THE 'IMAGINARY' WORLD OF THE AFTERLIFE: PARALLEL WORLDS IN BIBHUTIBHUSHAN BANDYOPADHYAY'S *DEBJAN*

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Abstract: *This article focuses on the presentation of parallel worlds in the early twentieth century Bengali writer Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's (1894-1950) novel* Debjan *(1946) [literally, 'the path of the Gods']. Bandyopadhyay is known abroad mainly for his novels* Song of the Road *(in Bengali* Pather Panchali*, 1929) and* Mountain of the Moon *(Bengali* Chander Pahar*, 1937), both of which have been translated into English. But the majority of his works still remain untranslated, including the novel* Debjan*. Due to the popularity of the film version of* Song of the Road*, adapted for the screen by the veteran Bengali filmmaker Satyajit Ray, the author is usually viewed as a realist who meticulously depicted the sad plight of the rural poor in colonial Bengal. But Bibhutibhushan also had a prodigious power of imagination, as manifested in* Debjan*. The novel depicts the afterlife, where the dead protagonists embark on a cosmic odyssey discovering several parallel worlds along the way. Inspired by religious beliefs, literary works have been depicting parallel worlds of the dead ever since the dawn of civilizations. Following Umberto Eco, one may classify such worlds as "utopias" where the parallel world exists somewhere outside the real world and is normally inaccessible to its inhabitants. From the point of view of researchers in history and cultural studies, such tales interest mainly because they provide us with insight into the religious beliefs and culture of a particular people of a particular age. The distinctiveness of* Debjan *lies in the fact that its presentation of the afterlife is not entirely based on orthodox Hindu beliefs, even when its author was a Hindu Brahmin by*

faith. Rather, Bibhutibhushan borrowed much from the tenets of Theosophy to construct his peculiar version of the afterlife in this novel. Though claiming to have its roots in Oriental religions, Theosophy was in reality an Occidental construct which aimed to amalgamate Eastern mysticism with Western occultism. This novel's mingling of the tenets of Theosophy with those of orthodox Hinduism converts it into a site of encounter between Eastern and Western spiritualism. This paper highlights this aspect of the work, something which has escaped the critics' attention so far. In the process, it pays particular attention to the concepts of "thought form" and "tulpa" which were popularized in the Anglo-American world by Theosophy and which continue to remain much popular. The basic idea is that the mind or imagination is capable of bringing mental constructs into actual existence through spiritual training and meditation. Bibhutibhushan makes an innovative use of this idea in Debjan*. He shows that spirits are capable of producing literally parallel 'imaginary' worlds or worlds built with the power of imagination. This is a unique way of imagining parallel worlds in literature, a fact that the article draws attention to. Finally, the article tries to account for the influence of Theosophy on Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay and his generation by taking into consideration both the author's biography as well as the historical developments in that age.*
Keywords: Bibhutibhushan; *Debjan*; parallel world; hinduism; *Saptaloka*; theosophy; thought-form; *Tulpa*.

1. Introduction

The growth of interest in parallel worlds and universes in our age seems to have developed out of the conjectures of modern theoretical physics. Nonetheless, imaginings other worlds or realities in literature predate contemporary scientific speculations. Even the pre-historic people in various countries had their ideas of different worlds or planes of existence which were believed to coexist with normally experienced reality. One comes across numerous such descriptions of 'parallel worlds' in religious and philosophical texts of the antiquity. They can also be found in ancient literature. Usually, one finds that 'parallel

worlds' in ancient texts reflect the people's belief in the afterlife. Following Umberto Eco, such worlds can be classified as *utopias* where the parallel world "exists somewhere but is normally inaccessible to us" (1984: 1257). The earliest known description of the parallel world of the dead in fiction occurs in a fragmentary Sumerian poem on the hero Bilgames. This poem, which dates back to the second millennium BCE, describes the plight of king Bilgames' servant Enkidu. Enkidu descends to the underworld to retrieve his master's favourite toys which had fallen there through a hole in the ground[1]. However, he gets trapped in the afterlife and is allowed to return only briefly as a revenant. At Bilgames' behest, Enkidu describes in details the condition of the dead in the afterlife (*Gilgamesh,* 2000). What we need to note is that in the process of describing the afterlife the anonymous poet provides us with a glimpse of the ancient Mesopotamian culture and the beliefs and aspirations of its people[2]. Works of similar nature can be discovered elsewhere, where an imagined account of the afterlife supplies a key to understanding the socio-historical condition of a people.

