CHAPTER-2
SUBVERTING COLONY THROUGH POETIC SYMBOL

Born on 25 January, 1824, in Sagardari, a village in the district of Jashohar (now in Bangladesh). Madhusudan was the only child to Jahnabi Devee and Rajnarayan Datta. Before coming to Calcutta, Madhusudan studied in the village school. At the age of thirteen, his father took him to his Khidirpur house in Calcutta. After a short period of study in a local school, he was admitted into the Hindu College. This educational institution was in fact the centre of the then Bengal awakening. It was here that Madhusudan felt an expansion of the qualities latent or already implanted in him. From ninth standard onwards, he started expressing his poetical ideas. His poems were published, in various periodicals of Calcutta.

The company and encouragement of Richardson, the then Principal of the Hindu College, gave young Madhusudan the required impetus towards pursuit of excellence in the field of literature and language. At the same time, there was Derozio whose influence transformed many into liberal thinkers and even into patriots. Madhusudan also came indirectly under his influential teachings of open- and even-mindedness. Thus, the atmosphere of his college, more than his parentage or the natural beauties of Sagardari, shaped and nourished his thinking. His friend circle too was a galaxy of bright youths like Raj Narain Bose, Gour Dass Bysack, Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, Pyaricharan Sarkar, etc. But time proved him to be the Jupiter among them. not only academically but in imbibing the spirit of freedom and awakening.
Michael Madhusudan Datta: a symbol of awakening and rediscovery of self in the colonial yoke

Michael Madhusudan Datta was both the scion and symbol of Bengal awakening in the nineteenth century. He, however, grew up to a more heightened stature. He was, in fact, the truest symbol of awakening to his generation as well as a symbol of rediscovery of self in the colonial yoke. Through his life, and more than that through his letters and works of literature, he exuded that beaming essence of self-esteem which is the hallmark of all great individuals, nations, and creations. Wakefulness ran as it were, through bodily as well as everyday-nerves of his life and kept him ever awake to thousand myriads of possibilities that life and literature keep blinking to human beings every other moment.

Madhusudan – typically like nineteenth-century Bengali intellectuals – was suffused with a newly-lit consciousness-of-life that ever pulsated in him. This consciousness urged the man in him to break free from the shackles of worn-out socio-religious customs, to drink to the fullest the sweet nectar of life, and to incubate the thirst for world-wide acclaim. It became his unquenchable desire to earn laurels as a world-famous poet. Such soaring aspiration in a man who resided in a country beset with the constraints of British colonial subjugation, was indeed worthy of esteem and praise. This indomitable spirit for self sublimation and recognition made him a symbol of rediscovered free self.

His education at the Hindu College considerably shaped his thinking and personality. But then we would like to acknowledge that he was born to render great service to Bengali language and literature. We might even conclude that such poets are born to change courses of national literature, to enrich it with their poetical offerings, to set a new legacy in poetry and within it to reconstruct ancient tradition. And an epic poet’s imagination – capable as it is of evoking grand ideas, of fostering and assimilating sublimated and diverse thoughts – does not recognize
any stranglehold of boundaries: for the sake of expressing perceptions acquired from dynamic and ever-expanding experience, it is at will able to transform entirely even a conventional subject matter. All this is perfectly applicable to Madhusudan who was an epic poet of exceptional wisdom and brilliance.

The personality of Madhusudan is an example of the magical combination of inborn talent and inexhaustible knowledge which he continually expanded through his entire life. He did not require an infancy or boyhood of learning separately for assimilating new things of literature. His learning period was his period of creation, and the period continued almost all his life.

Details of Madhusudan’s Literary Works

Sisir Kumar Das has divided Madhusudan’s literary career into three distinct phases. The first phase is from 1842 to 1858: that is, starting from his days of pupillage in Calcutta, the first phase covers the years he lived in Madras and continues up to his return to Calcutta. In this phase English is the language of his literary practices. Captive Ladie (1849), Visions of the Past (1848), Rizia: Empress of Inde (1849), The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu (1854), Ratnavali (1858), etc. are his prominent works in the first phase.

Madhusudan, though not historically, is the first memorable bilingual Indian literary artist in modern time. Although he did have emotional attachment to his literary output of the first phase, he himself did not feel much esteem for those works. He did not think about compiling or reprinting them. Sisir Kumar Das points out that how even historians of Indian English literature have not attached much value or importance to those works; only this much they have conceded that those works constitute the first light of dawn in the history of Indian English literature [translation mine] (Introduction, Michael Madhusudan Datta. Nirbachita Rachana). If we put those English writings beside contemporary
Bengali writings by others, then it would become clear that in literary ideal and sensitivity Madhusudan’s English writings are quite independent.

Madhusudan, during his pupilage at the Hindu College, regularly published his poems in monthly and weekly periodicals of Calcutta such as “Bengal Spectator”, “Gyananweshan”. “Literary Gleaner”. “Calcutta Literary Gazette”. “Literary Blossom”. “Comet”, etc. D. L. Richardson, the Principal, Hindu College, arranged for Madhusudan’s poems to be published in the periodicals he edited.

Short lyrics such as “My Fond Sweet Blue-eyed Maid” (26 Mar. 1841). “They ask me why I fade and pine” (28 Mar. 1841). “The Fortunate Rainy Day” (29 Mar. 1841) reflect Madhusudan’s celebration of his own sensibility in relation to beauty – natural and maiden – and his romantic dissatisfaction of unattained beauty which lies ever beyond reach, and also his determination not to give up pursuit. A poem like “Evening in Saturn”, which is a sonnet in blank verse and with a preface, showcases Madhusudan’s originality in thinking in recasting old convention into novel form: it also marks his rebel nature which is not prepared to bow down before constraints of rigid rules. But, more importantly, it reveals Madhusudan’s poetic tendency to glorify what is conventionally treated as evil. To this English sonnet may be related the Bengali one. “Shani” (i.e. Saturn, a symbol of evil or ill-luck) which Madhusudan wrote some twenty years later. His “Extemporary Song” (1841) speaks of his lifelong dream of traversing seas for reaching England for quenching his thirst for recognition as a great poet. To this poem may be related another. “Oft like a sad imprisoned bird I sigh” (1842), a sonnet, which too sighs for ‘climes more bright and free’ than the poet’s native land which was then a subjugated colony of the British.

Besides the abovementioned, Madhusudan composed a good number of other sonnets portraying varied moods. A few of them may be mentioned: “Sonnet to Futurity” (19 Aug. 1842). “To a Star during a Cloudy Night”. “Composed
during a Morning Walk”. “Composed during an Evening Walk”. “I saw young Zephyr pass from flower to flower”. “I wandered forth alone”. “Night” (1842) which is a sequence of four sonnets whereof the fourth is incomplete, and some more without a title, of which one is dedicated to his friend and classmate Gour Dass Bysack.

Short lyrics like “The Parting”, “The Slave”, “Verses”, the untitled “I loved a maid…”. “The Heavenly Ball – A Fragment” (dedicated to Gour Dass). “Lines” (divided into four sections whereof the fourth is titled ‘After a Shower in the Evening’), “To a Lady”. “To another Lady”. “An Acrostic”. “On Hearing a Lady Sing”. “On a Faded Lily given to the Author by a Lady”. “Comest Thou as One in Beauty’s Ray”, etc. continually portray the young poet’s dissatisfaction of unattainment of the longed-for ideal of beauty and freedom and his passionate love for them; they project Madhusudan’s honesty and warmth in friendship (particularly those dedicated or addressed or related to his bosom friend Gour Dass); they, again, hint at his sensitive mind that felt frustrated at having to adjust to the undesirable and smudged existence of the colonized.

The poems are suffused with melody and lyricism, with nature in her exquisite beauty, with a bold poetic voice. – that, though at times despondent, strives to express the subtle and inexpressible.

