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Militant Classicism: Michael Madhusudan Dutt and the Rewriting of Indian Myth

Abstract: *This paper explores the refunctioning of myth in nineteenth-century Bengal through the works of Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824–1873), one of the most radical figures of the Bengal Renaissance. It argues that Dutt’s literary project can be understood as a form of militant classicism — a poetics that simultaneously reveres classical form while destabilising canonical hierarchies. By appropriating Miltonic blank verse and epic conventions, Dutt reimagined sacred narratives from the Ramayana and beyond, elevating demonised figures like Meghnad and giving voice to heroines such as Pramila and Krishna Kumari. These revisions reveal myth’s dual capacity to sustain and unsettle authority, while also exposing the tensions of colonial modernity, religious reform, and gender politics. The paper traces Dutt’s experiments across epic, tragedy, lyric, and satire, showing how myth became a medium through which cultural identity, sovereignty, and female agency were negotiated. Reception history is examined to highlight how his works provoked devotional anxieties, inspired nationalist reinterpretations, and continue to invite feminist and postcolonial readings. In foregrounding Dutt’s militant classicism, the paper contributes to larger debates on myth as a living form — not a static inheritance but a contested and generative idiom of cultural politics in colonial Bengal.*

Keywords: Indian mythology, classicism, Gender and Patriarchy, Colonial Identity, Colonial Reception.

Militant Classicism: Michael Madhusudan Dutt and the Rewriting of Indian Myth

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Introduction — Myth as Living Form in Bengal

Myth in Indian cultural imagination has always been a developing inheritance. From epics and Purāṇic accounts to folk performance and devotional song, myth has flowed as a living idiom, repeatedly reinterpreted to meet new historical and social realities. In Bengal, the nineteenth century was particularly fecund with such refunctionings. Bengal Renaissance fashioned new publics in terms of print, education, and reform, whereas colonial modernity unhinged received hierarchies of authority. Myth was therefore a contested ground in this context where questions of identity, culture, and sovereignty were acted out.

This article treats the working life of Madhusudan Dutt (1824–1873), one of the more daring minds of the Bengal Renaissance, who characterised his working life through his martial reinterpretation of myth. Dutt took epic forms from Homer and Milton, mixed them with Bengali idiom, and recreated them to restate sacred tales of the Ramāyaṇa and more. This outcome was my own term, militant classicism: a poetics both in favour of classical form and against canonical hierarchies. By venerating characters like Meghnad and Tilottama, or by providing a lyrical voice to heroines in *Vīraṅganā* and *Brajāṅganā*,

Dutt destabilised fixed oppositions of heroism, piety, and gender. His literary experiments were not individual aesthetic gestures but interventionist ones in the cultural politics of colonial Bengal, poised between East and West, tradition and reform, devotion and criticism.

The stakes of Dutt's mythic reinterpretation are doubled. One, they show the manner in which myth functioned in nineteenth-century Bengal as a repository and as a critique: a cultural repository that could be invoked to challenge authority as well as legitimise it. Two, they show how hybrid strategies of a Western-educated Bengali Christian, located in liminality, and redeeming that marginality into productive energy. As researchers like Clinton Seely, Narayan Chaudhuri, Sudipto Roy, and Amrita Dhar have demonstrated, Meghnad-Badh Kābya and parallel texts alike were both cultural provocations and works of art, evoking controversies that reverberated well outside of literary circles.

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Structure of the Paper

Section I examines the formation of militant classicism in his early experiments, tracing his appropriation of Miltonic form and techniques of provocation.

Section II turns to Meghnad-Badh Kābya as the culmination of this project, analysing its formal strategies, tragic revaluation of Meghnad, and allegorical force in a colonial context.

Section III explores Dutt's other mythological revisions, from Tilottama-Sambhab and Krishna-Kumari Natak to the lyrical Vīraṅganā and Brajāṅganā and the satirical Buro Shaliker Ghare Roan, demonstrating the elasticity of his mythic imagination across genres.

Section IV situates these revisions within the politics of identity, gender, and cultural sovereignty, highlighting Dutt's hybrid position and proto-nationalist claims.

Section V traces the reception and legacy of Dutt's mythic interventions, from immediate controversy to long-term nationalist canonisation, feminist re-readings, and postcolonial reassessments.

