

Reading and Resistance in the Works of Nabarun Bhattacharya

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During the 2013 Taksim Square protests in Istanbul, performance artist Erdem Gunduz started a new form of demonstration by standing silently in a peaceful posture in defiance of the police and paramilitary forces deployed by the government. Soon this method of non-violent protest was picked up by other citizens who joined Gunduz at Taksim Square. Some of them would stand quietly, others would read books. Pictures of Turkish citizens protesting peacefully by standing silently and reading spread rapidly through the internet, as “The Taksim Square Book Club” became a cultural icon for its new way of using public and private reading as methods of protest against violent state oppression. However, the connection between reading and resistance is not unique in the history of either discursive process. In this essay I shall try to show how eminent Bengali writer Nabarun Bhattacharya used similar intellectual exercises as part of his revolutionary praxis. In his fiction and non-fiction Bhattacharya often speaks in his own voice and those of his characters, emphasizing the need to inculcate a habit of reading as a necessary tool of resisting the disciplinary powers of the state. Here I shall be tracing those allusions, as well as his own analysis of various texts, in order to show how he interpreted reading as a potent weapon against the state and state-sponsored mainstream intellectual paradigms which he vehemently despised.

Nabarun Bhattacharya’s untimely demise in 2014 cut short one of the most interesting careers in modern Bengali literature. Though he gained widespread critical attention much later in his career, in the last decade of his life he was acknowledged as one of the foremost literary figures of Bengal. Bhattacharya has been frequently hailed as a firebrand intellectual who represented the radical voice of literary Bolshevism in Bengal (Purakayastha 2014). One of the main features of Bhattacharya’s writing style that has received much attention is his use of rustic, colloquial language laden with expletives. In fact, critical literature on Bhattacharya seems to focus majorly, if not exclusively, on this aspect of his linguistic subversion. This attention, though overused, is not wholly unjustified. Not only did Bhattacharya put this crude language in the mouth of his characters in order to constantly attack the hegemonic dominance of “gentle speech” used by the Bengali upper and upper-middle class, he even created two groups of fictional, foul-mouthed unorganized urban guerrilla anarchists in the form of *Choktars* and *Fyatarus* who give this culture of verbal

effrontery its more effective physical form. *Choktars* and *Fyatarus* are members of the urban poor and lower middle class who have no or little financial resources to speak of, hold no regular jobs and live in the squalor of the poorest neighbourhoods of the teeming metropolis of Kolkata. They can fly using mysterious occult powers to inflict all sorts of random damages on the fragile consumerist world of the upper and upper middle class citizens. Even in other works of fiction that do not feature these anarchists, Bhattacharya has constantly attacked the plastic world of the urban elite as well as the fiction of “respectability” that they construct around themselves by hiding behind the curtain of “decent” and “polished” language. *Harbart* (1993), one of Bhattacharya’s first novels to gain critical attention, has often been cited as a similarly revolutionary and incendiary work that attempts to send “epistemic tremors through his advocacy of radical violence and systemic change” (Purakayastha 91). Similar opinion has been echoed by other commentators who suggest that Bhattacharya’s use of “crude” language is an attempt at creating a space for carnivalesque protest within the struggle for dominance of the urban cityscape (Tapodhir Bhattacharya 140). However, it seems that concentration of critical literature on this singular aspect of Bhattacharya’s literary output has led to a rather limited appreciation of his works. Without denying the importance of the attention devoted to the linguistic subversions in Bhattacharya’s works, here I shall try to show that an equally important aspect of Bhattacharya’s political and ideological stand lies in his vast and diverse reading as much as his incendiary writing. In fact, I would go on to argue that the much celebrated revolutionary rhetoric espoused by Bhattacharya stems directly from his practice as a reader.