This paper examines how the Bengali writer Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay imagined 'parallel worlds/universes' in his novel *Debjan* (1946). *Debjan* is a novel on the afterlife and the author's conceptualization of parallel worlds and universes in this novel is linked to his ideas on the afterlife. His description of parallel worlds and the afterlife is unconventional in many ways. Scholars believe that Bandyopadhyay's description of the afterlife in *Debjan* is basically grounded on Hindu religious tenets

[1] Bilgames has been identified as the proto-Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh is the hero of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* which circulated in Babylonia and Assyria in the first millennium B.C.E.

[2] For instance, when Enkidu mentions that individuals having many sons fare the best in the afterlife, he voices a need felt by the society at that time. Likewise, the poem provides information regarding the burial rites of the Mesopotamian people (*Gilgamesh*, 2000).

(see for instance Chakaraborty, 2007). But the author was also a heterodox thinker who borrowed much of his ideas from Theosophy, which was a late nineteenth and early twentieth century Western religious movement. No scholar has recognized this fact till now. In my view, *Debjan* is a product of the cross-fertilization between Eastern and Western ideas on the afterlife and the occult. This article seeks to highlight this fact. To do so, it tries to identify and point out Bandyopadhyay's various sources of ideas which influenced his peculiar imagining of the afterlife and parallel worlds in this novel. It also seeks to explain why a foreign religious movement like Theosophy came to influence the belief of a Hindu Indian writer like Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay. This is done by taking into consideration both the author's biography as well as the socio-historical condition in that age. Through this, it brings to light this prominent Bengali author's efforts to reconcile himself to competing worldviews in the mid twentieth century.

Without some background information, one would find it difficult to understand how Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's construction of parallel worlds in *Debjan* is so unique. The next section begins with a brief sketch of the author's life, before moving on to trace the ideas that influenced his imagining of parallel worlds in this novel.

2. Bandyopadhyay's Unparalleled Worlds in Debjan

As an author, Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay has unfortunately received little scholarly attention till now. Outside Bengal, he is known mainly for his two novels - *Song of the Road* (in Bengali *Pather Panchali*, 1929) and *Aparajito: the Unvanquished* (1931). These were adapted for the screen by the veteran Bengali filmmaker Satyajit Ray (1921–1992) as the "Apu Trilogy". The global success of Roy's movies ensured the translation of these two novels into English and some other European languages. Besides these, three other novels of the author have also been translated into English. These are *Aranyak* (lit, "of the

forest") (1937), *Mountain of the Moon* (Bengali *Chander Pahar*, 1938), and *Restless Waters of the Ichhamati* (Bengali *Ichhamati*, 1950)[3]. However, the majority of his works, which include 17 novels, 20 collections of short stories, as well as travelogues and diaries, still remains untranslated and unknown abroad. The novel *Debjan* is one of these. Since the author continues to remain virtually unknown outside West Bengal, few full-length studies on his writings have been published till now. Those that exist usually present him as a realist and a social critic who highlighted the sad plight of the rural poor in colonial Bengal (see for instance Tripathy, 2017). In the recent years, he has also been lauded for his concern with the ecology and the environment (see for instance Mishra and Sarangi, 2017). But Bibhutibhushan was also interested in the occult as many of his works show. His prodigious flights of imagination in this area remain unrecognized and undervalued so far.

