



“Who loves me not, tho’ I do love him well”: Situational *Eros* in Select Poems and Letters of Michael Madhusudan Dutt to Gour Das Bysac

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Abstract: Out of the numerous letters written by Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-73) to Gour Das Bysac (1826-99), almost seventy are extant (Murshid 36). Select letters written by Madhusudan to Gour Das between 1841 and 1843 (and beyond) contain curious protestations of love which transcend Aristotelian *philia* and take up connotations of romance, making occasional, well-contemplated inroads into the realm of the erotic. One of the most earnest aspirations of Madhusudan in his college-days was to become a poet and compose exquisite verse in English; several of the English (and unpublished Bengali) poems which he composed as a student of Hindu College were addressed to Gour Das Bysac. Madhusudan composed acrostics in both English and Bengali which spelt out the name of this closest friend, and also feminised him in some of the poems and letters. Madhusudan’s feverishly romantic letters to Gour Das Bysac elicit curiosity regarding the stance adopted by the latter in the face of these passionate overtures. In his historical novel, *Sei Somoe*, Sunil Gangyopadhyay portrays this friendship with vivid detail, constructing Madhusudan as an impetuous lover who expresses his affection both in words and action, and Gour Das as a level-headed companion who endures these advances stoically, remaining unresponsive and non-reciprocating on the whole. This article will attempt to, first and foremost, throw light upon the nature of emotions which Gour Das harboured for Madhusudan, based on his letters to and reminiscences of the former. Thereafter, the article shall study the friendship between these two Bengali gentlemen from the 19th century with respect to the theory of homosocialism propounded by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her influential study *Between Men*. Ultimately, acknowledging the impossibility of assigning any particular cognitive label to this friendship, this article will draw attention to its situational quality with reference to the works of Jeffrey Weeks, ultimately analysing the socio-cultural and intellectual factors which contributed to the situational *eros* in this passionate friendship.

Keywords: Madhusudan, Gour Das, homosocial, situational, epistolary, homoerotic

“G-o! simple lay! and tell that fair,
O-h! ‘tis for her, her lover dies!
U-ndone by her, his heart sincere
R-esolves itself thus into sighs!”ⁱ



Introduction

In a letter dated July 1861, Michael Madhusudan Dutt wrote to his friend from his Hindu College days, Rajnarayan Bose: “You may take my word for it...that I shall come out like a tremendous comet and make no mistake.” (Dutt 330) Widely celebrated in Bengal as a poet of epic grandeur, august dignity and a singular repertoire as resplendent (and oftentimes as inaccessible) as a comet, Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-73) is a pioneer and maverick who revolutionized the literary milieu of 19th century Bengal. A highly controversial figure in his own lifetime owing to both his literary and personal exploits, the legacy of Madhusudan survives chiefly in the form of his contributions to Bengali drama, inception of the sonnet and the *amitrakshar chhanda* (blank verse) in the Bengali poetic tradition, and the composition of his ambitious epic, the *Meghnadvadkavya* (The Slaying of Meghnad) which constitutes a highly stylized, individual and idiosyncratic adaptation of an episode from the *Ramayana*. However, his personal correspondences with friends and colleagues throughout his lifetime have received fewer studies, interpretations or literary treatments compared to their seminal role in furnishing biographical details about the poet-dramatist’s life. While several biographies of Madhusudan have culled a lion’s share of their content from his letters, it was a major work of historical fiction by Sunil Gangyopadhyay, *Sei Somoe* (Those Days)ⁱⁱ which drew popular attention to a remarkable aspect of Madhusudan’s life to which his fervent epistles stand eloquent testimony: his friendship with Baboo Gour Das Bysac.

Gour Das Bysac (1826-99), who went on to become a Deputy Magistrate, a Fellow of Calcutta University and a member and general secretary of the Bengal Royal Asiatic Society (Sengupta 140), was a batchmate of Michael Madhusudan Dutt’s at Hindu College. Having made Gour Das’s acquaintance in 1840, Madhusudan could never forego this friendship for the rest of his days (Murshid 36). In his *Reminiscences of Michael M. S. Datta*, Gour Das writes:

My acquaintance with Modhu began in 1840, when we were in the 6th class of the old Hindu College. It soon ripened into warm friendship. After that, we were all along together (with Bhoodeb, Sham and Bancoo) in every class, in every promotion even in the long leap that we (five) had from the 5th to 2nd class, Senior Department (Basu 642).

Out of the several letters that Madhusudan wrote to Gour Das, almost seventy are extant (Murshid 36) and amidst the plethora of subject matters which people the pages of these passionate epistles, what stands out is Madhusudan’s fervent love for Gour Das; this love seems to transcend Aristotelian *philia*, connote sentiments of Greek love and betray the subtle presence of homosocial and homoerotic desire, while at the same time evading all attempts at labelling, owing to its abrupt, fleeting, evasive and non-committal nature of expression. These letters are complemented by a collection of English poetry composed by Madhusudan in his college days, many of which are dedicated to Gour Das, addressed to him as verse epistles and deploying the acrostic form to spell out his name – all of these literary endeavours hinting potently, yet tantalisingly at the Wildean love “that dare not speak its name.”