Reading as an Act of Resistance

To what extent can a reader or a writer voice his discontent about the tremendous amount of discrimination practiced regularly in society? Reading or writing may appear, at the outset, a rather passive activity often dictated by the demands of others. Contemporary society puts the individual in a scenario where meaning of any kind is way too dependent on the visual impact: communication is ensured by repeatedly exposing people to “spectacular images” on television, newspaper and billboards. As Michel de Certeau suggests in his influential work *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), this exorbitant exposure to the visual medium has created a society that borders on a sort of “epic of the eye”, forcing the subject to recognize images and words and respond to them (xxi). Society thus itself becomes a text, forced down

upon the “reader” by multiple “authors” who try to control the commerce of meaning. One must remember that de Certeau is writing in the 1980s, well before the coming of digital media which has made information even more ubiquitous. However, the individual reader can use the same habit of reading to subvert the directives of the authoritarian voice that dictates the meaning of these texts. The way out of this “disciplining visual society”, then, comes from strategies employed by readers who can make the act of reading a part of the everyday practice of resistance:

In reality, the activity of reading has on the contrary all the characteristics of a silent production: the drift across the page, the metamorphosis of the text effected by the wandering eyes of the reader, the improvisation and expectation of meanings inferred from a few words, leaps over written spaces in an ephemeral dance. [The reader] insinuates into another person’s text the ruses of pleasure and appropriation; he poaches on it, is transported into it, pluralises himself in it like the internal rumblings of one’s body. (de Certeau xxi)

As the reader moves on through the text, he starts inhabiting the world created by the author, making the text habitable, like a rented apartment. It transforms another person’s property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient: “Renters make comparable changes in an apartment they furnish [by inserting] both the messages of their native tongue and, through their accent, through their own ‘turns of phrase’, etc., their own history” (xxi). One way of moving away from this dictatorship of the visual medium is, perhaps, to find out texts of various kinds which fall outside the ambit of state-dictated syllabi. In his various essays and articles, Nabarun Bhattacharya gives us an indication of how similar practices of reading enabled him to develop the revolutionary rhetoric that becomes a prominent driving force in his oeuvre. Bhattacharya inherited the habit of reading from his literary activist mother Mahasweta Devi and his father Bijan Bhattacharya, one of the most important figures of Bengali leftist theatre movement. Through his father, Nabarun came to know Ritwik Ghatak, the maverick Bengali filmmaker whose work is noted for the use of non-traditional formal and narrative style. These intellectual connections have given Bhattacharya’s literary consciousness a cosmopolitan touch that is rarely expressed, let alone acknowledged, by his contemporary Bengali authors. In his essays, Bhattacharya repeatedly mentions various

literary and cinematic works which are normally considered important for their strong political content. Most of the authors Bhattacharya mentions had their own literary careers cut short by ruthless censorship. Mikhail Bulgakov, Vassily Grossman, Isaac Babel, Yevgeny Zamiyatin and Ernst Toller are repeatedly mentioned by Bhattacharya as his sources of inspiration. In “Ajante Astropochar” [Surreptitious surgeries] (July, 2007), he acknowledges the fact that radical authors are constantly being attacked throughout the world by administrations which are trying to stifle their voices in the most terrifying ways possible:

In different corners of the world (irrespective of their leftist or rightist leanings) writers are being persecuted by regime after regime, who are trying to stifle their voices by citing religious, political or completely manufactured nationalistic excuses. Writers are being incarcerated and at times they are being killed, even. This has happened in past as well. (*Aquarium* 103)

Yet he declares, almost in muted triumph, that ironically enough the works of these censored authors are the ones which have survived, while the reign of those dictatorial few have vanished and their empires crumbled away. Aside from these authors, Bhattacharya continuously draws inspiration from radical filmmakers and their revolutionary creations. Talking about Gillo Pontecorvo’s *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), he fondly acknowledges how he came across this film at a moment of terrible personal strife and how it gave him the courage to deal with such difficult times. In the same breath, however, he ruefully comments that talking about such purely personal readings of literary or cinematic texts is no longer “in fashion” (21).

