



Open Library of Humanities



Part of the Ubiquity  
Partner Network



Open Library of Humanities

---

## Utopian Art and Literature from Modern India

**How to Cite:** Castaing, A 2019 Embodying Utopia in 1935: Poetry and the Feminized Nation. *Open Library of Humanities*, 5(1): 8, pp. 1–21. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.385>

**Published:** 30 January 2019

---

### Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *Open Library of Humanities*, which is a journal published by the Open Library of Humanities.

### Copyright:

© 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

### Open Access:

*Open Library of Humanities* is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

### Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

---

## UTOPIAN ART AND LITERATURE FROM MODERN INDIA

# Embodying Utopia in 1935: Poetry and the Feminized Nation

Anne Castaing

CNRS/CEIAS, FR

[annecastaing@yahoo.fr](mailto:annecastaing@yahoo.fr)

---

This article aims to highlight the significance of the gendering of the emerging nation that literature in India's nationalist period generated, nurtured and reinforced. This article focuses on what Judith Brown (1985) identified as the 'decisive decade' (1930–1940) of the nationalist movement, when nationalist vision and imagery extensively penetrated people's imagination. It will examine two contexts (Hindi and Bengali), which are certainly different but in some ways interestingly similar, through the works of two poets, both 'independent' of both literary movements and political parties. Besides having been published the same year, Harivansh Rai Bacchan's Hindi collection *Madhusālā* (1935) and Jibanananda Das' Bengali poem *Banalatā Sen* (1935) are romantic works, somewhat distinctive to most literary production of this period, and both exploit in a rather similar way an evanescent female figure who continues to fertilize Hindi and Bengali imaginations. The purpose of this paper is to question the practice and the function of these romantic figures in nationalist imagination and to examine the issues of differences and similarities they raise regarding the vision of the utopian nation in both Hindi and Bengali contexts.

---

## Introduction

Over the past decades, a number of studies (Orsini, 2002; Trivedi, 2003; Chatterjee, 1993; Kaviraj, 1995; Chandra, 1992) have sought to determine that literature has not only conveyed but also rooted and reinforced anti-colonial and nationalist discourses in North India since the end of the nineteenth century. According to Sisir Kumar Das (1995), literature of that period even preceded the ideological discourses of political parties in formulating 'anticolonial patriotism', it being understood that the very idea of nation as an 'imagined community' had not yet been fully constituted.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Sudhir Chandra (1985) has shown that at the end of the nineteenth century, the fictions of the Hindi novelists Pratap Narain Mishra (1856–1894), Radha Charan Goswami (1859–1925) and Harishchandra Bhartendu (1850–1885) can bear witness to a repressed communal conscience rooted in representations and stereotypes.

As a matter of fact, these novelists reflected the collusion between language, nation and community, which makes Hindi and its literary formulation not only inseparable from their political context but also a part of it. As shown by King (1994), the development of Hindi, constructed as the national language of independent and secular India, clearly bears witness to the complexity of literary writing, as a language that has both emerged as the result of a will to adopt a pan-Indian idiom, and crystalized communal and regional tensions. The standardization of Khari Boli at the end of the nineteenth century imposed a drastic division, along religious lines, of what was known as Hindustani: on the one hand, Hindi adopted the Nagari script and a Sanskrit lexicon; on the other hand, Urdu adopted Nastaliq script and appropriated Arabic and Persian lexicon, evacuated by Hindi who thus implicitly claimed a Hindu identity. Paradoxically, King writes, the constitution of a pan-Indian identity found its roots in the affirmation of communalism, which the nationalist claims tried to conceal behind the ideal of a composite nation:

---

<sup>1</sup> According to Benedict Anderson, who perceived the Nation as a community constituted by a collective imaginary and defined borders, the nation 'is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign' (1983: 5).

The Hindi movement of nineteenth century north India expressed a Hindu nationalism whose essence lay in the denial of existing assimilation to cultural traditions associated with Muslim rule and the affirmation of potential differentiation from these traditions. [...] In other words, one can view the Hindi movement as part of a process of multi-symbol congruence in which Hindu supporters of Hindi strove to transform the existing equation of Urdu = Muslim + Hindu and Hindi = Hindu + Muslim into Urdu + Muslim and Hindi = Hindu. In the twentieth century this process resulted in the coining of slogans such as 'Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan', a three-fold assertion of the identity of language, religion, and motherland (1994: 15).

On the other hand, Bengali, as a language that embodies in many ways the cultural ethos of a specific region, also reflects the paradox of national unity. Bengal has been both the capital of the Raj and the 'base camp' of anti-colonial discourses. But simultaneously, it also gave birth to both a pan-Indian nationalist discourse during the Swadeshi Movement, especially after 1905 Partition, and a specific Bengali culture, clearly defined by a collective 'reconstructed' imagination and traditions (Sarkar, 1973: 244–69) and delineated 'cultural boundaries' (Kaviraj, 2003: 534–42). Both Bengali and Hindi, for different reasons, aimed to progressively construct a national literary discourse, not only through the denunciation of colonial oppression but also through collective local images and symbols that imbued the nationalist imagination with common history, culture and values.

