CAVEAT LECTOR: ABÉCÉDARIAN ALIENATION IN ISHWAR CHANDRA VIDYASAGAR'S BARNA PARICHAY: A LACANIAN READING

Abstract

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's *Barna Parichay* is a seminal text in Bengali letters. This essay offers a close Lacanian reading of *Barna Parichay* which seeks to tease out the pedagogical politics and pathology of this celebrated and canonical abécédaire abutting on the problematic of desire qua alienation in the field of the Other in the articulation of the deontological axiology the text purports and performs.

Keywords: Vidyasagar, *Barna Parichay*, pedagogy, Lacan, desire, discourse, alienation

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Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's Bengali primer *Barna Parichay* was first published in 1855, and went through at least six subsequent editions, including major revisions by Vidyasagar himself. Vidyasagar is an honorific; the author signed his name as Sri Ishwar Chandra Sharma. *Barna Parichay*, comprising two books, is an abécédaire. As is well known, it is much more: it is a *magnummoralium*: it is didactic; it (re)presents a pedagogical programme orientated to a certain conception of the good life, imbricated, as we shall see, with the culture and practice of letters, whose politics and pathology this essay purports to examine and explore guided by the principles and practice of Lacanian psychoanalysis. *Barna Parichay* is a foundational text; it could be said to have marked an epistemic break in colonial Bengali letters and pedagogy with a pre-eminent post-colonial afterlife. It was a curricular constant: I studied *Barna Parichay* as a schoolboy, though, interestingly and importantly, it was later supplemented if not supplanted by Rabindranath Tagore's *Sahaj Path* (which may be rendered *Easy Reading*). *Barna Parichay* literally means "Alphabet Familiarity". As we shall see, progressive familiarisation with the alphabet seems to (de)familiarize a certain conception—cognitive mapping—of the civic institution of the family vis-à-vis the State itself. To my mind, it is precisely because *Barna Parichay* was and still is a foundational text that it invites interrogation of its conceptual frame. I shall refer in this essay to the sixth edition revised by Vidyasagar himself published in 1932-1933. Older editions, though they may be extant, are not easily accessible.

The "First Reading/Lesson" (*Pratham Path*) of the First Book introduces noun phrases. The "Second Reading" has imperative sentences. Thus, the abécédaire articulates and foregrounds its pre-eminently allocutionary (g)ambit: it directly addresses its young readers; it is not primarily declarative but imperative and thereby didactic. According to Jacques Lacan the primordial mode and mood of enunciation in and from the locus of the Other is imperative, and this is a function of the Freudian super-ego which censors and censures and is the coefficient of the ego-ideal which holds itself up as the paternal mode(l) of/for identification. Simply put, the mode of address in the book assumes the form: "do/don't". The sentences of the second lesson are: "Leave the road" (i.e. don't block the way), "Drink water", "Hold hands", "Go home".[1] Though discrete and apparently unrelated, these micro-sentences can be taken to form a set whose function is definable as an imperative bearing on physical and moral health and hygiene. More importantly, we can ask: what is the locus of enunciation, who is talking to whom? A pat answer would be: teacher to pupil, thereby underscoring a pedagogy not without its politics premised on what Lacan calls the Name-of-the-Father or the paternal metaphor.

The "Ninth Reading" introduces longer, and more connected, sentences as well as the protagonists in the *moralium*, Rakhal and Gopal, proper names singled out and soldered by Sibaji Bandyopadhyaya in his study of colonial Bengali children's literature. They are:

"I have cleaned my mouth" "Gopal doesn't have books to read"
"Rakhal is getting dressed" "Madhav has gone to study a long time ago"
"Bhuvan has dressed" "Jadav is still in bed"
"Rakhal plays around all day long"

Firstly, this segment has sentences beginning in the first person and going on to the third person. Who is speaking in the first person in the first sentence? Teacher or pupil? We don't' know, but the assertoric incipit inscribes the ego-ideal: a ritual, cleansing, action to be

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assumed. Washing the face and cleansing the mouth indexes purification/purgation of speech and language and thus foregrounds the primacy of the symbolic order and of discourse qua social bond. Secondly, the centred graphematic sectioning of the passage posits the final negative declarative sentence as a cautionary climax. Thirdly, the dichotomy of work and play framed by the question of and ethics of temporality is foregrounded. Fourthly, Gopal's not having books is implicitly articulated as privation—lack, and thus the pivot of desire—over against Rakhal's playing all day long which points to a jouissive plenitude—lack of a lack—indexing not so much a lack of as a deflection or perversion of desire.