Texts, for him, are not entities that are enclosed within their own discursive spaces. Subversive and anti-institutional texts refer to other texts of similar kind, eventually leading the reader through a journey of discovery and intellectual development. He has given a detailed account of his habits as a reader in a small essay titled “Andaje Andaje” [Simply by guesswork]:

At the beginning of every year I make a list of the books that I want to read. I spend a lot of time making this list of texts that I haven’t read, and texts that are indispensable. At the beginning of 2009, I am thinking about various political non-fiction texts

(especially Robert Fisk), Buddhist Classic, the autobiography of Diego Rivera (I came across this in a biography of Frida Kahlo), Udayan Ghosh, Manto etc., plus C.L.R. James...I make such lists every year, though I know quite well that I won't be able to cover most of them. (62)

One text leads to another, taking the reader from Lebanon¹ to Tibet to Latin America and post-partition subcontinent on a magic carpet that only literature can provide. Michel de Certeau has described this act of textual consumption as transience, especially when contrasted with textual production or writing:

[R]eaders are travellers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves...Reading takes no measures against the erosion of time ...and each of the places through which it passes is a repetition of the lost paradise. (174)

Reading allows the individual, private reader to interpret a certain text in a context that is particular to his own *personal being* – a context that is created for him at that particular time by virtue of *immediate association*. This gift of reference, in turn, leads him onto other texts through chain of reference that is as unique as the chain of meaning that he partakes in. Thus a private reader builds his own canon of texts – his own “holy list”– which is quite often contrary to the state-mandated syllabi. de Certeau compares this with the wanderings of pedestrians through the streets of a city – streets that they fill with “forests of their own desires and goals” (174). Quoting Lyotard, he reminds us that this very act of free-flowing textual association is something that the oppressive state-machinery wants to arrest (165). For Bhattacharya, on the opposite side of this free-flowing chain of ideas rests the stagnant world of contemporary Bengali literature, governed by the demands of large publishing houses which force authors to create tailor-made uninspiring texts that are politically and aesthetically sterile. Writers who have confronted this hegemonic structure have regularly been marginalized by mainstream literati who have persecuted them for their literary daring. He locates these draconian acts in the context of global literary history:

When *Kangal Malsat* was being serialized, one pundit, and it would not be a mistake if one called him a pundit appointed by the government, had said that since this novel was not written in the *manya bhasha* (gentle, polite speech), it would not stand the test of time. Can one think of something more terrible, more vulgar and asinine?... Long live the writers and readers of subversive literature. I know very well the people who raise such complaints, and I despise them heartily. Sometime in the late 1970s, Mikhail Suslov, the ‘great’ theoretician of Soviet Communist Party had told Vasily Grossman that his novel *Life and Fate* would not get printed in the next 200 years. Now everyone knows how things have turned out: *Life and Fate* has emerged victorious, while no one cares about who Mikhail Suslov was. (*Aquarium* 89)

Bhattacharya thus uses his praxis of reading to enform his subversive literary being, to create a list of his intellectual peers who he would draw on throughout his career as a writer. But the habit of reading is not limited to this list of subversive and/or revolutionary texts. Bhattacharya becomes the *subversive reader* himself, extracting unconventional meaning from canonical texts which are normally read in different ways. An example of that can be found in his essay “Bibhutibhusan: khudhar dalil o prasangikata” [Bidhutibhushan: a document of hunger and its importance] – a radically new interpretation of two novels by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay – *Pather Pnachali* [Song of the Road] and *Aranyak* [Of the Forest].