Sunil Gangyopadhyay (1934-2012), one of the foremost novelists of 20th-21st century Bengal, depicts Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Gour Das Bysac as characters in *Sei Somoe*, and he portrays this friendship as imbued with shades of affection that tend to invest “male friendship” with homosocial connotations. Though Gangyopadhyay was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for *Sei Somoe*, his literary endeavour also courted controversy with critics castigating him for supposedly libelling a prominent Bengali poet with seemingly nefarious suggestions about his character. In a review of *Sei Somoe*, Malashri Lal wrote:

I refer to the sketch of Michael Madhusudan Dutt as an irascible debauch indulging in the pleasures of the flesh to liberate the poetry trapped in him. Not only are there unseemly suggestions of homosexuality...What compulsions of the narrative led Sunil Babu to embroider such fiction about Dutt? While one need not be sanctimonious about the private life of public figures, one need not be prurient either. (Lal 245)

A careful perusal of select poems and letters written to Gour Das by Madhusudan renders the question asked by the critic redundant, since these documents may function as possible, consummate literary evidence for an age-old tradition of homosocial/homosexual longing and affection that found expression in the multiform literary creations of the likes of Horace, Shakespeare, Tennyson, Whitman and Wilde. Therefore, this article will examine select poems and letters of Michael Madhusudan Dutt addressed to Gour Das Bysac which seem to exemplify a “situational homosexuality” as theorised by Jeffrey Weeks, and corroborate undertones of male homosocial commerce as propounded by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, with occasional references to *Sei Somoe* by Sunil Gangyopadhyay.

“Belovedest. / Most dearly-loved and much-valued Friend”: Madhusudan’s Protestations of Love

The letters of Michael Madhusudan Dutt to Gour Das Bysac are of varying length, and they make for a particularly engaging read due to their unpredictable shifts in tone and mood, with the poet waxing eloquent, displaying irascible flippancy, conveying petulant complaints or dissolving in feverish protestations of love at every random juncture. While Madhusudan was quite a gregarious young man within his personal coterie of friends at Hindu College, he was reserved and introverted with most of his other batchmates (Basu 661). However, he seemed to have forged an equation with Gour Das which surpassed his other friendships, and facilitated candid epistolary expression of exuberance or displeasure under any circumstance. Madhusudan had written to Gour Das from Kidderpore, Madras, Calcutta or Versailles while the latter was staying in Burra Bazar, Calcutta, Balasore, Khulna or Bagerhat respectively (Murshid 36).

An initial study of the salutations of Madhusudan’s letters to Gour Das could function as a suitable foundation stone for queering this correspondence. A sequential perusal of Madhusudan’s letters to Gour Das written between 1841 and 1842 reveals a sine curve in the intensity of passion woven into the salutationsⁱⁱⁱ. While Letter 1 begins with “My dear friend”, Letters 2, 3, 4 and 7 progress to “My dear Gour”, suggesting growing familiarity through the spontaneous adoption of the sobriquet “Gour”. Letter 6 shifts to an unexpected display of mock reverence and emulation of formal 19th century epistolary models in colonial Bengal:



The Baboo M. S. Dutt's compliments to the Baboo G. D. Bysac, and begs to inform him that he called here at sacrifice of time – and some money too – to have the pleasure of the Baboo G's company. (Dutt 277)

Letters 10, 11 and 14 suggest growing emotional involvement with the use of “my dearest Gour” and “My ever-beloved Friend” respectively. While the initial letters were much briefer in length, they have begun to expand markedly Letter 8 onwards, with their content undergoing proportional augmentation in their passion quotient (more on this later). The rising curve stabilises for a while as one encounters salutations of a consistent degree of passion viz. “My dear Gour Dass” (Letter 17), “My dear friend” (Letters 18 and 19), “My dear Gour” (Letter 21) and “Ever beloved Friend” (Letter 24). The culminating moment of these salutations comes in Letter 26 composed in 1843 which begins with “Belovedest. / Most dearly-loved and much-valued Friend,” making a compulsive suggestion of homosocial, even homoerotic passion owing to the romantic flourish at the onset of the letter. Subsequently, there comes a curious decline in the passion quotient in salutations till Letter 35, with these constantly alternating between “My dear friend” and “My dear Gour”, thus completing the aforementioned sine curve. Letter 26 onwards, it is observed that the ebullient passion for Gour Das seems to ebb, while the friendly emotions and longing for company remain constant, thus perhaps nodding at the cementing of a warm, lifelong friendship sans the initial romantic element. There is a versatile usage of salutations in the remaining letters to Gour Das, such as “My dearest friend” (Letters 36, 37, 44), “My dear Bysac” (Letter 38), “My dear Gour” (Letters 41, 47, 48, 49, 51-56), “My dearest Gour Dass” (Letter 45) and “My dearest Gour” (Letter 46). This versatility is non-existent in Madhusudan's salutations in letters to his other friends such as Bhoodeb Mukhopadhyay or Rajnarayan Bose, whom he addresses simply as “My dear Bhoodeb” (Letter 39) and “My dear Raj Narain” (Letters 58, 59, 60, 61) respectively.