This article aims to show that female figures, as a common symbol of the nationalist imagination (Chatterjee, 1993; Sarkar, 1987, 2001), can reveal the paradoxes of the utopian nation. This article focuses on what Judith Brown (1985) identified as the 'decisive decade' (1930–1940) of the nationalist movement, when nationalist vision and imagery extensively penetrated people's imagination. It will examine two contexts (Hindi and Bengali), which are certainly different but in some ways interestingly similar, through the works of two poets, both 'independent' of both literary movements and political parties. Besides having been published the same year, Harivansh Rai Bacchan's Hindi collection *Madhusālā* (1935) and Jibananda

Das' Bengali poem *Banalatā Sen* (1935) are romantic works, somewhat distinctive to most literary production of this period, and both exploit in a rather similar way an evanescent female figure who continues to fertilize Hindi and Bengali imaginations. The purpose of this paper is to question the practice and the function of these romantic figures in nationalist imagination and to examine the issues of differences and similarities they raise regarding the vision of the utopian nation in both Hindi and Bengali contexts.

### Literature and the utopian nation

If the emergence of an ideal nation in North India has been accompanied by a quest for 'unity' (Orsini, 2002; Pandey, 1990), it has also coincided with the emergence, in the literary domain, of spectacular images that penetrated people's imagination: Written in Hindi, the collection *Bhārat bhāratī* (1912), by Maithili Sharan Gupt (1886–1964), overflows with references to Hindu history and mythologies, recreating a collective imagined past and a common 'golden age' of India.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in rural north-east Bengal, *Mymensingh Gitika* (folk songs from the Region of Mymensingh) have been 'rediscovered' after Bengal's 1905 Partition, and made a 'vehicle of the Swadeshi propaganda' as a witness to local, indigenous creativity (Sarkar, 1973: 246–50). In the late-nineteenth century, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Anandamāth* (1882), a pioneering work of nationalist literature, used the image of the mother, firmly embedded in Bengali cultural landscape, to represent the 'motherland' endangered by colonial abuse but victorious (Sarkar, 1987). The adoption of a female figure in the nationalist discourse echoes Hindu mythologies where women intertwine with themes related to the community or, more broadly, the kingdom. This analogy also responds to the colonial obsession with women as a way to justify colonizers' 'civilizing mission', where (as notably shown by Spivak, 1988) the rescue

---

<sup>2</sup> 'All had but one language, one mind, one felling,  
The whole of Bhāratvarṣa was like a big town:  
Cities and villages like a net of muhallas'  
Maithili Sharan Gupt's *Bhārat bhāratī*, *Atīt khaṇḍ*, stanza 73; quoted and translated by Orsini, 2002: 198. See also 292–303.

of women from the practices of a Hindu patriarchal society became a commonplace of colonizers' discourses and, in a sense, legitimated colonial violence.

In *The Nation and its Fragments* (1993), Partha Chatterjee stressed the way British discourses have focused on women and also emphasized the nationalist response among Bengali reformers from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards: women, at the heart of the domestic field, must embody and preserve 'pure' traditions and values that could represent a weapon against colonization. Chatterjee showed that constructing women as metaphors of the nation, notably through education and the promotion of feminine values (such as patience and passivity), became a major challenge for the reformist movements of the Bengali Renaissance, and notably Brahmo Samaj, who claimed an indigenous cultural and spiritual superiority. Rabindranath Tagore's fictions, where 'reformed' female characters abound, demonstrate the nationalist, obsessive focus on women as 'testing grounds' of political and social reforms: the novels echo the division of the social space identified by Chatterjee between the 'home' (the local, the tradition, the spiritual) and the 'world' (western modernity perverted by materialism and individual profit) that Tagore's *Ghare baire* ('The Home and the World', 1916) literally dramatized.<sup>3</sup>

In Hindi writing, Premchand (1880–1936) also (but differently) resorts to female characters who embody not Brahmo's values but Gandhian ones. Patience, courage, honesty and compassion are the personal qualities of a number of female characters in his stories and novels. In 'The Thakur's Well' (*thākūr kā kuā*, 1924),

---

<sup>3</sup> 'The discourse of nationalism shows that the material/spiritual distinction was condensed into an analogous, but ideologically far more powerful, dichotomy: that between the outer and the inner. The material domain, argued nationalist writers, lies outside us – a mere external that influences us, conditions us, and forces us to adjust to it. Ultimately, it is unimportant. The spiritual, which lies within, is our true self; it is that which is genuinely essential. [...] Applying this inner/outer distinction to the matter of concrete day-to-day living separates the social space between *ghar* and *bahir*, the home and the world. The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activity of the material world – and woman in its representation' (Chatterjee, 1993: 120).

one of Premchand's most famous stories, Gangi, a female *dalit* villager, knows that stagnant water will make her husband sick and bravely decides to defy ancestral social prohibitions to bring him clean water from the Thakur's well. In addition to transgressing social and religious hierarchies she condemns them, denouncing the higher caste's dishonesty, greed and malice:

How are they any better than us? True, they are better at praising themselves. We don't go from street to street, proclaiming our worth: 'We are superior! We are superior!' If I happen to come to the village they eye me with lust, their heart burns with malice and yet they think that they're superior! (Premchand, 2017: 182).

