proportioned, was not fully developed; whether it was because of her young age, or the natural built of her body, this beautiful body was more slender than plump. Yet every part of this young girl’s body was perfectly rounded and delicately soft. Gem bracelets on her perfectly rounded wrists; a diamond studded ornament on her perfectly rounded arms; a ring on her perfectly rounded finger; a *mekhala* on her perfectly rounded thighs; a golden necklace on her beautifully formed shoulder; a gem necklace on her beautifully formed neck; everything beautifully formed.<sup>140</sup>

As mentioned above, this passage is clearly meant to demonstrate Bankim’s ability to mould Bengali out of its supposed vulgar past into a highly ornate and rhetorically charged language. The use of *anupras* or alliteration bears this out—every descriptive unit begins with either *sugathan* (beautifully formed) or *sugōl* (perfectly rounded), and the repetition of the syllable “su” employs *shabdalamkār* (ornamentation based on the sound of the word). In fact, this overreliance on *shabdalamkār* becomes so intimately associated with the *bankimī* style that later writers, such as Rabindranath, consciously stay away from it, and in the perception of the modern Bengali reader, the style remains somewhat stilted and archaic. The alliteration, however, perfectly captures the interpretation of the *śṅgāra rasa* Dhananjayan alludes to. Tilōttamā is *sundar* (beautiful) cues the reader into not just a description of her physical self but the dominant *rasa* the novel seeks to evoke. The *sugathan* of her body echoes not only the first syllable of *sundar* but also its meaning, and the same is implied in the use of *sugōl* and *sulalita* (delicately soft). The choice of the alliterative syllable is similarly telling—“su”, much

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<sup>140</sup> *Durgeśnandinī*, chap. 7, translation mine

like the Greek “eu” refers to that which is auspicious, good, and by implication, inherently beautiful. Bankim continues to remind the reader of the *rasa* by enhancing each portion of *sundar* Tilōttamā with an ornament, thus coupling the *alamkār* (ornament) of the language with a physical adornment. Each member of her body is decorated with an appropriate ornament, and together they infuse the prose with the appropriate *rasa*. The catalogue of jewels further performs the dictates of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* by presenting the heroine in glittering attire. At one level, Tilōttamā is very naturally dressed in the finest—she is the daughter of a wealthy landowner and her jewels help the reader gauge her social status. Jagatsingha does the same thing when he first encounters her in the temple.<sup>141</sup> Yet at the level of dramatic theory, the ornaments are as necessary as Tilōttamā being in the “fullness of youth” in enhancing her beauty and evoking the *śṛngāra rasa*.

This play on *alamkār*, both literally and figuratively, is present in both *Kādambarī* and *Vāsavadattā*, with the former going so far as to even surround the heroine with handmaidens, each of whom is both bejewelled as well as a jewel herself.<sup>142</sup> Bāna’s description of *Kādambarī* makes Bankim’s use of *alamkār* seem quite tame, as *Kādambarī*’s beauty is reflected in the jewelled pavement, walls, roof, and figures carved into the roof of her pavilion. Her very nails are jewel-like, she wears ruby bracelets that tire her arms while magnifying their beauty, the rays of her necklace support her delicate

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<sup>141</sup> *Durgesnandinī*, chap. 1

<sup>142</sup> *Kādambarī* narrates the tale of two pairs of star-crossed lovers, Mahāswetā and Pundarik, and *Kādambarī* and Candrapida. Using the structure of stories nestled within stories, Bana describes how both couples are separated by fate, with the heroes either dead or suddenly called away. The result is that both heroines feel compelled to die following the departure of their beloved, but are urged by the gods to believe in rebirth, and are finally rewarded for their patience by being reunited with their lovers. The moment in the narrative I discuss above occurs when Chandrapida first encounters *Kādambarī*, and both are captivated and physically weakened by their love for the other.

chin, and her lips and cheeks are ruby red with newly found love.<sup>143</sup> For Bāna, Kādambarī abandons childhood in favour of youth the moment she falls in love, and becomes a woman whom the poet can describe as the erotic ideal,<sup>144</sup> but Bankim very consciously refuses to cross that line. Tilōttamā, though ornamented, is the archetype of innocent adolescence, and hence her body, though bearing the marks of *sugathan* (beautifully formed) is not *puṇyāyata* (fully formed). Thus while Bāna’s text plunges into a vivid description of Kādambarī’s heavy breasts which are jewel-like, Bankim prudishly restricts himself to Tilōttamā’s arms, fingers, shoulders, and neck. The *śṛṅgāra rasa* is to be evoked, but within the bounds of Bengali decorum.

Tilōttamā, however, is not an isolated instance of the *śṛṅgāra rasa* in *Durgeśnandinī*. After the reader is invited to gaze upon her beauty, he disappears for two chapters, reappearing when Bimalā, Tilōttamā’s chaperone is performing her toilette, or the act of *śṛṅgāra*. Having described the paradoxically captivating innocence of Tilōttamā’s eyes, the author now asks the *pāthak* to contemplate the more mature, self-consciously erotic beauty of Bimalā;

PāThak! Manaścakkhu unmīlan kara; jekhāne basiyā darpan sammukhe Bimalā  
keśbinyās kariteche, tāhā dekha; bipul keśguccha bām kare laiyā, sammukhe  
rākhiyā je prakāre tāhāte ciranī diteche, dekha; nija jōubanbhāb dekhiyā Tipi Tipi  
je hāsiche, tāhā dekha; madhye madhye bīnanindita madhur sware je mṛdu mṛdu  
sangīta kariteche, tāhā śrabān kara; dekhiyā śuniyā bala, Bimalā apekhyā kōn  
nabīnā tōmār manōmōhinī?

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<sup>143</sup> *Kādambarī*, 59-62 (Kane), 217-219 (Layne, English translation)

<sup>144</sup> *Kādambarī*, 60 (Kane), 218-219 (Layne, English translation)

Reader! Open your mind's eye; see where Bimalā is doing her coiffure before the mirror; see how she is bringing her mass of hair to the front in her left palm, and running a comb through it; see how she is smiling at her own youthful state; listen to her occasionally singing softly in dulcet tones; having seen and heard it all, tell me which young woman is more alluring to you than Bimalā?<sup>145</sup>

The thirty five-year old Bimalā is certainly not the novel's heroine, but she is no less important in creating the *śṛṅgāra rasa* than her ward, the sixteen-year old Tilōttamā. Bimalā is also ornamented, but the prose used to describe her is far less poetically charged; she is the erotic incarnate, the more sensual element of the *rasa*, and Bankim is clearly anxious to contain her sexuality. By the end of the narrative, Bimalā is reduced to widowhood and shorn of all her physical charms, but not before those very charms have been employed to seduce Katlu Khān (the lascivious and cruel Pathan villain) to his death. In Bimalā one notices the novelist's hesitance with fully exploring the bounds of the *rasa*; it is too erotic, too sensual to be emulated completely. Tilōttamā's presence mitigates what to Bankim are the cruder aspects of this dominant sentiment, as she can be safely relied on to filter *śṛṅgāra* through the *sundar* (beautiful), and allow the novelist to safely reinterpret a classical theory for the modern reader. Thus Tilōttamā does pick up *Kādambarī* first, but abandons it with annoyance soon after. Bankim's use of the verb *parityāg* to describe Tilōttamā's rejection of the text is telling—the word carries a distinctly negative connotation, variously translated as to relinquish, to renounce, and to desert. Tilōttamā does not merely set *Kādambarī* aside, but explicitly rejects it.

