

Linguistic Negotiations and Narrative Strategies in Reverend Lal Behari Day's *Bengal Peasant Life*

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Abstract

Ludwig Wittgenstein long ago questioned the ability of language to represent an experience in its totality- "the language of everyday", he thought, was somehow "too coarse and material for what we want to say". He wondered that how another language is to be "constructed" for the purpose of representation. This problem multiplies several folds when the language of literary expression/representation is an "acquired" one- as opposed to a "native" language or "mother tongue". Language carries within it cultural signifiers, racial memory, shared history, and socio-political contexts that complicate and problematize telling/ writing. This paper examines the relationship between author-language-subject-reader, between "pen" and "penning" as seen in Revd. Lal Behari Day's novel, *Bengal Peasant Life* (1874). The intended reader being the "Englishman", Day takes effort to write a prefatory chapter stating in some detail what the reader may or may not expect from his book and how the reader should participate in the "telling/hearing" of the story. This preface is a part of the narrative strategy that the author devises to achieve his task of representation. Day also formulates/uses other strategies to negotiate the linguistic and cultural challenges he encountered as a "native Christian" writer, writing a Hindu tale in a "foreign" language.

Keywords: Language, Representation, Linguistic Negotiations, Narrative Strategies

*Our sincerest laughter with some pain is fraught, Our Sweetest thoughts are those that tell of saddest thought.*¹ ("To a Skylark", P. B. Shelley)

The relationship between pen, pain, and writing is often determined by but not limited to the following questions: a) Who is wielding the pen? b) What is the subject of the "penning"? c) What is the author's relation to the subject of his pen? d) Can the pen fully convey the pain? e) Who are the intended readers/ audience?

Ludwig Wittgenstein long ago questioned the ability of language to represent an experience in its totality- "the language of everyday", he thought, was somehow "too coarse and material for what we want to say". He wondered how another language is to be "constructed" for the purpose of representation.²

¹ Life is fraught with uncertainties and ironies. It is indeed supremely ironical that I write the final draft of this paper at a time of great personal pain. Even three weeks back I had not the slightest hint that life would so ruthlessly test my capacity for forbearance. I am writing these words in a hospital cabin, patient attender to my husband, forty one years of age, who has had a Coronary Artery Bypass Surgery earlier this week.

² Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscomb (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 116.

This problem multiplies several folds when the language of literary expression/representation is an "acquired" one - as opposed to a "native" language or "mother tongue". Language carries within it cultural signifiers, racial memory, shared history, and socio-political contexts that complicate and problematize telling/ writing. This is true more so when the language one chooses to speak/write in is the language of his "colonial master", and the listener/reader is a "foreigner". Speakers/writers have chosen to negotiate this complexity by devising their own strategies. We have had a Caliban who was satisfied to be able to curse his "master" in his "master's language", thereby mitigating some of his pain.³ But we also have examples of African authors like Achebe who found the new (English) language "liberating". This paper examines the relationship between author-language-subject-reader, between "pen" and "penning" as seen in Revd. Lal Behari Day's (1824-94) novel *Bengal Peasant Life* (1874), a text in which the "representation" issue is further problematized by the fact that a "converted" devout Christian Reverend is seen fondly describing in vivid detail, the daily rituals of a Hindu life.⁴ Not only is the author required to strategize his negotiations with language and culture but also he is under scrutiny for his "real" sympathies. The intended reader being the "Englishman", Day takes effort to write a prefatory chapter stating in some detail what the reader may or may not expect from his book and how the reader should participate in the "telling/hearing" of the story. He also formulates/uses other strategies to negotiate the linguistic and cultural challenges he encountered as a "native Christian" writer, writing a Hindu tale in a "foreign" language.

Lal Behari Day's *Govinda Samanta or The History of a Bengal Peasant* (1874) is an anthropological/ethnographical novel that focuses on the peasant life in nineteenth century Bengal. *Bengal Peasant Life* was first published in 1874 in two volumes under the title, "*Govinda Samanta or The History of a Bengal Peasant*". In 1878 it was re-published under the title *Bengal Peasant Life*. It is a poignant story of a poor peasant, Govinda Samanta, and his family who live in a village in Burdwan. The novel maps the story of Govinda's life (a doubly subaltern figure, first because he is the colonised subject, and again because he belongs to the lower socio-economic strata of society) from his birth to death. It is a life of much poverty, pain and suffering. Economic distress co-exists with personal losses in this poignant tale of a peasant.