Notwithstanding the risks taken by his wife, Gangi's husband drinks the foul water at the end of the story. Is the dirty water a metaphor for the forthcoming Indian society according to Premchand? No: in its spatiality that hierarchizes castes and communities, the village represented by Premchand becomes a way to condemn social inequalities and the oppression of the poor by the rich, the low caste by the high caste and woman by man; but the village is also the laboratory of an ideal society or a utopian nation where social change is made possible. For example, the fact that *dalit* women break silence in order to condemn male oppression in a very modern, feminist, language ('they merely order us to get the fresh water as if we're slaves', Premchand, 2017: 183) could be read in this story as both a strategy of critical consciousness and a utopian vision of independent India's society, where women play a crucial role, symbolic or actual (see also Premchand's *The Gift of a Cow* (2002)).

While 'The Thakur's Well' gave rise to a number of readings that identified a didactical Marxist discourse elaborated through social realism (Gajarawala, 2013), Gandhian utopia is also evident, as shown by Asaduddin (2017) and Dalmia (2002): the village is made an ideal space where the subaltern conscience can be empowered and where it becomes possible to overthrow caste, class and gender hierarchies. The village thus embodies the utopian nation which, by means of social realism, becomes possible. Besides, *thākur kā kuā* clearly demonstrates that social realism and nationalist utopia can fit together perfectly. Literature can formulate these utopias,

not only through didacticism but also through symbolic elements and romantic images rooted in an ideal land, promoting both national and community unity.

### ***Banalatā Sen* (1935): regionalizing the Motherland**

In the December 1935 issue of the new poetry magazine *Kavita*, founded two months earlier by novelist and poet Buddhadeva Bose (1908–1974), the young Bengali poet Jibanananda Das (1899–1954) published *Banalatā Sen*, a remarkable and enigmatic poem that was to become his most famous work. In this issue, poems by Rabindranath Tagore, Buddhadeva Bose himself and Samar Sen, rising stars of Bengali poetry, were also published. Among them, Jibanananda Das nevertheless remained a ‘poet apart’, in his biographer Clinton Seely’s words (1990): vivid and complex metaphors and darkness and shade inhabit his writings, which some have considered as *durbodhya* (‘complex’, ‘impenetrable’). Moreover, his melancholic and nostalgic poetry is both captivated by lost places and times and enchanted by the present, forging a close, organic relationship with Bengal’s fauna and flora as reminiscent of his childhood in Barisal, in east Bengal. This complexity is shown in his poetry by the recurrent figure of the wandering poet, a metaphor of both timelessness and introspection.

In the poem *Banalatā Sen* appears a romantic heroine, represented as both mysterious and peaceful:

হাজার বছর ধরে আমি পথ হাঁটিতেছি পৃথিবীর পথে,  
সিংহল সমুদ্র থেকে নিশীথের অন্ধকারে মালয় সাগরে  
অনেক ঘুরেছি আমি; বিশ্বিসার অশোকের ধূসর জগতে  
সেখানে ছিলাম আমি; আরো দূর অন্ধকারে বিদর্ভ নগরে;  
আমি ক্লান্ত প্রাণ এক, চারিদিকে জীবনের সমুদ্র সফেন,  
আমারে দুদণ্ড শান্তি দিয়েছিলো নাটোরের বনলতা সেন।

For thousands of years I roamed the paths of this earth,  
From waters round Sri Lanka, in dead of night, to seas up the Malabar Coast.  
Much have I wandered. I was there in the gray world of Ashoka  
And of Bimbisara, pressed on through darkness to the city of Vidarbha.  
I am a weary heart surrounded by life’s frothy ocean.  
To me she gave a moment’s peace – Banalata Sen from Natore.



