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### The Unique Modernity of Aparajito

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#### Abstract:

*Cultural modernity in India was a response to British colonial subjugation. It was developed to counter the charges of barbarity against Indian society and to prove to the British that India was capable of ruling itself. The project of creating a modern national culture originating as a corrective measure was characterized by nativism and hegemony of the Indian elite. The philosophy developed by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay in Aparajito expresses a modernity that attempts to rectify the flaws of Indian national modernity. The unique modernity expounded through the novel ventures to counter the onslaught of colonialism on Indian culture with universal values of transcendentalism. By doing so it creates an ideology that is not only modern but eternal in its relevance.*

**Keywords: modernity, modernization, colonialism, anti-colonial, national culture, hegemony, universalism, transcendentalism.**

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Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Aparajito*, the sequel to his renowned work *Pather Panchali*, is considered an iconic modern Bengali novel. His künstlerroman narrates the tale of Apu- the hero-artist's formative years in the city of Calcutta. Set in the early 20th century British India, in his novel Bandyopadhyay promotes Apu's manifesto of artistic aesthetics expressed through his beliefs, and artistic inclinations for the purpose of carving out a unique cultural modernity of the colonial subject in response to colonial rule in the South-Asian subcontinent.

As Partha Chatterjee has elucidated in his work *Nation and its Fragments*, the particular kind of anti-colonial nationalist modernity constructed by the Indian middle class *bhadralok* in response to colonial subjection by the British was characterized by a two-fold negation. While it was markedly anti-West, it also asserted its difference from what was regarded as traditionally Indian. However, this disavowal of Indian tradition was not a rejection of the Indian identity. This particular cultural modernity identified itself as Indian but with the added layer of being 'modern' or not traditional. Its hegemonic aspiration to become both 'national' and 'modern' expressed itself through the

desire to construct an aesthetic form that was modern and national, and yet recognizably different from the Western, was shown in perhaps its most exaggerated shape in the efforts in the early twentieth century of the so called Bengal school of art.

[...] this agenda for the construction of a modernized artistic space was accompanied [...] by a fervent ideological program for an art that is distinctly "Indian," that is, different from the "Western." (Chatterjee, "Community" 8)

The ideological program mentioned above took place through the discursive construction of a space that was already independent and therefore immune to the onslaught of colonial rule. Chatterjee elaborated it thus-

Anticolonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within the colonial society well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power. It does this by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains— the material and the spiritual. The material is the domain of the "outside," [...] a domain where the West has proven its superiority and the East had succumbed. [...] nationalism declares the domain of the spiritual its sovereign territory and refuses to allow the colonial power to intervene in that domain. [...] The colonial state, in other words, is kept out of the "inner" domain of national culture; but it is not as though this so-called spiritual domain is left unchanged. In fact, here nationalism launches its most powerful, creative, and historically significant project: to fashion a "modern" national culture that is nevertheless not Western. ("Community" 6)

Notably, the creation of the modern national culture in the nation's spiritual domain was essentially a hegemonic project taken up by the Indian elite to 'challenge the "rule of colonial difference" in the domain of the state' (10). In order to circumvent the inadequacy in 'coevalness' of the colonized subject, a concept entrenched in Enlightenment thought that lent 'colonialist praxis' its 'ideological justification', the Bengali middle class or colonial elite engaged in discursive naturalization of their modern culture at the cost of subordinating subaltern deviations (Fabian 27). The compromise inherent in such discursive construction is explained thus

The hegemonic project of nationalism could hardly make the distinction of language, religion, caste, or class a matter of indifference to itself. The project was that of cultural "normalization," like, as Anderson suggests, bourgeois hegemonic projects everywhere, but which the all-important difference that it had to choose its site of autonomy from a position of subordination to a colonial regime (Chatterjee, "Community" 11)

Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's artistic manifesto that finds embodiment through the character of Apurba is an attempt to overcome this compromise through changing the destination of this modernizing project. Although originating from the movement of nationalist modernity, Bandyopadhyay attempts to reconcile this compromise by redefining the aspirations of Indian discursive modernity.

Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay places Apu in a relation of Derridean *différance* to the Calcutta elite at the helm of the nationalist project. Although Apu belongs to their community but unlike them he comes from a poor family and therefore has to face

considerable impediments to gain access to the institutions for manufacturing discourse. The author tries to find a solution to this problem by refusing to engage with the politics of the age. The identity that the hero of the novel acquires by birth makes him visible as a rightful inheritor of the nation within the nationalist discourse that had developed. But the difficulty he faces in accessing the colonial institutions of modernization is a result of the inner variation within his community that got exaggerated as a result of the institutional changes introduced by British rule. This placement creates the expectation of him contributing to the nationalist discourse and adding nuance to the discussion. But Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay thwarts such expectation by making his hero strikingly apolitical. While completing his education in Calcutta, Apu gains access to the 'institutions that eventually constituted [Indian] modernization' (Chakrabarty). But his acquaintance with the 'institutional or infrastructural change[s that led to] modernization' does not automatically predict the specific path his ideas of nationalism and modernity will follow (ibid.). Although the European Great War had its effect on its colonies and the colonias, Apu shows no sign of having a political opinion on the matter. In Calcutta

A war had started in Europe. Clothes had become impossibly expensive. He had only one good shirt- made of tulle- which he had to wash every other day. He could not go out until it was dry. Sometimes he was forced to put it on even before it had dried properly. The efforts of washing it in the morning made him doubly hungry. A plate of muri did nothing to help.