Section VI concludes by synthesising these findings, reflecting on archival gaps, and considering the broader implications of militant classicism for understanding myth as a living form in colonial Bengal.

In foregrounding Madhusudan Dutt, this paper contributes to the larger inquiry of how Indian myths are continually refashioned in art, word, and ritual. His militant classicism demonstrates that myth in nineteenth-century Bengal was not a neutral narrative inheritance but a contested and dynamic medium through which literature became an arena of cultural politics.

Section I—“Militant Classicism”: Form, Sources, and Public Protest in Michael Madhusudan Dutt and the Formation of a Militant Imagination

Madhusudan's early experiments in English verse and satirical drama are often dismissed as derivative, yet they can be read as laboratories where his militant imagination first took shape. Sudipta Sau notes recurring irony, tonal restlessness, and formal experimentation; such traits function as rehearsals for later epic strategy. In plays like *Is This Called Civilisation?*, methods of provocation, moral confrontation, and audience address were tested and later redeployed on an enlarged epic stage. This performative apprenticeship aligns the poet's early public-facing work with the rhetorical techniques that would later unsettle inherited moral categories.

The turn to epic blank verse is best understood as an act of cultural assertion. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* offered both a formal model and a tragic-heroic framework. As Amrita Dhar observes, Madhusudan appropriated Miltonic diction and simile not merely for imitation but to elevate Bengali into the register of world epic (Dhar 201). By bending the language to sustain Miltonic scope, the poem transforms form into polemic: grandeur becomes proof of Bengali's epic potential. This is visible in the siege of Lanka:

The opposition ranks had surrounded golden Lanka, just as a hunting party deep within the densest jungle, cautiously, with teamwork ensnares a lioness— whose form is charming to the eye, whose force is furious, like goddess Bhima! (Seely 142)

The extended simile, reminiscent of Miltonic epic, likens the besieged city to a lioness—beautiful yet dangerous. Words like “golden” and “furious” raise Lanka into mythic grandeur. Such passages exemplify militant classicism: epic technique is redeployed not as ornament but as an assertion that Bengali can sustain the cadence of global epic.

Madhusudan's engagement with the Ramayana is both informed and disruptive. Clinton Seely demonstrates how he drew from Valmiki, Krittibas, and folk strands before shifting the narrative centre toward Meghnad. By granting soliloquies and heroic epithets to a traditionally vilified figure, the poem redistributes sympathy and exposes how narrative framing produces moral categories (Seely 167). One striking instance is the elevation of Indrajit:

Foe-conquering Indrajit—his wife is pretty Pramila—that woman now will enter Lanka, by force of arms, to worship at her husband's feet! What man-at-arms, you fool, can block her way? (Seely 167)

Here, martial language fuses with domestic devotion. Indrajit is not merely an antagonist but a noble warrior and husband, surrounded by pathos precisely because his fall is foreknown. The inversion is calculated: authority is drawn from canonical texts but reoriented to fracture their inherited hierarchies.

These structural inversions culminate in the sustained portrayal of Meghnad as a tragic protagonist. Elevated diction, soliloquies, and similes integrate him into universal patterns of tragic experience. The effect is sharpened when the demon army is celebrated in bardic song:

As the gods en masse sang Sati's praises, so the bards with joy extolled in victory songs the Rakshasas' army! Meanwhile, bested in war, the sovereign of the gods, in a fit of rage, strode through the godly ranks on back to heaven. (Seely 173)

The reversal is stark. Rakshasas are praised in the same language once reserved for gods, while Indra retreats in humiliation. Ritual imagery—“praises,” “bards,” “victory songs”—is transferred wholesale to the demon army. This deliberate reallocation of epic rhetoric echoes Milton's elevation of Satan in *Paradise Lost*: sympathy is drawn toward the adversary, compelling readers to re-evaluate the categories of hero and villain.

Recasting sacred narrative carried immediate public consequences in colonial Bengal. As Seely shows, such reinterpretations provoked not only literary debate but devotional anxiety. Because the Ramayana functioned as a communal framework as well as a text, shifting its sympathies meant destabilising cultural authority. The controversy around Meghnad-Badh Kabya therefore confirms its militancy: aesthetic innovation doubled as cultural intervention, forcing readers to negotiate competing claims of tradition, modernity, and identity (Seely 175).