The poet is fascinated by this woman whose beauty, embodied in her 'bird's nest-like eyes', is comparable to immemorial India:

চুল তার কবেকার অন্ধকার বিদিশার নিশা,  
মুখ তার শ্রাবস্তীর কারুকার্য; অতিদূর সমুদ্রের 'পর  
হাল ভেঙে যে নাবিক হারিয়েছে দিশা  
সবুজ ঘাসের দেশ যখন সে চোখে দেখে দারুচিনি-দ্বীপের ভিতর,  
তেমনি দেখেছি তারে অন্ধকারে; বলেছে সে, 'এতোদিন কোথায় ছিলেন?'  
পাখির নীড়ের মত চোখ তুলে নাটোরের বনলতা সেন।

Her hair was like an ancient darkling night in Vidisha,  
Her face, the craftsmanship of Sravasti. As the helmsman when,  
His rudder broken, far out upon the sea, his bearings lost,  
Sees the grass-green land of a cinnamon isle, just so  
Through darkness I saw her. Said she, 'Where have you been so long?'  
And raised her bird's-nest-like eyes – Banalata Sen from Natore.

The third and last stanza is clearly more intimate:

সমস্ত দিনের শেষে শিশিরের শব্দের মতন  
সন্ধ্যা আসে; ডানার রৌদ্রের গন্ধ মুছে ফেলে চিল;  
পৃথিবীর সব রঙ নিভে গেলে পাণ্ডুলিপি করে আয়োজন  
তখন গল্পের তরে জোনাকির রঙে ঝিলমিল;  
সব পাখি ঘরে আসে—সব নদী—ফুরায় এ-জীবনের সব লেনদেন;  
থাকে শুধু অন্ধকার, মুখোমুখি বসিবার বনলতা সেন।

At day's end, like hush of dew comes evening;  
A kite wipes the scent of sunlight from its wings.  
When earth's colors fade, the manuscript is readied  
And it is then, for embellishing the tale told, fireflies' glimmer:  
All birds come home – all rivers – all life's business dealing over.  
There remain only darkness and, sitting face to face with me, Banalata Sen  
(Seely, 2008: 130).

Published during Jibanananda Das' lifetime (much of his poetry having been published posthumously), *Banalatā Sen* has been widely read and received significant attention from its readership. Critics have intensively analyzed it and the poem gave rise to a number of interpretations, notably regarding the identity of Banalatā Sen, the places described by Jibanananda Das (Seely, 2008) and the enigmatic metaphors such as the 'bird's-nest-like eyes' or the 'cinnamon isle'. In other words, Banalatā Sen inhabits the Bengali imagination as a romantic figure located in beautiful yet enigmatic places and times.

Interestingly, Jibanananda Das elaborated in this poem a long progression focused on both ancient and eternal strategic places. Seely (1990) thus identifies a movement that goes from the oceans and the kingdoms' vastness to the figure of Banalatā Sen and her intimacy with the poet, as the outcome of his wandering:

All three [stanzas] taken together likewise exhibit comparable movement from large to small. From the world, an ocean, kingdoms, a city, we move, in the first stanza, to the local point, an individual woman. From a kingdom, a bustling commercial city, an island, we again move, in the second stanza, to that individual woman (1990: 121).

Moreover, whereas the first two stanzas, written in classical *payār* meter, outline a pan-Indian geography that goes from Vidarbha to the vast kingdom of Ashoka on the one hand, and from the Malabar coast to Sri Lanka on the other, the last stanza, written in free verse, is definitely located in a more regional (Bengali?) microcosm, in a land where kites, fireflies, rivers and Banalatā Sen coexist. This concluding stanza echoes the 'intimate' depictions of Bengal's biodiversity undertaken by Jibanananda Das as his trademark, in widely-known poems such as *Rūpasī bānglā* (1934) or *Ābār āśiba phire* (1934). The movement described by Seely suggests a continuity between one element and the other; more precisely, a crystallization of the largest (the country) on the smallest

(the woman). Banalatā Sen, with her welcoming and protective eyes, embodies both Bengal and India's landscapes and the poem evokes the ancient, intimate relationship that the poet has developed with the 'wide' land that stretches from North to South in the Subcontinent, but also with this female figure with a Bengali name.

The other enigmatic aspect of this poem is precisely this name: Banalatā Sen as a feminine icon echoes a feminized imagery globally recognized as Durga or Mother India, revitalized in Bengal during the Swadeshi Movement (Sarkar, 1973) and the remarkable figures in Tagore's novels. Nevertheless, both her name and her origins are quite ordinary: whereas 'Banalatā' ('forest vine') echoes the Dasian 'forest spirit', it is, when linked with 'Sen', a rather common name; Natore, in East Bengal, is a market town of no great interest. Of course, the name Banalatā Sen has given rise to many interpretations (Seely, 1990, 2008; Lago and Gupta, 1965), but let us simply underline its ordinary, popular and deeply Bengali character, embedded as fireflies and kites in the land of Natore or Barisal in East Bengal. Unlike feminine nationalist icons such as Durga and Mother India, the romantic, utopian figure of Banalatā Sen is thus rooted in a popular land, a cultural landscape and ethos identifiable by any Bengali, which is no longer national but regional, no longer global but local. In other words, it is an ordinary Bengali woman who, in the poem of Jibanananda Das, comes to embody the motherland.