“King Porus: A Legend of the Old” (1843) is a poem in six parts or long stanzas. In this poem of over 120 lines Madhusudan tried to recapture the historical battle fought by King Porus of Bharat and his army against Alexander the intruder and his army. The poem depicts in a Homeric manner the valour exhibited by the King even in defeat. It moans the sad loss of such heroism and valour from the heart of India which now stood enchained in slavery. Poems like this, one might say, served as the foreground for Madhusudan to consider the pathetic and exploited, sordid and soiled, condition of his motherland under
colonial rule and to prepare himself mentally and artistically for future subversion of colony through poetic symbol in the Meghangaadvadh.

One issue much discussed by Madhusudan’s contemporaries was his embracing Christianity. The poet had his own viewpoint in that, since he desired an easier passage to his dreamland, the ‘distant shore’ of ‘Albion’. What was interesting, from literary viewpoint, in that conversion was that Madhusudan, being a poet in every turn of thought, composed one “Hymn” (9 Feb. 1843), perhaps immediately before his baptism, to be sung during the ceremony.

One long poem needs mention here, which Madhusudan wrote during his stay in Calcutta and before he went to Madras: “The Upsori: A Story from Hindu Mythology”. The poem with much difficulty endeavours to relate a story. But, what makes the poem interesting is Madhusudan’s intermingling of two aspects of love, voluptuous and divine. Diction in the poem is illustrative of Madhusudan’s avid reading in European literature.

Many of Madhusudan’s English works are lost along with the periodicals wherein they were published, especially those published during his stay in Madras. Date of composition of many surviving works could not be properly retrieved.

While Madhusudan was living in Madras, he wrote a long poem in two cantos, the Captive Ladie (1849). The Captive Ladie was written, probably, immediately after Visions of the Past (1848). It was originally written and printed in 1848 for the columns of a local journal in Madras – the Madras Circulator and General Chronicle – as Madhusudan himself mentioned in the Preface to the book format published later. In the Preface, he gave the historical background of the plot. But the poem as a matter of fact does not wholly draw from history. Therefore, Madhusudan’s spinning of the tale Captive Ladie should be assessed as combining history with telltale and imagination. In the process we get a story that was created with elements of romantic love: and bold adventures including
escapades, intrusion, disguise, duping, elopement and marriage for the sake of that love: and also heroism and valour, patriotism, sacrifice, etc.

The first canto of the poem tells of the lovelorn princess’ desolate confinement in a well-guarded castle on an island amidst a wide sea. Prithviraj the lover came in the disguise of a ‘Bhat or Indian Troubadour’. Then, in the darkness of night, he took the captive princess with him and they escaped.

The second canto describes Muhammad Ghori’s attack on Delhi, downfall of Hastinapur (the capital), defeat of Prithviraj and then his suicide.

When Prithviraj with all his might stood against foreign aggression and warred valorously, it was as though Madhusudan’s creative effort to hallow and ennable a crippled race, a race under foreign siege.

In the Captive Ladie, Canto First, love and war for love – covert or open – is the motivating force for the hero, and also for the poetic progression of the tale. In Canto Second of the poem, love for nation and war in its defence is the motivating force. The two forces take the poem great distance toward success, in spite of its faults.

Just before the Captive Ladie, Madhusudan wrote another long poem: Visions of the Past (1848). It was published together with the Captive Ladie in 1849.

The poem should be given a special place among Madhusudan’s works for some reasons. It is the first long poem where blank verse is used. Secondly, its subject matter is wholly Christian, drawing from Genesis. Thirdly, it may be seen as a parallel with Milton’s Paradise Lost, though by no means of equal stature. Madhusudan’s reverence for Milton must have propelled him to using the subject matter and the verse type of his epic. In his mature work Meghnaadvadh, too.
Madhusudan used blank verse in Bengali, which he modeled on Milton’s blank verse.

There is not much of incidence, nor is there any effort at characterization in the Visions. Description sweeps every other aspect in all of the twelve stanzas of the poem.

The Visions of the Past reveals its Christian subject matter in the “Introductory Sonnet” itself. Kshetra Gupta opines, in the use of imagery, diction, phrases, mythological allusions, and similes and metaphors, a Christian air has been thoroughly maintained [translation mine] (48 – 49). In no other long poems of Madhusudan maintenance of the similar scale can be found. The Visions, thus, is a uniquely composed poem of Madhusudan.

Rizia: Empress of Inde (1849) is Madhusudan’s first successful three-act dramatic composition. He himself preferred to call it a ‘dramatic poem’ instead of drama. But, it has almost all qualities of a good play. There is dominance of dynamic action over static poetic eloquence there. Dramatic conflict – an element which Shakespeare always had under his artistic command, which makes a play thorough and taut – abounds Rizia and makes it vibrant and an artistic success.

The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu (1854) was originally delivered as a pro-Christian sermon to a dominantly Eurasian audience in Madras. It emerges as Madhusudan’s reading of the ambience of his times as a cultural problematic. The essay also expresses his endeavour as an English-bred artist to synthesize conceptually the Western and the Indian cultures and outlooks.

The essay at the outset focuses on queries of the then Hindu: ‘Who is this fair-haired stranger that has come to our shore?’; ‘who is this stranger that in the course of a solitary century reared among us a fabric of power the most wonderous and glorious?’; ‘Who is this stranger who has bound us, as it were, with chains of
adamant, and whose bright sword gleams before our eyes like a fiery meteor – terrifying us into submission and humbling us to the dust?"

The outcome or the resultant picture of this tremendous onslaught of such a ravaging career was at once a scene of undaunted victorious glory as well as of abject humiliation: ‘Behold him [the Anglo-Saxon] here, sceptred and crowned. – with his feet on the jeweled neck of fallen Hindustan!’

Madhusudan, then, strove to evoke a sympathetic look from the congregated Anglo-Saxon listeners before him toward the subjugated state of the Hindu, and exhorted the sons of the Anglo-Saxon to rejuvenate the Hindu

With The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu, Madhusudan’s first phase of literary career nearly draws to a close. After his return to Calcutta from Madras, he continued for some time to write his literary works in English. The interim period – between the English phase and the next – may be given the name of translation period or of preparatory period for the next phase wherein the language of creation becomes Bengali.

The tropical phase of Madhusudan’s literary life occurred when he had come back to Calcutta from Madras, translated Ramnarayan Tarkaratna’s Bengali play Ratnavali into English, and had found his first footing in the literary circle of Calcutta as a translator. Shortly after that he decided to write in Bengali. He wrote one play titled Sharmishtha. With this began the second phase of his literary life. But before fully getting settled in the second phase, he appeared once more as a translator, only this time the translator of his own play Sharmishtha.

In the end of his literary career, Madhusudan again translated, but no more from Bengali to English, as now the wheel had turned in the opposite direction. Once he translated from French to Bengali: La Fontaigne’s writings turned into moral fables. Another time he translated, from Greek to Bengali, a few cantos of
Homer’s *Iliad*. This incomplete prose composition titled “Hectorvadh”, is an illustrative example of Madhusudan’s prose writing, and is also probably the first Bengali version of Greek poetry.

The second phase of Madhusudan’s literary life spreads over only four years. Within these four years he wrote as many as five plays: *Sharmishtha* (1859), *Ekei Ki Bale Sabhyata* (1860), *Buro Shaliker Ghare Rno* (1860), *Padmavati* (1860), and *Krishnakumari* (1861); four works of poetry: the *Tilottamaasambhav* (1861), the *Meghanaadvadh* (1861), the *Vrajaanganaa* (1861), and the *Veeraanganaa* (1862). Calcutta is the place of residence in the second phase of his literary life.

The *Sharmishtha* followed Shakespearean school of drama. Besides being a five-act play with as many as thirteen scenes, it takes liberty, like most of the Shakespearean plays, with unities of time, place and action. There are not less than twenty-one characters in the play: Raja Yayati; Maadhavya; Mantri (minister); Shukracharya; Kapil; Bakasur; Daitya (demon); 1st citizen; 2nd citizen; 3rd citizen; senators [two are enough]; chopedaar (two); porter; Devajanee; Sharmishtha; Poornika [companion and confidante of Devajanee]; Devika [companion and confidante of Sharmishtha]; Natee (dancer); waitress.