Originally published in 1929, *Pather Pnachali* is the story of the struggle of a poor Brahmin family of Bengal. The novel gained wide international attention when it was made into a critically successful film by Satyajit Ray in 1955. It has been subsequently read as a bildungsroman that tells the story of its protagonist Apu’s journey from childhood to adolescence as he travels with his family from the small sleepy village of Nischindipur to Benares in search of a stable life. Like most children of his time, Bhattacharya had read *Pather Pnachali* as a simple text that asks its readers to sympathize with his fellow human being. Yet, as an adult, his reading of this novel became markedly different. He proposes that it is not simply the story of the struggle of a poor family, or the journey of its protagonist from birth to adolescence, but of a “controlled famine that goes on for years. The famine selects its victims in a slow and agonizing way – even the deaths which are apparently caused by diseases of various kind, actually stem from malnutrition” (*Anarir Narigyan* 29-30). In

order to show how Bibhutibhushan uses hunger as the principal theme of his novel, Bhattacharya provides a catalogue of food-items that are consumed by the poor people of Nischindipur, things that are no longer recognized by urban chroniclers as possible sources of nutrition. Quite often these things are eaten by the members of Roy family with much relish, and the mere presence of edible things in the house becomes a reason to celebrate. But Bibhutibhushan's story of the hungry does not stop within the boundaries of the village. Bhattacharya reads Roy family's journey from Nischindipur to Benares in the context of the mass-migration of famine-stricken people that became a terrifying feature of Bengal in the late 1930s and early 1940s, especially during the great famine that killed millions of villagers during the Second World War. Here Bhattacharya differs from the previous commentators and translators who have generally skipped "Akrur Sambad"², the third section of *Pather Pnachali*:

Those who consider "Akrur Sambad" an anomaly, unworthy of translation, fail to realize that this chronicle of poverty and hunger is capable of causing great textual violence by the same logic of humane struggle. [The characters who fall victim to this famine] are contributors to that document of man's fight against hunger which begins from village and, by logical progression, reaches the city. This is a 'normal' social process that has been going on for centuries (31).

Similarly, Bhattacharya reads *Aranyak* (1937-39) as a testimony of the tremendous exploitation of poor tribal communities of Lobtulia-Azamabad-Baihar by the rural aristocrats in the late 1920s. A scene of fantastic opulence greets the novel's protagonist Satyacharan at the house of loan-shark Rasbehari Singh, where weapons like sticks, shields, swords and spears hang on the wall like mute symbols of discipline that controls his subjects. The signs of prosperity are marked by the abundance of food that the aristocrat's family enjoys. Contrasted with this scene of extravagance is the description of poor villagers who at times are forced to eat eggs of red ants and flowers and roots of wild plants. Bhattacharya provides a reason behind his unusual methods of reading:

I fully believe that the literature of a poor country, i.e. nations that were till recently under bonds of colonialism and are perhaps still trying to come out of those chains,

should first and foremost be the representative of their people – their poor, insulted, hungry people. And those literary works demand different, contextual readings. I am a literary activist from one of the world’s most populous countries – inhabited by millions who are starved, exploited and marginalized. I read Bibhutibhushan in a different context that stems from my awareness of the social conditions of my country, something that constantly disturbs and bothers me (28).

Bhattacharya reads Bibhutibhushan’s novels as records of these terrible, often untold stories of exploitation and struggle that are easily forgotten.

Nabarun Bhattacharya’s Characters as Readers

Looking at his works of fiction, it becomes apparent that the habit of reading is not merely limited to the author himself. The authorial “reader-persona” seeps in through his numerous characters that read, or talk about the items that they have read recently. I argue that these characters are extensions of the same reader-persona that is never content at delimiting itself to a set of canonical texts mandated by the state. Even when reading does not have any obvious connection with resistance, it comes naturally even to the minor characters created by Bhattacharya, irrespective of their social conditions. One example of this can be found in his short story “Necklace” (first published in 2000, anthologized in 2001). The unnamed protagonist of the story is a former KGB hit-man currently living incognito in a small flat in Kolkata. Ruminating on the growing number of criminals in the city and their advanced weaponry, he fondly recalls meeting author William Pomeroy:

[He] is one of the great Americans that I have seen. He had fought the American Army alongside the Huk guerrillas in the Philippines³...I met him once in Moscow. Pomeroy, Astafiyev and I were walking along Prospekt Mira. Pomeroy had gifted me his book *Guerrilla Warfare and Marxism*, and he had written “with love, from a defeated guerrilla” on the dedication page. (*Andha Beral* 72)