In February 1843, Madhusudan Dutt was found absconding from Hindu College, leading to much anxiety among his friends and family. In a couple of days, it became common knowledge that he had taken refuge with the clergy at Fort William with the desire to convert to Christianity. Madhusudan's baptism took place on 9th February, 1843 at Old Mission Church, Calcutta and he was subsequently cut off from his friends and family due to ideological conflict, controversy and unwieldy feelings on both sides (Som 32-39). Impatient with his ostracism and resultant solitude, Michael exhorts Gour Das to hire a *palkee* and travel to Old Church, Mission Row to meet him (“Come, brightest Gour Dass, on a hired Palkee/ And see thy anxious friend M. S. D.”: Letter 22). What further renders this letter remarkable is the single-line epigraph “O Gour! Doodeen char deenetaye ato!!!” (“O Gour! Such upheaval in two to four days!” – my translation); this happens to be the singular occasion when Madhusudan includes an epigraph in a letter to a friend, the lyrical quality of the line speaking volumes for the turbulent emotions in the poet. While the “upheaval” could be assumed to be alluding to the controversy surrounding Madhusudan's conversion to Christianity, it may also imply the keen pangs of separation from a friend which has become almost unendurable over a mere span of two to four days. The latter interpretation seems to bring in overt suggestions of romantic shades to the love which Madhusudan felt for Gour Das – one which an Indian audience is most likely to associate with *viraha*, a state of abject suffering owing to a period of distance from the beloved, celebrated in Indian Vaishnav lyrics.



A brief study of Madhusudan's terms of adulation denoting fraternal love for Gour Das will further underline the possible romantic and homosocial tinges to the love which he felt for the latter. Addressing Gour Das as "**Baboo** G. D. Bysac" (Letter 6), as mentioned previously, seems to be a quasi-humorous effort to import formal, adult epistolary linguistic usage into the comparatively young-adult space of college-day friendship through the adoption of the honorific "Baboo". The spectrum of emotions latent in these terms oscillates between the dramatic ("**most noble** Gour": Letter 12) to the playful irreverence common to male comradeships and fraternities ("You are one of the **best dogs** in creation, an honour, Sir, to human nature": Letter 54). There is also appreciation for Gour Das's geniality through candid statements such as "You are a gentleman" (Letter 21) and "I used to call you long ago – "**an amiable gentleman**" (Letter 8). However, a particular statement in Letter 1 (1841) requires especial contemplation:

You are *such a boy* that you scarcely deserve any favour at all. You see how many times you have disappointed me, but however, I am glad to see you at any time you please (My italics)

Gour Das Bysac was fifteen years old in 1841, and though being referred to as a "boy" does not qualify completely as a semantic anomaly (modern vocabulary would suggest terms such as "child" or "adolescent") the statement seems to suggest infantilisation of the younger Gour Das; Madhusudan steps into the role of the older *erastes* in a pederastic relationship who harbours similar patience in the face of any "misdemeanour" on the part of his student-beloved, the *eromenos* (typically boys of early teenage), and extends to him life-lessons with affection. Reinforcing the possibility of pederastic sentiment, Madhusudan writes to Gour Das in Letter 20: "Had you been my pupil, Gour, – depend upon it, I would whip you to death or do something worse." Homoerotic affection is further suggested when in Letter 23, Madhusudan qualifies Gour Das's previous letter with almost sensuous adjectives such as "kind", "sweet" and "*balmy*" and further states: "I am so happy to think that I shall see *sweet you...*", almost as one is likely to address their lover. (Dutt 286)

It is evident from Madhusudan's letters that he regards his correspondence with Gour Das to be of paramount importance. Being a prolific author of letters himself, Madhusudan seems to be incessantly anticipating replies from his friends, especially Gour Das, and does not shrink from remonstrances when he is disappointed ("...it is always an awkward task to write to persons from whom we receive no answer": Letter 16). Madhusudan's complaint is melodramatic and ultimately hilarious when he writes to Gour Das from Madras on 22nd November 1849:

My dear Gour,/ Are you all dead! Or have I by some unintentional act or other offended you? I really do not remember having received a single line from you or Bhudeb for the last 3 months! *Et tu Brute?*...

P.S. Mr. Bhoodeb Mookherjee is a humbug, so is Mr. Soroop Banerjee, so are you all! Bad luck to ye! (Dutt 298)

Madhusudan seems to be constantly unsettled by the length and frequency of Gour Das's letters, which are not to his satisfaction^{iv}. He constantly exhorts his friend to write to him (Letters 26, 38), makes it known that it is a matter of personal agony to him if he is uncertain whether his letters reach him (Letter 17)^v and apologises gracefully and fervently in the event of being unable to answer his



letters (Letters 23, 31). The poet's exultation on receiving a substantial letter from Gour Das is also robust: "Your thundering letter of Saturday last came over me like a thunderbolt: Oh! with what a beating heart I read it!" (Letter 8) Madhusudan states unambiguously in Letter 19, "I like to read long letters from *you*" and then goes on to make a curious and emphatic statement in the very letter:

I read your letters with so much attention that I can repeat them (each of them) word per word, tho' you couldn't recollect something of a letter of mine last evening at the M.I.'s! (Dutt 284)

Modhu-Kobi's claim that he can quote from memory the contents of Gour Das's letters betray a sense of obsession with them, bordering on a Poesque monomania, and this further illustrates how immeasurably precious these epistles were to him. Gour Das reminisces that while they were students at Hindu College, Madhusudan would see him frequently at his house (Basu 642). Co-existing with meetings with Gour Das in academic and personal spaces, the letters seemed to provide Madhusudan with a fragile sense of reassurance that he would not be forgotten by his closest friend^{vi}.