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<sup>145</sup> *Durgesnandinī*, chap. 10, translation mine

The work she takes up next, *Vāsavadattā*, is more appealing, and it engages her for a little longer. Composed by Subandhu, *Vāsavadattā* recounts the romance between Kandarpaketu and Vāsavadattā, both of whom have a vision of the other in their dreams which serves as a catalyst to their meeting. Like *Kādambarī*, *Vāsavadattā* too subjects the lovers to a separation, when the heroine accidentally wanders into a hermitage, and is turned into stone by an ascetic whose penances are interrupted by her excessive beauty. Kandarpaketu, having lost Vāsavadattā, is on the brink of committing suicide when a divine voice assures him of reunion; his search leads him to her statue which returns to life on his touch. The narrative is much shorter than *Kādambarī* and the structure less intricate, but here too the dominant *rasa* is *śṛṅgāra*, as becomes evident from the author's introduction of Vāsavadattā;

(Kandarpaketu) saw Vāsavadattā brilliant with a pair of legs <reddened feet> as grammar has <rubricated *padas*>; with <goodly joints> as the *Bhārata* has <a hundred books>; charming with <beautiful ankles> as the *Rāmāyana* is charming with its <*Sundarakānda*>; [235] with a glorious <slender waist> as the *Chandoviciti* has the glorious <*tanumadhya* metre>; with <hands and ears that must be reckoned with> as astronomy has the <*hasta* and *sravana* that may be counted>; <revealing her beauty> as the permanence of the Nyaya system has its <form from Uddyotakara>; decked with <ornaments> as an assembly of Buddhists is decked with the <*Alamkāra*>; [236] showing the <essence of delight> as an Upanishad shows him whose <being is bliss><sup>146</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> *Vāsavadattā*, sec. 234-236, pg 113-114, translation Louis H. Gray

The above translation by Louis H. Gray is notable for its attention to Subandhu’s style, and in particular the latter’s reliance on *slesha* or paronomasia. According to the translator, Subandhu declares his mastery of this particular form of *alamkāra* in the text’s introduction, claiming that he is able to arrange “a series of paronomasias in every syllable.”<sup>147</sup><sup>148</sup> In this particular section, the extended *slesha* compares Vāsavadattā to various classical Sanskrit texts and rhetorical devices, thus textualising the body of the woman, and extending the appreciation of the *śṛṅgāra rasa* to the literary arts.

Vāsavadattā’s beauty is comparable to the true beauty of the *pada* (lit. feet, here referring to the quarter divisions of Panini’s treatise on grammar), the science of astronomy that can identify lunar mansions (*hasta* and *sravana*), and *Nyaya* or law. Such is her allure that she calls to mind the perfection of the epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana*. The *rasa* is encoded in the term *Sundarkānda*. Here Subandhu puns on the multiple sense of the word *sundar*; *Sundarkānda* refers to the fifth book (*kānda*) of the *Ramayana*, but *sundar* also means beauty, thereby standing in for *śṛṅgāra*. Unlike Bāna who introduces Kādambarī with the help of visual ornamentation, Subandhu relies on the *alamkāra* (ornaments) of literature and the arts. The author of *Vāsavadattā* follows the conventions of the blazon by comparing each portion of the heroine’s body with a beautiful object, thus enhancing the attractiveness of the body, but replaces the traditional lexicon of precious gems and heavenly bodies with rhetorical devices and the *śāstras* (religious or secular treatises). Little wonder then Tilōttamā prefers *Vāsavadattā* to the more sexually explicit *Kādambarī*. The essence of the *rasa* can be read as being filtered through the

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<sup>147</sup> Gray, *Kādambarī*, 17

<sup>148</sup> In order to be faithful to the Sanskrit text, Gray indicates the puns within <>, thus explaining the translation’s code-like appearance. Subandhu prefaces *slesha* using the word *iva*.

literary arts, and as the reader, Tilōttamā can choose to identify with the textualised beauty of Vāsavadattā. More importantly, the invoked reader of Bankim's novel can hear the echoes of Subandhu's description when Tilōttamā picks up *Vāsavadattā*, and perceive her in the same way that Kandarpaketu does when he first sees his beloved. The intertextual reference works to elevate *Durgeśnandinī* to the level of *Vāsavadattā*, from where it can then be compared to the body of classical Sanskrit texts, in the same way that Bankim's heroine can be compared to Subandhu's. The reader who is able to recognise this connection between the two texts, is also able to find in Bankim a modern practitioner of a classical *rasa*, and notice the Bengali novelist rinsing the sentiment of its overt sensuality. Tilōttamā, and by extension the reader, prefers that iteration of the *śṛngāra rasa* which focusses on the *sundar* as not merely transcending the bodily but conflating the corporeal with the textual. In *Kādambarī*, the *alamkār* used in the prose evokes the *rasa*, but the object of the sentiment is always the beautiful woman; in this passage from *Vāsavadattā*, the *alamkār* of *slesh*, by virtue of equating the body of the woman with the text, makes the prose as much an object of the *rasa* as the body.

Bankim's style, then, far from being exclusively an exercise in Sanskritising the vulgar Bengali, is an attempt at making the language itself an object of the *śṛngāra rasa*. Like Tilōttamā, like Bimalā, Bankim's prose possesses the beauty worthy of evoking in the reader the *rasa*, and nowhere is it more evident than in the description of the novel's third female character, Āyeshā. As the daughter of the Pathan Katlu Khān, Āyeshā is necessarily in the wrong camp, but that does not prevent Bankim from lavishing some of the most beautiful language in the novel on her. She also forms the third side of the love triangle when she falls in love with Jagatsingha after he has been taken prisoner by her

father, and her unrequited love for the hero, along with her beauty, wins the reader's sympathy. Following the trend established first in the description of Tilōttamā and then of Bimalā, Bankim addresses the reader after seemingly forgetting him in the heat of narrative's action. He then displays his mastery of *slesha*, as he plays upon the idea of painting a picture of Āyeshā for the reader. If he were an artist, Bankim says, he would take up a brush at this point and paint her complexion, outline her forehead, her ears, her mass of beautifully parted black hair, draw her eyes and her lips. However, as one reads the passage, one begins to note the insertion of the verb "I would write" (*likhitām*) for the verb "I would paint" (*ānkitām*). The construction "If only I could write her dark, silken hair" ("Jadi temani kālō reśamer mata keśguli likhite pāritām") plays with the reader's expectation; the writer is writing a picture, but with the exception of this one verb, using the verbs associated with the act of painting an image.<sup>149</sup> By the end of the passage, the only verb used is "I would write" but the construction is still that of "I would paint." The word play Bankim effects relies on the reader noticing the syntactical incongruity only upon a careful perusal of the passage, but humouring the author nonetheless as he conflates the two verb forms and paints a word picture. The elaborate pun culminates in the author's somewhat perplexing confession; having described her incomparable beauty, he says, "if I could write it [the extent of her beauty] all, even then I would not touch the paintbrush" ("Jadi sakali likhite pāritām, tathāpi tuli sparśa karitām nā").<sup>150</sup> Such is the force of Āyeshā's beauty, that any effort to capture it in words or lines is in vain, and yet this false modesty merely serves to intensify the exquisiteness of the prose that, despite

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<sup>149</sup> *Durgeśnandinī*, chap. 1, translation mine

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid*

the syntactical confusion, evokes the *śṛṅgāra rasa*. If Āyeshā's beauty is worth the reader's attention, the allure of Bankim's prose is a formidable competitor; the latter might ostensibly serve as the vehicle for evoking the sentiment for the former, but in its beauty, it is as much an object of the *rasa* as Āyeshā herself.