Although never staged as drama, the poem performs theatrically through apostrophes, soliloquies, and bardic interludes. These resemble scenes meant for an audience rather than a solitary reader. Consider the bardic interlude: “So the bards with joy extolled in victory songs the Rakshasas’ army!” (Seely 173).

The bardic voice implies performance and shared spectatorship. By transferring this performative moment to the Rakshasas, Madhusudan dramatises inversion as a public spectacle. Like protest theatre, the poem destabilises authority by staging alternative sympathies before a virtual audience.

While Meghnad-Badh Kabya remains central, shorter works such as Virangana and Brajangana reveal continuity of method. Heroic tableaux and lyrical epistles rehearse themes of martial valour and emotional complexity on smaller scales. These experiments show that Madhusudan’s aesthetic-political project was not confined to one genre: drama, sonnet, and epic each became arenas for rethinking authority and sympathy.

Madhusudan’s classicism is militant because it fuses reverence for classical form with systematic subversion of its moral assumptions. Miltonic blank verse dignifies a demonised figure; Ramayanic authority is harnessed to question Ramayanic values; theatrical energy ensures these inversions resonate in the public sphere. By combining form, inversion, and performance, the poet fashioned a Bengali epic tradition that was both aesthetically innovative and culturally disruptive.

Section II — Meghnad-Badh Kabya and the Recasting of the Ramayana

If Section I traced the formation of Dutt’s militant imagination, *Meghnad-Badh Kabya* demonstrates its culmination. Written in blank verse and sustained by Miltonic technique, the poem relocates narrative attention from Rama and Lakshmana to Meghnad, a figure traditionally vilified. By elevating Meghnad into the tragic centre, Dutt enacts a radical inversion of sympathy, transferring epic dignity to a demon-hero and unsettling the inherited binaries of hero and villain. This is not a mere stylistic experiment but an ideological revaluation that reflects, as Sisir Kumar Das argues, “a deliberate attempt to disrupt the sacred authority of received epic” (Das 118).

Dutt's formal choices are as polemical as they are aesthetic. His blank verse provides the amplitude for extended simile and soliloquy, echoing Milton's enlargement of Satan in *Paradise Lost*. Consider the siege of Lanka:

The opposition ranks had surrounded golden Lanka, just as a hunting party deep within the densest jungle, cautiously, with teamwork ensnares a lioness— whose form is charming to the eye, whose force is furious, like goddess Bhima! (Seely 142)

Here, Lanka is cast as both alluring and dangerous, elevated into tragic grandeur by diction and cadence. As Narayan Chaudhuri notes, this was the moment when Bengali proved itself “capable of sustaining the weight of world epic without collapsing into parody” (Chaudhuri 77).

The heart of the poem is Meghnad's revaluation. His soliloquies combine martial courage with domestic pathos. The martial and the intimate converge, reframing Meghnad as a dutiful husband and heroic warrior. This tragic arc, where nobility meets inevitable defeat, recalls Aristotle's conception of pity and fear. William Radice remarks that Dutt's strategy here was “to give the colonised imagination its own tragic hero, one whose dignity survives catastrophe” (Radice 54).

The tragic dignity of Meghnad resonated with allegorical force in colonial Bengal. Amrita Dhar observes that the inversion “enacts a counter-history, where the subjugated figure retains grandeur even in loss” (Dhar 201). The poem thus functions as a veiled allegory of colonial subjugation: brave, noble, yet overborne by overwhelming power. At the same time, Dutt's adoption of blank verse and Miltonic conventions asserted that Bengali literature could rival European forms. As Das insists, *Meghnad-Badh* was “a claim to parity”: a demonstration that Bengali could bear the weight of epic argument (Das 121).

Although never staged, the poem is infused with theatricality. Bardic interludes, ritual praise, and apostrophes simulate performance before an audience:

As the gods en masse sang Sati's praises, so the bards with joy extolled in victory songs the Rakshasas' army! (Seely 173)

By transferring ritualised victory language from gods to Rakshasas, Dutt stages inversion as a collective spectacle. Clinton Seely underlines this performative quality, noting how the poem “reads like theatre meant to provoke the public sphere” (Seely 192).

The inversion is therefore not confined to text but enacted as a communal experience, akin to protest theatre. The poem's audacity provoked strong reactions. Somprakash, a reformist Bengali journal, praised its technical achievement but worried about its “dangerous disruption of religious sentiment” (qtd. in Das 125).