Lal Behari's explanatory, anthropological stance in this book makes his text an important socio-cultural document engaged in the act of cultural representation. The novel sketches a comprehensive picture of the rural Bengali society with its caste-system, rituals, superstitions, folk-beliefs, village *pathshalas*, *guru-mahasayas*, the astrologer, *ghataks*, marriages, social problems such as the Zamindari system, *Sati*, Indigo, taxes, epidemics, and vividly sketches many such scenes reflecting the domestic and social realities of the time. Throughout the novel the author is clearly trying to explain the cultural "difference" or "otherness" of this community, and thereby perhaps to demonstrate that the Bengali culture, albeit "different" from the culture of the coloniser, is a rich one. Although his tone is sharply critical when it comes to the superstitious and fatalistic attitude of the peasants, he reveals an intuitive empathy, an in-depth intellectual as well as emotional understanding of the pain and suffering of his characters, their motives, motivations and actions.

³ Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest* (New York: Penguin, 2007).

⁴ Day, Lal Behari. *Govinda Samanta or The History of A Bengal Peasant* (London: Macmillan, 1874. It was subsequently published under the title *Bengal Peasant Life* in 1878 by the Book Society of India, Calcutta, and reprinted in 1916.

Like the narrator in W.M. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, or Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, the narrator in *Bengal Peasant Life* directly addresses the reader at many points in the narrative and often identifies himself with the reader. In fact, the novel begins with a direct address to the reader: "Gentle Reader, in case you have come with great expectations to the perusal of this humble performance, I deem it proper to undeceive you at the very outset..."⁵

Throughout the text there are many occasions where the reader is addressed and indeed, often invited, into the text.⁶ The boundaries of fiction and reality overlap as the narrator invites the reader to participate in the events of the text, building an intimacy with the English educated native, or the Englishman reading his book. Both of them would have little firsthand knowledge of the peasants. The trust in the narrator therefore becomes absolutely necessary to understand the purpose of the novel, that is, to provide an "authentic history". The first chapter clearly states its purpose in the title: "Premises What The Reader Is To Expect And What He Is Not To Expect In This Authentic History".

It is significant that Lal Behari calls his narrative not a piece of fiction but an "authentic history", thereby anticipating the twentieth century concepts of "history from below", and "new labour history". "History from below" is a type of historical narrative which focuses on the perspectives of ordinary individuals within society, and includes regions that were not previously considered historically important in its retelling of sociological drama. This comprises women and the working class, and the people lying outside the discourse of the West. *Bengal Peasant Life* essentially offers a look at history from below because it focuses on what happens among the masses at the base levels of society, and includes women's gossip and trivia as part of the narrative. For example, in a chapter titled "Ladies Parliament", the narrator invites the reader to accompany him to the bathing *ghat*, "conceal ourselves among the thick foliage of a sacred *sriphal* tree", "to listen to a conversation carried on by a number of women".⁷ This conversation is centered mainly on trivia and gossip. This method of writing is but one of the various strategies used to align the reader to the subjects of the novel, attune them to their way of thinking and seeing. The women's talk in this chapter has a striking similarity with some passages in Fakir Mohan Senapati's Oriya novel, *Chha Mana Atha Guntha*, translated as *Six Acres and a Third* by S. P. Mohanty.⁸

Lal Behari attempts to function as the native informant who is a kind of a mediator between the peasants whose story he tells and the readers. He has an intimate knowledge of the peasants and is also well equipped epistemologically to tell the tale in the coloniser's language. Yet, the very fact that the story is not told in first person problematizes the telling: to what extent and in what way does the presence of the narrator modify the "telling"?

In the first chapter, the narrator, using the metaphor of the tradesman who "wishes to earn

⁵ Day, Lal Behari. *Bengal Peasant Life*. 1.

⁶ "I... propose taking a stroll through the village, and trust my reader will give me the pleasure of his company", 7. "The reader will remember that, in the middle of the village...", 53. "If the reader will accompany me about the middle of the day... to the women's ghat of the Raya's tank...".

⁷ Day, Lal Behari, 132.