What makes the study of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's works difficult is the lack of biographical resources on him. The few that do exist fail to relate his life to the broader socio-historical context in which he lived. Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay was born in Muraripur village in undivided Bengal in British India on 12 September 1894. His ancestors were rural middle class Bengali Brahmins. After completing his primary education in village schools, Bandyopadhyay studied Bachelor of Arts at Ripon College (now Surendranath College) in Calcutta (now Kolkata). He was a teacher by profession except for a brief intervening period, during which he served in the estate of a rural landlord (Chakaraborty, 2007; also, Chakrabarti & Chakrabarti, 2013: 62). Bandyopadhyay was an autodidact and a polymath. He was interested in a

[3] A few of his short stories have also been recently translated into English by Rani Ray (Bandyopadhyay, 2018). One or two short stories have been translated into English even earlier, like the story "Atheist" (Bengali, *Nastik*) by Nivedita Sen (Bandyopadhyay, 2010).

variety of subjects like Hindu philosophy, Indian history, Indian and World literature, the occult, films, music, geography, plant geography and astronomy (Chakaraborty, 2007: 14). From the account of his life constructed by Mita Chakaraborty we learn that, like other educated Bengali gentlemen of his age, he took a special interest in English literature. Bandyopadhyay translated Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* and John Barrows' *How I Began* into Bengali (14, 16). He was also an avid reader of Sanskrit classics and could cite Sanskrit religious texts like the *Upanishads* at the drop of a hat. Many of his works reveal this. The untimely death of his first wife in 1918 induced him to turn to spirituality and the occult for solace. This fascination with the occult remained with him throughout his life.

The novel *Debjan* reveals how deeply Bibhutibhushan thought on the subject of the afterlife. Though this work was finally published in 1946, the author conceived the plot as early as in 1928 (Chakaraborty, 2007: 12). Originally, he thought of the title "Debotar Byatha" [literally, "the sorrow of the God"] for his novel (12)[4]. However, he finally came up with the title *Debjan* [literally, "the path of the Gods"]. This title distinctly relates the novel to Hindu soteriological doctrines. The Sanskrit word *devyana* occurs in scriptures like the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* 6.2.15, the *Chāndogya Upanishad* 5.10.1–2, and the *Kaushîtaki Upanishad* 1.2, where it is contrasted with the *pitryana* or the "path of the ancestors". The *Bhagvad Gita* 8.24-25 also refers to the two paths, though not by name (1984: 362-63)[5]. While the descriptions in different texts do not concur in every detail, Max Muller explains the basic doctrine in the following words:

[4] The Bengali word *byatha* is properly translated as 'pain' or 'ache'. But it also sometimes connotes 'sorrow' or 'suffering'. As the plot of the novel indicates, Bibhutibhushan was using the word *byatha* in the sense of sorrow and not physical pain.

[5] In *Gita* the paths are called *uttarayana* and *daksinyana*, or northern and southern paths.

> The future life is reached by two roads; one, the Devpatha [*devyana* or *debjan*], leading to the world of Brahman (the conditioned), beyond which there lies one other stage only, represented by knowledge of and identity with the unconditioned Brahman[6]; the other leading to the world of the fathers [*pitryana*], and from thence, after the reward of good works has been consumed, back to a new round of mundane existence (1879, Footnote, n. p.).

In other words, for the Hindus, who believe in the doctrine of reincarnation, the path of the Gods or *devyana* leads to *moksha* or liberation from the cycle of birth and death[7]. On the other hand, the path of the ancestors or *pitryana* leads to a brief spell of enjoyment in heaven and rebirth thereafter. Bibhutibhushan's title thus makes it clear that the novel is concerned with the afterlife and the liberation of souls. However, the word *debjan* appears to have been used here in a broader 'universalist' sense than in the aforementioned scriptures[8]. The author seems to champion a belief in eventual universal salvation through

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[6] According to Vedanta, Brahman, in the neuter gender, is the root cause of everything. 'It' is without any attributes (*nirguna*), and therefore, unconditioned. The world exists because of *maya* or illusion. Even Brahman appears conditioned or with attributes (*saguna*) due to *maya*. This doctrine occurs in scriptures like the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagvad Gita*.

[7] Though the Hindus believe in reincarnation, the ideal is to break free from cycles of birth and death through achievement of *moksha* or liberation and enlightenment. While most schools within Hinduism agree to this basic doctrine, they debate on the exact meaning of *moksha* and the way of attaining it.