The audience for all three moments when the *śṛṅgāra rasa* is evoked through a description of feminine beauty is Bankim's reliable *pāthak*. It is as though at these moments, the narrative takes on the aspects of a dramatic performance, as the author invites the *pāthak* to direct his attention to the performer on stage, and marvel both at her beauty and at the perfection of the composer's craft. As with the portrayal of Āyeshā, with the reader too Bankim plays on the verbs; he calls on all of the reader's senses, thus constructing reading as an act that transcends the restrictions of the medium, and becomes an act performed by the body and all its senses. The reader sees the words on the page, but he also imagines, hears, and tastes them, and the entire experience occurs with a conscious awareness of the *śṛṅgāra rasa*. Bimalā's description perfectly captures the centrality of *rasa* for the audience-like reader; she is not young, much like the *pāthak*, but age has not tarnished her beauty because her mind (*man*) brims with *rasa*. Bankim uses rhyming ideophones (*dhyanātmakśabda*) to further cement the equivalence between beauty (*rūp*) and *rasa*. Hence, Bimalā's body overflows (*dhalodhalo*) with beauty because her mind overflows (*talotalo*) with *rasa*. Age, for Bankim, only serves to make the *rasa* perfectly digestible, and the reader who is past his prime can attest to this.<sup>151</sup>

In many ways, this bodily experience of reading is alluded to by Victorian critics such as G.H. Lewes, for whom reading is a physical act governed by the temporal

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<sup>151</sup> *Durgesnandinī*, chap. 10, translation mine

rhythms of both the body of the reader as well as the sequence of words on the page. However, the argument presented is in favour of a mechanization of the reader’s body—so as to echo the mechanical aspects of Victorian England—not the visceral, organic experience espoused by the Bengali novelist. The physiological theory of Lewes further indicates an attempt to create theoretical tools exclusively for the novel, and not borrowed from older literary genres such as the epic and the lyric.<sup>152</sup> Bankim, on the other hand, emphasises the bodily appreciation of text to situate his novel in the tradition of older literary genres, to ensure that a reader accustomed to consuming narratives in the tradition of Sanskrit aesthetics does not feel out of place while reading *Durgeshnandinī*. In using culinary terms such as “*paripāk*” (digestion), and coupling them with ideophones evocative of vessels filled with liquid (*dhalodhalo*, *talotalo*), the novelist consciously asks the reader to model himself along the lines of the *sahṛdaya* (empathetic) audience who necessarily tastes the myriad flavours (*rasas*) of a work of art while consuming the text. Royona Mitra summarises the relationship between food and art perfectly, and while Mitra’s emphasis is on classical Indian dance forms, her reading can be extrapolated to cover a broad range of art forms, including *sahitya* or literature;

In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, *rasa* theory is theorised as a conceptual framework for the relationship between art (across multiple disciplines) and its reception. The word *rasa* in Sanskrit means juice, or the flavourful extract derived from ingesting a fruit or any kind of cuisine. In using the term *rasa* in the context of the reception of art, a parallel is thus evoked in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, between the consumption of food and the reception of art. The physical and emotional satisfaction that can be

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<sup>152</sup> Nicholas Dames, *Physiology of the Novel*, 9-12

derived from a flavourful meal is thus compared to the ‘aesthetic delight—a state of joy characterized by emotional plenitude’ that can accompany an immersive encounter with a piece of art.<sup>153</sup>

It is this “physical and emotional satisfaction” that Bankim’s reader derives while voyeuristically gazing on Bimalā, Tilōttamā, or Āyeshā, and the satisfaction is not in addition to the act of reading. Rather, the *pāthak* is like the audience of classical Sanskrit drama or classical Indian dance forms, because for both, the act of consuming the aesthetic object produces the sensory delight in the same way as that produced by the partaking of a “flavourful meal.” Thus the deliberate confusion of verbs attunes the invoked reader of the novel to the extent to which the theory of the *rasas* informs the text he is reading, and assures the reader that *Durgesnandinī* as a work of art follows conventions familiar to him; the organisation of the elements into a genre maybe new, but the elements themselves the reader knows well.

### III. The *Sahṛdaya Pāthak*

Equating the *pāthak* with the *sahṛdaya* audience of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* provides Bankim with one other advantage that calls for rethinking the charges laid against the genre as whole. The arguments accusing novels and novelists of corrupting readers by exposing them to narratives of lax moral standards is too well known to require restating in detail here. If there is one thing that the nineteenth century Bengali novel has in common with its Victorian—and later—counterpart, it is that both are thought to be harmful for the average reader. In the case of Catherine Morland from Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, the Gothic novel faces criticism for inspiring lurid imaginations; for

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<sup>153</sup> Akram Khan: *Dancing New Interculturalism*, 14

the heroine of the popular Bengali satire *Nobel Nāyikā* (*The Novel Heroine*), reading romances, such as Bankim's, compel her to become a social outcast, much to the chagrin of her husband and in-laws. These well-rehearsed accusations, however, are founded upon the novel's near fatal ability to thoroughly immerse the reader and compel her to identify with the characters she reads about, so much so that she is unable to tell reality from fiction. As the heroine of yet another Bengali satire, Miss Bino Bibi exemplifies, her reading of novels forces her to desire only heroes of romances, thus leading her to reject perfectly suitable grooms, whom she deems boring and devoid of passion.<sup>154</sup>

This criticism misses a trick—one that Bankim carefully incorporates in his novels by urging his reader to be a *sahrdaya pāthak*. J.L. Masson and M.V. Patwardhan remark on Abhinavgupta's 10<sup>th</sup> century commentary on the *Nātyaśāstra*, addressing in particular the relationship of the audience to the text;

The *sahrdaya* (sympathetic spectator) sympathises (*hrdayasamvada*) with the original character, and to a large degree he even identifies (*tanmayibhava*) with the situation depicted. But he does not identify completely; he retains a certain *aesthetic distance*, the name for which is *rasa*.<sup>155</sup>

The reader whom Bankim calls upon while describing Tilōttamā, Bimalā, and Āyeshā, sympathises with these characters, but at no point does he see himself in them; the novelist counts upon this critical distance when he asks this reader to compare the characters to lovers the reader has known. The *pāthak* is never urged to imagine *being* Tilōttamā, or even being in the same situation as her, but rather, he is asked to remember

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<sup>154</sup> *Miss Bino Bibi B.A.*

<sup>155</sup> Masson and Patwardhan, 76

the experience of loving someone like her in order to fully appreciate her as a character. In invoking the reader, Bankim returns again and again to the conventions of dramatic staging—the characters perform before the audience-like reader, unmindful of his presence, and the reader is acutely aware of seeing them at a distance from himself. The *pāthak* is connected to the action on the page/stage as though he occupies the same spacio-temporal location, but his aesthetic experience of the characters ensures that he never identifies fully with whom he sees before him.

Vijaya Subramani traces the roots of the *rasa* theory in the Vedantic tradition of Hindu philosophy which seeks to find a “balance between indiscriminate indulgence and self-starving asceticism” by urging the individual to enjoy without the desire for ownership.<sup>156</sup> She suggests that the audience who is truly *sahr̥daya* enjoys the aesthetic experience by being in harmony with the *rasas* or the emotions in common with universal humankind, instead of seeking ownership of that particular emotion through the aesthetic object. Thus in a text like Kalidasa’s *Śakuntalā*, the *sahr̥daya* audience is urged not to desire ownership of the erotic sentiment she experiences through the performance of the play, or seek to be in the same situation as the lovers so as to feel in reality the erotic. Rather, her experience of the aestheticized emotion relies upon her ability to perceive it as not belonging to anyone in particular; it is not the audience’s personal emotion, or that of the character, performer, or even the composer. It is the universal feeling of the erotic produced within the emotional space of the text which the audience shares with all others experiencing the aesthetic object. Watching King Dushmanta professing love to Śakuntalā allows the audience to experience what being madly in love feels like, without

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<sup>156</sup> “Rasa: Aesthetics of Belonging *Unbelongingly* in Theory and Practice,” 244

inducing the desire to own that feeling for herself; the experience is entirely aesthetic without moral or ethical consequences since the *sahṛdaya* audience is not tempted to follow in the characters' footsteps.<sup>157</sup> In this tradition, theatrical representations—and by extension all other artistic representations, including characters—are ephemeral, and “belong to none in particular.” According to Subramani, the audience “gather[s] to experience the representations and paraphernalia of the theatre in a mood of sharing but not possessing; [it] also does not take them to be lasting and real.”<sup>158</sup> This sense of detached enjoyment thus prevents the audience from fully identifying with the representation she encounters, and the understanding that what is being experienced is fleeting further distances her from uncritically emulating the aesthetic object.