Amongst all of Madhusudan's batchmates and friends at Hindu College, Gour Das Bysac decisively emerges as his uncontested favourite. In Letter 18, the budding poet writes how he intends not to attend college till the return of his most revered Professor David Lester Richardson, whom he refers to as D. L. R. He is mindful of the fact that:

This will do me no harm – none whatever – except one – a mighty one – that is it will deprive me of the pleasure of your company, of which I am passionately fond – as I am of *you*. This sounds like flattery *but it is not so*. It is *truth*. There is not in this wide world a soul I prize so much as thine... (Dutt 283)

Apart from vouching unparalleled affection for Gour Das, Madhusudan also expresses a vigorous desire for constant companionship, any exception to which is likely to cause him significant discomfort. Previously, when Madhusudan had been instructed by his father to return to the ancestral seat for an indefinite period owing to the former's desire to convert to Christianity, the promising student of Hindu College laments with remarkable affect the impending separation from Gour Das:

Had I had the power of opening my heart, I could then show you the state of my feelings! Language cannot point them! To leave the friends I love – particularly ONE – (imagine who that 'one' could be) my poor heart can't but break!...I wish I could see you; – but Oh! That cannot be! – I am not allowed! dear, dear Gour! dearest friend! do not forget me! (Dutt 278)

A delicate sado-masochism becomes evident as Michael seems to savour the ineluctable pangs of longing that will succeed his departure from Calcutta; he is able to muster the requisite rhetorical strategy to construct an air of suspense around the identity of the "one" which is already known, thus conjuring up an air of romance around a situation of genuine anxiety.

Writing to Gour Das from Tumlook, Madhusudan enunciates how all his thoughts are fixed on Calcutta, and that "all his dreams of pleasure – that is – about your visiting my house – and my visiting yours, have vanished like Alnaschar's Castle!" (Letter 14) It is almost unsettling to witness this rapid foreshortening of a term as universal as "dreams of pleasure" into a prospect as particular



and exclusive as exchanging visits with Gour Das Bysac. In Letter 11, Michael states that the pleasure which he derives from meeting Gour Das is “something more exquisite than the vulgar world ‘pleasure’”. Launching himself into fervent encomium of Gour in Letter 18, Michael writes:

Never did I dream of finding a heart so true, so susceptible of *true friendship* as yours, in this deceitful world of ours (Dutt 282).

Apart from being convinced of Gour Das’s excellence of character, Madhusudan also seemed to draw poetic inspiration from this wonderful young man. In Letter 18, he writes:

Know, then, that I attempted lately to write some verses on a certain subject, but could not write a single line in about four hours. I have either left my Muse with you or she is *no more* (Dutt 282).

The acquisition of poetic inspiration from Gour Das is further corroborated in a poem of Madhusudan’s composition where the latter quips “Gour excuse me that in verse/ My Muse desireth to rehearse/ The Gratitude she oweth thee;” (Dutt 483). It seems evident at this juncture that Madhusudan’s love for Gour Das not only manifests itself through an uninterrupted craving for company and vigorous expression in his epistles, but also assigns to the young student of Hindu College an exalted, Parnassian pedestal in his psychic landscape, juxtaposing him constantly with his Muse.

Madhusudan dexterously incorporates the presence of Gour Das into his early English poems, frequently acknowledging his verses to this “brightest” “fellow collegian” and composing several acrostics which spell out his name. The acknowledgement section of the “The Fortunate Rainy Day” states that it was “written at the request of my beloved friend, Babu Gour Doss Bysack Mohashoy” (Dutt 478)^{vii}. “Sonnet (Composed on the Ochterlony Monument)” is “Dedicated, as usual to G. D. Bysac” (Dutt 481). A verse epistle addressed to Gour Das, entitled “TO G. D. B.” articulates something like a passionate lover’s complaint: “There is a lad – his name I will not tell, / Who loves me not, tho’ I do love him well” (Dutt 482). Poem 38, entitled “AN ACROSTIC” spells out the name “GOUR DAS BYSOC” and it is almost Petrarchan in its eulogy of a fair addressee. Madhusudan has also composed an unpublished acrostic in Bengali that spells out the name of Gour Das^{viii} (Dutt 389). Poem 12 is extraordinary inasmuch it contains implications of erotic proximity with Gour Das, and it also conjoins the subtle erotic sentiment with an intellectual pursuit:

I thought I shall be able,
Making thy lap my table
To write that not with ease: –
But ha! Your shaking
Gave my pen a quaking; –
Rudeness ne’er saw I like this – (Dutt 483)



Madhusudan sedulously portrays rhetorical brilliance and literary versatility through his poems and letters as far as his affection for Gour Das Bysac is concerned, alternating between covert nods at and stolid proclamations of his emotions. Two letters in particular bear testimony to Madhusudan's turbulent emotions for Gour Das inasmuch as both mention the word "love" with undisguised directness. On 27th November, 1842, Madhusudan writes to Gour Das:

It is the hour of writing love-letters since all around, now, is love-inspiring. But alas! the heart that "Melancholy marks her own" imparts its own morbid hues to all around it: and how can I, the most wretched being, on whom yon "refulgent lamp of night" now shines, write love letters or gay letters? (Letter 21)

It is especially at this juncture that Madhusudan appears to lay bare the character of emotions that have spearheaded this entire epistolary endeavour – there is a strong suggestion that his letters to Gour Das are intended to be "love letters" but he fails to ensure this owing to his lugubrious state of mind. The most extraordinary protestation of love is encountered in Letter 24 where Michael writes:

"Can I cease to love thee! No!" –said the poet to his mistress, but so say I to a dearer being, a friend, a true (which is very rare), a true friend! (Dutt 286)

The poetry of Michael Madhusudan Dutta which celebrates his affection for Gour Das Bysac plays a role contrary to that of the letters. An acrostic upholds the possibility of clever concealment of the identity of the beloved within a syntactical labyrinth which may be traversed through a vertical scan of the first alphabets of every line. The letters, constituting a personal correspondence, present a greater opportunity for the uncensored expression of romantic feelings. Predominantly, Madhusudan refers to Gour Das as a true friend, but a catalogue of elements namely, rhetorical usage, poetic flourish, versatility of address, obsessive tendencies, drama, fear and insecurity, oblique sado-masochism and subtle feminisation of the addressee seems to suggest a deeper romantic longing which partakes of the homosocial and the homoerotic.

Gour Das Bysac: Literary Representations and Reminiscences

Perusing Madhusudan's poems and letters to Gour Das engenders several obvious curiosities regarding the addressee of these impassioned epistles, chiefly the nature of his emotions for Madhusudan, the expression of these emotions and the character of his friendship with his avowed admirer. In *Sei Somoe*, Sunil Gangyopadhyay portrays this friendship in vivid detail, drawing strongly from the poems and letters discussed in the previous section. Young Madhusudan is a brash, impulsive poet who basks in the ephemeral joys of inebriation and churns out poetry in elocutionary trances. Utilising the licenses offered by the genre of historical fiction to the fullest, Gangyopadhyay provides his readers with a precise description of the collegian Gour Das:

Gour was a fair, slim youth with tapering eyes, joined eyebrows, and imbued with feminine grace in the lines of the lips and chin. He draws everyone's attention even within a crowd (Gangyopadhyay 29) (My translation) ^{ix}

This brief catalogue of Gour Das's remarkable personal charms seems to call to mind the description of young Dorian Gray who had so mesmerised the painter Basil Hallward ^x. Such a description also



situates Gour Das in the same category with mythical men of legendary beauty who had attracted the love of male deities, namely Ganymede and Hyacinthus, constructing him as an object of homoerotic desire. In *Sei Somoe*, Modhu (Madhusudan) drinks on the Hindu College grounds and vociferates his dislike for Professor Kerr^{xi}, while occasionally reciting at the top of his voice from his own poetic creations. Modhu's friends are of the unanimous opinion that none but Gour would be able to pacify him, and their words are corroborated when Modhu is diverted from his tipsy harangue at the sight of his beloved friend. What ensues proves to be embarrassing for Gour:

Modhu jumped up at the sight of Gour. Embracing him tightly in his arms, he planted two kisses on his cheeks and cried, "Gour! Gour! How long it has been! I have come today only for you! I can't even see you at the Mechanical Institution these days!"

Visibly embarrassed, Gour attempted to free himself from the embrace, but Modhu would not let go. He was slightly taller than Gour, and was physically strong despite being thin; he was hugging Gour tightly to his chest like an inebriated Bhima (Gangyopadhyay 29) (My translation)

Owing to Gour's intervention, Modhu gives over his drunken, chaotic behaviour and decides to travel to his Kidderpore residence with his friends Bhudeb, Beni, Buncoo, Ganga, and undoubtedly Gour Das. When the band of young men are about to depart after a few frolicsome hours, Modhu becomes instrumental in ensuring that Gour stays on: "No, Gour won't leave right now. He's going to spend the day with me. Perhaps even the entire night-who knows?" (Vanita and Kidwai 337)^{xii} When Gour stays back, Modhu remarks ecstatically, "Now there's just you and me, me and you. Gour and Madhu, Madhu and Gour. Aaah! What bliss!" While Gour is disconcerted by certain snide observations on Modhu's acrostics made by their batchmates, the young poet is nonplussed, and gifts his friend with jars of pomatum and lavender water (Vanita and Kidwai 339). Repeatedly vouchsafing vigorous and exclusive love for Gour, Modhu gradually leads his charming friend to his bedroom and entreats him to "honour his poor cot with the sacred dust of his feet" (Vanita and Kidwai 341). Speedily leading to the climactic moment, Modhu makes an attempt to rest his head in Gour's lap and laments, "Why, why, why, Gour? I love you *so*, why don't you love me back? Why do you spurn me? I write so many poems about you, but still I can't win your heart. Today, I've got you all to myself after such a long time." This finally elicits a forceful rejection from Gour and the episode draws to a close with Modhu accepting this response with a modicum of stoicism. Gangyopadhyay depicts Gour Das Bysac as resistant to Madhusudan's advances, though neither unavailable to him in terms of friendly company, nor insensitive to his romantic overtures.