[8] Bandyopadhyay's ideas on salvation are 'universalist' in implications. Jatin and Pushpa visit Russia where they meet liberated souls like Doctor Amendo, who suffered for criticizing the government during the Stalinist regime (Bandyopadhyay, 2014:42). In the *Maharloka* they meet an unnamed 2500 year old sage who had taken birth in ancient Egypt and Greece. Significantly, this sage expresses firm belief in the formlessness of God (Bandyopadhyay, 2014:133). Was the author thinking of figures like Moses and Heraclitus?

realization of the true nature of God and reality. Such a belief appears more in agreement with the universalist aspirations of Theosophy than with orthodox Hinduism. Thus, Bandyopadhyay's imagination does not confine itself entirely to Hindu soteriological doctrines in this novel. In constructing a picture of the afterlife, he borrows freely from Theosophy which was popular in his age.

A synopsis of the novel will help us better appreciate Bibhutibhushan's construction of parallel worlds in *Debjan*. The novel describes the experiences of the lovers Jatin and Pushpa in the afterlife. While existing as the dead in the afterworld, they meet various advanced and god-like beings and travel across the cosmos to distant planets and alternate dimensions of existence. In the process, they acquire understanding of the nature of the cosmos and the meaning of existence. However, Jatin's infatuation with Ashalata, his wife from his past life, ultimately compels him to leave Pushpa and the blissful existence in the afterlife and to take rebirth on earth. Ashalata too reincarnates, destined to be united with Jatin in his new life. Pushpa, who reaches the level of a minor deity, becomes the guardian spirit of the reincarnated Jatin. The novel ends with Pushpa glimpsing the high God, manifesting himself as the sleeping Lord Vishnu. This signifies that she finally attains enlightenment or *moksha*.

From the synopsis of the novel provided, it becomes easy to understand that Hindu doctrines of salvation represent the bedrock on which this novel is mainly based. Interestingly, Hindu scriptures postulate several spheres or dimensions of existence for the soul. These are called the *lokas* and might be identified as 'parallel worlds'. Bibhutibhushan, by whose time the idea of 'parallel worlds' had gained wider currency, certainly interprets the *lokas* as such. As described in Vedic and Puranic literatures, *lokas* are seven (*sapta*) in number and exist one above the other in a hierarchical relationship. The seven *lokas* consist- of the three lower spheres – *Bhu* or the Earth, *Bhuvar* or the space between the earth and the

heaven, *Svar* or the heaven, the intermediary *Maharloka*, and the three highest spheres – the *Jana*, the *Tapa* and the *Satyaloka*. As Deborah Soifer explains, the three lower spheres are considered transitory while the three highest spheres are believed to be durable. The *Maharloka* has a mixed character. It is deserted by its inhabitants at the end of each *kalpa* (Soifer, 1991: 52–53). The word *kalpa* requires some explanation, as here the concepts of space and time merge in Hindu thinking. It is well known that the Hindu idea of time is cyclical, with creation and destruction following each other in endless cycles (see for instance Eliade, 1959: 112–15). Moreover, different kinds of beings are believed to experience the flow of time differently. As RomilaThapar explains, "A human month is a day and a night for the ancestors and a human year is the same for the gods.". A thousand ages of the gods "constitutes a single day of Brahmā and a night of Brahmā is of equal length" (Thapar, 2004: 13-14)[9]. A *kalpa* makes one day in the life of Brahmā. Another *kalpa* makes a night (Eliade, 1959: 114). For the human beings, *kalpa* is thus the longest unit of time imaginable. It is estimated to consist of 4320 million human years (Thapar, 2004: 13). *Kalpa* has a soteriological significance. The end of each *kalpa* is believed to bring about the destruction of the three lower worlds of *Bhu, Bhuvar* and *Svar*. However, the three upper worlds as well as the *Maharloka* face destruction only at the end of Lord Brahmā's life. This means that the inhabitants of the 'upper worlds' live much longer than the inhabitants of the 'lower worlds'. As Soifer points out, "The soteriological import of this is significant; by living as long as Brahmā and dwelling in the higher spheres, their [that is the inhabitants'] liberation is all but ensured" (1991: 52). The dwellers in these upper regions are beings