The significance of this critical distance of the reader from the text becomes evident when one considers the range of fairly risqué subjects Bankim engages with in his novels. The presence of the *sahṛdaya pāthak* capable of deriving aesthetic pleasure from the situations represented on the page allows the author to introduce characters who prioritise desire over morality, become willing accomplices to seduction, and go against codes of social behaviour, without the fear of providing the reader with bad role models. At this juncture, I should emphasise that Bankim does not rely exclusively on his reader's willingness to be *sahṛdaya* to ensure that she does not suffer from the moral repercussions of his narratives. There is a didactic strain prominent in his novels that defies *rasa* aesthetics, and it becomes evident in the construction of Tilōttamā as the reader to be emulated, or of Kamal and Śrīścandra as the model of companionate

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<sup>157</sup> For a detailed analysis of the transcendence and aesthetic experience see Arindam Chakrabarti's “Play, Pleasure, Pain: Ownerless Emotions in Rasa-Aesthetics”

<sup>158</sup> Chakrabarti, “Play, Pleasure, Pain: Ownerless Emotions in Rasa-Aesthetics”

marriage in *Bishabr̥ksha*. As an author obsessed with the moral education of his readers,<sup>159</sup> Bankim can be accused of the sin of commission but not of omission. Yet the recurrence of the *śṛṅgāra rasa* in particular, in texts aimed at the conservative Bengali reader during an age when it was taboo for the wife to even meet her husband during the day, suggests that the reader is expected to maintain a certain distance from the situations and emotions depicted, a detachment which owes its origin to the *sahṛdaya* audience of classical Sanskrit aesthetics.

In a text such as *Bishabr̥ksha*, for example, Bankim chooses as his protagonist Kundanandinī, a woman who, compelled by fate and her own desires, falls in love with her benefactor, Nagendra. Their illicit relationship almost destroys Nagendra’s first marriage, when his wife Suryamukhi chooses to sacrifice herself for the sake of her husband’s happiness. The moral world appears to be inverted when the reader finds Suryamukhi destitute and on the verge of death while Kundanandinī, already widowed, becomes Nagendra’s second wife. While polygamy is still a fairly common practice among the landed gentry in nineteenth century Bengal, Kundanandinī’s story assumes a peculiarly scandalous edge because the reader is made privy to her uncontrolled desire for Nagendra while he is still *parpurush* (lit. someone else’s husband, but also carrying connotations of a person outside the inner chambers of the house). Even when Suryamukhi initially throws her out of the house—before inexplicably bringing her back in—the reader learns of her plan to return for a single glimpse of Nagendra, the wave of love (*pranaysrōt*) overcoming that of shame (*lajjasrōt*).<sup>160</sup> Yet despite this non-normative

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<sup>159</sup> Evident in essays on readers and practices of reading from chap. 2

<sup>160</sup> *Bishabr̥ksha*, chap 23, translation mine

admission of desire, Kundanandinī remains the novel's heroine and the subject of both pity and admiration. When Kundanandinī hears of Suryamukhi's apparent death, the reader—whom Bankim here addresses as *thakurāni* (a term used to address female elders, also suggestive of a social acquaintance)—is chastised for being gleeful at the death of a *satī* (co-wife), but the heroine mourns.<sup>161</sup> The narrative attains closure only when Kundanandinī consumes poison, thus leaving the legitimate couple to continue unhindered, but it still treats her with considerable poignancy while reinscribing the warmth of her passions; she dies as a virtuous wife, having gained both the love of Nagendra and the forgiveness of Suryamukhi.

The novel leaves little doubt as to which character sustains the reader's attention; Suryamukhi, the only other contender, physically disappears for a significant stretch of the narrative, while Kundanandinī, even at the height of her shame, remains a constant presence. She is the aesthetic object who evokes the *śṛṅgāra rasa* even when she first elicits an extramarital confession of love from Nagendra. The prose places her in a garden, and the beauty of her surroundings echoes her own as the *pāthak* is once again present to witness the blossoms caressing her body. Bankim reintroduces the *rasa* with the word *sundar* (beauty), but unlike *Durgesnandinī*, here Kundanandinī ascribes the quality to everyone but herself—she thinks everyone is *sundar* while she has no attractive qualities at all. The effect on the reader, however, is the opposite. The more she laments that Suryamukhi, Haramani, Biśu, Mukṭā, and all the members of the household, down to the conniving and morally destitute maid, Hīrā, are prettier than she is, the more the reader perceives her as the model of innocent yet doomed beauty.<sup>162</sup> Yet this beauty is

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid, chap 43

<sup>162</sup> *Bishabraksha*, chap 16, translation mine

also dangerous, as Kundanandinī's contemplation of death demonstrates. She has this initial chance to kill herself, thereby removing the threat posed by her allure, but as the narrator wonders at the close of the chapter, "why [doesn't] Kunda kill herself by drowning?" ("Kunda dubiyā marila nā ken?").<sup>163</sup>

Here I contend that despite peril of her beauty, Kundanandinī can safely live and thrive in the novel as the reader is shielded from emulating her self-destructive passion by her critical distance from the text. The reader derives pleasure and thrill from seeing Kundanandinī challenge fate and social customs, without becoming embroiled in the world of the novel. Her death at the moment she transgresses would preserve the moral universe but detract from the *rasa*, and so the narrative chooses instead to minimally contain the damage by suggesting she kill herself while emphasising her fragile beauty that is evocative of both desire and death. The reader feels what it is to give in to a forbidden love, but the experience of the *rasa* prevents her from identifying with Kundanandinī or desiring to be in the same situation as the novel's heroine. As the *sahṛdaya pāthikā* (the female reader), she recognises the *rasa*'s emphasis is not mimetic (*anukaran*) since it is impossible to imitate a character who has either lived in the past (especially for the reader of Bankim living in the twenty-first century) or is purely fictional (as is the case with most of Bankim's characters).<sup>164</sup>

#### IV. *Kathā, Ākhyāyikā*, and the Bengali Novel

If the texts read by Tilōttamā—in particular *Kādambarī* and *Vāsavadattā*—provide Bankim's reader with an aesthetic reference point, they also situate his novels

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid, chap 16

<sup>164</sup> Arindam Chakrabarti, "Play, Pleasure, Pain: Ownerless Emotions in Rasa-Aesthetics," 196

within the tradition of classical Sanskrit prose narratives. One of the earliest references the novelist makes to the genre of his narrative occurs in the third chapter of the first section of *Durges̄nandinī* while referring to the time period the novel is set in. He describes his novel as an *ākhyāyikā*, which is one of two available modes of Sanskrit prose narratives, the other being the *kathā*.<sup>165</sup> This choice of descriptor is significant as Bankim does not merely identify the text as a *kāhinī* or a story; he selects a specific genre, one which his reader would be more familiar with than the foreign form of the novel. In this, Bankim effects a departure from the existing Bengali prose texts—proto novelistic works such as *Hutam Pyancār Nakśā* (*Sketches by Hutam, the Owl*, 1863)—which do not adopt either *ākhyāyikā* or *kathā* as identifiers. The word “novel” itself becomes assimilated into the Bengali language soon after the publication of *Durges̄nandinī* and enters colloquial use to the extent that popular, cheap satires regularly refer to the ill-effects of reading “*nātak-nabel*” (“plays, novels”).<sup>166</sup> Yet Bankim persists in his use of the term *ākhyāyikā* in texts as late as *Ānandamath* (1882) and *Debi Chaudhurāni* (1884), assuming his readers’ familiarity with the form even when the novel as a genre and a term is well-established in Bengal.

To return, then, to *Kādambarī* and *Vāsavadattā* and the process of creating a literary lineage for the Bengali novel. However, before embarking on a reading of the two genres, it is worth looking briefly at the history of prose in the Sanskritic literary tradition, given the primacy of verse compositions and the wealth of commentary surrounding poetic texts. The record of Sanskrit prose is a contentious one, not least

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<sup>165</sup> *Durges̄nandinī*, chap 3, pp. 5

<sup>166</sup> *Nabhel Nāyikā Bā Śikkhita Bou* and *Miss Bino Bibi, B.A.* are only two such examples

because it is rarely accorded the literary merit associated with the more illustrious poetic tradition. As if to illustrate this divide between prose and poetry, and to discuss the value of prose despite its nature, Hrishikesh Bose begins his analysis of Sanskrit prose thus;

Sangskṛta sāhitya kabya balite kebal kabitāke bōjhaāy nā—kabitā o gadya  
ubhaykei bōjhāy. Bākyang rasātmakang kābyam—alamkāṛ-śāstrer ei sangāTi  
tāhār pramān. Kājei padya hauk, gadya hauk, rasōttīrna hailei tāhā kabya. Gadya-  
śailīr itihāser prasange tāi ekathā baliyā rākhā bhāla je swatrantra haileo ihā  
mūlata: kabya-śailī.