Devotional readers were unsettled by the sympathy extended to Ravana's camp, while modernising elites admired the poem's European ambition. This bifurcated reception confirms the poem's militancy: it was not merely a literary exercise but a cultural intervention that forced readers to negotiate competing claims of tradition, reform, and modernity. The impulses visible in Meghnad-

Badh—rhetorical inversion, bardic address, tragic dignity—had been rehearsed in smaller forms such as Virangana and the sonnets, but here they reach full articulation. As Chaudhuri points out, Meghnad-Badh “is not a deviation from Dutt’s corpus but its logical summit” (Chaudhuri 80).

By synthesising form, inversion, and cultural politics, the poem consolidated his aesthetic-political project into a single monumental text.

Meghnad-Badh Kabya recasts the *Ramayana* not by discarding its sources but by appropriating and inverting them. Its Miltonic blank verse dignifies a demonised figure; its bardic voice re-stages cultural authority; its tragic arc allegorises the colonial condition. The result is militant classicism in its purest form: reverence for classical structures fused with the audacity to fracture their moral hierarchies. As such, the poem stands as both an artistic triumph and cultural protest—a Bengali epic that redefined the politics of myth.

Section III — Other Mythological Revisions in Dutt

Michael Madhusudan Dutt’s mythic imagination did not exhaust itself in the monumental *Meghnad-Badh Kabya*. If that poem was his thunderclap, these other works reveal the lightning that forked across multiple genres. Here, myth does not appear only in the guise of tragic epic but also as cosmic allegory, historical tragedy, lyrical epistle, and even biting satire. Such experiments remind us that Dutt’s militant classicism was not a single stance but a range of strategies—myth could dignify, unsettle, console, or ridicule, depending on the form he chose. To attend to these works is to see the elasticity of his imagination: myth was never static inheritance but living material, refunctioned each time to test the boundaries of language, gender, and society.

In *Tilottama-Sambhab Kabya* (1860), Dutt dramatises the creation of the celestial nymph Tilottama, whose beauty is destined to disrupt the tyranny of the asura brothers Sunda and Upasunda. The poem dwells on cosmic spectacle and divine-human interplay, with ornate description serving as both ornament and polemic. Clinton Seely notes that the poem “transforms ornament into agency: Tilottama’s beauty is no passive attribute but the very medium of cosmic justice” (Seely 98). Here, sensuality and divinity are fused, revealing Dutt’s continued Miltonic inheritance, where aesthetic grandeur becomes an ethical force.

In *Krishna-Kumari Natak* (1861), Dutt blends history and myth to recount the tragic fate of Princess Krishna Kumari of Udaipur, compelled to embrace self-sacrifice for dynastic honour. While celebrated as an act of nobility, the sacrifice is framed as a tragedy. A chorus laments: Her beauty is like moonlight, but her fate is darkened by duty. (qtd. in Sarkar 58)

This tonal dissonance, as Sumit Sarkar observes, “converts an act of patriarchal control into a commentary on the limits of autonomy under honour-bound codes” (Sarkar 58). The play mobilises

mythic colouring not to glorify sacrifice but to critique the coercive logic that produces it. Feminist critics such as Malashri Lal argue that Krishna Kumari's voice "exposes the gendered violence underlying heroic ideals" (Lal 42). Her tragedy thus illustrates how female characters in Dutt simultaneously reinforce and unsettle patriarchal codes: agency is voiced, yet circumscribed by inevitability.

Dutt's shorter works show mythic revision in more intimate modes. *Virangana-kavya* reimagines heroines of history and legend through dramatic letters, giving them eloquent voices of martial pride and emotional vulnerability. One heroine writes: "My sword thirsts for battle, but my heart bleeds for your return" (qtd. in Das 134).

As Sisir Kumar Das notes, these voices "anticipate the tragic eloquence of Pramila in *Meghnad-Badh*, where female subjectivity carries both passion and pathos" (Das 134). Similarly, *Brajangana-kavya* recasts Krishnaite devotion into lyrical epistles, where abandoned gopis speak in tones of longing and defiance: "Why does the flute call him afar, while my tears call him home?" (qtd. in Seely 105).