⁸ Senapati, Fakir Mohan. *Six Acres and a Third: The Classic Nineteenth-Century Novel about Colonial India*. Translated by Rabi Shankar Mishra, Satya P. Mohanty, Jatindra K. Nayak, and Paul St-Pierre (California: University of California Press, 2005).

an honest penny" by selling his ware, tells the reader about what he may and what he may not expect to find in the "following pages".⁹ He calls his novel a "hall of refreshment", and wants to acquaint the reader with "the bill of fare" (the phrase recalls Fielding's famous "bill of fare" passage at the beginning of *Tom Jones*) in advance in order to prevent any disappointments later on.¹⁰ Lal Behari thus adopts the form of the bildungsroman novel popular in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but inscribes/underlines the element of cultural difference. He makes it clear at the outset that his narrative is about a culture that has its share of equivalences and differences with the European/British culture. The equivalence is underlined by means of the allusions and analogies while the difference is spelt out in clear words in the *Preface* itself.

The narrator's "first point" in his "bill of fare" deals with what the reader is *not* to expect in his narrative. Firstly, he says, the reader is not to expect anything "marvellous or wonderful".¹¹ Very interestingly, the narrator traces his ancestry (perhaps indeed the tradition of all Indian Writing in English) to "my great Indian predecessors ... Valmiki, Vyas, and compilers of the Puranas" on the one hand, and "my European predecessors like Swift and Rabelais", on the other.¹² He is conscious of the modes of writing prevailing both, in his Sanskrit tradition, and in his European lineage. Lal Behari is thus aware that by writing of an Indian subject in the English language, and by virtue of the fact that his own education was partly European and partly Indian, he and his novel has a hybrid ancestry, having behind him the literary tradition of India as well as that of Europe.

Lal Behari however says that he shall not be writing in the tradition of the literary ancestors he names, because:

Such marvels, my reader, you are not to expect in this unpretending volume. The age of marvels has gone by; giants do not pay nowadays; scepticism is the order of the day; and the veriest stripling, whose throat is still full of his mother's milk, says to his father, when a story is told him: "Papa, is it true?"¹³

Rejecting the "marvellous" in favour of the "true", he chooses to write an "authentic history", in the "realist" mode. Throughout the novel there are detailed realistic descriptions of every aspect of village life (domestic, social, religious, economic) in nineteenth century Bengal and of the rituals that form such an essential part of the life of every Bengali Hindu peasant.

The narrator's next point in his "bill of fare" is that,

Secondly, you are not to expect in this authentic history any thrilling incidents. Romantic adventures, intricate evolutions of the plot, striking occurrences, remarkable surprises, hair-breadth escapes, scenes of horror... have no place here. Thrilling incidents occur but seldom in the life-history of ninety-nine persons out of a hundred, and in that of most Bengal raiyats never.¹⁴

⁹ Day, Lal Behari.

¹⁰ Fielding, Henry. *Tom Jones* (England: Penguin, 2005).

¹¹ Day, Lal Behari,

¹² Day, Lal Behari.

¹³ Day, 2.

¹⁴ Day, 2.

The narrator here distances his narrative from certain types of the novel, particularly the gothic novel, which was characterised by “romantic adventures, intricate evolutions of the plot, striking occurrences, remarkable surprises, hair-breadth escapes, scenes of horror” and was quite popular in the eighteenth century European literature.¹⁵ The reason cited by the narrator for not writing in the gothic tradition is related once more to the question of authenticity. The narrator says that thrilling incidents do not ever occur in the life of a Bengali peasant and thus there are no such elements in the narrative. “Thirdly”, the narrator says that the reader should not expect any “love scenes”.¹⁶

This passage is important for its explanatory stance, its attempt to explain the self to the other. Lal Behari here underlines the difference in the man-woman relationship, a relationship which is replicated in India’s encounter with the West. He says that for Bengalis, and indeed for all Indians, marriage is a matter arranged by the parents/guardians and that there is no courtship before marriage.¹⁷ By choosing to remain silent on the conjugal relationships, Lal Behari was perhaps making the point that Bengalis (and Indians) were themselves reticent about this relationship and chose not to bring it out in the domain of public discourse. The narrator thus highlights the differences in cultural practices of the Bengalis and the English. “Fourthly”, the narrator says that,

...you are not to expect here “grandiloquent phraseology and gorgeous metaphors”. ... “Big thinkers may require,” as old Sam Johnson said, “big words”; but we, plain country-folk, talking of fields, of paddy, of the plough and the harrow, have no sublime thoughts and do not, therefore, require sublime words ...¹⁸

The story that he has chosen to narrate is by his own admission a plain and simple story, and it does not require sublime expressions. The irony here is unmistakable. Adopting a rather unassuming tone, setting the readers expectations, Lal Behari ultimately goes on to tell a touching tale of simple life, punctuated by various levels of distress and suffering at personal and social levels. Without using grand metaphors he is able to evoke a poignant picture of peasant life and its most touching aspects.