The word poetry in Sanskrit literature does not refer to poems alone, but rather to both poetic and prose compositions. The charming utterance (lit. containing *rasa*) is poetic—this rhetorical designation is proof of the above. Whether it be a poetic composition or a prose one, it is poetic if it has the intended flavour. Thus it is important to mention in the context of the history of the prose style, that while it exists as an independent form of composition, it is chiefly derived from the poetic style.<sup>167</sup>

Bose’s reading situates prose as an inferior art form, composed in the shadow of poetry, and in this he follows the accepted hierarchy in Sanskrit art; poetry is the repository of beauty or *alamkāṛ* and characterized by *rasa*. Yet the word *kāvya*—which can be broadly translated as poetic in a number of Indic languages, including the Bengali of the above quote—has a particular meaning in Sanskrit rhetoric, and examining its definitions and rhetorical use allows one a clearer insight into the ordering of prose and poetry.

According to the 1899 *Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English dictionary*, *kāvya* encompasses

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<sup>167</sup> *Kādambārī Ō Gadya-Sāhitye Śilpa-Bicār*, 1, translation mine

a range of meanings, from its verb form indicating, literally the work of a *kavi* or a poet, to the masculine plural of the noun “poem”, to the feminine singular of the noun “intelligence”, to the neuter gender (often plural) nouns “wisdom, intelligence, prophetic inspiration, higher power and art”<sup>168</sup>. It is also used as the binary to *itihās* or history when defined as “a poem, poetical composition with a coherent plot by a single author”<sup>169</sup>. As becomes evident from the definitions, *kāvya* is intimately related to poetic composition in particular, and art in general, while the opposition to history aligns *kāvya* with imagination.

This association of *kāvya* with such a broad denotative field appears almost counterintuitive to a speaker of modern Bengali, given the word having a set of fairly specific meanings in Bengali. If I may be permitted a brief digression, *kābya* (the Sanskrit “v” morphs into “b”) has an intrinsic colloquial association with the Bengali individual—every educated Bengali is thought to fancy themselves as a poet and write (inevitably bad) poetry. The act of composing poetry—or doing *kābya*, as the saying goes—defines the Bengali as being more invested in the arts and literature than confronting the real world. Or so goes the common belief.

This somewhat inauspicious opening introduces a well-versed hierarchy in Sanskrit literature—poetry, including dramatic forms, is the repository of *rasa*, and thus occupies the position of art, while prose, as the more mundane form of composition must strive to attain the poetic *rasa* and aspire towards art. The history of prose is dependent upon that of poetry not merely because the artistic features of prose are almost

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<sup>168</sup> Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English dictionary, 280

<sup>169</sup> Ibid, 280

exclusively derived from poetic compositions, but also because it is a history narrated through difference rather than identity. Sanskrit prose is initially described as the absence or limited use of verse, and consequently lacking the rhetorical sophistication of poetry, while its content is seen as a smaller subset of the subjects fit for poetic composition. Even in such classic texts as *Kādambarī* and *Vāsavadattā*, the prose is frequently interspersed with stanzas of verse which either indicate a break in the narrative or—and this is more often—express the more creative articulation of the *rasas*.

The reading of prose presented by Bose can be traced back to one of the most significant treatise on classical Sanskrit rhetoric, *Kāvyaalamkāra* (*The Ornaments of Poetry*) by the 7<sup>th</sup> century Kashmiri rhetorician, Bhāmaha. The work, divided into six parts, comprises a total of 400 *ślokās* or verses, and the very first part of the work addresses *kāvya* or poetry and its variations based on structure, subject matter, and the manner of composition. For Bhāmaha, the word *kāvya* is the combination of word and meaning, and can be composed as verse or prose.<sup>170</sup> He further divides prose into two categories, the *ākhyāyikā* and the *kathā*, thus beginning a debate which is later taken up by such prominent theorists in ancient India such as Dandin, Lollata, and Rudrata. The *ākhyāyikā*, according to Bhāmaha, incorporates historical material and is generally a longer composition, while the *kathā* is a product of the composer's imagination alone and thus limited in both length and scope. That the *ākhyāyikā* occupies a slightly higher position becomes further evident from the following set of attributes, which Sushil Kumar De compiles in his 1924 essay on these two Sanskrit prose genres. As De notes;

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<sup>170</sup> *Kāvyaalamkāra*, 6

[T]he *ākhyāyikā* is a literary composition (1) which is written in prose in words pleasing to the ear (*śravya*) and agreeable to the matter intended (*prakṛtanukula*); (2) but which may contain metrical pieces in *vaktra* and *apavaktra* metre, the object of these verses being to give a timely indication of the future happenings in the story; (3) which should have an exalted substance (*udattartha*) with some characteristics supplied by the poet's imagination as a special mark, and having for its theme the abduction of a girl (*kanya-harana*), a fight (*samgrama*), a separation (*vipralambha*), and the (final) triumph (*udaya*), apparently of the hero; in which an account of his own deeds is given by the hero himself; (5) in which the story is divided into several pauses called *ucchvasas*. In the *kathā*, on the other hand, there are no *vaktra* or *apavaktra* verses, no division into *ucchvasas*; and the story should not be narrated by the hero, but by someone else. It may be written in Sanskrit or Apabhramsa [all languages other than Sanskrit], which indicates by implication that the *ākhyāyikā* should always be composed in Sanskrit.<sup>171</sup>

The distinctions mentioned here are not adhered to by later writers, and it becomes common practice to assume that both the *ākhyāyikā* and the *kathā* are fairly similar in nature, and refer to the class of fictional prose narratives in Sanskrit. The lengthy quotation is useful nonetheless as a summary of the characteristic features of these two genres, and provides a schematic view of the codes on which Bankim later bases his novels. Most commentaries on *Kādambarī* and *Vāsavadattā* as prototypes of the prose narrative agree that the tenor of these works is primarily dictated by their central theme—*kanyālābha* (winning of the maiden) or *kanyāharana*, which gives “free scope to the

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<sup>171</sup> “The Ākhyāyikā and the Kathā in Classical Sanskrit,” 507-508

delineation of the amorous sentiment” (*śṛṅgāra rasa*).<sup>172</sup><sup>173</sup> This furthers the idea that (despite the association of the *ākhyāyikā* with history) the prose texts are fundamentally inventions of the composer, and can be read as early examples of romantic fiction in the Sanskrit canon. The final triumph (*udaya*) marks the victory of love as much as it does of the hero with the removal of the cause of separation (*vipralambha* or *biraha*) and the union (*milan*) of the lovers. The emphasis on the *śṛṅgāra rasa* is encoded in particular for the *kathā* when later theorists such as Rudrata and Vishwanatha insist on *sarasa vastu* (subject matter imbued with *rasa*, but also implying a contrast between the flavour of fiction and the dryness of historical accounts) as substance fit for the form.

The difficulties of applying the tenets of classical Sanskrit poetics to a set of texts written in nineteenth century Bengal are obvious, not least of all given that the Sanskrit theorists assume both prose and verse compositions to be initially oral. This transition from orality is perhaps most evident in the absence of *ucchvāsas* or pauses for breath in the novels; the narrator has the comfort of the written word and needs no longer trouble himself with recitation. Bankim also follows later conventions in conflating some of the distinctions, choosing to focus more on the *rasa* of the *kathā* while still retaining the historical allusions of the *ākhyāyikā*, thus modifying the genres to suit his treatment of historical romantic fiction. Given the difference in stress between Bengali and Sanskrit as languages, the metres are also different, and neither the *vaktra* nor the *apavaktra* metres occur in Bankim’s texts. However, despite the difference in metre, most of Bankim’s novels do follow Bhāmaha’s dictates in using verse to foreshadow future events in the

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<sup>172</sup> Rudrata’s version of the *Kāvyaalamkāra* replaces *kanyāharana* (abduction of a maiden) with the less valorous *kanyālābha* (winning of the girl), but the emphasis on the hero acquiring his beloved remains.