[9] Lord Brahmā is not to be confused with the Brahman. Lord Brahmā is the creator God in Hinduism. But unlike the Brahman or the first cause, he is not immortal and eternal. As Eliade points out, he lives for a hundred years. But Brahmas 'hundred years' are unimaginably long by human standards (Eliade, 1959: 114).

who have reached higher levels of perfection than ordinary mortals. Soifer explains that the *rsis* or sages inhabit the *Maharloka*, while the dwellers in the worlds above it are greater divinities (1991: 52–53). In *Debjan*, Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay grounds his conceptualization of the afterlife basically on the *Saptaloka* system. However, he adds three further higher spheres to the seven. As an inhabitant of the *Maharloka* explains to Jatin and Pushpa, beyond the *Saptaloka* there is the Brahmāloka or the abode of Lord Brahmā. Above it exists the *Goloka* or the abode of Lord Vishnu[10]. The highest sphere is that of the *Nirgun Brahmanloka* or the sphere of Brahman without attributes. This sphere is beyond conceptualization (Bandyopadhyay, 2014: 138). Each of these "worlds" is further divided into several layers. The inhabitants of a higher *loka* or a higher layer in a particular *loka* are generally invisible to the inhabitants of the lower layers or worlds. There is also the hell or *naraka* which is the abode of the sinners. However, Bibhutibhushan does not conceptualize *naraka* as a place where the sinners are tormented by Lord Yama after death[11]. He describes it both as a place and a state where the sinners are hounded by the remembrance of their own guilt. Likewise, *lokas* for Bandyopadhyay connote both physical space as well as states of perfection (132). As one ascends the *lokas*, one progresses in the path of liberation or *moksha*. For instance, at the beginning of the novel, Jatin finds Pushpa in the upper layer of the third sphere (17). By the end of the novel, she is declared to have achieved the right of

[10] Lord Vishnu, the second person in the Hindu trinity, is generally understood as the deity entrusted with the task of preserving existence. But in the Vaishnava tradition, He is seen as the Supreme Being himself. Bandyopadhyay seems to follow the Vaishnava tradition here.

[11] As the God of death, Yama is the ruler of *naraka* and the judge of the dead. However, since the Hindus do not believe in eternal damnation, *naraka* resembles the Roman Catholic purgatory more in function than the Christian hell.

living in the *Maharloka* (201)[12]. Significantly, here the author's ideas are in agreement with Hindu soteriology. As Soifer points out, "*loka* in the Veda did not simply mean place or world, but had a positive valuation: it was a place or position of religious or psychological interest with a special value or function of its own" (1991: 51).

Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's evocations of Hindu eschatological and soteriological doctrines in *Debjan* make it a unique piece of fantasy literature. To my knowledge, no other Bengali novelist has ever made such ingenious use of the *Saptaloka* doctrine in imaginative literature. However, properly speaking, the author does not ground his conceptualization of parallel worlds solely on the Hindu scriptures. Being interested in the findings of astronomy, he imagines the existence of sentient life in distant planets. But here one must admit that the Hindu scriptures also allow the scope for such an imagining. In *Debjan*, the author cites a verse from the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* which postulates the existence of multiple universes alongside the one we live in (Bandyopadhyay, 2014: 122). Of course, these are to be differentiated from the *lokas* which form the parts of a particular universe. Thus it appears that both science and religion gave the author grounds to believe in parallel worlds. Being imaginative in temperament, Bibhutibhushan always wondered about the possibility of existence of sapient life forms in other planets and universes. In his collection of observations and impressions published as *Smritir Rekha* [literally, 'etchings in the memory'], he muses on extraterrestrial existence. Some of these observations are worth citing:

> How are lifestyles in faraway planets and stars? Is their measuring rod for time as small as ours, or are they much longer? (Bandyopadhyay, 1955: 34).