The plot basically is a triangular love-and-conjugal melodrama among Yayati, the King of Pratishthanpuree. Devajanee, daughter of Shukracharya (the guru of demons), and princess Sharmishtha, daughter of the demon king who does not appear onstage but is referred to by Bakasur. The opening scene informs the reader of a quarrel between the princess and her contender. Devajanee: of her punishment with slavery under the daughter of the demon guru. The concluding scene resolves the discord finally as Sharmishtha is released from slavery and awarded the status of Yayati’s second wife, and crowns her with unquestionable glory. The scenes in between enact Devajanee’s love for Yayati and vice versa.
their marriage; Sharmishtha’s love for Yayati and vice versa; their secret gandharva marriage; revelation of the secret to Devajanee; Yayati cursed with palsy and ugly deformity of old age by Shukracharya; Devajanee’s remorse at her own vengefulness; the King’s miraculous cure through transfer of suffering to Puru, his youngest son by Sharmishtha, who is then blessed with the succession of his father’s throne.

Though Madhusudan set out with a mission to write a good play in Shakespearean lineage, his Sharmishtha could not possibly disentangle from the Sanskrit tradition fully. His unbridled indulgence in poetically charged passages at the cost of dramatic movement is evident even in the very second scene of the first act: Devika, Sharmishtha’s waiting maid and companion, poured out lucent images describing the verdant scene around filled with chirpings and colourful flowers.

If his Sharmishtha followed Shakespearean school of drama, the two farces, Ekei Ki Bale Sabhyata and Buro Shaliker Ghare Rno, which Madhusudan wrote just after the Sharmishtha, followed, perhaps, the French playwright Moliere’s.

Though Madhusudan never followed Ben Jonson’s theory or concept of humour, he had his personal and artistic sense for censure. Like Jonson, therefore, he tried to chastise the excessive, the faulty, the vicious, the vile, the wallowing, and the loathsome and punishable through the medium of his farces. In the first farce, Ekei Ki Bale Sabhyata, his target was unbridled and wanton ways of pleasure-hunt and excessive indulgence in drinking, feasting and revelry – in the name of enjoying freedom and becoming as liberal, advanced and prosperous as the Europeans –of English-bred urban youths of a modernising and Europeanising India. He may have had the uncouth manners, the excesses, of the so-called Young Bengal-s at the back of his mind while characterising in the play. In the second
According to Sisir Kumar Das, Madhusudan’s use of language in the two farces is a perfect imitation of colloquial dialects. His formation of dialogue clearly reflects the distinctive levels and various dialects of language used by a society that also is divided into various levels – rural and urban, man and woman, two different generations, educated and uneducated, people of many different professions, etc. He effortlessly threaded together mixtures of Bengali and English, English and Hindi, Bengali and Persian – and these introduce our real social identity. The social character of language, which is a sum total of the elements of profession, education, age, sex, milieu, etc., blossoms out beautifully in these two vibrant plays [translation mine] (Introduction, Michael Madhusudan Datta, *Nirbachita Rachana*).

After the two farces, Madhusudan moved back to tragicomedy and wrote the *Padmavati*. The play, which saw its first performance on 11th of December, 1865 at Pathuriaghata, is important for more than one reason. First, experimentally Madhusudan introduced in the play *amitrakshar chhanda* or blank verse in Bengali which he would apply extensively in the epic *Tilottamaasambhav* and then in the epic *Meghanaadvadh*. Second, he Indianised the Greek story of the judgement of Paris. Third, he drew a sustained parallel between the Ramayana story and his play.

The Dramatis Personae of the play show that a group of not less than fifteen male and eight female actors are required for a performance of the play. With male characters like Devarshi [the celestial messenger] Naarad, Kali [the era or *yuga* of Kali personified], and female characters like Shachi Devee [consort to Indra], Rati Devee [consort to Kamdev], Murajaa Devee [consort to Kuber], Rambhaa (apsaree) [a celestial beauty] etc. the Dramatis Personae reflect a storyline which
is largely permeated with celestial beings. However, the dramatist did not neglect “human interest” in the play. He weaved a plot that undulated with intervention of deities in the lives of human souls that had come in contact with deities or that had a deific origin.

In the second scene of the second act, we find Madhusudan’s first use of amitrakshar in his artistic career. Kanchukee, the old worker who maintained the royal seraglio, soliloquises in blank verse. Then, in Act IV, Sc I, Kali enters and soliloquises – in blank verse – about himself, his ways and activities, and also his motive behind his presence in Vidarbha Nagar. Again, Act IV, Sc II opens with Kali’s soliloquy in blank verse. When Shachi Devee and Murajaa Devee enter, they also converse with Kali in blank verse. In the final scene of the final act, Naarada eulogises King Indranil and Queen Padmavati in blank verse. The verse alludes to Yayati and Sharmishtha, the hero and heroine of Madhusudan’s first Bengali play and his first tragicomedy Sharmishtha, and wishes that Padmavati would find eternal fame, like Sharmishtha, the consort and beloved of Yayati the demon King.

The play ends with the same verse wishing as though for equal name and fame as enjoyed by its predecessor, the Sharmishtha, in the minds of Goudajan or the Bengali race.

One point needs to be noted: Madhusudan’s amitrakshar in the Padmavati is not yet the sonorous metre of the Meghanaadvadh. It was still in an experimental stage.

After the Padmavati, Madhusudan for the first time turned his attention to the tragic. The Krishnakumari, his first and most successful tragedy, was performed in 1867, almost six years from its publication in 1861.
Considering the nineteenth-century consciousness and sensibility of the native, it appears but natural that Madhusudan would be curious about the Rajpoots and feel desirous of writing a play on their patriotism and sacrifice. For his purpose he found James Tod’s *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan or the Central and Western Rajpoot states of India* to be a perfect source.

The *Krishnakumari* heaves its tragic import through gradual development of the plot which shows how misfortune befalls characters at every new turn of events, and how the dark thread of the tragic turns darker bit by bit.

The action of the play takes place in Jaypur and Udaypur. Acts I and IV, which are located in Jaypur, build up a kind of subplot as found in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. However, the subplot is not so well-connected to the main plot the way it is in Shakespeare’s play.

Madhusudan had to suffer the obvious limitations of a historical plot. This is a major reason why the *Krishnakumari* could not fully reach the high watermark of artistic flexibility and grandeur.

The role of *vidhi* or *vidhata* is depicted as prominently as possible in the context of the play. Right from the outset of Act II, Sc I, Ahalya Devee, consort of King Bheem Singha, laments of destiny being unfavourable, even harsh, towards their family and kingdom. She refers as many as five times to destiny and its varied connotations in this scene itself. Again in the second scene of the next act, she laments of *vidhi*. Besides her, Bheem Singha as well complains against destiny’s harshness and disfavour. Balendra Singha, in Act V, Sc II, wonders why such grievous task of sacrificing so endeared a niece has fallen to his lot [what destiny this is!]. Even the heroine herself refers to destiny in moments of acute anxiety and sorrow: the acutest of them being just before her suicide when she is saddened of her destiny which has made her father, she assumes, to turn angry and
ungracious to her. We, however, feel the vagaries of destiny in the heroine’s life, a life which ended much before maturity and fruition.

James Tod, in his discussion of the history of the death of Krishnakumari, the Rajpoot Princess, brought up comparisons with the fates of Iphigenia, daughter of Agamemnon, Virginia, daughter of Lucius Virginius, and Iphis, daughter of Jephtha. Since Madhusudan took his material from Tod’s, it is but likely that there would be some points of similarity between the plot of Krishnakumari and those of Euripides’ and Racine’s plays on Iphigenia and of the ancient Roman story of Virginia and of Handel’s oratorio Jephtha (1751). This may be considered as Madhusudan’s artistic assimilation of European dramatic art and its tragic aspect.

There are fifteen characters, ten male and five female, in the dramatic structure of the play. Besides, there are some characters that find mention only but never appear onstage: Maan Singha, Aameer Khan of Delhi, Dhanakul Singha, the Chief of Maharashtra, etc.