<sup>173</sup> “The Ākhyāyikā and the Kathā in Classical Sanskrit,” 516

narrative, with the most notable example being *Bishabr̥ksha*. As mentioned in the previous section, the subject matter is peculiarly thorny for a conservative Bengali audience, and the novelist resorts to preparing his reader through sections of verse. I wish to focus in particular on two such instances when Bankim presents one of the characters in disguise whose songs cue the reader—and all other characters except the naïve Kundanandinī—to what is about to happen. Debendra, the narrative’s black-hearted villain, intent on seducing and ruining innocent beautiful women, particularly Kundanandinī, gains access to the inner chambers or *antarmahal* of the house she lives in by disguising himself as a *baishnabi* (a female mendicant, usually followers of the god Vishnu, and often noted for their singing talent). He introduces himself as Haridāsi and offers to sing and entertain the women of the household. Harisdāsi ignores all requests and pointedly asks Kundanandinī what she would like to hear, thus ensuring the audience (and the reader) know who the song really is for. He sings a *kirtan* (semi-religious songs about Rādhā and Kṛ̥shna’s love), and the following lines foretell the crisis about to occur;

Tumi jadi nā cāō fire,  
Tabe jāba sei Jamunātīre,  
Bhāngbō bāNśī tejbō prān,  
Ei belā tōr bhānguk mān.  
Unless you look at me again,  
I’ll go off to the shore of the Yamuna,  
I’ll break my flute, give up my life,  
Let your vanity go now.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> *Bishabr̥ksha*, 217, translation mine

Debendra turns Kundanandinī into Rādhā, while he assumes the voice of Kṛṣṇa, and implores her to look at him again—she has already refused to meet him—and threatens to kill himself if she continues to be set in her defiance. The sentiment is an oft-repeated one in *kirtans*, and in itself not particularly notable. In the context of the narrative, however, it presages the future; even when physically threatened, Kundanandinī stands her ground and rejects Debendra’s advances. He ultimately dies of liver cirrhosis, driven to excess by his failure to conquer her. The song applies not merely to Debendra and his fate; it encodes the future of Kundanandinī’s story with Nagendra as well. The roles are reversed, and Kundanandinī is now the one professing love to the sometime reluctant Nagendra, but like Debendra, she too must die so as to pay for her forbidden love.

A few pages later, Haridāsi Baishnabi reappears, this time with an even more lurid song. If she restrains the phallic symbolism to the flute in the previous song, she shows no such decorum when she entertains Kundanandinī, Suryamukhi, and Kamal with a song of dying of a thorn’s prick yet not giving up on the honey the flower offers. Again, all but Kundanandinī hear the message and leave, but she remains, distracted. Yet she is not the only object of this song, which appears at the start of a chapter titled “Hīrā.” As the archetypal fallen woman, Hīrā’s purpose in the novel is to help lure Kundanandinī into Debendra’s trap and satisfy his sexual appetite in the interval. Following the fate of her *bābu* (a versatile word, here describing the man Heera is a mistress to), and that of Kundanandinī, she too willingly defies good sense and chooses ephemeral physical pleasure at the risk of social condemnation. The narrative secures its moral high ground by first effacing Hīrā from public memory—she leaves the village, and people gradually forget her name—and then turning her insane, so much so that even Debendra, a man she

had loved, fails to recognize her on his deathbed. The play on death and dying, so carefully coded in Haridāshi's song comes violently true for all three characters who either sing, hear or facilitate the songs.

The technique of encoding future events in verse is not exclusive to the tradition of Sanskrit prose, but in this context, it allows one to understand the repeated intrusion of verse in Bankim's otherwise emphasis on prose. In almost all his novels, he includes verse stanzas—in a range of metres—and they predominantly serve the same function as in *Bishabr̥ksha*. If one further takes into account the requirement that the verse additions reflect the tenor of the section which they either begin or are a part of,<sup>175</sup> their utility in helping establish the dominant *rasa* of the narrative becomes evident. To continue with the above examples, both songs are explicit articulations of the erotic sentiment, to the extent that the nineteenth century reader would possibly have considered the second one fairly vulgar. As a result, they serve to reinforce the emotion that has already been invoked for the reader through the heightened descriptions of female beauty and love. In *Durgeśnandinī*, Bankim utilises the descriptions of the female characters to highlight the *śṛṅgāra rasa*; in *Bishabr̥ksha*, a more mature novelist reintroduces the *rasa* through the subtle use of predictive verse.

Perhaps the most famous example of verse in Bankim's novels is from his last work, *Ānandamath*. “*Bande Mātaram*” (“I bow to thee, Motherland”) has acquired a life independent of the novel chiefly because of its association with Indian nationalism. It is first sung at the 1896 meeting of the Indian National Congress, two years after Bankim's death, and following the Indian Independence in 1947, the song becomes the country's

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<sup>175</sup> De, “The Ākhyāyikā and the Kathā in Classical Sanskrit,” 512

national song (not to be confused with the national anthem, which is Rabindranath’s “*Jana Gana Mana*”). In part, “*Bande Mātaram*” owes its popularity to the role played by the novel in creating the image of the nation as the motherland demanding service from its seventy million children (“*saptakōTikanTha*”).<sup>176</sup> The song lies at the heart of the narrative as a prayer to the motherland who is *dharma* (faith, purpose) and *marma* (meaning), foreshadowing the guerrilla war waged by the Hindu *Santan* (lit. children, referring to men who fashion themselves as the *Sanyasis* or the ascetics) against both the British and the Muslim rulers of Bengal. Set against the 1771 Bengal famine, the narrative follows Mahendra and Kalyāni as they try and survive in a land destroyed by hunger and consequent rebellions. They are given shelter by the *Sanyasis* who show them the vision of the motherland as she was (glorious, fertile, like the goddess Jagaddhātī), as she is (denuded, dark, like the goddess Kālī), and as she will be (renewed, golden, like the goddess Durgā). The narrative culminates in a battle between the *Sanyasis* and the British, as the former attack a fort, and despite all odds, win their first victory against the *rājā* (king, ruler).

The importance of *Ānandamath* to the project of Indian nationalism, and as an example of Bankim’s brand of revolutionary politics is well documented. What is of interest here is the language of “*Bande Mātaram*” and the window it provides to the novelist’s linguistic rebellion. Similar to the verses used in *Bishabr̥ksha*, “*Bande Mātaram*” too establishes the dominant *rasa*, which here I would argue is both the *vira rasa* (heroic) as well as the *śānta rasa* (tranquil). By appearing at a key moment in the narrative—soon after Mahendra has been rescued by Bhabānanda, one of the *Sanyasi*

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<sup>176</sup> *Ānandamath*, pp 663, translation mine

leaders, close to the start of the novel—the verses inform the reader of the actions to follow and the ultimate victory of the *Sanyasis* in establishing a glorious motherland. The language Bankim uses for the song is a distillation of the Sanskritised Bengali he employs in his prose, and is emblematic of the *bankimī* style in its infusion of the two languages. The verse, like the prose, uses language intended to be pleasing to the ear and fit for the subject (*prakrtanukula*), thus meeting the criteria established by Bhāmaha and others for the *ākhyāyikā* and the *kathā*. This language, however, appears to be particularly impenetrable for a modern Bengali reader as it practically disappears from literature after his death, and also because it requires at least a passing familiarity with Sanskrit which, again, for this modern reader, is an academic skill not easily acquired. Take for example the first few lines of the verse;

Bande mātaram

Sujalāng sufalāng

Malayajaśītalāng

Śaśyaśyāmalāng

Mātaram

Mother I bow to thee!