The "Tenth Reading" asks a series of questions, thus re-inscribing the allocutionary mode, concluding with, "What are you all doing here?" Interestingly, the punctuation mark used is not an interrogation but the Bengali equivalent of the full stop, perhaps suggesting foregone conclusions. Taken literally, the final question translates into "*Che Vuoi*?", What do you want? which can take the form of the Other's demand even as it indicates the primordial and inscrutable desire of the Other beyond demand. Desire is discursive. Pabitra Sarkar has pointed out (cited in Bandyopadhyaya) that of the 239 finite and infinite verb forms in *Barna Parichay* 25 are variants of to read/to study/to learn ("*para*"). Vidyasagar's project and purpose is to make his readers read right, which always already assumes a certain philosophy of right. To learn is to be able to handle little letters, often with big effects, letters which Lacan teaches overgoes the symbolic with a foot in the real thus causing aporia and anxiety. Gopal and Rakhal and their cognates are taken up and worked through contrapuntally throughout the text which not only foregrounds but also problematizes the question of the problematic articulation of duty and desire demonstrated, if not wholly determined, by and in discourse.

"Reading 19" introduces Gopal. Gopal is a good boy. He makes no demands. But the question arises, what about desire…? Gopal loves his younger siblings. He doesn't quarrel with them or hit them. Therefore, his parents love him. The logic of love here is hierarchical, top-down, and transactive rather than simply reciprocal or symmetrical: the parental Other loves Gopal because he loves his sibling others, from the place of the introjected Other…? Gopal is a good pupil. He is the first to come to school and begin reading his lessons. He plays only during the allotted hour, like other boys, but unlike them doesn't quarrel or fight. Gopal is thus defined by his difference from rather than his similarity with others. He is an exception, and therefore an example. He comes home, keeps his book safely, undresses, washes, eats, plays, studies. He doesn't neglect his studies. He is not only good but the best. "All who see Gopal, love him. All boys should be like Gopal." But can all be(come) the best? Gopal is an absolute. Can the average aspire to the absolute? If all become (like) Gopal will Gopal still be Gopal? Thus, the very pedagogic prescription is caught in a performative contradiction. Further, we are left wanting, if we want to know, what does Gopal want?

"Reading 20" introduces Rakhal. If Gopal is the paradigm of perfection, positive exemplum, Rakhal is his absolute, abysmal antithesis. Unlike Gopal, Rakhal is a bad boy. Rakhal is the mirror opposite of Gopal. "Nobody loves Rakhal. No boy should become like Rakhal. If a boy behaves like Rakhal, he will never be able to learn." The *telos* of life is thus to learn. We are not told how, what, and why. In "Book Two" Vidyasagar says that an educated person is loved. Learning becomes the condition of possibility of being loved. Rakhal is not loved. We are told, though, that Rakhal "does as he pleases" and so nobody loves him, even and especially his parents and teachers. Love and desire are not the same.

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Although Rakhal is not loved, and there is no mention, unlike Gopal, that he loves, insofar as he does as he pleases means that he desires, beyond and against the desire of the parental-pedagogic Other. Paradoxically, while the good boy Gopal is alienated in the Other's desire the bad boy Rakhal strives to assume his own desire, albeit negatively as a refusal to meet the Other's demand which he possibly misrecognizes as the Other's desire. The question of (the Other's) desire is articulated with the question of (the Other's) jouissance. In "Reading 17" we learn, regarding Nabin, that it is not good to verbally abuse anyone of which Nabin is guilty. But in "Reading 20" we are told that the teacher always verbally abuses Rakhal. Again, the narrative runs into and is caught in an aporetic performative contradiction: a pretty banal one. The teacher abdicates his desire to teach and submits to the jouissance of hate in obedience to the imperative of an obscene and ferocious super-ego and is also caught in the imaginary ego-to-ego non-relation. The teacher and the father, in metonymic contiguity, say "No" not to separate but to further alienate. The sheep and the goat are clearly distinct and the binary is Manichean.