[12] However, she chooses to remain in the lower *loka* to serve as the guardian spirit of the reincarnated Jatin.

> Not just in our earth, but so many habitations might lie hidden and invisible among the infinite planets and stars of the eternal space. The same rule applies to the life forms in them. Life and death inescapably exist even for creatures higher in the evolutionary ladder. If an enormous and starry universe like this has a beginning and an end, then what to speak of insignificant life forms (35).
>
> Gazing again and again at that far away star I wonder that perhaps life full of laughter and hope like ours flows there as well – who knows? Regions of gigantic Globular Cluster, big Star Clouds[13], galaxies, in what a universe of unconceivable greatness and infinitude am I born into (36)[14].

It becomes obvious from the astronomical references - particularly those in the last passage - that the author's interest in parallel worlds did not originate only from Hindu religious doctrines. As a matter of fact, Mita Chakaraborty informs us that Bibhutibhushan was much interested in the findings of modern astronomy. He even attended the Science Congress at Calcutta in 1937 to listen to the lectures of contemporary astronomers like Sir James Hopwood Jeans (Chakaraborty, 2007: 14). Given his wide reading in English literature, one might also assume that he had read the works of contemporary English science fiction writers like H.G. Wells who wrote about extraterrestrial life. In *Debjan*, Jatin and Pushpa not only visit the *lokas*. They also travel to several distant planets where they come across different sorts of civilizations. There are descriptions of both advanced civilizations in faraway planets as well as backward ones. However, Bandyopadhyay does not equate advancement with mere

[13] The English terms "Globular Cluster" and "Star Clouds" appeared in the original. Bibhutibhushan's acquaintance with modern astronomy is revealed through these.

[14] This text still remains untranslated. All translations mine.

technological progress. For him, true progress lies in obtaining spiritual enlightenment. That is why he imagines that unadvanced souls are made to take rebirth in planets where the inhabitants have longer lifespans. This gives them more time to progress in the path of enlightenment. Seeing the inhabitants leisurely enjoying their pastimes in one such 'unadvanced' planet, Jatin is reminded of the indolent lifestyle of the mariners in Tennyson's poem *The Lotos-Eaters* (Bandyopadhyay, 2014: 107). One notes that this way of conceptualizing extra-terrestrial life in fiction is uncommon. It is certainly unparalleled in Bengali literature. Bandyopadhyay seems to champion an orthogenetic model of evolution in this novel, though soteriological concerns distinctly govern his views.

We have observed that Bandyopadhyay's conceptualization of the afterlife in *Debjan* is primarily rooted in Hindu soteriological doctrines. However, one must also recognize the imprints of Theosophy on his thinking. Theosophy was a movement launched in 1875 in New York by the Russian occultist Madam Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907). Though claiming to have its root in Oriental religions, it was in reality an Occidental construct which sought to amalgamate Eastern mysticism with Western occultism. In India it was made popular by the British socialist Annie Besant (1847–1933), whose participation in the Indian freedom movement drew the admiration of the countrymen. Central to Theosophy was a concern with the occult and the world of the spirits. One may remember that these were topics in which Bandyopadhyay took a special interest. Apparently, it was the loss of his first wife Gouri Devi in 1918 which ignited his interest in the occult. Mita Chakaraborty informs that her untimely death had left him distraught. So much so, that he started participating in séances regularly. He was even compelled to resign from service in 1920 on that ground (Chakaraborty, 2007: 9–10). However, personal loss

may not have been the author's sole reason for becoming interested in Theosophy. As Peter van der Veer explains, Theosophy provided an alternative to militant evangelical Christianity which was championed in India by the colonizing British at that point. With colonialism seeking justification in evangelicalism, the Indians, and particularly the non-Christian Indians, discerned a connection between mainstream Protestant evangelical Christianity and the oppressive colonial regime. The more liberal Theosophy appeared more attractive to them on that account (van der Veer, 2001: 66–67). Also, a heterodox movement like Theosophy displayed greater appreciation for 'Eastern' religions like Hinduism and Buddhism. For instance, it accepted the doctrine of 'reincarnation' which forms a key aspect of Hindu and Buddhist beliefs. Naturally, the educated Indians of that period were drawn to it. They discerned in Theosophy both a rejection of British colonialism and an inclusive worldview (see van der Veer, 2001: 55-77). Bandyopadhyay, who lived during the final phase of the Indian freedom struggle, may have been drawn to this movement for similar reasons. It is also the case that Theosophy championed universalism and orthogenesis. One recalls that Bandyopadhyay advocated both in *Debjan*.