This allusion serves no further purpose in the story, apart from the fact that Pomeroy had told him about the single-shot guns that he had used during his days as a rebel against his own country. Similarly in “Nostradamuser Atmahatya” [The Suicide of Nostradamus] another unnamed protagonist waiting for a nuclear holocaust in an unnamed city recalls his father

buying a copy of *The Prophecies of Nostradamus* from a bookseller (*Sreshtha Galpa* 160). Like the hit-man in “Necklace”, he too talks about his father’s reading habit at the very beginning of the story, though it is never alluded to again. Reading is almost an organic process that simply becomes a part of everyday life for Bhattacharya’s characters, and they talk about it in a simple, casual way.

Aside from these rather random examples of “readers” we encounter in Bhattacharya’s fiction, there are other characters, too, who make reading a more serious activity. Two such readers can be found in *Harbart* (1993): the eponymous protagonist himself, and his nephew Binu. However, their reading list and methods of assimilation are vastly different. Orphaned at childhood, Harbart is the son of a wealthy family that had lost almost all of its assets in shoddy investments. Neglected and bullied by most of his relatives, Harbart never progressed beyond sixth standard at a local school in South Kolkata. He gains almost all his knowledge from trashy thrillers and horror novels like *Bhooter jolsae Gopal Bhnaar* [Gopal the Jester at a ghostly concert] or *Circuse bhooter upadrab* [Ghosts create trouble at a circus] and magazines such as *Nabakallol* and *Shuktara*. But the two books he reads most diligently are *Paroloker kotha* [Stories of the Other World] by Mrinalkanti Ghosh Bhaktibhushan and *Paralok-Rahasya* [Mysteries of the Other World] by Kalibar Bedantabageesh (*Harbart* 11). Both these texts are examples of occult literature that had long been discredited by the mainstream rationalist intelligentsia. Harbart reads these books regularly, almost as a duty, and they help him “develop” an ability to communicate with spirits of the recently deceased. Very soon, he garners a reputation as a “medium” and people come from far and wide to seek his help to communicate with their relatives who have recently passed away. Binu, on the other hand, is a meritorious student of one of the most reputed colleges of Kolkata. Secretly a member of Naxalite groups, he is one of the few people who never regarded Harbart as an unnecessary burden of their family. Binu is a serious reader – Harbart often takes a peak in his room to see thick, impressive English volumes displayed on the bookshelves. Though he never patronizes his uncle, Binu encourages Harbart to stop reading such “irrational rubbish” and read more practical stuff. Binu reads to him from the works of Mao Tse-tung, asks him to study Marx, Engels and other works which were banned in West Bengal in the turbulent 1960s and ’70s. Binu and Harbart both realize that the books they are harbouring in their house are not welcome in the society. Often they go up to the roof to burn them. The books burned by Harbart and Binu include

The Little Red Book of Mao Tse-tung, Bengali manuals of urban guerrilla warfare and magazines like *Deshbrati* and *Dakshin Desh* (33). While the methods and ends of their assimilation are different, Binu and Harbart both emerge as *subversive readers* as well as *readers of subversive texts*. Eventually, they both perish in the hands of agents of the society who are fundamentally opposed to such subversive orders of knowledge. Binu, urban guerrilla and a danger to the disciplining state machinery, is killed by the police. Even while dying, Binu recites lines from a poem written by his fellow martyr Samir Mitra, lines that declare that the world was changing around him, and he must be part of that change (33). Harbart commits suicide after he is publicly discredited by members of Paschimbanga Juktibadi Sangha [West Bengal Society of Rationalists] who vehemently oppose Harbart's claims that he can communicate with spirits.