Among the characters Bheem Singha, perhaps, stands at the tragic centre of the play. It is in him that Madhusudan tried to show gusts of conflicting emotions storming and rattling his sanity. No other character in the play exhibits similar emotional turmoil as Bheem Singha.

Bheem Singha, as Madhusudan wrote in one letter, is a grave and pathetic character. Dhanadas was not intended by the playwright, to be made an Iago. He is an ordinary devil full of avarice. Balendra Singha has been portrayed after the character of Bastard in Shakespeare’s King John. Ahalya Devee is grave and gloomy. Princess Krishna is an elegant character of an aristocratic royal family. She has some resemblance with Iphigenia.

The character of Krishnakumari exhibits excellence of body and spirit. She is a paragon of beauty and virtue. In Madanika’s opinion none else had she seen in
this world, more beautiful and lustrous than Princess Krishnakumari: that those who has seen her pretty face once could never get over its resplendent memory; and that the God-gifted eyes of those are a mere waste who has never had a glimpse of her (Act IV. Sc II). On the other hand, modesty, simplicity of mind and sympathy for others, especially for the in-affluent subjects (as evident during the storm in Act V. Sc III), make the princess a lovable maiden with warmth of heart. Her response to Madanika’s concoctions about Maan Singha is a sense of wonder. Her attraction for her unseen “Prince Charming” Maan Singha at the mere eulogising by Madanika who is not well-known to her, reflects her simplicity and maidenly imagination and her subsequent thoughts about him and his Marudesh reveal a streak of fantasising.

Madhusudan had definite points in his mind regarding use of language in the tragedy. He was well aware of his shortcomings in the Sharmishtha. Language in the play is, therefore, much more natural, almost shorn of unwanted grandiloquence. This lingual stage is reached gradually from the Sharmishtha through the Padmavati to the Krishnakumari. It enhances the unraveling of characters. Sentences are shorter and run with an effective force to the purpose of action and plot.

There is a unique similarity of tragic import between Madhusudan’s Meghanaadvadh and Krishnakumari. Both texts reach their respective end with the final doom still awaited. In the Meghanaadvadh, the poet does not include Ravana’s death and downfall of Lanka. In the Krishnakumari, he does not unravel whether Jagat Singha or Maan Singha in reality attacks Udaypur.

After the historical tragedy, Madhusudan had to stop writing any more plays since he did not find enough encouragement and assurance of performance of his plays from his patrons. Years later, only once did Madhusudan take up his pen for writing a complete five-act play: in 1872, he composed the Mayakanan
when he was suffering from grievous ailment and was hospitalised. But that is altogether a different chapter in his literary career.

In the second phase, now, Madhusudan fixed his attention fully on something which proved epoch making for Bengali literature. He had already written his first epicling Tilottamaasambhav. It was published in 1861. In it he could test the latent power of Bengali as a language, as an off-shoot of Sanskrit, within which, again, to test the Miltonic model of blank verse, with suitable adjustment of number of feet in a verse line.

During a discussion among peers of the then literary circle of Calcutta, Jatindra Mohan Tagore expressed his strong doubts about the possibility of materialisation of blank verse in Bengali. But Madhusudan took the challenge and promised to produce exactly that. The poet, in the heat of fervent emotion, accomplished his task over a few months. In the publication, it was dedicated to the patron Jotindra Mohan. In the dedication, Madhusudan wrote that such fruits of experimentation could not claim of maturity at once.

The poem, which consists of four cantos, runs over 2624 lines. For source of the poem Madhusudan turned to the Mahabharata. Chapters 209, 210, 211 and 212 in the Aadi Parva of Vyasa’s epic describe the story of Sunda-Upasunda. Madhusudan largely followed the original story with suitable variations in stress and spatial projection. He made the endeavours of deities towards regaining the possession of Heaven – an episode not so important in the Mahabharata – of paramount importance and length. This change suggests a significant novelty in his point of view. For him loss of Heaven by the gods was the most important issue. According to Tapodhir Bhattacharjee, in the nineteenth-century colonial context, the poet felt the pang of slavery: since his sympathy was with the gods, his hero [in the poem] was Indra [translation mine] (Punarnirman 98).
In the story, gods were the actual denizens of Heaven. But demons have invaded the Heavenly Kingdom, dethroned Indra and ousted his celestial clan from their “blissful seat”. The endeavours of the deposed King of gods, for repossession of his rightful Heavenly throne, were similar – for the poet – to an idea of the Indians’ regaining the mastery of their land. Therefore, the discourse in the poem has a subversive undercurrent which takes its life from the poet’s self-consciousness of being part of a subjugated race, of being as though a self-induced torch bearer for the cause of freedom from subjugation and colonial oppression. Thus the poem which he began ‘in a joke’ was no more limited to proving some point of contention. It became his soulful song of liberation from alien rule just as from the chains of ‘a vile school of poetry’.

The poem begins with a description of Dhavalgiri (I, 1 – 30), a desolate mountainous region. It is used as the backdrop for projection of the hero’s forlorn state. In the manner of European epic tradition, there is an invocation (I, 33 – 39): it is addressed to the Muse Saraswatee. It reveals the poet’s supplicant posture before the goddess so as to obtain her grace in his composition of the poem.

But, as Kshetra Gupta opines, the objective of the poet, in the Tilottamaasambhay, was to get drifted along the current of a newly-discovered verse rhythm and experience the beauty of all kinds of worldly objects in isolated splendour and to narrate a story in that context [translation mine] (64).

For the aforesaid reason flow of the story sometimes gets obstructed on the intricately carved narrative blocks of isolated though beautiful poetry.

Indra has lost in all scores to the twin demon brothers, Sunda and Upasunda – who have become invincible with Brahma’s boon. – and dispossessed of his Heavenly throne, now, passes his painful and hopeless moments in the desolate gloom of Dhavala Shikhara.
Shachi. Indra’s consort, is summoned to Dhavala Giri by goddess of dream. Her presence considerably bolsters up his drooping spirits. From her he comes to know that his celestial army presently resides in Brahmaloka in similar languishing spirit and remembers him every moment. He decides for immediate departure for Brahmaloka.

Canto two, titled “Brahmapurce-Toran”, takes the description to Brahmaloka. On reaching the golden entrance of Brahmaloka, the divine couple beholds their army men in front of the gate. When Indra descends with Shachi from his chariot and walks among his army, everyone is at once cheerful. Here follows a catalogue (for 29 lines) of the celestial warrior chiefs.

Indra proposes for a discussion so as to sort out possible means for regaining possession of Heavenly Kingdom. In the discussion it is felt that a meeting with Brahma would be necessary to best understand the needful. In Canto III, titled “Sambhava”, all the gods headed by Indra meet Brahma, the first of the Indian holy trinity. Brahma’s clue for solution is crisp: brotherly quarrel would be the only means for destroying Sunda and Upasunda.

Next follows a second consultation among the celestial warrior chiefs and their King, to decipher the full import of the acquired clue. Here, Madhusudan brought in the device of *daiva-vanee* (i.e. Divine Revelation through unseen ethereal heralding) for suggesting to Indra the necessity of appointing Vishwakarma for creating a wondrously beautiful maiden as the “apple of discord” between the two demon brothers.

Pavana follows Indra’s bidding to fly fast and fetch the divine artisan Vishwakarma there. On his return with Vishwakarma to Brahmaloka, Indra briefs the deity of craft to the immediate creation of a wondrously beautiful maiden as willed by the Almighty.
Vishwakarma at once busies himself in all capacity to the purpose. With his charms of mantra he extracts from diverse elements, materials fit for the creation.

In describing the creation of Tilottamaa (not yet named so), Madhusudan fairly followed Indian aesthetics or Rasa Sastra. The description – of her fair form under creation – starts from her feet and ends at her eyes. Besides, the description includes Vishwakarma’s choice of orpiment for her skin tone. The process is culminated as goddess Saraswaatee blesses the creation with her own divine presence and resonance of all raga-s on the maid’s tongue. Finally, the artist puts life into the maid with immortalising nectar.