Seely observes that these poems "miniaturise the epic gesture into song, where myth survives as affective intimacy" (Seely 105). Scholars of bhakti poetics such as Sumanta Banerjee have highlighted how Dutt "rewrites the Krishna legend in the secular key of erotic absence" (Banerjee 201).

Even in satirical prose like *Buro Shaliker Ghare Roan* (*The Old Pigeon's Nest Has Feathers*), mythic motifs and ritual allusions surface as instruments of irony. By invoking familiar cultural memory, Dutt ridiculed the hypocrisies of colonial Calcutta's elite. Narayan Chaudhuri remarks that Dutt's "mythic imagination is elastic, capable of carrying both solemnity and satire" (Chaudhuri 104). Myth here is less a sacred inheritance than a cultural idiom, available for parody as much as reverence.

These works reveal that Dutt's mythological revisions cannot be confined to the monumentalism of *Meghnad-Badh Kavya*. In *Tilottama-Sambhab*, myth becomes the theatre of cosmic justice; in *Krishna-Kumari*, it turns tragic to expose the coercions of honour and gender; in *Virangana* and *Brajangana*, it contracts into intimate voices of longing and defiance; in *Buro Shaliker*, it is stripped down for satire. What binds these disparate forms is not subject matter but method: a relentless will to refunction myth as critique. Whether enlarging demons into heroes, dignifying women's voices, or mocking elite pretensions, Dutt treats myth not as timeless scripture but as a living idiom of cultural argument. In this breadth lies his militancy: by making myth speak in many registers—epic, tragic, lyrical, comic—he showed that Bengali literature could rival any tradition in both scale and versatility, while also unsettling the moral hierarchies that myth had long naturalised.

Section IV — Myth, Identity, and Cultural Politics

Michael's mythic revisions were inseparable from the politics of identity in nineteenth-century Bengal. His work registers the dilemmas of a Western-educated Bengali Christian who straddled multiple

cultural spheres and turned that liminality into creative force. Postcolonial theorists like Homi Bhabha have described such in-between positions as sites of hybridity, where mimicry becomes resistance. Dutt's militant classicism, with its simultaneous reverence for Miltonic form and defiance of Ramayanic orthodoxy, epitomises this dynamic: myth became the medium through which he negotiated belonging and dissent.

By valorising figures like Meghnad and Tilottama, Dutt destabilised the epic's traditional moral hierarchies while elevating Bengali to a global literary register. His achievement, as Narayan Chaudhuri notes, was "simultaneously an assertion of belonging and a critique of exclusion" (Chaudhuri 112). Sudipto Roy reads *Meghnad-Badh Kabya* as a revisionist retelling that "articulated colonial subjugation through the dignity of a demon-hero," a move that fostered nascent national consciousness (Roy 75). By demonstrating that Bengali could sustain epic scope, Dutt advanced what Subodh Sengupta calls "a cultural claim to freedom" (Sengupta 95). His militant classicism was therefore more than aesthetic bravado: it was a proto-nationalist strategy of literary sovereignty.

Dutt's refunctioning of myth also intersected with gender politics. In *Meghnad-Badh Kabya*, Pramila emerges as both devoted wife and martial leader, a synthesis that unsettles Victorian ideals of femininity. Roy observes that she "fuses traditional domesticity with warrior agency" (Roy 99), making her emblematic of a feminised yet resistant national self. Similarly, *Krishna-Kumari Natak* frames the princess's coerced immolation not as heroic fulfilment but as a tragic indictment of patriarchal honour codes. Malashri Lal argues that Krishna Kumari's voice "exposes the gendered violence underlying heroic ideals" (Lal 42). In both cases, female characters speak with force and conviction, yet their agency is shadowed by tragic inevitability. This doubleness shows how Dutt's heroines simultaneously reinforced and unsettled patriarchal codes: they became symbols of dignity and protest, even as they were circumscribed by cultural constraints.

Dutt's personal circumstances amplified the cultural charge of these revisions. As Swapan Chattopadhyay argues, his use of Hindu epic material served as a "master-narrative bridging colonial and native audiences" (Chattopadhyay 53). His Christian identity, often invoked by detractors, sharpened his urgency to prove Bengali's literary parity. Sudipta Bhattacharjee notes that even as he reimagined myth militantly, his vision of the nation remained conventionally maternal—a "feminised geo-body" of Mother India (Bhattacharjee 67). These layered positions—insider and outsider, rebel and nationalist, subverter and devotee—demonstrate how militant classicism operated not only as a poetic strategy but as cultural politics, negotiating questions of identity in colonial modernity.