Neither Binu nor Harbart are *sui generis* readers. Reading as a part of the revolutionary praxis has long been employed by radical groups that emerged in Bengal over the last century. During the early days of the armed resistance movement against the British, groups like Anushilan Samiti (1906) and Prabartak Sangha (1920) grew in Bengal, members of which inculcated revolutionary ideas amongst themselves and their contemporary citizens through the reading, writing and distribution of radical, extremist literature. A large section of British intelligence system was constantly preoccupied with the activities of such groups and tried to control the literary culture that their members fostered. The Naxalites later in the century inherited and developed similar practices while waging war against the oppressive nation state. However, while such activities were encouraged and glorified by native intellectuals in pre-independence India, members of the radical left-wing groups faced severe persecution during the 1960s and '70s. Harbart, on the other hand, represents a more personal yet equally problematic method of reading. When members of West Bengal Rationalist Society threatens to expose him as a charlatan, Harbart brings out *Paroloker Kotha* and *Parolok-Rahasya* from his bookshelf and produces those in front of his assailants as definitive texts of the order of knowledge that he represents (68). To his horror, his opponents burst out laughing, suggesting that lunatics and liars like Harbart should be dragged away to prison for perpetrating irrational ideas. One of the members of the Rationalist Society who had barged into Harbart's room snidely remarks that the right medicine for people like Harbart is a Stalinist purge (69). While Binu represents the revolutionary reading habits of the radical section of Bengal's youth, Harbart becomes the symbol of an individual's right to

liberated reading, as opposed to accepted standards of rationalist, liberal reading habits upheld by organized, state-fostered intelligentsia. Even in his death, Harbart remains faithful to an order of “subjugated knowledge” and the sub-culture of reading texts of occultism which were marginalized and suppressed by Western paradigms of rationalism and reason.

Choktars and Fyatarus: Anarchist Readers and Writers of “trash”

Building a world through reading has its drawbacks. Revolutionaries like Binu, or pedagogical anomalies like Harbart prove to be rather inadequate tools to break the shackles of the hegemonic power of rationalist civil society that is blinkered by the policies of the welfare state. In the later fiction of Bhattacharya, then, a deep sense of frustration seems to take over. As I had indicated at the beginning of this essay, I shall now try to connect this sense of disappointment to his use of crude, colloquial language as an alternative mode of protest. To clarify, Bhattacharya does not use random verbal abuse or crude humour without any specific context. I shall try to show that this device is also used within the same framework of reading and writing: passive and active literary production.

The most popular works of the later part of Bhattacharya’s career are the novels and short stories featuring his foul-mouthed urban anarchists *Fyatarus* and *Choktars*. Very much like the polished assassin in “Necklace” or the radical intellectual Binu of *Harbart*, *Fyatarus*, *Choktars* and their associates have readers and writers amongst their ranks. As readers, they are closer to Harbart than Binu: preferring trashy thrillers, horror and detective novels and works of occult literature over serious, rationalist and philosophical works. Bhattacharya uses a rather interesting occasion to introduce his readers to the reading habits of *Fyatarus* in the short story “Boimelae Fyataru” [*Fyatarus* at the Book Fair]. The story is set in February, 1997, when a devastating fire destroyed large number of stalls at the annual Calcutta Book Fair. This story features Madan and DS (short for Director’s Special, a popular brand of whiskey), two of the earliest *Fyatarus* introduced by Bhattacharya, who fly to the fairgrounds at night and try to steal half-burnt books from the wreckages of bookstalls. Madan, who emerges as the leader of *Fyatarus* later in the sequence, leads DS to one stall from which they “collect” books like *Tantrik Sadhana o Siddhanta*, *Tantrikguru* and *Bagalamukhir Dhyana* (both of them are texts related to the Tantric traditions) but throw away in utter disgust a collection of modern Bengali poetry (*Fyatarur Bombachak* 39-40). It’s significant to know that Bhattacharya gives us a hint of the literary taste of his anarchist readers over a scene that

represents the burnt, smouldering wreckage of the most important event in Bengal's literary calendar. *Fyatarus* would not have been welcome in a sophisticated cultural event like the Book Fair on any normal day, mostly because they do not have the money to buy expensive new books but also because they do not conform to the demands of the elite, gentle and cultured Bengali literati. Yet, as Bhattacharya shows us, they have the audacity to make their own selection of books, to attest their literary taste.