As all the gods praise Vishwakarma for his creation, there is a second daiva-vanee: it tells Indra to send the lustrous maid to where Sunda and Upasunda reside, and also to bid Ananga (Kamadev) and Vasanta (the season of spring personified and deified) to accompany her. Then the ethereal voice heralds Vishwakarma’s act of choosing carefully from diverse elements of the cosmos to bring forth the maid, as a suitable reason why she should be named Tilottamaa.

Canto III ends with Indra’s happy departure with Tilottamaa for the strategic destination. Canto IV. titled “Baasav-Vijaya”, starts with the poet’s gratitude to Saraswaatee and Imagination, and his prayer for their continued grace on his poetic flight. The canto then proceeds along two principal scenes. One shows Indra and his army entering the forest of Kamya near the Vindhya, rampaging and destroying trees, creepers, undergrowths, etc. and filling the place with fright which makes animals and birds take flight. The other shows Ananga and Vasanta escorting Tilottamaa to the grove, erstwhile for deities, at the mountainous region where Sunda and Upasunda now revel in triumph.

In the sylvan grove Tilottamaa roams. Ananga and Vasanta remain hidden above unseen in the sky. When Sunda and Upasunda, out on their leisure stroll, come upon Tilottamaa, their first reaction is to worship her, assuming her to be
Mother Gouri, consort of Shiva. As they approach with that intention, Ananga from above starts raining his floral shafts in plenty and renders them more and more restless and wrought with lust. Next happens the obvious, the most-sought-after wish of the deities. Each of the brothers grabs one hand of Tilottamaa. Each seeing the other’s act is filled with querulous fury. Shouts of quarrel are followed by blows of arms. Spouting blood, drenched in profusion, they fall, unconscious. Just before death they realise their blunder: but it is too late.

Indra’s army celebrates the fall of Sunda and Upasunda with widespread killings in the demon kingdom not sparing even innocent infants and females. The macabre of the event is, nevertheless, a little illuminated with Indra who feels saddened at such bloodshed and near extermination of the demon race. He not only stops further killings, but even orders a proper funeral of Sunda and Upasunda; he praises of their valour in battlefield.

After the funeral, Indra expresses his gratitude to Tilottamaa for her decisive role in the enemies’ fall and regaining of Heavenly Kingdom. He declares that her accomplishment and fame would last forever in the universe. Then he instructs her to go and live in Suryaloka (i.e. the solar region) away from and unseen to mortal sight.

Madhusudan’s poem fulfilled its primary objective: it realised the construction of a Bengali poetic text in blank verse. The story of Sunda and Upasunda was used for the purpose. But the demon brothers were given minimal space and importance. It was rather to highlight the possibility of the creation of such beauty as Tilottamaa that the story was reshaped. Thus, even though the story of her creation played the second fiddle in the poem and application of blank verse in Bengali played the first, both came together in the poet’s magical imagination and conviction and thus both crossed the threshold of possibility or sambhav.
Besides being an experiment in blank verse or amitrakshar, the Tilottamaasambhav is a work belonging to Madhusudan’s preparatory period for his epic imagination, epic dream, epic endeavour and epic sojourn in poetry.

Madhusudan’s epic dream and dream epic materialised in the Meghanaadvadh. It evolved from pure poetic and creative inspiration. In it, the poet could combine a new artistic medium with suitable subject-matter in the light of his experience as a man, scholar and artist acquired from his avid reading of Western and Indian Classics. from his composition of the epicling Tilottamaasambhav, his dramas and some major English works and from his existence as an Indian under colonial yoke.

In the first edition, the epic was published in two volumes in 1861. the first volume consisting of five cantos and the second of four. However, its composition started in April, 1860, when the Tilottamaasambhav and the Padmavati were still unpublished. and the Vrajaanganaa was in the press. It indicates his state of mind: he was, in his own choice of Miltonic words, ‘smit with the love of sacred song’ and also ‘madly after the Muses’ (Letter no. 60, 309); he was creating and producing in abundance.

In the words of Tapodhir Bhattacharjee, since Madhusudan’s personality and poetry were nourished in the profoundly mysterious essence of the renaissance, we find, in the Meghanaadvadh, an elaborate preparation for dismantling of conventional structures in versification, plot-construction, characterisation and conception of new ethos [translation mine] (Aitihyer Punarnirman 115).

The Meghanaadvadh is essentially Madhusudan’s reconstruction of Valmiki’s epic poem, and a transformation of the “Ramayana” into a “Ravanayana”. In this epic composition of over 6000 unrhymed verse lines, Ravana and not Rama, is made the hero or protagonist. The plot is, therefore.
constructed with such incidents and events as would glorify the demon king of Lanka. In relation to that, characters like Lakshmana and Vibheeshana, who have traditionally been in the good book of the composer and the reader alike, are coloured as guilty, degraded and traitorous. Rama loses his heroic stature and is made to consider himself ‘a beggar’. He is portrayed as the “favoured” one of gods, and yet lacking in self-confidence, wavering in faith in his own brother and his powerful army, and even Divine Dispensation. On the other hand, Meghanaada is raised to an astonishing height of nobleness, greatness, patriotism, prowess, chivalry, courtesy, hospitality, etc. Thus, the entire structure of Valmiki’s epic tale singing the glory of Rama is recast with a complete shift in the focal point of the narrative. Everything is looked at from the point of view of the raksha or demon race.

Going against the current was as though Madhusudan’s destiny. Subverting the story of the dominant was his unique artistic tendency. In that he subverted the well established colony of Rama’s story – sustained for so long by Valmiki’s successors like Bhavabhuti, Kalidasa, Bhatti, Kumaradas – from the epic corpus and established there Ravana and his Swarna-Lanka.

Madhusudan’s position as an Indian under colonial yoke made him see parallels between the British usurping ruling power from the native Indians – (and degrading the country into a colony of theirs) – and Rama and his army invading Lanka as outsiders, holding it under long siege and gradually destroying it, man and glory, mercilessly. For him, Ravana’s efforts of self-defence and retaliation symbolised the national dream of fighting against the colonial siege. Hence, Ravana’s tragedy of yielding up his brave warriors one by one to death evoked, for the poet, not only the fate of the demon race but of the Indian nation which saw no ray of hope or absolute freedom under colonial constraints.
Madhusudan found the structure of an ocean-bound nation under foreign siege in Homer’s epic narrative Iliad. There he found Priam, Hecabe and Hector as archetype(s) – if we might use the term liberally – for his Ravana, Mandodaree and Meghanaada; he found vengeful deities perpetrating and condensing the tragic as models for his portrayal of the Indian deities and thus restructuring Indian Purana-s. But, most importantly, he discovered in Homer, glorification of humanity. Consequently, his renaissance spirit of humanism was further enriched and nourished to find expression in humanisation of the demons in his Meghanaadvadh.

At the very outset of the poem, Madhusudan hints at the subject-matter. The narrator wonders how an unconquerable hero and warrior like Meghanaada came to be killed by Lakshmana. Out of the nine sarga-s or cantos of the poem, the first six try to draw a picture that might bring us a satisfactory answer to the intrinsic query. But still there remains a lingering air of wonderment and dissatisfaction at Ravana’s tragedy that culminated in his son’s death. The remaining three cantos enhance this unbelievable tragic import in its unredeemed finality. Even Ravana’s revenge is seen to prove futile with Lakshmana’s unscathed return from death.

In the poem, Madhusudan shows in event after event, in canto after canto, how hostile deific forces could conspire against human efforts for glory and power and an all-conquering stature that might threaten even godly glory and dominance. As mentioned before, Ravana and his demon clan in the poem are demons in the namesake. For Madhusudan they were humanity in vibrant celebration and enjoyment of boundless power and excellence.

Canto VI. titled “Vadha”, not only dramatises Meghanaada’s death, but brings out his patriotism, great prowess, noble chivalry, courtesy, hospitality, his love and respect for his parents and even parent-like uncle, and his sense of
honour, as a warrior, for his race and his opponent. Madhusudan’s epic sensibility enabled him to give a sustained, highly charged and yet controlled account of his favourite Indrajit’s end. In finishing Meghanaada he made him immortal.