Rich with thy hurrying streams,

Bright with orchard gleams,

Cool with thy winds of delight,

Dark Fields waving Mother of might,

Mother free.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> *Ānandamath*, pp 663, trans. Aurobindo Ghose

The script is Bengali, as is roughly the syntactical structure, but the words Bankim uses are Sanskrit. To emphasise this distinction, most editions of the novel either use the diacritic mark *hashanta* after the final “m” in “*mataram*” (which represents a consonant sound without an inherent vowel, an infrequent construction in Bengali) or replace the “m” with “ng”, thus creating a nasal sound. Both forms are common in Sanskrit but rare in Bengali, and would appear to the reader as somewhat striking. The rest of the words in the segment quoted above—“*sujalāṅ sufalāṅ malayajaśītalāṅ śaśyaśyāmalāṅ*”—are distinctly Sanskrit in form, both in terms of the “ng” endings as well as the compound words, yet comprehensible in Bengali. A pattern begins to emerge in this song which is present in all of Bankim’s Bengali works. The language uses the Sanskrit style of compounding words (*samās*), often resulting in entire phrases being constructed as single word units. Bankim is almost unique in this practice and most of his contemporaries either rely on a form of Bengali mimicking the English grammar,<sup>178</sup> or write in the popular form of the language, which often incorporates the vulgar.<sup>179</sup> This technique of using *dīrgha samās* or long compound phrases has been long accepted in Sanskrit compositions, and indeed various regional styles are identified by their propensity for compound words and *sandhi* (euphonic combinations).

The story that the scholar of modern Bengali literature has inherited positions the language of “*Bande Mātaram*”, and by implication that of the novels, as innovative yet anomalous since it forms merely one stage in the teleological progress of Bengali literature. In this story, the pre- or early modern literary traditions are present in order to

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<sup>178</sup> *Ālāler Gharer Dulāl*

<sup>179</sup> *Hutam Pyāncār Nakśā*

provide a point of origin and of difference, and their relationship to the modern are obscured; Bankim is certainly a product of these traditions, so the tale goes, but his experiments are unique because they look to the future, severing ties with the past.<sup>180</sup> Yet the *bankimī* style has a long history in early modern Bengali literature, and in many ways, Bankim is merely its best known, and perhaps final, practitioner. I should qualify, best known to all but scholars of Bengali literature today since his predecessors are formidable authors in their own right. Of these, the nineteenth century Bengali reader would have been familiar with, if not a competent reader of, authors such as Bharatchandra Ray, Rama Prasad, and Ishwar Gupta.<sup>181</sup> For such an audience, Bankim's style of writing in Sanskritised Bengali would have produced the linguistic pleasure Bhāmaha advises even though they occupy a world in which Sanskrit has become "so high that it has already become inaccessible."<sup>182</sup> As both Sudipta Kaviraj and Sheldon Pollock note, Sanskrit literacy is firmly on the decline in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and as a result, the language is insufficiently and inappropriately used. However, their reading suggests by implication that the average Bengali reader of Bankim at this moment in time would be comfortable enough with Sanskrit to be able to comprehend it when mixed with Bengali. Kaviraj's analogy using Bollywood cinema is a useful conceptual tool;

In contemporary India, for example, there is a functional Bombay-based Hindi that is easily *understandable* to people in most parts of the country where these

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<sup>180</sup> Kaviraj, "Two Histories of Literary Culture in Bengal," 510

<sup>181</sup> For a detailed analysis of the relationship between Bengali, Sanskrit, and Prakrit see Dinesh Chandra Sen's *History of Bengali Language and Literature*

<sup>182</sup> Kaviraj, "The Sudden Death of Sanskrit Knowledge," 119-120

vernaculars are spoken (demonstrated with incontrovertible certainty by the vast popularity of Hindi films). However, more stylized and purified forms of Hindi and Hindustani used by native speakers of the language, which have greater overlap with Sanskrit or Persianized Urdu, are not as easily intelligible to others.<sup>183</sup>

An analogous situation occurs in Bengal, Kaviraj continues, with the *mangalkāvya*s (approximately from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries) in which Bengali not only shares words and meanings with Sanskrit, but also “in the more complex registers of *alamkārik* forms, iconic images, and the structure of *rasas* evoked.”<sup>184</sup> The resultant texts are comprehensible to the audiences of the region—as Kaviraj notes, this is territorially diverse as well, including Mithila, Orissa, and Manipur—without the need for the knowledge of high Sanskrit. One of the texts Tilōttamā reads in *Durgesnandinī*, Jayadeva’s *Gītagōvinda*, is a perfect example of this comprehensible form of Sanskrit as the following lines demonstrate;

*Lalitā-lavanga-latā-parisilana-kōmala-malaya-samire*

*Madhukara-nikara-karambita-kōkilā-kujita-kunja-kutire*<sup>185</sup>

The language Jayadeva uses is Sanskrit, but the lines can be read in Bengali as each word is *tatsama* or identical in meaning in both languages. A reader of Bengali would read the last four words “*kōkila-kujita-kunja-kutire*” (“the cuckoo sang in the hut in the garden”)

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<sup>183</sup> Kaviraj, “Two Literary Culture Histories in Bengal,” 511

<sup>184</sup> Ibid, 512

<sup>185</sup> As qtd. in Kaviraj

as Bengali, thus making the language of the poem ambiguous. Compare this to a few more lines of “*Bande Mataram*”;

SaptakōTīkanThakalakalaninādakarāle

DwisaptakōTībhūjairdhr̥takhara-karabāle

Seven million voices in unison

Twice seven million hands bearing arms<sup>186</sup>

In syntactical form, the lines appear to be in Sanskrit, yet the language is clearly Bengali. Each component of the compound is a Bengali word that is either *tatsama* or *tadbhāva* (derived from Sanskrit). The alliterative sound in the segment is “k”, and Bankim is able to play with it because of the alliterative effect created in the previous segment (“*sujalāṅg sufalāṅg malayajaśītalāṅg*”). In that, the rhyme is based on Bengali using a single “sh” sound for both *s* and *ś*, even though the words are Sanskrit, and would not rhyme if pronounced in that language. The linguistic play here draws on the literary culture that exists among the Bengali speaking audience who inhabit the junction of both these languages and is able to appreciate Bankim’s texts for their continuance of this tradition.

The linguistic gymnastics is not limited to Sanskrit either, as becomes evident from the numerous verses in a passable imitation of Maithili. The style attains its height of popularity in modern Bengali literature with Tagore’s *Bhānu Singher Padābali* in which he imitates the style of Vidyāpati and composes a series of songs in Brajabuli (the language of Braja). Here I refer to an example also drawn from *Ānandamath*. At the moment when Shanti, the wife of another *Sanyasi*, Jibānanand, decides to abandon the few available domestic comforts and follow in her husband’s footsteps, she sings

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<sup>186</sup> *Anandamath*, 663, translation mine

“Samare calinu āmi hāme nā firāō re” (“I go to war, do not refuse me”)<sup>187</sup>. The line, while comprehensible in Bengali, uses both *ami* and *hame* to refer to the singer; both words mean “I” or “me”, and while *ami* is in Bengali, *hame* is in Brajabuli.

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<sup>187</sup> *Ānandamath*, 685, translation mine

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Thakorelal Desai, writing in the 1919 issue of the *Calcutta Review* argues for the consumption of prose fiction given that “in a big country like India, with its immense diversity of race, religion, common habits, language, politics, where innumerable artificial and natural barriers exist between man and man, a more effective means for the spread of common culture and common sympathy than popularising the study of fiction cannot be imagined.”<sup>188</sup> If the Indian novel, both in English and the vernaculars, becomes universally legible to all Indian readers so much so that it serves as the vehicle for the “spread of common culture,” then there is little to suggest such an outcome as inevitable at the moment of its inception. As this study of the Bengali iteration of the Indian novel demonstrates, the genre and its reader have a number of paths to choose from, some of which are not only language and region-specific but constructed by actively excluding sections making up the “immense diversity of race, religion, common habits, language, politics.” The Bengali novels by Bankim between 1865 and 1894 are intensely local in their preoccupations, and it is only when they begin to form archives of reading with the specific goal of imagining a nation and its subject that these preoccupations are universalised and read in the interest of creating a common bond among Indians.