This contrast makes clear the poem's purpose: to illustrate the ideal, utopian land (the emerging, independent nation), but to articulate it with the local, cultural ethos and imagination of Bengal's people. If nationalist utopia can resort to images and symbols referring to the greatness of the nation, it also has to promote its simplicity and its rurality. This is probably what the metaphor of the 'bird's nest eyes' refers to: the symbols and icons that accompany the nationalist discourses can be drawn not only from scholars' ancestral texts but also, and mainly, from local and rural life. Similarly, whereas Banalatā Sen embodies the united territory of India, she is nevertheless part of (and is defined by) a strong regional ethos, that of Jibanananda Das' rural Bengal.

Far from the didacticism of nationalist literature, Jibanananda Das' atypical romantic poem nevertheless resorts to metaphors that, in the context of 1935 Bengal, have strong connotations. The association between the female body (her eyes, her hair) and the national territory is far from exceptional, but critics have hardly focused on the political issues at stake in this poem. Similarly, the phenomenal success of the poem (Seely, 1990) bears witness to the significance of these connotations in Bengali imaginaries. By mobilizing both national utopia and the sense of regional belonging, Banalatā Sen became the romantic muse of modern Bengali identity.

### ***Madhuśālā*: reconstructing the community**

That same year, the publication of the Hindi collection *Madhuśālā* ('The House of Wine') by the young poet Harivansh Rai Bachchan (1907–2003) was likewise a major public success. In his autobiography (originally four volumes, translated and reduced to one volume by Rupert Snell, 1998), Bachchan remembers the tremendous popular echo of these poems which were first read during huge *kavi sammelan*, a real 'miracle' according to the poet himself who said he could find *Madhuśālā* on everybody's lips (1998: 227–229). The collection narrates the existential itinerary of a man, portrayed as a drinker, welcomed by a hospitable 'house of wine'. It thus promotes a hedonist representation of life, glorifying both intoxication and enchantment toward beauty, nature, sensuality, art and of course poetry. The collection is composed of 135 quatrains and the rhyme follows an 'aaba' structure. Its originality lies in the fact that every stanza ends with the term *madhuśālā* ('house of wine'). This configuration thus defines /ālā/ as a unique rhyme, which structures the collection's poetic universe around a set of elements: *madhuśālā*, *pyālā* (the 'cup'), *hālā* (the 'wine'), *madhubālā/ saqibālā* (the 'maid'), *pīnevālā* (the 'drinker'), etc. Such a prosodic configuration provides the poem with a unique musicality, that singer Manna Dey, in a 1973 recording, continued to popularize.

While the collection's title itself defines intoxication as a both thematic and aesthetic framework, it is accompanied with the fervour of creativity. In the first stanza, the collection, as the fruit of the distilled inspiration/grapes, is offered to the reader/drinker in its achieved form ('To you I proffer now the Cup', st. 1):

1  
 मृदु भावों के अंगूरों की  
 आज बना लाया हाला,  
 प्रियतम, अपने ही हाथों से  
 आज पिलाऊँगा प्याला,  
 पहले भोग लगा लूँ तेरा  
 फिर प्रसाद जग पाएगा,  
 सबसे पहले तेरा स्वागत  
 करती मेरी मधुशाला।

1  
 Distilled from all my hopes and dreams,  
 This wine is yours, my Dearest Dear;  
 To you I proffer now the Cup  
 Unsullied, and the liquor clear;  
 Before it goes to every nation, You, Goddess, taste my first libation;  
 My House of Wine shall honour you  
 Before the thirsty crowd draws near  
 (trans. Boulton and Vyas, 1989: 1).

As with *Banalatā Sen*, the tremendous romantic aura of *Madhusālā* interfered in many ways in the political or historical readings of the collection. Written at the heart of the Hindi literary movement Chāyāvād ('Shadowism'), *Madhusālā* indeed adopts most of its characteristics: romanticism, symbolism, lyrical depiction of love, beauty and arts, mysticism inherited from Sant and Sufi poetry, introspection and expression of the poet's intimacy. While Chāyāvād fully demonstrated that Hindi could be a poetic language (as shown by the quality of metaphors and figures elaborated in *Madhusālā*, see Trivedi, 2003: 990–99; Orsini, 2002: 88, 152–7), this movement was in decline by 1935: in this crucial historical period, literature was dominated by realism and concerned by the direct representation of oppressions and their condemnation, as shown by Premchand and the Pragātivād (Progressive movement) that had started to occupy the Hindi literary scene. *Madhusālā*'s obstinate romanticism, which focuses on human existence and where abound images drawn from both Persian and Sanskrit repertoires of love poetry, seems to repress the complexity of the political

and social context, and ignore the realist trend of this period. However, critics have hardly commented this paradox, as if a romantic collection could naturally emerge from a complex, political context.