It needs to be admitted that no direct reference to Theosophy can be found in *Debjan*. However, a close reading of the novel reveals that Bandyopadhyay's conceptualization of the afterlife borrows much from Theosophical doctrines. One of these is the curious idea of soul colour. Bandyopadhyay writes that the quality of a soul is revealed through its hue. While advanced souls appear blue or white, backward souls appear dull red or vermillion in colour (Bandyopadhyay, 2014). Such an idea is hard to find in Hindu scriptures. One may instead trace it in nascent form in the works of early Christian exegetes like Tertullian. Of course, Tertullian did not actually introduce an explicit colour scheme for souls. He merely suggested that, being corporeal, souls have colour (for

overview see Kitzler, 2015: 56–57). Theosophy seems to have borrowed this idea from the exegetes, though it elaborated upon it. Theosophists suggested a gradation of colours for what they called the mental bodies, with blue appearing at the top (see Besant & Leadbeater, 1901: 25). Bandyopadhyay, who writes that the souls manifest themselves in mental bodies, seems to have been indebted to Theosophy for this concept.

It is interesting to note that the world after death, as imagined by the author, is literally 'imaginary". Pushpa explains to Jatin that in the afterworld thought directly acts upon the subtle matter this world is made of. Consequently, one is able to construct anything simply by imagining (Bandyopadhyay, 2014: 16).This idea is in agreement with the assumptions of Theosophy. Annie Besant postulates in her treatise "Karma" that, "...the matter of each plane is denser than that of the one above it. This is according to the analogy of Nature, for evolution in its downward course is from rare to dense, from subtle to gross" (1959: 4).

One would not find this concept of subtle matter, amenable to psychic influence, inorthodox Hindu thinking. The author seems to have amalgamated Hindu and Theosophical concepts here. The key concept here is that of the "thought-form". Besant explains, "A thought-form, then, is a mental image, created – or moulded – by the mind out of the subtle matter of the higher psychic plane, in which ... it works. This form [is] composed of the rapidly vibrating atoms of the matter of that region ..." (6). These thought-forms are thus generated by imagination.

Also interesting in this context is the idea of the *tulpa*. The word *tulpa* has been made popular in the West by the famous Belgian-French occultist and explorer Alexandra David-Néel (1868– 1969) who describes it as a Tibetan Buddhist concept. She defines *tulpas* as "magic formations generated by a powerful concentration of thought" (1971: 311). They are "phantoms" that can be consciously or

unconsciously created, often instantaneously[15]. David-Néel further explains, "Once the *tulpa* is endowed with enough vitality to be capable of playing the part of a real being, it tends to free itself from its maker's control" (313). As a curious esoteric belief, *tulpa* continues to captivate Western imagination[16]. However, Mikles and Laycock argue that the concept of *tulpa* owes its origin more to Theosophy than to Tibetan Buddhism. These authors point out that David-Neel's description of *tulpas* (Tibetan, *sprul-pa*) "was more consistent with Theosophical literature about "though-forms" written by Annie Besant than with the Buddhist ideas of *tulkus*" (2015: 89). In their view, David-Néel, who had a background in Theosophy, had misinterpreted the Tibetan Buddhist concept (Mikles & Laycock, 2015, pp. 88–89). Whatever the case is, Bandyopadhyay may have read David-Néel's book the English translation of which was published in 1932. At least he appears to have been aware of this concept, as his writings show. His last work was the posthumously published short story "Sesh Lekha" (literally, "last composition") (Chakaraborty, 2007: 17). This story narrates an episode in the life of Lord Buddha who tries to help his younger brother Nanda attain *nirvana*. To help Nanda overcome his infatuation with his newly wed wife, the Buddha entices him with the vision of several celestial nymphs of unparalleled beauty. When Nanda finally attains *nirvana* by overcoming his infatuation, the Buddha discloses that the celestial nymphs were mere illusions created by him to draw away his younger brother from his wife (Bandyopadhyay, 2019: 671). One notes that these 'imagined' nymphs described in this story appear very similar to the *tulpas*/*tulkus* described by David-Néel. In