Since we are attempting to read the links between pen, pain and penning, let us now dwell briefly on how the choice of language problematises and determines the construction of the text and how the author negotiates these problems. One of the most significant consequences of British colonization was the appropriation of the English language by the colonised. In India, the first well-articulated conceptualization of such crossover – linguistic and contextual – was presented in 1937 [published in 1938] by Raja Rao, in his novel *Kanthapura*.¹⁹ But long before that, in *Bengal Peasant Life*, Lal Behari Day almost apologetically presented the dilemma in contextualizing English in Bengal. Mohanty, in his introduction to F. M. Senapati’s Oriya novel *Cha Mana Atha Guntha (Six Acres and A Third)*, says that Day’s transcription of peasant speech

¹⁵ Day, 3.

¹⁶ Day, 3.

¹⁷ Hindu *Shastras* doctrine “*Putrarth kriyote bharya*”, meaning that marriage is only for giving birth to children (*putra* stands for ‘children’ and not ‘son’). Hindus are largely motivated by this doctrine in marriage. Ramkrishna Deb says, ‘Behave like brother and sister after begetting two-three children’.

¹⁸ Day, 3.

¹⁹ Rao, Raja. *Kanthapura* (Gurgaon: Penguin, 2014).

resembles that of an anthropologist imposing an Orientalist and ahistorical universality on village life.²⁰

Over the years, postcolonial authors writing in English have found a way out for negotiating what Lal Behari has called a “grave though unavoidable fault” - using perfect English to transcribe the indigenous peasants’ speech and portraying in the colonisers language the inhuman aspects of colonization.²¹ So far as Lal Behari’s approach to the problem is concerned, he does not attempt abrogation or appropriation of language. While sticking to the “standard” English syntactically (not only in the dialogues but in the narratorial passages as well), he uses a large number of Bengali words, a glossary of which he provides at the end of the novel, under the heading, “Glossary of Indian Terms”. If we study these terms we shall find that these terms are utterly untranslatable: they are not just words, but cultural concepts and codes. And by refusing to decode these codes in the body of the text, Lal Behari not only adds a local colour to his text, but he also makes a subtle statement (that these codes are untranslatable), the point of which has probably been missed by critics because it is not spelt out explicitly (as is done by Raja Rao for example), but only implied. However, in his approach, there is no Caliban’s sting. The coloniser’s language is being used, not to curse, but to illustrate the social situation, to explain cultural otherness, to narrate national history, to participate in the political, social and literary discourses of the day, and to voice the distressing condition of the colonised and make it heard.

Other than the remark on the love of “grandiloquent phraseology and gorgeous metaphors” of his “educated countrymen”, which signposts the literary inclinations of the “Young Bengal”, what is significant is that the narrator identifies himself with the “plain country-folk, talking of fields, of paddy, of the plough”.²² He seems to imply that though he is “educated” (he seems to be a learned man from his language, his style of narration and from his wide-ranging knowledge), yet, essentially, he is a plain country folk talking of country matters.²³ This claim of being a plain country folk authenticates his tale, but, and more importantly, it also situates this peasant (hi)story as “coming from within” as well as “coming from below”. Indeed, he seems to have quite an intimate knowledge of the village and the villagers.

Coming to the “second point of this preliminary discourse which is what the reader is to expect in this book”, the narrator simply says that, “The reader is to expect here a plain and unvarnished tale of a plain peasant, living in this plain country of Bengal... told in a plain manner”.²⁴

If we look at the premises set in the preface by Lal Behari, what strikes as a common point in all of them is that the author wants to pen an authentic, real picture of society. Lal Behari anticipates Social Realism, which was an art movement representing socialist ideologies, and represented social and political contemporary life in the nineteen-thirties from a left-wing

²⁰ Senapati, 23.

²¹ Day, 46.

²² Day, 2.

²³ He even makes his peasants speak in the same register, the inconsistency of which he is aware of, and which he calls a ‘grave though unavoidable fault in this authentic narrative’. (p. 46) But I will deal with the language issue separately.