The poet moved far away from Valmiki in details of Lakshmana’s fight against Meghanaada and killing him. But he was justified in so doing since he was reconstructing the epic structure in terms of contemporary nineteenth-century sensibility. In a colonial setting, fair fight or sporting chance were out-of-bounds issues for him. Therefore, he could not think of portraying an alien intruder to offer such points to the insider.

Lakshmana, resplendent with divine weapons and armour, goes in Vibheeshana’s company. By Mayadevee’s grace they become invisible and proceed toward the entrance to Lanka. The goddess herself visits Lakshmee’s temple in Lanka and tells her to withdraw her favouring powers from the demon city and to bless Lakshmana’s entry to the temple of Nikumbhila. Goddess Lakshmee does accordingly and leaves the temple in spirit for good with Mayadevee. Her absence deprives the demon clan of prosperity and auspicious wholesomeness.

Canto VI completes the course of divine machination against Ravana and his citadel of affluence and demon culture. Madhusudan’s accomplished and touching description of Meghanaada’s unfair death in the subsequent stanzas of the canto clinches the finality of cosmic disposition. But, simultaneously, it creates the subversive text which heightens and sublimates the tragedy of the so-called evil, the dark and demonic, which is marginalised in a “probable” universe dictated by deities.

Canto VII. titled “Shaktinirbheda”. delineates Ravana’s revenge of his son’s death. Shiva aids him with his own emboldening energy to keep his spirit from sinking. Like Zeus in Homer’s Iliad, Shiva sends his messenger Veerabhadra
for informing his devotee Ravana of Meghanaada’s demise and for infusing *rudrateja* into him. The shocking news at once renders Ravana unconscious. It indicates Meghanaada’s importance and endearment in Ravana’s life of a father and protecting ruler. When he has been energised and brought back to consciousness by Veerabhadra and advised to forget his sorrow in act of vengeance, he gives his orders for arms.

Canto VII, thus, shifts the focus from covert warfare through machination to open battlefield. It is the only canto to contain direct descriptions of battle.

Since Madhusudan had finished narrating Meghanaada’s death, he could now better attend to glorification of other characters such as Ravana, Lakshmana, and to some extent, Rama. Lakshmana has already received considerable conditioning from the poet in Canto V. Now, he is seen as unwavering and steady as a rock in the face of deadly Ravana and his lethal weapons. Though his valour falls short of Ravana’s Shiva-energised prowess, he dies heroically.

The central character, Ravana, exhibits unparalleled valour and one-pointed vengeance to spare Rama:

Na chahi tomare
Aaji, hey Vaideheenath. E bhavamandale
Aar ek din tumi jeevo niraapade! …
… Jao phiri tumi
Shivire. Raghavashreshtha!  

(VII. 648 – 653)

Before that, he had defeated Skanda and Indra who, with many other deities, were on Rama’s side that day. After that, he defeats Hanumana, Sugreeva, and then comes face to face with Lakshmana. Like a Greek warrior, he vaunts that he would serve his flesh to the scavengers. When Lakshmana has nullified many of his weapons, he has the magnanimity of praising his enemy; but he reminds the
slayer of his son that there would be no escape for him from Ravana on that day. He thinks of his son and shoots Mahashakti shaft which he has always restrained from using till then. Its lethality ensures (not really so, though) Lakshmana’s death. But he is not fully avenged. He quickly gets down from his chariot and, like a Homeric victor, hurries towards the corpse of the vanquished so as to mutilate and humiliate it. However, Veerabhadra’s whispering counsel in his ear abates his fury and he returns to his palace, smeared all over with blood.

Canto VII ends with Indra defeated in battle returning to Heaven in all humiliation. It thus performs twofold function: first, it shows Meghanaada’s fame as an “Indrajit” reaffirmed posthumously through his father; second, it successfully obverts the tragedy and revenge of the demon King towards the epicentre of the poem and subverts the dominance of deities to the periphery at least for some duration.

Canto VIII, titled “Pretapuree”, sends Rama in Mayadevee’s company – like Aeneas in Sibyl’s in Virgil’s Aeneid – to the House of Yama or Hell in order to learn from Dasharatha, Rama’s deceased father, how Lakshmana is to be brought back to life. It is the longest canto of the poem. For the composition of this canto, Madhusudan utilised to the most his wide reading of the European epics, especially those of Virgil, Dante and Milton.

Having known from Dasharatha that Hanumana is to be sent to the Gandhamaadana for bringing – within that night – vishalyakaranee, a miraculous life-reviving herb, for Lakshmana, Rama goes back with Mayadevee to where Lakshmana has been lying near-lifeless in the battlefield, surrounded by mourning heroes of his army.

Canto IX, titled “Sankriya”, describes the funeral of Meghanaada and mourning. Sarana’s giving Ravana the news of revival of Lakshmana’s life, culminates deifie disfavour for the demon King: Gandhamaadana, as though a
harbinger of life, had himself come and revived the pulse of life in the slayer of Meghanaada. It is all “destiny”, the King concludes, which has made even Yama – who metes out death to all mortals – forget his own nature or the finality of his work. In the previous canto, we have known from Dasharatha that it had been Yama’s grace to unveil to him the secret way for a second lease of life for Lakshmana.

Just as Homer’s Priam went to Achilles for ransoming Hector’s body, minister Sarana, with Ravana’s message, goes to Rama for an untroubled funeral of Meghanaada. Rama, for the first time in the poem, shows laudable humanity and greatness of heart to consent to restraining from warfare for seven days; he even expresses later on his sympathy for Ravana’s grief and instructs Angada to take a troop of thousand charioteers and join the funeral and mourning in courteous amicability.

In Canto IX, Ravana with a broken heart expresses his inconsolable grief at the shattering of all his dreams: dreams such as the happy succession of Meghanaada to his throne of Lanka; defeating Rama and his army and freeing Lanka of foreign aggression, invasion, siege; and so on. His conscience, however, does not yet give him any reason for the intolerable dwindling away of such powerful dynasty of his. His wonderment is therefore obverted toward vidhi.

Canto IX ends with the construction of Meghanaada’s memorial mound in bricks of gold – a parallel to Hector’s grave mound in the final book of the Iliad – and tearful return of the procession of aggrieved demons to the city and their observance of mourning for seven days.

The Meghannaadvadh, besides reconstructing from various European epics, takes amitrakshar to majestic heights of sonority and evocativeness. The verse form, then, reaches a fine blend of the epical and the lyrical in the Veeraanganaa.
When Madhusudan was writing his *Meghanaadvadh*, a collection of poems was in the printing press; he called them odes. They were all written ‘about poor old Radha’ and her *viraha* or lovelorn state. Since Radha is said to have belonged to Vraja, the village Gokula near Mathura, the collection was published under the title “Vrajaanganaa”.

Kshetra Gupta elucidates the characteristic features of an ode as found in European literature: odes usually express personal longings and pains, or patriotism of the poet; they are usually addressed to some person or object of nature; they primarily exhibit complexity and variety in stanza formation [translation mine] (93). He, further, examines whether the aforementioned features may be found in the *Vrajaanganaa*, and concludes that in matters of rhyming and stanza formation, the influence of European odes has worked the most (94).

The *Vrajaanganaa* consists of one single canto titled “Viraha”. It contains eighteen odes; within each ode, again, there are verse stanzas counting in varied numbers, from four to eleven: each verse is five to fourteen lines long. There are one hundred and fourteen verse stanzas in total. In an ode all verses contain same number of lines. There are, however, some exceptions to this design. In the fifth ode, titled “Prthivee”, verse two contains six lines, but each of the rest contains seven. In the fifteenth ode, titled “Nikunjavane”, both of the verses one and three contain nine lines, while verses two and four contain ten, and verse five is fourteen-line long.

The first ode is titled “Bangshee-Dhwani” (flute-tune), the second “Jaladhar” (cloud), the third “Yamunatate” (on the bank of the Yamuna), the fourth “Mayooree” (the peahen), the sixth “Pratidhwani” (echo), the seventh “Usha” (dawn), the eighth “Kusuma” (flower), the ninth “Malaya Maaruta” (wind), the tenth, again, “Bangshee-Dhwani”, the eleventh “Godhooli” (dusk), the twelfth “Govardhan Giri” (the mountain Govardhan), the thirteenth “Saarikaa”
(parrot or popinjay), the fourteenth “Krishnachooraa”, the sixteenth “Sakhee” (companion), the seventeenth “Vasante” (during spring), and the eighteenth, again, “Vasante”.