Later in the sequence of stories Madan and DS would meet Purandar Bhat, a poet who spends his days composing "trashy" verses full of crude language and images. Naturally, though he gets booted out of elite literary meets, he becomes the favourite poet of Madan, DS and, later in the novel *Kangal Malsat*, Bhodi and other Choktars. Bhat later joined the *Fyatarus* and learned to fly. In the short story "Kabi Sammelane Fyataru" [*Fyatarus* at the meeting of poets], together with Madan and DS, Bhat caused tremendous chaos at a poetry-conference by dropping smelly rubbish on finely dressed elite poets who were sitting on the dais, simply because the organizers did not allow him to participate. In *Mausoleum* (2006) we meet Bajra Ghosh, a writer of vulgar, semi-pornographic novels like *Khandani Khanki* [Aristocratic Whore] and *Membatir Alo* [Light of Fair-skinned Woman]. While Bajra Ghosh and Purandar Bhat are authors of trashy texts themselves, Bhattacharya points out that their works are no worse than those produced by sophisticated writers, who are basically slaves of large publishing houses. Moreover, Ghosh and Bhat are exonerated in the eyes of Bhattacharya as their works stem from a genuine source of anguish created by years of abject poverty, neglect and discrimination. Naturally, their works refuse to conform to any pretentious literary elitism in form and content and the language that they use in their poems and novels are as aggressive, crude and vulgar as the one that they use in their day-to-day conversation.

Bhattacharya takes this idea of literary production to a different level in the novel *Kangal Malsat* [Beggars' War Cry, 2003]. Without a doubt Bhattacharya's most popular work, this is the story of the epic battle between the administration of Kolkata and the alliance of *Choktars* and *Fyatarus* and other marginalized groups of anarchist rebels. This alliance is led by Bhodi, the principal of the *Choktars* and a practitioner of black magic. In their rebellion, members of the alliance are aided by supernatural forces of ghosts, mysterious flying saucers and Dandabayos – a huge raven who claims to have lived for centuries, knows sorcery and is a father figure and spiritual guide to Bhodi. But this novel is not merely the

story of that battle; it is also a treatise accusing the common Bengali reader of being party to a culture of amnesia that has caused a sustained and systematic violence to cultural memory. As Aleida Assmann has pointed out, cultural working memory functions in the dual form of accumulation and neglect. While the “accumulated” texts become part of the canon, “neglected” texts are forgotten and gradually weeded out of the collective memory of a social group. Thus, the canon itself in time becomes the acceptable source of archival memory that the reader turns to in order to make an assessment of the texts which are “worthy” of preservation and consultation. But then, the canon needs to be challenged repeatedly by each generation, otherwise it could lead to a stagnant list of exemplary texts untouched by passage of time (Assmann 100). In *Kangal Malsat*, Bhattacharya constructs a meta-textual narrative in order to question the construction of that canonical memory. Here, like his other texts, Bhattacharya takes the reading habit of the common Bengali intellectual as an indicator of cultural amnesia. Throughout the novel, Bhattacharya directly addresses his readers by quoting from the works of forgotten Bengali writers and challenges his readers to identify their authors – to explore this alternative, marginalized canon. However, these writers are now so obscure that most people can no longer recognize them by their works. For example, Chapter 3 ends with a quote from a poem:

Sokoli dhwangser pathe! Sokoli dhwangser pathe!
 Keho jaye ashwe goje,
 Keho jaye podobroje
 Keho swarna-choturdole, keho jaye pushparothe;
 Sokoli dhwangser pathe! Sokoli dhwangser pathe! (*Kangal Malsat* 26)

[Everything is rushing towards the end! Some travel on horses or elephants, while others walk on foot. Some ride the golden palanquins, while others go on chariots adorned with flowers. But everything is surely rushing towards the end.]