Dutt's mythological rewritings thus emerge as deeply political acts. They articulate a hybrid identity, intervene in gendered discourse, and assert the cultural sovereignty of Bengali literature in a colonial world. Yet their full significance lies not only in what Dutt intended but in how they were received by contemporaries who debated their audacity and by later generations who reinterpreted their

militancy. The next section turns to this reception and legacy, tracing how Dutt's mythic imagination continued to unsettle, inspire, and challenge cultural memory in Bengal and beyond.

Section V— Reception and Legacy

The significance of Michael Madhusudan Dutt's mythological reimaginings cannot be gauged solely from the texts themselves. Their cultural force was measured, and continues to be measured, through reception: in the immediate debates they provoked, in the devotional anxieties they unsettled, in the critical and scholarly discourses they generated, and in the long-term legacy that shaped Bengal's literary culture. Reception history demonstrates how *Meghnad-Badh Kabya* and related works were never merely aesthetic experiments but public interventions that unsettled authority and stimulated cultural debate. By reconstructing responses across different temporal layers, this section shows how militant classicism acquired meaning not only through Dutt's intentions but through the negotiations of his audiences—contemporaneous readers, colonial administrators, nationalist intellectuals, and later critics.

The appearance of *Meghnad-Badh Kabya* in 1861 quickly made Dutt a household name in educated Bengali circles. Reviews in periodicals such as *Somprakash* and *Bharati* praised the technical daring of composing an epic in blank verse and hailed the achievement of elevating Bengali into a global register. Reformist and anglophile critics admired Dutt's Miltonic cadence, often remarking on the novelty of reading Bengali poetry that carried the syntactic weight of European epic. For them, Dutt's achievement signalled entry into a cosmopolitan literary world, a vindication of the Bengali intelligentsia's aspirations for parity (Das 122).

At the same time, however, contemporary reception was deeply bifurcated. While the literary elite lauded his form, conservative critics were unsettled by the poem's ideological content. The inversion of sympathy—dignifying Meghnad while casting suspicion on Rama and Lakshmana—was perceived as an affront to communal memory. In devotional pamphlets and letters to editors, critics argued that to sympathise with the “demonic” camp was to erode reverence for the Ramayana as a sacred text. Thus, *Meghnad-Badh Kabya* was not just read as literature but as a cultural intervention with religious and political stakes.

One well-documented controversy involved *Somprakash*'s mixed review. While praising the poet's technical mastery, the periodical expressed alarm at the destabilisation of Ramabhakti (devotion to Rama), reflecting the broader anxiety that literature was overstepping into religious life (qtd. in Das 125). Some orthodox readers even refused to keep copies of the poem at home, fearing it would pollute ritual space. Such backlash underscores two points. First, it reveals how deeply intertwined literary and devotional spheres were in nineteenth-century Bengal: to reframe an epic character was to intervene in religious practice. Second, it confirms the militancy of Dutt's classicism: his aesthetic daring carried

immediate cultural costs, provoking a community to re-examine its sacred narratives. By the 1880s and 1890s, literary historians such as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee acknowledged Dutt's achievement, though with reservations. Bankim admired the grandeur of blank verse but felt that Miltonic diction sometimes strained Bengali idiom (qtd. in Chaudhuri 91). Early critics thus oscillated between reverence and anxiety: admiration for the audacity of blank verse coupled with unease at its foreign cadence.

By the early twentieth century, nationalist readers retrospectively claimed Dutt as a proto-nationalist poet. His inversion of the *Ramayana* was interpreted less as irreverence and more as resistance—a veiled allegory of colonial domination. Critics highlighted Meghnad's tragic dignity as an emblem of a subjugated yet noble people (Roy 75). In this nationalist reframing, the audacities that had scandalised earlier audiences were absorbed into a narrative of cultural pride.

Although never staged as drama, the poem's performative qualities ensured circulation through recitation. Public declamations of key passages were common in educated circles. Teachers encouraged students to memorise excerpts, and gatherings were held where educated Bengalis recited episodes like the siege of Lanka as evidence of linguistic grandeur (Seely 192).