"Book I" concludes with the cautionary tales—moral fables—of Gopal and Rakhal. "Book II" was revised by Vidyasagar and later published in 1933. Vidyasagar's editorial preface states that the readings are added to alleviate the tedium of learning the advanced form of the Bengali alphabet. A Horatian injection of pleasure into pedagogical profit. He adds, interestingly, that new words in the book are to be taught without a consideration to their meaning. Aside from the possibility of endorsing rote-learning, which sits close to ideological interpellation, the signifier is sifted out off of the signified, opening out to non-sense, and thus to the condition of the jouissance of the Lacanian letter, to be supplemented by the readings which eminently signify. Sibaji Bandyopadhyaya feels that the universe of *Barna Parichay* indexes a *tabula rasa* in that it is ahistorical, dehistoricized. But it seems to me, on the contrary, that the minds of a Gopal or a Rakhal reflect not so much an empty slate as an always already programmed performance which make their careers deterministically teleological as well as Manichean. Gopal is good and Rakhal is bad from the beginning till the end of history. The crucial question for the educator then becomes, can the prior programme be reprogrammed, can the arché-writing be rewritten? This reprogramming would precisely be the pedagogical programme. This is evinced in the cautionary tale of Nabin, "Reading 5", who goes from bad to good. Vidyasagar the great reformer gives us a fable of reformation. But is it a transformation? Madhav, of "Reading 6", is the polar and mirror opposite, negative, of Nabin who although studious is a book thief and goes from bad to worse. Madhav is the negative instance of Nabin. The relation can be schematically represented as follows:

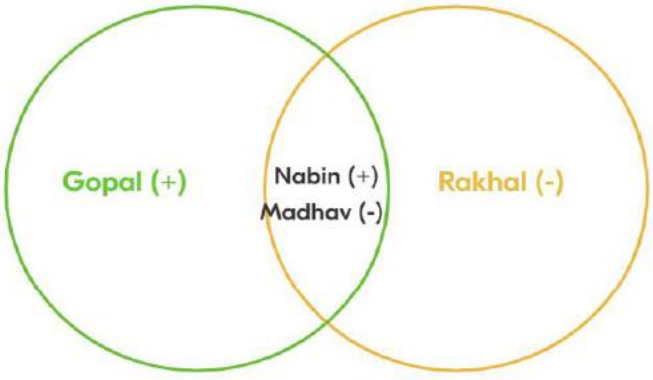

Figure 1

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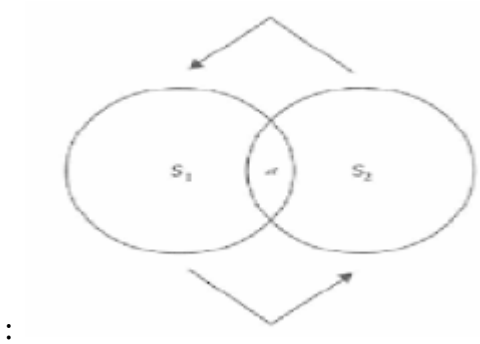