Two elements should be highlighted to understand the symbolic and political impact of this collection: on the one hand, even though not an activist, Bachchan was a convinced Gandhian and was thus inhabited by a certain idea of the Nation, perceived as multireligious and built on the principles of equality and social justice. Bachchan had indeed joined the nationalist movement in the early 1920s after Gandhi's appeal; in 1948, he also published two collections in tribute to Gandhi, *Sūt kī mālā* and *Khādī ke phūl*. Besides, *Madhusālā* itself displays some key elements of the Gandhian discourse, such as the denunciation of untouchability, communalism and religious segregation:

50

O Muslim, Hindu – faith are two,  
But one the brimming cup you share;  
And one the drinking house, and one  
The wine which flows so freely there.  
By mosque and temple all's divided,  
All is neither 'mine' of 'thine';

But enmities thus forged are all  
Forgotten in the House of Wine  
(trans. Boulton and Vyas, 1989: 49).

57

None of the drunkars in this House  
Stand upon caste or social form;  
None says, "My Wine is touched!" "My Cup  
With a polluting touch is warm!"  
Here tipsy in the drinking hall  
Sit drinking freely great and small;  
Here wealth and rank sink drowned in Wine;

My House achieves a great reform  
(trans. Boulton and Vyas, 1989: 55).

Moreover, together with *Madhusālā*, in 1935 Bachchan published *Khayyām kī madhusālā* ('Khayyam's House of Wine'), a translation into Hindi of the *Rubā'iyāt* ('quatrains') of Persian poet Omar Khayyam (1048–1131), the famous English translation of which by Edward Fitzgerald (1899) had a tremendous echo in early twentieth-century India (Trivedi, 1993). Though Bachchan knew Persian (maybe not well enough), he used Fitzgerald's romanticized translation for his own Hindi translation, and this Persian-into-English poems were clearly an inspiration for his own *Rubā'iyāt* in their themes, form and structure. Nevertheless, he vernacularized these *Rubā'iyāt*, injecting in his own *Madhusālā* a number of indigenous elements, such as the reference to Vedic or Tantric rituals, which are desecrated by wine:

115  
Think not that poison was my choice  
Since Wine its ecstasy denies;  
I did not take a begging bowl  
Lacking a Goblet for a prize;  
To roast my heart and heart's desire  
I dwelt beside the funeral pyre;  
  
But look! For there beneath my feet  
The House of Wine submissive lies  
(trans. Boulton and Vyas, 1989: 104).

This stanza bears witness to the multiple transfers performed in *Madhusālā* between both traditions on the one hand, and the original text, its translations and its vernacularized rewriting on the other hand. Apart from relocating ecstasy in an indigenous, tantric context, the poet, made an ascetic, adopts a heretic position comparable with Khayyam's position. Similarly, this stanza is directly inspired by a *Rubā'iyāt* in Fitzgerald's translation:

*Omar Khayyam*

Ah, with the grape my fading Life provide,  
 And wash my body whence the Life has died,  
 And in a Winding-sheet of Vine-leaf wrapt,  
 So bury me by some sweet Garden-side  
 (trans. Fitzgerald, quoted by Trivedi, 1993: 67).

*Madhusālā*, 82

Not Ganga-water on my tongue  
 But drops of wine shall bring relief;  
 Lay on my dying lips at last  
 The Goblet, not the Tulsi leaf;  
 Let those who bear me to the pyre  
 And stand beside my funeral fire  
 Not chant 'Our God alone is great!'  
 But chant 'The House of Wine stands chief!'  
 (trans. Boulton and Vyas, 1989: 70).

In his autobiography, Bachchan wrote that he not only published both collections, *Madhusālā* and *Khayyām kī madhusālā*, in the same year but also wrote them simultaneously, in a sort of creative urgency. What urgency led him to recreate *Rubā'iyāt*, on the model of a twelfth-century poetic creation? What did he read in these poems or in this translation? I assume that this urgency itself can be understood as a 'sign' of the political substance of the collection: *Madhusālā* is made to both reflect and perform the vision of the unitary, welcoming, secular and egalitarian nation, not only as a poetry collection but also as a translation and an indigenization, even an 'hinduisation' of a text produced in a Muslim context.

*Madhusālā* indeed brings together traditions, including Sanskrit and Persian love poetry and religious rituals, arising from both Hindu and Muslim cultural landscapes in order to highlight their similarities (Castaing, 2012), in a context where it is indeed



urgent to promote unity within diversity. Many historians, such as Pandey (1990), Chatterjee (1993) and Chandra (1992), have shown the ambivalences that lie in the formulation of the national ideal during this pivotal period of modern India – an ambivalence that literature strikingly exposes. Similarly, Pandey (1989) stresses in Premchand's fiction of the same period both the urgent need to promote the Gandhian 'living together' in a context of religious tensions and rise of communalism, and the traces of 'Hindu chauvinism' that inhabit his writing. As shown by Pandey (1990) who analyzed the sources of communalism in South Asia, this paradox echoes the Hindu bias of Hindi language, which was conceptualised and perceived as the national language of independent and secular India.