This dissertation is interested in a fairly brief span of colonial history during which a great degree of fluidity exists both in the production and consumption of a form that goes on to become best known for its English language texts. The nineteenth century Bengali novel is premised on a rejection of the English language novel by the same

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<sup>188</sup> Desai, as qtd in Priya Joshi, *In Another Country*, 136

readers who enthusiastically embrace the former. Bankim's first novel, *Rajmohan's Wife* published in 1864, one year before *Durgeshnandini* is largely forgotten by all but Bankim scholars, and even when his readers compare his first Bengali work to *Ivanhoe*, there is no evidence to suggest they even draw on *Rajmohan's Wife* to support their claim that Bankim is indeed trying to imitate the British form. If one assumes the English language novel to be the end goal, as Desai and some contemporary postcolonial scholars do, then this thirty-year period is part of the teleological progression of both the Bengali novel and its reader towards becoming their English language counterparts. However, my contention is that this progression is neither inevitable nor the dominant path at the height of Bankim's popularity. The Sanskritist reading practice aligning the genre with classical Sanskrit literary traditions clearly resonates with readers who still inhabit these traditions as part of their present. That this does ultimately give way to the Anglicist practice bears testimony to the pervasive and violent nature of colonial rule and the degree to which its ideologies infiltrate and inform native practices. Even the Bengali language falls prey to this pressure to proclaim its radical break from all that is non-Western, as Bankim's use of the *dīrgha samās* (long compound words) and *śabdalamkāṛ* (verbal ornaments) is replaced by the more direct, clipped prose of Tagore and later novelists such as Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, Leela Majumdar, and Tarashankar Bandopadhyay.

While this dissertation traces the formation of the Bengali novel reader in the nineteenth century, and pays particular attention to linguistic, pedagogical, and generic themes, it does consciously bracket the questions of gender and religion. I am aware that there is a rich body of scholarship that looks specifically at the pedagogical policies for women in general, and female readers of novels in particular, and that *strī śikkhā* or

educating the woman is an integral part of the non-novelistic discourse surrounding the production and consumption of novels such as *Bishabr̥ksha* and *Debi Caudhurānī* (1884). However, the arguments that I make, particularly with reference to the Sanskritist reading practice, are applicable equally to readers of both genders as they are based not merely on being formally trained in these practices but rather as drawing on their lived experiences in order to perform them. The question of religion is one that I acknowledge as being outside the scope of this dissertation, and one that I hope to pursue further. In my preliminary research of the various archival sites, including the National Library of India in Calcutta and the Uttarpara Jaykrishna Public Library, I was able to locate periodicals devoted to the literary habits of nineteenth century Muslim Bengalis. As Sukumar Sen notes in his work *Islāmi Bānglā Sāhitya (Islamic Bengali Literature, 1951)*, this incredibly diverse body of literature draws its inspiration from, and responds to, concerns and texts deliberately ignored by caste Hindu novelists such as Bankim. Thus their practices of reading can be traced to the “Mussulmani Bangla” language which has more clearly articulated affinities with Perso-Arabic forms than the high Sanskrit of Bankim’s Bengali. From my admittedly superficial perusal of these texts, I was able to identify the recurrence of certain Perso-Arabic narrative traditions such as *Yusufjuleikhār puthi* (Calcutta, Kaderia Press, 1874) and Azim-al-din’s *Jāmāl-nāmār puthi* (1859), and also to note that some of these texts are referenced by Tagore in his essay “Bankimchandra” as he effects a series of cleavages, distancing Bankim’s novels from existing Bengali literature. This body of literature is particularly instructive to understanding Bankim’s own very conflicted, and often aggressive, relation with Islam and Islamic rule in pre-colonial Bengal, and would be a productive area for further research.

The primary claim I make for revisiting an area of scholarship as incredibly overworked as the nineteenth century Bengali novel is the lack of attention existing scholarship has paid to the formation of the novel reader, in particular through the medium of Bankim's novels. With Bankim's novels, the literate Bengali must contend with texts lacking the morally acceptable narratives of earlier novelistic ventures<sup>189</sup>, or the descriptive thrust of social commentaries<sup>190</sup>. Who the reader is, how he/she performs the act of reading, and how well established this reader's existence is in various social strata, become questions having a real import on the life of Bengalis gradually adjusting to the world of colonial modernity. The novel form is by turns celebrated and denigrated for exposing Bengalis to modern/western values because most commentators take fairly seriously the novel's ability to train its readers in particular ways of thinking. Novels such as *Durgēśnandinī* and *Bishabr̥ksha*, with their focus on creating and training the modern Bengali reader, are surrounded by critical discussions of and satirical responses to this emergent reader. Such unanimity of interest across such a broad range of genres suggests that the reader of the novel is determined by the social, material, and political conditions in which the novels are produced, and can be traced to this particular period of Bengali literary history during which the interest becomes most evident.

Bankim's novels and essays have traditionally been perceived as literary spaces engaged in the cultivation of a national identity for the Bengali *jāti* or race. Historians such as Sudipta Kaviraj and Tanika Sarkar suggest that Bankim creates both a national space and a subject well suited to occupy this new nation, through the imaginative space

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<sup>189</sup> Such as Tekchand Thakur's *Ālāler Gharer Dulāl* (*The Spoilt Child*)

<sup>190</sup> Such as the anonymously composed *Hutam Pyancār Nakṣā* (*Sketches by Hutam, the Owl*)

of the novel and the literary essay. Scholars further this argument by reading Bankim's fiction as calling for a new, invigorated social order, capable of negotiating both traditional and modern modes of being in colonial Bengal. Tracing the formation of the reader, both in Bankim's novels and in his essays, helps understand how he imagines the national subject. It has often been noted that in novels such as *Ānandamath* and *Debi Caudhurānī* Bankim outlines the characteristics of the new subject, one suitable for constructing the new nation. The subject Bankim champions is rational, enlightened, and capable of moderating their emotions. She/he comprehends the benefits of heterosexual love and is capable of limiting their desires in the interest of a stable, monogamous family. Finally, this subject is capable of rousing the Bengali individual from the morass of effeminacy, lethargy, excess of emotions and a tendency towards blindly following tradition. Even a brief glance at Bankim's essays on reading and on literature reveals a startling similarity; the reader Bankim feels compelled to educate shares all the negative qualities of the Bengali race, and his ideal reader is the same as his ideal modern Bengali subject. It is not too much of a stretch to suggest that to understand Bankim's national subject, and his/her role in constructing a new nation, one needs to understand his conception of the reader, both within the world of the novel, and in the world in which the novel functions. The novel and its reader are not mere by-products of Bankim's national imaginary; rather they are the means to constructing the nation.

A secondariness has often been associated with the (post)colonial novel, and comparisons between this form and the British novel lead to enunciations of a historically conditioned lack. The tendency to read generic experiments in the postcolonial novel as part of the Postmodern turn furthers the image of a normative style of novel writing,

where the norm is instituted by the erstwhile colonial centre. Yet this work suggests that while British colonial intervention may have introduced the novel to the colonies, it was not the dominant force that dictated how the colonial audience read the novel, and how the colonial reimagined the genre. The project engages with this questioning of the postcolonial novel's generic form, and suggests an alternative reading of its relationship with the British novel. The postcolonial novel operates within a productive space created by the tension between generic principles of the British novel, and this form's desire to fulfil the same. The genre that emerges is less belated and more an engagement with tensions foreign to the British novel. Examining the connections shared by readers, reading practices, and the novel provides the project with an opportunity to re-evaluate the genre of the postcolonial novel, and approach it neither as an allegorical form passively reflecting anticolonial ideologies, nor as just another cultural artefact among others. As the texts by Bankim suggest, the novel can instead be understood to actively create a reading public and instruct it on how to read the text, and in the process, be created as a form distinct from the British novel.

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