Folk theatre too appropriated Dutt's mythic innovations. Jatra troupes experimented with staging episodes inspired by *Meghnad-Badh*, though often re-domesticating the inversion to avoid offending devotional audiences. In Gambhira and kirtan performances, echoes of Dutt's sympathetic portrayal of Ravana's camp can be traced, refracted through devotional idioms (Banerjee 109). These appropriations suggest that Dutt's militant classicism was not confined to an elite readership but filtered, selectively, into performative traditions.

From the late nineteenth century, efforts were made to introduce Dutt's epic to wider audiences through translation. Early English renderings were partial and often softened the provocative inversion of sympathy, presenting the poem as an exotic curiosity rather than a radical intervention. Only in the twentieth century, with Clinton Seely's full translation and commentary, could anglophone audiences appreciate the full scope of Dutt's militant classicism (Seely 201). William Radice also emphasised how Dutt's blank verse was not mimicry but an audacious claim to global literary parity (Radice 54).

Across the twentieth century, reception shifted with ideological climates. Nationalist literary histories enshrined him as the father of modern Bengali poetry, celebrating his break from Sanskrit metre and his use of Western forms. Marxist critics, however, were more ambivalent, noting that while his subversions were bold, his elite background limited his engagement with class concerns (qtd. in Sengupta 101). Feminist critics reframed characters like Krishna Kumari and Pramila as windows into the politics of female agency, showing how Dutt's mythic imagination both reinforced and unsettled patriarchal codes (Lal 42).

By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, postcolonial scholars reassessed Dutt as a hybrid figure anticipating subaltern concerns. Gayatri Spivak’s notion of the “subaltern voice” has been invoked to read Meghnad as a dignified adversary whose tragedy allegorises colonial subjugation (qtd. in Dhar 205). Amrita Dhar emphasises that Dutt’s blank verse was not mimicry but counter-claim, asserting that Bengali could host the cadences of global epic (Dhar 210). Current scholarship thus reads Dutt less as derivative and more as strategically militant, crafting literary sovereignty under colonial conditions.

The legacy of Dutt’s militant mythic revisions remains contested. Nationalist movements appropriated *Meghnad-Badh Kabya* as an emblem of pride, while religious conservatives continued to view its inversion of Rama with suspicion. Today, his works are invoked in cultural debates: some valorise his audacity as emblematic of secular critique, while others worry that his sympathetic portrayal of Ravana undermines devotional unity. The elasticity of his mythic interventions ensures their political usability—appropriated by diverse camps to argue for very different visions of culture and nationhood.

Section VII — Conclusion: Myth as Militant Classicism in Colonial Bengal

Madhusudan Dutt’s literary career demonstrates how myth in nineteenth-century Bengal functioned as a dynamic idiom rather than a fixed inheritance. By appropriating epic forms from Milton and Homer, and by redeploying them to retell sacred narratives from the Ramayana and beyond, he fashioned a militant classicism: a poetics that revered classical form even as it fractured canonical hierarchies. His inversions — dignifying a demonised hero, amplifying women’s voices, or parodying social hypocrisy — turned myth into an arena where colonial identity, gender politics, and cultural sovereignty were contested.

The trajectory of his works reveals the breadth of this project. *Meghnad-Badh Kabya* remains the monumental articulation of militant classicism, but other writings — *Tilottama-Sambhab Kabya*, *Krishna-Kumari Natak*, *Virangana*, *Brajangana*, and *Buro Shaliker Ghare Roan* — demonstrate its elasticity across epic, tragedy, lyric, and satire. Each text stages myth as both repository and critique: a medium that could unsettle authority while simultaneously negotiating the limits of gender, devotion, and political aspiration.

Reception history confirms the disruptive force of these interventions. Contemporary audiences oscillated between admiration and outrage, nationalist readers reframed his audacity as proto-resistance, and modern critics continue to debate his gender politics and hybrid identity. That elasticity of meaning is itself a mark of militancy: his works were never neutral but always entangled in cultural politics.

To read Dutt, therefore, is to encounter more than one poet’s aesthetic bravado. It is to witness a cultural strategy — militant classicism — that harnessed epic grandeur to destabilise inherited values and to claim literary sovereignty in a colonial world. His legacy demonstrates that myth in Bengal was

not passive repetition of tradition but an active, contested, and generative form. In continually being reimagined, myth became a living medium through which literature addressed the struggles of identity, culture, and power.

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