

The Outlier: Michael Madhusudan Dutt

Namita Gokhale

As a writer, I sometimes find myself possessed by a literary figure, or a literary moment, and cannot break the spell until I have paid some form of homage, some tribute, to acknowledge the deep and lasting impact that the encounter has had on me.

It was more than a decade ago that I reviewed two books on the nineteenth-century Bengali poet and dramatist Michael Madhusudan Dutt for Uma Iyengar at *The Book Review* journal. These were a biography, *Lured By Hope*, and *The Heart of a Rebel Poet*, a volume of his letters with commentary, both by Ghulam Murshid.

In that long ago review, I wrote that Michael Madhusudan Dutt was a romantic poet by instinct and persuasion. These twin volumes portray and expose the ragged contours of his extraordinary life... The conflicts, both internal and social, that dogged him with such notoriety were in time to become emblems of the clash of Indian and Eurocentric cultures.

I had already at that time made a *sankalp*, a private resolve, that I would, someday, somehow, write about Dutt. And now, in 2020, my friend and long-time collaborator Dr Malashri Lal and I have published a play, titled *Betrayed By Hope*, on this compelling figure and the intensity and tragedy of his short life.

Dutt was born in 1824 into a wealthy Calcutta family. His youthful rejection of his Hindu roots, and his conversion to Christianity, marked the beginning of a voyage of tumultuous self-discovery. In 1849, he published the long poem 'The Captive Ladie: (an Indian Tale) in Two Cantos'. There was

a favourable review in the *Athenaeum* of Madras, but *The Bengal Hurkuru* of Calcutta rated it as 'fair amateur poetry' and urged him to write in his own language.

Michael Madhusudan Dutt continued to write prolifically in English, and then, after his return from Madras to Calcutta in 1856, in Bangla. He was destined to become the visionary catalyst who leavened the traditions of Bangla literature with the gift of tongues. A true polyglot with a knowledge of Bangla, Sanskrit, Urdu, Persian, Tamil, Telugu, Greek, Latin, German, French, Italian and English, his sharp erudition and knowledge of the European classics and mythology transformed the literary sensibility of his mother tongue. He brought blank verse, and the epic and sonnet forms, to Bangla. His dazzling range of reference included a sonnet dedicated to Dante, as also poems to the Sanskrit writers Valmiki, Kalidasa and Jayadeva, to Victor Hugo and Tennyson, and to his fellow Bengalis, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and Satyendranath Tagore.

He suffered the tragedy of being ahead of his times in his cosmopolitan scope. His personal and financial life teetered on the brink of multiple betrayals, and he died a broken man in 1873. His journey of alienation, and a return to his roots, is one many writers have travelled before and after him, and mirrors the rites of passage of other poets and dreamers with fractured cultural identities. He penned his own epitaph, 'Stand still, O passer-by, if you were born in Bengal...' and he lies buried in Lower Circular Road Cemetery in Kolkata. Our play, *Betrayed By Hope*, pays tribute to his restless spirit and Promethean life.

Namita Gokhale

Namita Gokhale is an award-winning writer, publisher, and festival director. She has written nineteen books, including ten works of fiction. Her debut novel – *Paro: Dreams of Passion* is a cult classic, continuously in print since it appeared in 1984. A recent novel, *Jaipur Journals*, was released in January 2020. *Betrayed by Hope*, a play based on the life of Michael Madhusudan Dutt, co-authored by Dr Malashri La, will be published in late 2020.

Gokhale was conferred the Centenary National Award for Literature by the Asam Sahitya Sa-bha in Guwahati in 2017 'for her literary contributions as well as her service to the nation in supporting and showcasing literary talents and creating a literary environment in the country'. She is a founder and co-director of the Jaipur Literature Festival. She is also one of the founder directors of Yatra Books, a publishing house specializing in translation.

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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