The Vrajaanganaa came out before the publication of the second volume of the Meghanaadvadh. In ancient Bengali poetry, Radha’s love had been presented in a spiritual atmosphere. But Madhusudan’s poetry was written with a new outlook. It was nothing but a shedding off of that old spiritual sheath from Radha’s human body. The sincere devotion and faith of the Vaishnavite poets were not to be found in Madhusudan. But he had heartfelt sincerity for expressing viraha. He selected some subjects (flute-tune, cloud, bank of the Yamuna, peahen, the earth, echo, dawn, flower, breeze, dusk, the mountain Govardhan, popinjay, krishnachooraa, etc.) around which to express Radha’s mental agony. The method of expressing the love between Radha and Krishna as human was an inevitable outcome of the age and milieu. The human essence of padavalee (Vaishnav poems) was freshly presented through the eyes of a poet who was a lover of Western literature [translation mine] (Ujjwal Kumar, Paschatya Prabhav, 85).

Thus, we find that what Kshetra Gupta has to say about the Vrajaanganaa is quite appropriate: that love is the underlying theme of the poem, and that nature is the backdrop for its expression (96).

Madhusudan’s Veeraanganaa, too, is essentially about love. Structurally, however, it is influenced by Italian poet Ovid’s Heroides. Both the Italian and the Bengalee poets talked of love in its varied expressions in human life. Ovid’s work contains twenty-one letters. Originally Madhusudan as well planned for twenty-one letters to be written by twenty-one women to their lovers or husbands. But he did not have the luck and leisure for complying with his artistic plan. But, besides the external influence of structure, another aspect of Ovid must have inspired Madhusudan’s creative genius: the poet’s treatment of less prominent
women characters of Greco-Roman epic legacy and his giving them their own voice to express unhindered their own selves.

With the Veeraanganaa the second phase of Madhusudan’s literary career almost comes to an end. His epic sojourn, too, comes to a sudden halt. For, in later life, he tried several times to set sails for newer voyages across the oceanic billows of epic: “Singhala Vijaya”, “Subhadraa-Harana”, etc. But all efforts had to be discarded after mere initiations. He, however, wrote two pure lyrics in the second phase itself: “Atmavilaap” (1861) and “Bangabhoomir Prati” (1862). The first lyric – which he wrote as an alternative to Satyendranath Thakur’s request for some “Brahmasangeet” (song related to the concept and realisation of Brahma or the ultimate truth of the universe) and which was published in the periodical named “Tatwabodhinec”– is an effusion of personal lamentation. The title “Atmavilaap” as well speaks for such an import.

Externally, the poem is, to some extent, in the manner of Christian confessions (Kshetra Gupta 272). But Madhusudan was scarcely inspired by any religious fervour in its composition. Colourful effusion of love of woman, of wealth, and of fame – three types of human desires – in a human heart. and the astray and anguished romanticism of these mirage-like desires are reached out for in this poem [translation mine] (273).

The second lyric. “Bangabhoomir Prati”. was originally written in a letter to Rajnarain Bose (Letter no. 89. 335 – 336) just before Madhusudan’s departure for England. Later. it was printed in “Somaparakash” on 16th June of 1862.

The second lyric is artistically more successful. It has mingled patriotism and self-revelation with ease. Even before “Vande Maataram” (Bankimchandra’s singing glory of Mother India). Madhusudan accepted and worshipped his native land as mother with the devotional expression ‘Shyama Janmade’ [translation mine] (Kshetra Gupta 273).
The poem starts with an epigraph from Byron: ‘My native Land. Good night’. The epigraph evokes a picture of the poet, situated abroad, retiring to bed after his toilsome day, and remembering his dear land now far away.

The poem is vibrant, also, with Madhusudan’s incessant pursuit after the mirage of hope, his thoughts on death, his desire for a lasting niche in fame [translation mine] (273).

In the third phase of Madhusudan’s literary career, place of composition is first France and then again Calcutta. This phase is from 1862 to 1873, his final year in life as well. The second phase is by far the best and greatest phase in his literary life – his fame, achievement, and historical significance, all being determined on the basis of his works in those four years. In the third phase, his literary career was faced with hindrances and hence was decentralised. Sparks of his talent were visible in the fourteen-lined verses wherein lay the inception of Bengali sonnet. But this phase brought forth no such creation as might compete grandly with those of the second phase. He died before completing fifty years of age, and left behind several manuscripts of unfinished poems and plays: “Subhadraa” (a dramatic poem), “Rizia” (a play in Bengali), “Vrajaanganaa Kaavya” Canto II titled “Vihaara”, “Singhala Vijaya”. “Veeraanganaa Kaavya” 2nd Vol., “Draupadecswayamvara”, “Matsyagandhaa”, “Subhadraa-Harana”. “Duryodhaner Mrityu”, “Vish Naa Dhanurgun” (a play), “Devadaanaveeyam” (a satirical poem). The Hectorvadh is the last published work while he was still alive, but this too is unfinished. The Mayakanan, his last extant play, was published posthumously in 1874.

Madhusudan’s anthology of Bengali sonnets, the Chaturdashpadee Kavitavalee, was first published in 1866. It was published by Ishwarchandra Basu Co. and printed at the publisher’s Stanhope Press in Calcutta. In the Publisher’s advertisement – dated 1st of August, 1866 – there was specific mention about one-
hundred sonnets sent by Madhusudan from Versailles, France. There were, moreover, some details regarding the persons and the poets – Dante, Theodore Goldstucker, Tennyson, and Victor Hugo – glorified in particular sonnets (respectively in the eightieth, eighty-first, eighty-second and eighty-third as per the advertisement).

The varied levels of these sonnets unravel various tendencies and rainbow-like many-coloured horizons of the poet-mind. Moreover, they are together an index of Madhusudan’s artistic versatility. Even though all of them may not be applauded as of high poetic quality, yet their sheer variety of expressiveness and subject-matter render them worthy of approval.

As far as stanza pattern is concerned, Madhusudan’s Bengali sonnets, like his English ones, exhibit all sorts of application as found from Petrarch to Milton. In sonnets like “Annapoornaar Jhanpi”, “Tara”, etc. the Petrarchan structure of octave and sestet is thoroughly maintained. But other sonnets do not show such thoroughness of form accompanied by the thoroughness of spirit in the tidal musical aspect of the octave-sestet transition where octave corresponds to the flow and sestet to the ebb, or sometimes vice versa. Many of his sonnets follow the outward pattern, but the effect of breaking of the wave is absent in them. It might be that the poet was not really conscious of this subtle aspect of Petrarchan sonnet. In “Nootan Vatsara”, again, there is an unbroken flow of music as found in Miltonic sonnets.

All major works and many others of Madhusudan bear instances of experimentations in language, subject matter, theme, motif, context, atmosphere, etc. The two farces (Ekei Ki Bale Sabhyata and Buro Shaliker Ghare Rno) are instances and evidences of his ability for inventing and applying diverse styles in syntax and structure. Sisir Kumar Das opines that if Meghnaadvadh with its rumbling sonority and majesty of intonation, is seen at one end of his style
spectrum, then at the other end can be found the two farces. Such wide expanse of style in Bengali literature nobody could demonstrate before Madhusudan, nor does anyone after him [translation mine] (Introduction, Michael Madhusudan Datta. Nirbachita Rachana).

Madhusudan performed a variety of experiments on Bengali poetry — experiments in subject matter and structure. He tried to embellish Bengali poetry with the tradition of European poetry. He created “amitrakshar chhanda” (unrhymed verse) out of the inspiring English blank verse. He wrote Veeraanganaa on the model of Ovid’s Heroides. He introduced sonnet into Bengali literature on the ideal of Petrarch. He even wrote some odes with a difference in his Vrajaanganaa. But critics and scholars would all agree to the point that his fame principally rests on Meghanaadvadh. Herein his talent shines most brilliantly. Herein his amitrakshar finds doubtless and stable support. In this towering monument of epic poetry we can trace interweaving of different European epics. In it the poet tried to write afresh the Ramayana in the structure of Homeric Greek epic.