Posterity is indebted to Gour Das Bysac for having composed a reminiscence of Madhusudan Dutt, published after the death of the poet in 1873. The account is replete with the most delightful anecdotes from the college days of Madhusudan, one statement being particularly important in understanding the poet's disposition:

But Modhu was a genius. Even his foibles and eccentricities had a touch of romance and a taste of "the attic salt" that made them savoury and sweet (Basu 642).



While Gour Das's tone retains admirable objectivity throughout the reminiscence, it assumes a sprig of passion towards the fag-end, thus suggesting the potent core of emotions which had sustained the friendship for such a considerably long period. Embarking on a description of Madhusudan's character, Gour Das writes:

There perhaps had never existed a man of a more loving heart than he. His friendship was not an ordinary friendship. His heart always brimmed over with love (Basu 653).

Apart from citing many a plaudit for Madhusudan's convivial ways, Gour Das resorts to a mythical repertoire in the penultimate section of his reminiscence which seems, once more, to suggest a deeply appreciative fervour for the then deceased poet:

He, like Krishna of old, was dark in complexion, but handsome in features, with eyes beaming with expression. His sparkling wit and brilliant repartee were to him the flute, as it were, with which he charmed and enthralled (Basu 654).

While this may appear to be a neutral enough eulogy for a soul blessed with consummate personal charm, the reference to Krishna still resonates strongly with an element of queerness latent in Vaishnav religious philosophy, which professes *Radha bhaav* (adoption of the Radha persona) in every adherent (irrespective of gender) vis-à-vis Krishna, who is supposed to be the singular, paradigmatic manifestation of the male principle. The aforementioned words of Gour Das may then be read as an unconscious acknowledgement of the feminisation which he had undergone in the poetic and epistolary endeavours addressed to him in his salad days.

The handful of extant letters written by Gour Das to Madhusudan do not betray the slightest sign of reciprocation of the romantic and quasi-erotic overtures constantly coming his way from his correspondent. Apart from expressing feelings of utmost elation at the warmth of Madhusudan's letters^{xiii}, and consenting to compose a biography of his friend^{xiv} (Som 237), Gour Das seems to have harboured a general disinterest for the passionate wooing of Madhusudan as speculated by Gangyopadhyay in *Sei Somoe*. However, his reminiscence of Madhusudan facilitates academic contemplation on the element of homosocialism latent in the poet's outlook which might have spearheaded this versatile project of homosocial *eros*, as shall be examined in the succeeding section.

Between a Homosocial ethos and Situational Homosexuality

In the numerous letters which Madhusudan had written to Gour Das Bysac, there can be found no mention of his interest in women or any allusion to romantic heterosexual liaison (Murshid 42). However, the reminiscence of Gour Das throws light upon Madhusudan's romantic aspirations and outlook towards women. Gour Das has written:

...though inspired by love at first sight, he would not, supposing adult marriage to have been prevalent in Hindu society, have acted with any precipitancy in the selection of a fit partner for his life...It is in fact that, before he became a Christian, his parents had elected for his bride a girl who was a cherub—a veritable Peri. But Modhu had not a heart to give away at the



bidding of another...He could not realise the idea of a wife without experiencing before marriage the mutual "flow of soul and feast of reason" that characterises true love between the sexes (Bose 654)

Golam Murshid is of the opinion that exposure to European (especially British Romantic) literature had marshalled his opinions on love, courtship and marriage in a highly unorthodox manner (Murshid 42). Murshid states that Madhusudan's friends, and even his mother had confirmed that according to the poet, European women surpassed their Indian counterparts by a hundred times in terms of virtue and appearance (Murshid 42). The young son of Rajnarayan Dutt would dream of blue-eyed maidens who were impossibly out of his reach as far as he was rooted to the soil of the subcontinent, and in case of compliance with societal expectations pertaining to matrimony. Apart from this, Madhusudan's views on women's education qualify as utilitarian, patriarchal and borderline chauvinistic. In an essay competition on women's education organised by his alma mater, Madhusudan had written:

Extensive dissemination of knowledge amongst women is the surest way that leads a nation to civilization and refinement...The happiness of a man who has an enlightened partner is quite complete...in India, women are looked upon as created merely to contribute to the gratification of the animal appetites of men... (Murshid 42)

In the garb of feministic sentiment, Madhusudan ends up being complicit in the furtherance of patriarchal interest in constructing women as model life-partners of men. Incidentally, Madhusudan married twice in life, and both women were Europeans^{xv}. Hence, it would not be erroneous to opine that Madhusudan's college-day romantic endeavours had met with a situational and aspirational roadblock owing to the absence of women in his immediate surroundings (and within the marriage market) who inflamed his imagination; based, therefore, on the aforementioned sections, it would not be over-ambitious to enumerate the hypothesis that he found in the romantic pursuit of the handsome adolescent Gour Das Bysac a semblance of the gratification he believed he would find in the pursuit of a European maiden, thus upholding a surreptitious (yet badly disguised) homosocial ethos. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick defines male homosocial desire as the whole spectrum of bonds between men, including friendship, mentorship, rivalry, institutional subordination, homosexual genitivity and economic exchange – within which the various forms of traffic in women take place (Sedgwick 256) – a traffic which makes male homosocial bonds cohere (Yaeger 132). In the current study, the "traffic in women" is almost non-committal and indirect, camouflaging itself well within a semblance of absence facilitated by poetic models and linguistic usage. Kosofsky cites Catherine MacKinnon in her influential study *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*:

Socially, femaleness means femininity, which means attractiveness to men, which means sexual attractiveness, which means sexual availability on male terms (Sedgwick 21).