At the beginning of the next chapter, Bhattacharya says that the writer of this poem Gobinda Chandra Das (1885-1918), who was once hailed by his contemporaries as the last national poet of Bengal, has vanished not because he was a terrible writer, but because he was not an “impotent conformist” like his modern-day counterparts (27). Similar examples are given from the works of Girindrasekhar Basu (20), Premankur Atarhi (48), Harihar Seth (75),

Kalidas Ray (93), Kumudranjan Mullick (104) and many others. None of these writers, Bhattacharya says, have received their due respect. He contends that this has not happened because the writers were themselves unworthy, but because their readers have been brainwashed into following a different cultural paradigm altogether. Also, he argues that this collective failure of generations of Bengali readers is almost irreversible, for they are passing this habit onto their next generation (20).

The failure of the sophisticated reader comes as a disappointing antithesis to the practice of reading as an act of resistance. Bhattacharya tries to find a way out of this failure in a different way – *Kangal Malsat* becomes not only a text about a struggle between two mismatched powers (the alliance of *Choktars*, *Fyatarus* and other lumpens of the city versus the state administration), but also a narrative about the *composition* of the novel itself. Literary production becomes an act of defiance against the dominance of “pure” or “respectable” culture. The entire novel is written in the same language that is used by the *Fyatarus* and *Choktars* to abuse the upper class citizens of Kolkata. Through his novel, Bhattacharya in turn abuses the “respectable” literary culture in a similar way, accusing it of turning the Bengali consciousness into something servile, weak and unaware of its own past. In his effort, along with his revolutionary peers, Bhattacharya draws inspiration from those writers whose works have not received due recognition. *Kangal Malsat* becomes the representative of the forgotten literary heritage which Bengali readers should have preserved. Repeatedly, the author keeps on telling his readers how the respectable literati are trying to stop the publication of this novel, and how they are scared of the crude language and abuses that he is constantly hurling at them. However, he does not try to alienate himself from his readers by needlessly abusing them in the crudest possible language. Rather, this language becomes a challenge to those few who would be willing to see through the culture of effrontery that lies on its surface, and venture beyond that to partake in the act of reading, reclamation of the collective memory and development of a culture of intellectual resistance.

Conclusion

The rebellion that the alliance of beggars and have-nots of Kolkata wages against the city administration comes to a rather tame end in the final chapters of *Kangal Malsat*. Bhodi, the principal *Choktar* and leader of the rebel alliance, asserts his claim over the imaginary reserve of oil under Kolkata, and the terrified administration gives in to his demands. The

rebels assume the role of the capitalists, and the promise of freedom and subversion with which the struggle had begun ends with a situation where the rebel leader could end up becoming yet another powerful dictator, poaching on the poor and weak. The only tangible success to come out of this is the publication of *Kangal Malsat*, the meta-novel that Bhattacharya was writing the entire time. At the end of the novel, Dandabayos takes flight to give the news of the publication of this novel to his ghostly friends. Despite the failure of the political uprising, acts of passive resistance such as reading and writing need to go on. Individual readers of *subversive texts* must continue their *subversive reading* no matter how many obstacles come their way. Nabarun Bhattacharya's fiction and non-fiction show us that the struggle against hegemonic dominance of canonical literature and "respectable language" must be kept alive. For a society that lives constantly under a coma induced by the pleasures of capitalist affluence, these forms of passive resistance are the only hope.

[All transcriptions and translations from Nabarun Bhattacharya's texts quoted in this essay are mine.]

Notes:

¹Robert Fisk's book *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War* (1990) is an account of the Lebanese civil war which he reported on as a correspondent of *The Independent*.

²Even Satyajit Ray left out this section from his cinematic interpretation.

³The Hukbalahap (*Hukbong Bayan Laban sa mga Hapon*, or The Nation's Army Against the Japanese), or *Hukbong Laban sa Hapon* (Anti-Japanese Army) was a Communist guerrilla movement formed by the farmers of Central Luzon.

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