(Bandyopadhyay 90-91)

Albeit enduring such hardships, his discontent is not channelized towards anti-colonial struggle. Nor is he interested in such politics.

Walking aimlessly, one day he found himself near a tram stop. A hawker was selling newspapers, shouting out the headlines. There was fresh news about the war. Apu paid no attention. He looked idly at the people standing at the tram stop. (91)

His lack of concern with contemporary politics and consequently his own society becomes apparent through his response to a debate organized at his college. After listening to a debate themed upon contemporary social problems of India, Apu wonders: "What was the point in talking about subjects so trite and hackneyed?" (101). He plans to write an essay on something entirely new that none had thought of before him. Apu's thematic choice in his literary venture is indicative of the kind of modernist aesthetic morality that Bandyopadhyay envisages. The apoliticality that the author imbues Apu's character with is not of the kind that limits his concerns to the extent of his own selfish interest. Rather, it is the rejection of political factionality and a movement towards acceptance of universal humanity. The specific nuances of such rejection of politics is made apparent by making the two warring sides of the college debate represent the opposing attitudes in society towards colonial rule in India. On one side, there is Pranav who represents the traditionalists of Indian society.

Pranav read an article at a debate, arranged by their college union. It was called Our Social Problems. He had worked hard on it, using strong and difficult English words,

to describe a number of problems, such as the remarriage of widows, education of women, demands for dowries and child marriages. Each problem was presented from his own point of view, but what he said went in favour of the traditionalists. [...] to prove the utter futility of educating women and the necessity of marrying people off in their childhood. His friends and supporters provided him a deafening applause. (99)

On the other side of the debate the author places those that blindly worship the British rulers and ape their ideas and manners

Manmatha - who was at St Xavier's before- rose to offer the opposite viewpoint. Most boys looked upon Manmatha with a certain amount of awe, for he knew Latin. No one dared speak English in his presence, in case he found fault with their pronunciation, and jeered at them. He appeared to know all there was to know about Western etiquette, no one could question his authority. [...] When Manmatha began speaking, he spoke with confidence. His language was even stronger, his accent almost like an Englishman's. However, as things turned out, that was not enough to see him through. To start with, his arrogance and snobbery had made him very unpopular. Then, when he began to criticise age-old traditions, a number of students got angry and started crying: 'Shame! Shame!' and 'Withdraw! Withdraw!' Manmatha's own band of followers, on the other hand, began clapping loudly. As a result, things became so noisy that no one could hear a word of the concluding part of speech. (100)

Describing both parties with comic realism, Bandyopadhyay implies his rejection of both strains of ideology. Apu's rejection of both of these ideological trends is not impassive neutrality but a political statement of espousing a new ideology. Apu bases his aesthetic manifesto on the modernity that resisted colonial accusation of inadequacy by creating a new culture for India. Development of his artistic sensibilities is evidenced in the essay he writes to counter the debate

He called it The Call of the New. All things old and established were going to be changed. In literature, or social behaviour, or one's personal attitude... one would have to accept what was new and different. [...] Sometimes, he felt a strength within himself, and overwhelming emotion, that he knew could not be contained within. It had to be expressed, and once it was, it would wipe out all old and worn out ideas, and the trivialities of life. He would be the first to show the world the power of the New. (101)

The author avowedly signals his ideological allegiance by making his hero a disciple of Rabindranath Tagore- the literary giant of Indian modernity. Tagore has become a household name in Apu's life.

'Nirmal walked in with a packet in his hand, reciting lines from Tagore. [...] However [Apu] was perhaps more fond of Tagore's poetry than Nirmal. Whenever he found himself alone, he recited lines from his poems with great enthusiasm. (81)

Stemming from the modernist ideals popularized by the likes of Tagore, Apu's aesthetics do not reject Western thoughts in the manner of the traditionalists but appropriates and

assimilates it as part of world literature, thereby attempting to upend the idea of hierarchy inherent in colonial rule. Apu reads *Palgrave's Golden Treasury* for his own pleasure. But knowledge produced by the English passes through the critical scrutiny of appealing to his own tastes. It is not considered sacrosanct for the sole reason that it is authored by a European. Apu borrowed a book from the library, however

Back at home, he tried reading Gibbon, but he did not like it. There were far too many details. He got bored, and changed it the next day for a different book on history. (83)

He appropriates the colonial institutions of modernization like the public college and public library, enriches his mind through European knowledge, but maintains an irreverent attitude towards the sanctity imposed upon them. Pranav's criticism of Apu is indicative of just that [Pranav] mentioned names that Apu had never even heard of- Nietzsche, Emerson, Turgenev. But that was not all. Pranav was also a far more disciplined reader. Apu read what his eyes fell on. The library was packed with stuff that aroused his curiosity. Gases of the Atmosphere by Sir William Ramsay. Apu had to find out what gases there were. Extinct Animals by E. R. Lancaster. What animals were these? Worlds Around Us by Proctor. Oh, he had to read that one!