Bachchan's Hindi is remarkably conscious of this issue, and his poetic skills clearly promote the hybrid character of his language: he not only uses a both sanskritized and persianized Hindi, but also draws upon synonyms collected from Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian lexicons, belonging either to a literary or a colloquial level: 'intoxication' can be either *mādarkā* (Sanskrit) or *mastī* (Persian); 'world', either *visva* (Sk) or *duniyā* (Arabic), 'fate' either *bhāgya* (Sk) or *qismat* (P), 'desire' either *abhil* (Sk) or *armān* (P), 'mad' either *madmātā* (Sk) or *divānā* (P). A stanza can accommodate a double lexicon: both *himmat* (P) and *sāhas* (Sk) refer to 'courage' in stanza 7; *bhāgya* et *qismat* both refer to 'fate' in stanza 98. In his language, Bachchan promotes the Gandhian national vision of unity within diversity, embodied by the hospitable House of Wine.

Similarly, the *sāqī*, a key figure of the collection, is used as a transitory character who articulates the utopian place and the world, like Banalātā Sen does in Jibanananda Das' poem. She embodies *Madhusālā* and shelters both the drinkers and the patriots' hopes. But whereas *sāqī* is in Persian a rather masculine character, Bachchan made both the term and the character feminine. Furthermore, he included some variants such as *sāqībālā*, *kumārī*, *sukumārī* and *priyatam*, which reinforce its femininity and, at the same time, the romantic character of *Madhusālā*. This feminization also justifies in some stanzas the references to the figures of *Mātribhūmi* ('Motherland') or *Bhāratmātā* ('Mother India'), as in stanza 45, associated to a semantic field of sacrifice, where the poet clearly adopts the nationalist rhetoric:

45

धीर सुतों के हृदय रक्त की  
 आज बना रक्तिम हाला,  
 वीर सुतों के वर शीशों का  
 हाथों में लेकर प्याला,  
 अति उदार दानी साकी है  
 आज बनी भारतमाता,

45

There is a precious rich red Wine  
 Made for a terrible carouse  
 From those heroic Indian hearts  
 Victims by patriotic vows;  
 Now generous the Motherland  
 Pours out such Wine with either hand;  
 Freedom is thirsty Kali, and  
 The altar is a hallowed House  
 (trans. Boulton and Vyas, 1989: 45).

*Madhusālā's* tremendous success from 1935 onward can be explained by its musicality and its rhythm as well as, as Harish Trivedi wrote, the 'succès du scandale, particularly among Hindi-Hindu readers by whom the Persian-Muslim joys of imbibing were seen as deliciously wicked' (1993: 56). But, as in *Banalatā Sen*, the glorified feminine figure also echoes, from Delhi to the Eastern Indo-Gangetic plain, the mythical figures and the allegories of the nation brought out by nationalist discourses. She indeed embodies a utopia of the Nation that sublimates both caste and class inequalities and communal threat, a threat which was for historically different grounds present both in Bengal and the Ganges plain.

## Conclusion

As a matter of fact, literature clearly informs of the purposes, the focuses, the symbolic assimilations and the paradoxes of ideological discourses, through the symbols or metaphors it draws upon, which inhabit and nurture imaginations and

forge imagined communities. In other words, literature can document the complexity of history, ideologies and mentalities. Both *Madhusālā* and *Banalatā Sen* reveal the appropriation of female figures and, more widely, of romanticism to embody the hopes and utopia of nationalism, which deeply permeated popular imaginations.

Clearly, the assimilation of female body with the land, the community or the nation is a commonplace in nationalist discourses and the fiction that accompanied or relayed them, from the mid-nineteenth century to the 'Partition fictions' that appeared in North India after 1947. Many academic (Das, 1996; Kiswar, 1985) and artistic works have discussed this issue and its consequences.<sup>4</sup> By appropriating women as nationalist icons, *Madhusālā* and *Banalatā Sen* also show that these figures reveal the contradictions of nationalist utopia, haunted by the promotion of unity in a context of great diversity; regional diversity and emotional attachment to cultural identities, as shown in Jibanananda Das' poem; and religious and community diversity, which poetry can certainly deconstruct but which the appropriation of a national language has clumsily taken in hand, at least at the beginning. Both poems, written against the 'realistic tide' of 1935 but involved in the depiction of a utopia, nevertheless carry and illustrate the issues and the difficulties of this pivotal and crucial period.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## References

- Anderson, B** 1983 *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Asaduddin, M** 2017 Introduction. In: Premchand. *The Complete Short Stories*, Asaduddin, M (Ed.), pp. xxiii–xlvi. New Delhi: Penguin.