Salient features of Madhusudan’s worldview

Madhusudan’s poetic sensibility was infused with the spirit of Renaissance. The spirit of Renaissance invigorated him, with love of humanity and unbounded freedom, with zeal for knowledge and artistic creation, and with aspiration for material prosperity and its intense enjoyment.

Madhusudan became a votary of human excellence and greatness over everything else. For him, this excellence consisted in freedom of self-expression, individuality, inquisitiveness to life, a questioning attitude to set rules and customs; it consisted in free thinking, in centring the marginalised. in
sympathising the subjugated and giving the voiceless a clear voice: it consisted.

further, in love for one’s own country, nation and humanity, in pride in one’s
culture and language; moreover, it consisted in following one’s own heart with
determination and accepting challenges undaunted, in achieving a life of refined
culture and dazzling material affluence.

Since Madhusudan was a foster child of renaissance or awakening that
swept across the privileged quarters of nineteenth-century Bengal, he had the
sense of being an individual personality, had an urge for self-expression in life and
art. English education had given him access to a world of liberating Western
thoughts and an inquisitive attitude to life. It had rendered him independent of the
medieval theo-centric way of life. The consequence was reflected in his artistic
creations. There he was the votary of humanity.

The Western concept of human personality has its origins in Greek
thoughts about a “man”. In his book *The Greeks*, H. D. F. Kitto tells us that the
Greeks were known for their ‘reason and humanity’ (8) and that they considered
themselves as ‘free men’ (9); they assigned great dignity to man in terms of socio-
political freedom and rights (9 – 10); for them ‘slavery and despotism’ were
‘things that maim the soul’: the ‘Oriental custom’ of ‘obeisance’. for them, was
‘an affront to human dignity’ (10). Indeed, unique is the fact that even ‘to the gods
the Greek prayed like a man, erect; … that he was not a God, he knew; but he was
at least a man’ (10).

Although modern Western society did not quite agree to the Greek way of
praying to a divine power, it, nevertheless, had imbibed – through Renaissance –
the essence of the Greek concept of “man” as a dignified entity with wonderful
capabilities of body, mind and intellect. Now, the medieval literature of Bengal
did not provide such concept of humanity or glory of human personality for the
native society. It was the coming of the English – and with them, of the Greek
humanity – which stirred the stalwarts and scholars and persons with poetic zeal out of the medieval slumber and stagnation. Then, an artist like Madhusudan felt the need of asserting the rightful position of humanity in literature.

In his dramas and poems, Madhusudan tried, over and above to put the human interest at the centre of affairs. His universe, like that of the classical Greek poets, was anthropocentric. Man was the yardstick for everything.

Madhusudan was a man of this world: of earthly pleasure-pain, prosperity-poverty, and desires for material affluence. His hermits, too, are hardly hermit enough; they rather reveal themselves to be attached to the same worldly concerns as are common humans.

The “this-worldly” outlook of Renaissance, and Western culture, not only turns towards humanity but to worldly or material prosperity and its intense enjoyment. In the perspective of Bengal, Kshetra Gupta calls it ‘unish shataker balishtha bhogavaad’ (66). The inspiration and acquiring of wisdom and wealth together moved Madhusudan’s imagination and dream. In other words, he desired blessings of both Lakshmee and Saraswatee. But, in real life, he could achieve Saraswatee’s grace alone. Despite being the son of a wealthy landlord, he had to live in poverty almost all his life. That which remained beyond his reach and enjoyment in life, beamed from all around in his literature.

In the Meghnaadvadh, he described Ravana’s royal court. He rendered Swarna-Lanka into the abode of all that the whole world desires for:

E jagat jena
Ania bibidha dhan, poojar bidhane.
Rekhechhe, re Charulanke, tor padatale.
Jagat-vaasanaa tui, sukher sadan. (Canto I. 214 – 217)
This is what Ravana, the hero of the poem, saw and through him the poet felt about Lanka. But the city of Lanka, despite being the hub of culture and high living, was now steadily crumbling down; its destiny was un-severable from that of its inhabitants who were confronted with loss and hollow desolation.

Madhusudan’s human figure, thus, is under the control of destiny. In Madhusudan’s poetic universe destiny is not exactly what the word means in English. “Destiny” here signifies rather that subtle invisible universal law which controls and maintains the actions or movements of all that exist in the cosmos – from living to nonliving, from human to animal, from the tiniest creatures to powerful deities, and so forth. Any transgression or breach in the law is bound to bring affliction down on the transgressor. Destiny, for the poet, was, therefore, somewhat post-Homeric Greek as a concept. It corresponds to the Greek theories of cause and effect, and of nemesis. In the Greek plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, especially of the last two, we come across characters that have to kneel before their nemesis. Sophocles’ Oedipus is a glaring example of how, in the Greek code of ethics, man cannot undo the effect of his misdeeds whether committed intentionally or in ignorance.

Destiny in Madhusudan’s works, however, also relates to the Indian concept of Karma. The concept speaks in the manner of ‘as you sow, so you reap’. Thus, whenever man transgresses against the bindings of destiny, he suffers immensely.

In the Meghnaadvadh, Ravana had to suffer the consequence of abducting somebody else’s wife. Though he was, for Madhusudan, ‘a grand fellow’, yet the poet could not by any means make an oversight of his tragic flaw, his nemesis. But this did not demean Ravana the man in the eyes of Madhusudan. On the contrary, his suffering of such magnitude ensured him all the more the poet’s sympathy.
Madhusudan’s sympathetic outlook to the marginalised, to the conventional “evil”, made him bring them to the central position of his works, and adorn them with lovable human qualities. It is actually the same renaissance spirit for freedom that spoke through Madhusudan the man and artist. This spirit made him a harbinger of freedom for all who are oppressed or marginalised: women, or demons, or humanity at large: women who are oppressed in a patriarchal social setting: demons who are outside the mainstream of society; or humanity which is, as viewed by Madhusudan, under the dictates of destiny and divinity. Consequently, his woman characters voice themselves, his demons are humanised, and his humanity is sympathised against “divine” dispensation or vidhi.

The picture of a world we find in Madhusudan’s creations is one that toys with human emotions and aspirations. Here human endeavour for happiness and success is brought to naught. Here human beings and deities are seen opposed to one another. Deities especially are seen to be biased, scheming, and taking advantage of human ignorance. In the Padmavati, – which partly is an Indianised version of the Greek story of ‘the golden apple’. – the three goddess. Shachi, Murajaa, and Rati, play with the lives of King Indranil and Padmavati. In the Tilottamaasambhav. Indra and his peers scheme against Sunda and Upasunda and cause their death. In the Meghanaadvadh, several deities conspire to end Meghanaada’s life. Though the outcome of deific scheming is not always a dark tragedy, yet the scheming plays a decisive role in the lives involved with it in those works. It should be mentioned that Madhusudan’s deities are not according to the Indian prototypes. They are all blends in varied proportions of Greek, Roman and Indian gods and goddesses.

Madhusudan’s worldview is a reconstruction of the views of the Hellenic world with some iota of Indian “Niyativaad” intermingled in it. It will not be perhaps unfair to mention here that Madhusudan’s life and literature ran parallel throughout and got influenced by each other. So the person Madhusudan and
Madhusudan the artist are often tantalizingly inseparable in our eyes. Thus the person imbued with renaissance spirit of freedom and learning unmistakably looked upon the world around with that perspective of free will and scholarly fame in mind. He even turned Christian in the fond wish, perhaps, of getting an easier passage to ‘Albion’s distant shore’, and becoming famous as a poet in England. His view for a world ideally was expansive and it transcended frontiers of time and space. In it can be traced reconstruction of English, ancient European (Greek and Roman), and ancient Indian world orders.