Pranav laughed at him. 'You read as if you are playing a game. If you want to be a serious reader, Apurbo, you have to bring order and method in what you read!' Apu tried but failed, and remained as impulsive as ever. (84)

Within the world of knowledge that Apu's mind has conjured, there is no distinct category of European and non-European. All knowledge belongs to the universal body of knowledge that has no inherent hierarchy. The German philosopher Nietzsche, American essayist Emerson, and Russian novelist Turgenev, all fall within the same league. The most conspicuous feature of his thirst for knowledge is its universalist aspirations. While the modernists of India wanted to create a culture that was at the same time modern but also identifiably Indian, the aesthetic modernity expressed in *Aparajito* has no such drive to establish itself as national culture. Although sustained through the sensibilities of an Indian boy, Bandyopadhyay's modernity seeks to blur the territorial boundaries and hierarchies of geographic and cultural location. When Apu yearns to cross his domestic boundaries to see the larger world, it is not a Eurocentric world that he desires to experience. Nor is his imagination of the larger world imbued with an implicit understanding of European superiority. His imagination is truly global- it encompasses Eastern lands like China, Japan, Penang and also Western places like California. We get evidence of the author's universalist attitude when Apu imaginatively surmises the journey of a mariner in an American cargo ship bound for Japan

Perhaps he had come through a typhoon near China, spent lazy afternoons in the palm groves of Penang, leant over the railing as he was doing now, and witnessed the fury of a wind-tossed, turbulent sea. [...] Had he seen Mount Fujiyama from the far distance and felt enthralled? Had he ever got off his ship to inspect the plants that grew on the coastline of

Japan? Would he know if any of the flowers back home also grew on Japanese soil? Had he ever seen the sierras of California [...]? (107)

When he dreams of the seafarer Tasman, he is not thought of as a European explorer but simply a braveheart adventurer. Similarly, Tasmania is not conceived as a part of the Western world but a mysterious and faraway land existing in between reality and fairytale. Apu thought of the old sea captain Tasman, caught in a terrible storm. He lost his mast, his sails were torn, but he continued to float for twelve days until he saw land. Yes, it was there... once called Van Diemen's Land, now Tasmania... The blue horizons beckoned him (107)

Bandyopadhyay's universalist ambition is most explicitly expressed through Apu's adoption of Ralph Waldo Emerson's philosophy of transcendentalism. The essay that Apu read in his college debate is emblematic of his aesthetic values and philosophic ambition.

Apu based his arguments on what he had felt himself. The joys and sorrows he had experienced every day for nineteen years, his memories of his childhood, the affection in his sister's eyes, his friendship with Ranu, Nirmala, Debu; bright sunny skies, or moonlit nights, days of hope and days of despair; these had all built something special in him, something that was both great and wonderful. (101)

Then he recited these lines from the transcendental philosopher Emerson:

I am the owner of this sphere  
Of the seven stars and the solar year. (103)

Transcendentalist values like essential goodness of all individuals negates the colonial excuse of civilizing the native, the existence of divinity in all humans nullifies the hierarchy between the colonizer and colonized, and the inherent unity between human and nature becomes an apt tool for contradicting the colonial and imperialist division of East and West. Since nature recognises no boundary between the East and the West, therefore the division between mankind-at unity with nature- is also unfounded. By embracing the universalism of transcendental philosophy the modernity expounded in the novels transforms from a corrective response to an anticolonial response.

The modernity that Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay extols is rooted in the lived experience of the imaginative rural Indian boy- a life that is so organically Indian that it is devoid of any European sensibility, but it is also the intimately Indian experiences of life that, out of its own volition and necessity, rejects the native timeworn traditions. Yet, deviating from the politics of the nationalist elite, unlike the modernity they constructed which was 'premised not on a conception of universal humanity, but rather on particularity and difference: the identity of the "national" community as against other communities', Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay modifies this modernity in *Aparajito* making it aspire towards universalism as opposed to nativism(Chatterjee, "Elite" 75). Recognition of universal humanity in every individual can be regarded as an attempt to nullify the hegemonic nature of the project of modernism that was being executed at the expense of the

subaltern. In hindsight, though such universalism is insufficient for authentic representation of the dominated and the dominant, within the nation and without, it is nonetheless a sincere effort at bridging the differences, especially, at a stage where postcolonial thought had not begun to materialize. Above all, by modifying the direction of his modernity Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay fleshes out a philosophy that is not only innovative but timeless in its relevance.

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