
Anandita Mukhopadhyay, *Children's Games Adults Gambit: From Vidyasagar to Satyajit Ray*. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2019. xvii+404 pages, ₹1105.

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Societies across the world devise distinct tools and techniques in order to cultivate an awakening among their young which is in tune with the needs and demands of the age. One of the most important tools that is utilised for shaping and cultivating children and the youth is the craft of storytelling. The storytellers use their distinct flair for the written word

to enter into the world of children and consciously carve out a path for their impressionable minds that enables the world of adults to establish authority and moral power over the child. The book at hand is about how childhood as a distinctive and extremely crucial period of life has been conceptualised and depicted by noted writers of Bengal during the eighteenth century.

The eighteenth century marked a distinctive phase in the history of Bengal, as it gave a momentum to the Bengal renaissance. This process implied the opening up of the metropolitan space of the West and a sudden yet prominent reorientation in the ways in which the world was interpreted and also in the ways in which the 'self' was reimagined.

It was 'childhood' as an important stage in human life that began to be seen as the most vital and crucial phase in the individual's life trajectory and which could be seen as the building block of a renewed understanding of the self and the world.

Children's Games, Adults' Gambits does not just stop at analysing how it was this important phase of childhood that was historically conceptualised by eminent writers of the Bengal renaissance but rather delves deep into the inherent gender and caste bias in such a depiction of childhood. The book reveals how the programme was gendered and carried an upper-caste male bias and endorsed a privileged space for boys, and when the girl did find a mention, it was in the form of either a 'chaste wife' or the 'frightening divine'.

The book is an extremely important contribution to the understanding of the works of the icons of the Bengal renaissance and its most prominent advocates such as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, Saratchandra Chattopadhyay and, in its later phase, Satyajit Ray. What makes the present work extremely engaging is the fact that it paves way for an engaging discussion between postcolonial critical literature and a rigorous feminist discourse. It is this broad, exhaustive and cross-disciplinary flavour of the book that makes it a resourceful read for researchers working on modern literary criticism, history, culture studies and also for those interested in the field of comparative literature.

The book contains six chapters, and the theme that runs across all of them is that the colonial period made the Bengali elite realise that something had drastically altered in the world around them and that it was time to reorient and redefine the dynamics of social relations, sociocultural *telos* of individuals and communities and make it the need of the hour to strengthen global knowledge networks that would enable them to

resist the traditional and indigenous structures. This meant that a cultural programme towards a new modernity began both through formal and informal social institutions. And within this project of modernity, working with children and young adults was of vital significance.

It is in this context that the book's first chapter, 'Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar' gains a special significance. It takes us into the minds of the two stalwarts of the Bengal renaissance and shows us how both of them dealt with the impact of a new colonial modernity on children's education.

Vidyasagar wanted school education to be universal and based on graded class systems – wherein children would be taught according to their distinctive age groups; be trained in cognitive, analytical and rational skills and be prepared to lead a meaningful life in the modern world. He celebrated the ideal of western masculinity and its physical prowess and saw them as being critical to the cultivation of a modern, educated Indian child. For Raja Ram Mohan Roy, instead of appearing like a 'perfect' and homogenous whole, the West appeared fragmented and dislocated. Therefore, his engagement with colonial modernity and its educational programme was more nuanced and layered. 'Had the west therefore appeared to Roy as harmonious territorial unit interconnected with webs of printed knowledge held together by the same idea, the same civilisation as the self-representations of the Occident constantly pitched the West? Roy's acquired binaries were crumbling, for he had obviously pitted the fragmented, localised geographies of the subcontinent against the connected Western culture? For Roy, India too was split into different lingual zones, but had no common thread to pull them all together'.

The second chapter of the book argues that children's fiction about imagined spaces by the Bengal writers were built on the idea that unlike before, the child's engagement with fiction was not anymore just about listening to stories as an interactive–communicative act but was increasingly becoming a private/isolated act of reading on one's own. Before the arrival of the print, stories would generally be narrated to children orally by adults. This offered the child a mental opportunity to travel to an alien land and explore a new world order all by himself/herself. The printed book in other words came like an invitation to both the sexes and thus insisted on the idea of a universal childhood. The colonial orientation to education where it was supposed to open up new windows of exploration for both genders became the cornerstone of the new educational vision, and this contradicted the ideals of rigid moralists who envisioned only training in domestic chores for girls.

In the third chapter of the book, the author tells us about how the notion of masculinity and the discursive nature of gender identities crept into the ways in which thinkers like Vidyasagar would look at the gender question in their works. He may have shown sensitivity to the issues of women but continued to resonate the ideas of Victorian masculinity that asserted that the 'weaker' gender sought the constant support and patronage of the 'strong and capable' men. However, it is also in Vidyasagar's later works that we see the conceptualisation of a 'gender-neutral' spatial world that professed equality between girls and boys.

The fourth chapter of the book is about how gender identity is explored in some commonly translated texts of that time and how notions of masculinity derived from the West were soon incorporated into the very discourse of a new kind of nationalism that was being shaped in India. This 'heroic', 'courageous' masculinity came to be seen in stark contradiction to the more 'feminine', 'submissive' qualities associated with the womenfolk. The world that is thus painted through these binaries of male and female is the one where a new kind of youth culture is set forth of a journey, where economic independence and political opinion, enjoyment of sports and cultivation of physical prowess become the defining features of the modern 'man'.

The chapter also takes interesting references from Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's works, where he builds on masculinity as a combination of fearlessness and nationalist fervour.

While the above chapters speak about the construction, imaginations and dissemination of a specific kind of childhood, the fifth chapter enables us to see how it was politicised and how there was a stark difference of pedagogy and narration in the stories meant for young boys and young girls. The 'home' was portrayed as the sacred space for a woman who is seldom seen as a child but always already a woman. There is an essentialism inherent in the way the role and purpose of men and women are defined. Nationalism and patriotic fervour are largely attributed to the 'strong' and 'capable' men, while women are pushed deeper into the home-world. The sixth chapter of the book 'Not Out of the Blue' paints the portrait of the legendary filmmaker Satyajit Ray as a product of the cultural and political renaissance of modern Bengal.

In the final and concluding chapter of the book, 'An Inconclusive Conclusion', the author attempts a very important journey at understanding how young girls would have read and perceived the texts that seldom saw them as leading protagonists or which were largely peopled by boys or men. How do we look at such a gender gap in the way literature unfolded itself during this time? The chapter also encourages us to reflect

whether this gap, as far as gender representation is concerned, can also be felt in contemporary texts and makes us wonder whether literature continues with its 'exclusionary' practices.

Anandita Mukhopadhyay's work is an extremely important and timely intervention into the understanding of Indian literature in the colonial period because it not only makes us familiar with the external contours of the same but also helps us understand the roots of contemporary gender and regional, ethnic and cultural exclusions that continue in the literary representations of self and the world. She argues how the Bengali elite's interaction with the modern West set forth into a motion a distinctive and crucial process of self-reflection and redefinition. It allowed the Bengali elite to expand their wings and look beyond limiting and parochial parameters of identity. Challenging traditional identity that defined existence in the pre-colonial/pre-modern world, the Bengali elite were broadly compelled to identify themselves with the linguistic frames of Sanskrit and Persian and yet feel compelled to articulate the newly gained knowledge through the vernacular medium. They were experiencing a complex and nuanced mental manoeuvre that compelled them to simultaneously discover the self, while also discovering the 'other'.

Anandita Mukhopadhyay's book is indeed an engaging and rigorous piece of work that is a timely and significant contribution to the world of literary criticism and the understanding of colonial literature in India.

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