

TITLE: “EKPHRASIS, GENDER AND COLONIALITY IN BANKIMCHANDRA CHATTOPADHYAY AND RABINDRANATH TAGORE”

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ABSTRACT

Ekphrasis, or the “verbal representation of a visual representation” (Heffernan 3), one of the oldest European literary genres is known for its tendency to thematize imbalance of power¹, especially along co-ordinates of political, social and gender. The genre has its quite independent instances in classical Indian literature as well, but its use in the works of nineteenth century literateurs like Michael Madhusudan Datta, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore is characterized by a strong affinity to the European ekphrastic tradition in its representation of gender and the experience of coloniality. While arguably the earliest instance of the genre’s use in Bengali literature can be found in two of Datta’s poems, more sustained engagements are seen at work in Chattopadhyay’s works - “Debi Choudhurani” (1884), “Kamalakanter Daptar,” (1875) and “Rajani,” (1877). While in their ekphrastic writings both Datta and Chattopadhyay thematize sites of imperial power and class-struggles for agency, Chattopadhyay introduces the element of gender along the intersections of colonial and societal/familial dominance. Rabindranath Tagore’s work, which shows perhaps the most sustained engagement with the Ekphrastic genre in the history of Bengali literature. From Tagore’s early critical pieces to his two most poignant ekphrastic poems (“Shah Jehan” and “Tumi Ki Keboli Chhobi”) to his later ekphrastic volumes of poetry “Chitralipi” (1940) and “Bichitrita” (published posthumously) – Tagore touched upon aspects of gender, politics, history and philosophy in ekphrasis and inter-medial relation with a breadth that few others have attempted before. This paper seeks to grasp an overview of the ekphrastic genre in the works of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath by examining a select few of their critical prose, fiction and poetry.

Keywords

ekphrasis, gender, coloniality, power, representation, nineteenth century Bengali literature

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1 In WJT Mitchell’s words, “(t)he “otherness” of visual representation from the standpoint of textuality may be anything from a professional competition (the paragone of poet and painter) to a relation of political, disciplinary, or cultural domination in which the “self” is understood to be an active, speaking, seeing subject, while the “other” is projected as a passive, seen, and (usually) silent object” (Mitchell 157)

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