MacKinnon's statement is partially relevant to Madhusudan's idea of what qualifies as attractive in a woman; while the poet was indubitably filled with fantasies revolving around Caucasian women hailing from European climes, external appearance (or "sexual attractiveness") was not the only



criterion he laid stress on in the context of marriage. Madhusudan was equally concerned with the intellectual capability of his prospective bride, and the “cherub” whom his parents had elected for him clearly did not measure up to his expectations (since it was most likely that the girl was eight to nine years of age). In Letter 21, he writes to Gour Das, “At the expiration of three months from hence I am to be married; – dreadful thoughts! It harrows up my blood...My betrothed is the daughter of a rich zemindar; – poor girl! What a deal of misery is in store for her in the ever-inexplicable womb of Futurity!” (Dutt 285) This anxiety shows genuine concern for a blameless girl who would fall prey to a marriage where it was unlikely for her to find love and appreciation from her husband. Therefore, despite being partially guilty of harbouring patriarchal interest in the context of women’s education, and adopting a condescending outlook towards Indian women, we find Madhusudan obliquely constructing an eidolon of the desirable woman through a literary endeavour, mainly as a reaction to social mores surrounding matrimony with which he was at loggerheads.

Since the homosocial element in Madhusudan’s letters coexists with suggestions of homoeroticism, the work of Jeffrey Weeks becomes relevant here. Weeks draws into question who is categorised as a homosexual individual, as one may participate in sexual acts with members of the same sex and not identify as gay (Nguyen 26). Weeks opines that there is no such thing as the homosexual (or the heterosexual for that matter) and (that) statements of any kind which are made about human beings on the basis of their sexual orientation must always be highly qualified (Weeks 134).

The very unevenness of the social categorisation, the variations in legal and other social responses meant that homosexual experiences could be absorbed into a variety of different lifestyles, with no necessary identity as a homosexual developing (Weeks 134).

Weeks talks about a type of homosexuality which avoided all the problems of commitment and identity, was highly individualised, deeply emotional and possibly even sexualised relations between two individuals who were otherwise not regarded, or did not regard themselves as ‘homosexual.’ (Weeks 135). Such situational homosexuality possibly revealed more clearly than anything else a constant homosexual potential which could be expressed when circumstances, desire, or the collapse of social restraint indicated (Weeks 135).

Golam Murshid states in his influential biography of Madhusudan that the poet was potently influenced by the life and works of Byron, his primary exposure to Byron originating in Thomas Moore’s *Life of Lord Byron* (Murshid 54). Murshid speaks of Byron’s love of boys in his schooldays and terms it categorically as “homosexuality.” It is not unlikely that Byron, a student of Harrow had indulged in intimate friendship with his peers; Jeffrey Weeks writes how “J. A. Symonds described his horror at the situation in Harrow, where every boy of good looks had a female name and was either a ‘prostitute’ or a ‘boy’s bitch’”. Other examples of such situational homosexuality occurred then, as now, in the army, the navy and prison, each giving rise to specific rituals and taboos.” (Weeks 135). A study of Moore’s *Life of Byron* seems to corroborate this standpoint as the young student of Harrow indulges in friendships with his male classmates which he himself terms as “passions.” Moore states how “like most proud persons, he (Byron) chose his intimates in general from a rank beneath his own...which enabled him to indulge his generous pride by taking upon himself, when



necessary, the office of their protector.” (Moore). In a letter to William Harness (classmate at Harrow), Byron wrote, “...you were almost the *first* of my Harrow friends...There is another circumstance you do not know; – the *first lines* I ever attempted at Harrow were addressed to *you*” (Moore).

These anecdotes from Byron’s schooldays, then, open up possibilities of regarding this homosocial and situational homoerotic enterprise in the light of literary inspiration. Murshid states at length how Madhusudan was much inspired by the literary career of Byron, and Byron’s personal decision of leaving behind his diaries and memoirs with his friends which later served as primary material for his biography (Murshid 46). It is strongly possible, then, that apart from romantic longing, it might also have been a matter of intellectual curiosity for Madhusudan to have indulged in this epistolary enterprise where he regarded a younger, good-looking male peer with all the fervour of true friendship and the romantic passion he intended to direct at his blue-eyed European maidens.

Conclusion

Golam Murshid opines that the language deployed by Madhusudan in expressing his love for, or soliciting love from Gour Das is generally reserved by male lovers for their female beloved. He considers this love to be much deeper than that encountered in an average friendship (Murshid 36). Yet, it would be justifiably irrational and impossible to attach any label pertaining to sexuality/sexual orientation to Michael Madhusudan Dutt based on his epistolary romance with Gour Das Bysac. However, the homosocial dimension of this enterprise, and the occasional erotic asides in his poetry and letters do function as fertile ground for appreciating the situational nature of the *eros* that flourishes in the letters and poems under scrutiny.