[15] A corresponding term mentioned by David-Néel is *tulku*. However, she writes that the term is also used to mean 'emanation' or 'incarnation' in Tibet (1971: 116 – 21). David- Neel's account does not appear very consistent.

[16] *Tulpamancy* is becoming a new 'subculture' in the West and several sites are dedicated to it in the internet.

Debjan, one finds that the inhabitants of the higher spheres or *lokas* can imagine entire beings into existence. Early in the novel, Jatin and Pushpa come across Karuna Devi or the goddess of compassion who helps them throughout the novel in various ways. Karuna Devi turns out to be Sita, the heroine of the epic *Ramayana*. She is imagined into existence by the author of the epic, Valmiki. Valmiki explains to Jatin and Pushpa that his own favourite character from the epic was Sita. Consequently, when he moved on to the afterlife, he created Sita or Karuna Devi with the power of his imagination. Once created, Sita or Karuna Devi attains a will and a life of her own and acts independently (Bandyopadhyay, 2014). Thus she might be identified as Valmiki's *tulpa*. This whole idea of 'imagining' a being into existence seems to be more in agreement with Theosophy than with Hindu beliefs.

In *Debjan* one thus detects how two different belief systems influenced Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's conceptualization of the afterlife. While the influence of Hindu doctrines on his imagination does not appear exceptional, his appropriation of the tenets of Theosophy surprises us. By way of explanation one may say that Bandyopadhyay could not resist the allure of this movement which was then reaching its height of popularity in India. Peter van der Veer mentions that many Indian politicians, including the future prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, became members of the Theosophical Society of India for a while (2001: 77). Evidently, the involvement of its leaders like Annie Besant in the Indian freedom movement made the educated Indians take interest in it. In itself, Theosophy sought to integrate differing and competing worldviews. Its universalist approach may have attracted colonized intellectuals like Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay.

3. Conclusion

Our study highlights how divergent religious-cultural systems affected Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's

construction of parallel worlds in *Debjan*. Such cross-fertilization of ideas could have been possible only under the particular socio-historical condition in which he was writing. In the colonial era, the colonized writers were exposed to differing, and usually competing, worldviews. More than anyone else, they faced the peculiar challenge of integrating these differing worldviews. Failing to do so could lead them to be condemned either on the charge of traditionalism or on the charge of iconoclasm. There was also the need of opposing the colonizers attempts at cultural domination while retaining whatever progress could be acquired from them. Through an inspection into Bandyopadhyay's sources, we are able to see how skillfully he was able to integrate doctrines from two diverse beliefs to suit his own artistic purpose. However, it is also to be kept in mind that it was a heterodox movement like Theosophy that had greater influence on him than traditional Western faiths. As argued earlier, this was probably due to Theosophy challenging Anglican Christianity which British colonialism invoked to justify itself. Thus one may detect a latent element of resistance in Bandyopadhyay's approach, though he still tries to harmonize diverse worldviews.

Finally, one concludes with the observation that Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's conceptualization of parallel worlds in *Debjan* is unique. It reflects his wide knowledge in diverse disciplines. Such an imagining of parallel worlds in fantasy literature remains unsurpassed, at least in Bengali fiction. While a few other Bengali authors of that period like Pemendra Mitra and Hemendra Kumar Roy had conceptualized parallel worlds in their writings, Bandyopadhyay's exuberance of imagination in this novel seems to outshine them all. Unfortunately, no detailed study of this novel exists yet. In focusing on Bandyopadhyay's construction of parallel worlds in *Debjan*, my objective has therefore been to draw attention to an aspect of the writer that remains unrecognized till now.

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