---

<sup>4</sup> The Bengali feminist poet Mallika Sengupta (1960–2011), for example, undertook to deconstruct mythologies of womanhood by giving voice to those iconified characters who inhabit Bengali and, more widely, South Asian imagination. In the collection *O jāneman jībanānanda, banalatā sen likhchi* ('Dear Jibanananda Das, I Banalatā Sen, write', 2008), she appropriated Banalatā Sen's voice in order to deconstruct the archetypal figure of the woman perceived as a 'resting shore', a 'green-grass land' or a 'moment of peace'. See Sengupta (2012).

- Bacchan, H R** 1935 Khayām kī madhuśālā. In: *Baccan Racnāvālī*. 1. Delhi: Rajkamal.
- Bacchan, H R** 1935 *Madhuśālā*. Delhi: Rajpal and Sons.
- Bacchan, H R** 1989 *Madhushala, The House of Wine*, Boulton, M and Vyas, R S (trans.). New Delhi: Penguin.
- Bacchan, H R** 1998 *In the Afternoon of Time: An Autobiography*, Snell, R (transl. and ed.). New Delhi: Viking.
- Brown, J** 1985 *Modern India: The Origins of an Asian Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Castaing, A** 2012 Vernacularizing Rubaiyat: The Politics of *Madhushala* in the context of the Indian Nationalism. In: Seyed-Gohrab, A A (Ed.), *The Great Umar Khayyam: A Global Reception of the Rubaiyat*, pp. 223–249. Leiden: Leiden University Press.
- Chandra, S** 1985 Communal Consciousness in Late 19th Century Hindi Literature. In: Hasan, M (Ed.), *Communal and Pan-Islamic Trends in Colonial India*, pp. 180–195. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Chandra, S** 1992 *The Oppressive Present. Literature and Social Consciousness in Colonial India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chatterjee, P** 1993 *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Dalmia, V** 2002 Introduction. In: Premchand, *The Gift of a Cow*, Roadarmel, G C (trans.). pp. v–xvii. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Das, J** 1935 1968 *Banalatā Sen*. Kolkata: Signet Press.
- Das, S K** 1995 *A History of Indian Literature, 1911–1956. Struggle for Freedom: Triumph and Tragedy*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.
- Das, V** 1996 Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain. *Daedalus*, 125(1): 67–91.
- Gajarawala, T J** 2013 *Untouchables Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- King, C** 1994 *One Language, Two Scripts. The Hindi Movement in Nineteenth Century North India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Kaviraj, S** 1995 *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

- Kaviraj, S** 2003 The Two Histories of Literary Culture in Bengali. In: Pollock, S (Ed.), *Literary Cultures in South Asia. Reconstructions from South Asia*, pp. 503–566. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Khayyam, O** 1899 *The Ruba'iyat of Omar Khayyam*, Fitzgerald, E (trans.). London: Bernard Quaritch.
- Kiswar, M** 1985 Gandhi on Women. *The Economic and Political Weekly*, XX(41): 1691–1702.
- Lago, M M and Gupta, T** 1965 Pattern in the Imagery of Jivanananda Das. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 24(4): 637–644. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2051109>
- Orsini, F** 2002 *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920–1940. Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Pandey, G** 1989 *Between Two Worlds: An Intellectual Biography of Premchand*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Pandey, G** 1990 *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Premchand** 2017 *The Complete Short Stories*, Asaduddin, M (Ed.). New Delhi: Penguin.
- Sarkar, S** 1973 *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903–1908*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black.
- Sarkar, T** 1987 Nationalist Iconography Image of Women in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Bengali Literature. *Political and Economic Weekly*, 22(47): 2011–2015.
- Sarkar, T** 2001 *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation. Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism*. London: Hurst & Company.
- Seely, C** 1990 *A Poet Apart: A Literary Biography of the Bengali poet Jivanananda Das (1899–1954)*. Newark: University of Delaware Press.
- Seely, C** 2008 *Barisal and Beyond: Essays on Bangla Literature*. San Francisco, Chronicle Books.
- Sengupta, M** 2012 *Kavitā samagra*. Calcutta: Ananda Publishers.
- Spivak, G C** 1988 1994 Can the Subaltern Speak? In: Chrisman, L and Williams, P (Eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, pp. 66–111. New York: Columbia University Press.

**Trivedi, H** 1993 *Colonial transactions: English literature in India*. Calcutta: Papyrus.

**Trivedi, H** 2003 The Progress of Hindi part 2: Hindi and the Nation. In: Pollock, S (Ed.), *Literary Cultures in History, Reconstructions from South Asia*, pp. 958–1022 Berkeley: University of California Press.

**How to cite this article:** Castaing, A 2019 Embodying Utopia in 1935: Poetry and the Feminized Nation. *Open Library of Humanities*, 5(1): 8, pp. 1–21. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.385>

**Published:** 30 January 2019

**Copyright:** © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



*Open Library of Humanities* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

**OPEN ACCESS** The Open Access icon, which is a stylized symbol representing an open padlock.