The select poems and letters of Michael Madhusudan Dutt addressed to Gour Das Bysac studied in this research article, then, uphold a situational *eros*, which is potently indebted to literary/epistolary precedents, and the transgressive sentiments born from disagreement with social strictures imposed on matrimony in 19th century Bengal. At a time when this stalwart-to-be of Bengali literature had felt claustrophobic due to the looming threat of arranged marriage on the horizon (to a much younger girl inexperienced in the ways of life, literature and culture), he had resorted to protestations of romantic and quasi-erotic love to a male friend from college who fascinated him with both his virtuous character and personal charms. Gour Das Bysac traverses a broad spectrum of being an androgynous presence in the poems, a feminised *eromenos* figure in the letters who is constantly on the receiving end of the poet’s broadsides, reprimands and occasional playful threats of chastisement and a cold, distant yet sympathetic “Petrarchan mistress” figure in Sunil Gangyopadhyay’s representation. Comparing Madhusudan with Krishna seems to liberate in Gour Das a thitherto repressed, silent romantic appreciation of the poet’s multifarious charms. Though both men were married to women and led heterosexual lives, the poems and letters under scrutiny uphold a self-conscious, highly dramatized epistolary (and poetic) expression of an *eros* which was homosocial and situational – which bloomed only in a particular season in the lives of these two talented gentlemen.



Endnotes

- ⁱ The first four lines of Poem 38 of *Madhusudan Rachanabali* (cited in the List of works). It is an acrostic which spells out GOUR DAS BYSOC.
- ⁱⁱ Initially, *Sei Somoe* was serialised in *Desh*; subsequently, the novel was published in two separate volumes in 1981 and then as a bi-volume novel in 1991.
- ⁱⁱⁱ The source for all letters of Michael Madhusudan Dutt is *Madhusudan Rachanabali* (cited subsequently in the List of Works).
- ^{iv} I begin this with a critique on the pigmy letter you sent as answer to the gigantic one I wrote you. (Letter 20) (Dutt 284)
- ^v My dear Gour Dass/ Do you receive the letters I write you? – ‘pon my word, – a most tormenting, – torturing –excruciating uncertainty it is.
- ^{vi} Can’t you write a few lines to me? Do not forget me, for by that you break a solemn and oft repeated promise. (Letter 26)
- ^{vii} Poem 21 of the Collected Poems of Michael Madhusudan Dutt is “Dedicated to G. D. B. by his loving friend, the Author”. Poem 33 entitled “THE HEAVENLY BALL – A Fragment” specifies a “Dedication to G. D. Bysac, Esqr.” Poems 12, 13 and 35 are entitled “To G. D. B.”
- ^{viii} *Gobhir gorjon sada kore jolodhor, / Utholilo nod-nodi dhoroni upor/ Romoni romon loye sukhe keli kore, / Danavadi deb jaksha sukhito ontore!/ Samiran ghono ghono jhon jhon rob,/ Barun probol dekhi probol probhab/ Shadhin hoiya pachhe poradhin hoe,/ Koloho koroye kono mote shanto noe*
- (The clouds roar constantly/ The rivers overflow onto the earth, / Women indulge in games of love, / The gods, demi-gods and demons are all pleased, / The winds create a frequent din, / They are much powerful; their influence is great/ Lest they are imprisoned after breaking free, / The winds refuse to be pacified) (My translation)
- Sunil Gangyopadhyay includes in *Sei Somoe* a fictional representation of the situation in which this particular poem was composed by Michael Madhusudan Dutt in the presence of Gour Das Bysac
- ^{ix} In a letter addressed to Gour Das dated 25th November, 1842, Madhusudan had written that he was “prepared (poor as I am) to receive so **beautiful** a guest as yourself.” (My emphasis)
- ^x Yes, he was certainly wonderfully handsome, with his finely curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair. There was something in his face that made one trust him at once. All the candour of youth was there, as well as all youth’s passionate purity. One felt that he had kept himself unspotted from the world (Wilde 16)
- ^{xi} “I hate the d – d fellow K – r” wrote Madhusudan in Letter 18. James Kerr was the Principal of Hindu College when Madhusudan was a student there, and he had not attended college for a few days owing to his dislike for the former (Som 14).



^{xii} The quotations from *Sei Somoe* from this point onwards in the article have been extracted from “*Sunil Gangopadhyay’s Those Days (Bengali)*” introduced and translated by Shormishtha Panja from *Same-Sex Love in India* by Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai.

^{xiii} “I do not have words to tell you how happy and delighted I am to have received your letter infused with warmth and love.” (My translation) This is an excerpt from Gour Das’s letter to Madhusudan dated 5th January, 1856 (Murshid 148).

^{xiv} In the meantime, let me tell you that I am anxious to begin your biography, I propose a short treatise for the present...

^{xv} Michael Madhusudan Dutt’s first wife was Rebecca Thompson McTavish from 1848 to 1856. In 1858, Madhusudan married Emilia Henrietta Sophie White who passed away a few days before the poet in 1873.

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