²⁴ Day, 4.

standpoint (it dominated Soviet culture and artistic expression for over sixty years in the middle of the twentieth century). Social Realism depicted subjects of social concern; the proletariat struggle – the pain and hardships of everyday life that the working class had to put up with.

Lal Behari portrays the varied aspects of social and domestic life. He depicts moments of pain and grief as well as moments of joy. In its theme, *Bengal Peasant Life* is remarkably close to Kamala Markandeya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), which describes the experiences of a woman named Rukmani who lived in India during a period of intense urban development.²⁵ *Bengal Peasant Life* too speaks of the little hopes and fears of Govinda and his family. It is hope that keeps them going, and with that hope are also present the many rituals of daily life that gives life a momentum to keep moving ahead. These rituals form an integral part of his life, and he has to perform them even if he has to incur a debt for the purpose. These rituals are not only a socio-religious necessity but a psychological one.²⁶

An important aspect of *Bengal Peasant Life* is the profusion of epigraphs, analogies and allusions. Lal Behari has to capture in the English language, the nuances of Bengal peasant life, for the "genteel" English reader, who is distanced from the subject on multiple levels, that is, in terms of religion, culture class and race. One of the strategies adopted by the author traversing this gap is the use of literary allusions, as a kind of epigraph to every chapter, and within the chapters as well.

Lal Behari's extensive allusions to European literary texts not only reveals his intimate knowledge of European literature, but also, function as signifiers of his inevitable cultural syncreticity. The text becomes a platform on which the divergent European and Bengali cultures stand face to face, a site juxtaposing the analogous as well as the disparate elements in the two cultures. Certain phenomena do not have or do not evoke the same associations in English as in Bengali culture. Every *signified* and *signifier*, in Saussurian terminology, mean different things across time and cultures. To convey in a foreign language the culture-bound and socio-religious items and nuances of another culture is not unproblematic. Lal Behari's ample use of allusions creates the very permeability of boundaries which Ashis Nandy seems to be talking about in *The Intimate Enemy*.²⁷ The text continually shifts in time and space, moving freely in and out of cultures and time frames and is implicated with all the texts that it alludes to. The process of allusion installs cultural distance itself as a subject of the text. The maintenance of the "gap" in the cross-cultural text is of profound importance to its ethnographic functions.

In 'The Problem of Cultural Self-representation' Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asks that "What can the intellectual do toward the text of the oppressed?" She answers her question herself: "Represent them and analyze them, disclosing one's own positionality for the other

²⁵ Markandeya, Kamala. *Nectar in a Sieve* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2007).

²⁶ Towards the end of the novel, when his mother dies, Govinda, like all orthodox Hindus and dutiful Hindu sons, performed the ceremony with suitable pomp. . . *The English reader may exclaim, "Govinda must have been a fool to spend money on such an occasion, especially as he had no money". Fool or no fool he had to spend it. Whether he had money or not is beside the point. Spend he must whether he had it or not. The customs of the country, the laws of Hindu society, the Hindu religion, all demand it. If Govinda had not made the usual presents and given the customary feasts, he would have lowered himself in the estimation of his caste-men. He would have been black-balled. There was therefore no escape from it (281) (Italics mine).*

²⁷ Nandy, Ashish. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 107.

communities of power").²⁸ This is precisely how Lal Behari's text functions. He represents and analyzes the condition of the Bengal peasants divulging his own location as the mediator between the oppressed and the oppressor. As noted by MacPherson,

Perhaps the most striking passages are those where Mr. Day, with nervous energy, assailed some abuse, such as his exposure of the harsh, overbearing, unjust dealings of the indigo-planter. Happily these evils have become modified, or even become a matter of past history. The peasant has been placed on a better footing to protect himself, and need not be bullied by either *zemindar* or indigo-planter into acts ruinous to himself ... *For his improved condition the peasant owes something to this tale of peasant life* (Italics mine).²⁹

It would be a pretension to suggest that all peasants' pains have been modified, or that there was effected drastic changes in the condition of the peasant following the publication of the novel, yet Lal Behari fulfils his "task" in representing the Bengal peasant's tale in as heart-rending a manner as he possibly could. Lal Behari's chronicle of the Bengal peasant portrays a pain so poignant that the pen has to constantly re-invent and re-adjust itself in penning the tale.

²⁸ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, 'The Problem of Cultural Self-representation'. In *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogue*. Edited by Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge), 56.

²⁹ MacPherson, G. , *Life of Lal Behari Day: Convert Pastor Professor and Author* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1900), 125.