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Figure 2: Alienation

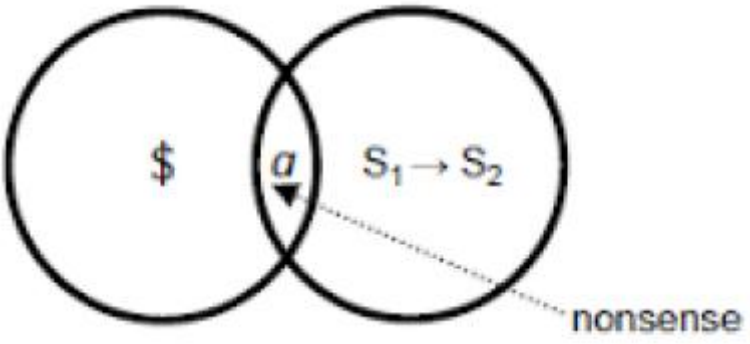

Figure 3: Separation

It is significant and symptomatic that a boy who is good with books should steal others' books, although other things as well along a metonymic chain. Madhav the kleptomaniac is fixated at the level of oral demand. The psychopathology of stealing is of more than marginal interest to education and for educators insofar as pedagogy pivots on (symbolic) speech and (real) voice, in other words on the function and field of speech and language in their signifying materiality: in sum, on orality. As well as on the book qua at once privileged object *and* signifier. It would be interesting and instructive to know if anybody ever stole *Barna Parichay*. Desire, according to Lacan, is always desire of the Other. Madhav is alienated in the desire of the Other at the imaginary register of ego-other mirror relationship unable to assume a symbolic mandate and thus articulate his own inarticulable desire. Madhav is at first forgiven by his teacher but finally scolded, beaten and expelled by both teachers and his father and everybody else. Madhav says at first that he has stolen by mistake and promises never to steal again, a promise he breaks; and a symbolic debt to the Other he cannot discharge in thrall to his repetition compulsion which indexes the real of a jouissance attached to his death drive. Madhav's alienation in desire takes the form of saying "No" to the Father's No: but as in the case of Rakhal, is it an attempt at separation from the field of the Other, gone awry? In the beginning Madhav is loved by all. At the end he is hated by his father, his teachers, by all. The punishment for his criminal pathology is not only destitution but the loss of love. Yet again, the narrative runs into a performative contradiction. Even as we have learned that everybody loves a studious boy and Madhav is loved accordingly, education fails to be an antidote to original sin and the consequent loss of love and a life of lone suffering! Will then *Barna Parichay* be able to perform its ethico-pedagogic promise? Does the generic insistence of the cautionary tale conceal a reformer's

pathological anxiety? According to Schopenhauer, duly recalled by Freud, the world is moved by the twin forces of love and hunger. Madhav moves from the loss of love to the laceration of hunger. The responsibility is his. But, at the same time, education fails to reform and rectify a flaw in character.

"Reading 8" is an address to boys to obey their parents. Nobody is greater, kinder, more loving than parents. Parents delight in their children's delight. They send their children to school so that schooling makes their wards happy. Obedience makes boys good boys, which delights their parents no end. The family romance is here Hegelian in that what matters is that the child be recognized by the parent. Desire, here again, is determined by and alienated in the Other's desire. Boys should do what their parents tell them to do and should not do what they are told not to do. Satisfaction is consequent upon the super-ego. It is an open question whether the parental Other stands in for the State qua Other. But a piquant piece of Vidyasagar's biography is that as a boy he would do the exact opposite of what he was told to do by his father, who reversed his demands accordingly. "Reading 8" purports to prop up what Lacan calls the Name-of-the-Father qua symbolic mandate by way of prohibition and permission at once to speak and thus to desire and enjoy.

The 10th and final reading tells the story of Bhuvan the thief who is duly caught and hanged. The tale carries the commandment: One should never steal. Bhuvan's parents are dead. He is brought up by his maternal aunt. One day Bhuvan steals a book from a school friend. His aunt doesn't admonish him. He grows up to be a great thief. Eventually he is caught and sentenced to death. He has an epiphany. At the gallows he asks to meet his aunt for one last time, who arrives in tears. He calls her close so as to whisper something into her ear. When she brings her face close he bites off her ear, stating "this is your reward for not asking me not to steal." This storiette is remarkable for a number of reasons. While Madhav is responsible for his own original sin Bhuvan imputes responsibility to the maternal Other. In both cases, though in different ways, the reader is confronted with the failure of the paternal function, the Name-of-the-Father, in separating the child subject from the desire of the mother. Desire is desire of the Other. Bhuvan's desire to steal is situated in the field of the aunt qua desiring Other who, qua faux (M)Other has stolen the place of the "true" mother and is unable and unwilling to mediate the empty place of the sanctioning (in both senses) father. The question of legitimacy, which becomes a question of life and death, is thus located in the locus of the Other qua a hole in the Other. According to Marx man is alienated in labour wherewith human relations are reified. According to Lacan man is alienated in language the moment an infant (= speechless) is marked by language and becomes a speaking being. By the same token, he is caught in the field of the desire of the Other and thus is alienated in desire. The ethical position to adopt for a subject is to effect a separation from the field of the Other whereby s/he is able to assume his/her own desire, sometimes, perhaps at the point and price of death. Hamlet, caught in the trap of his mother's desire, is able to strike uncle Claudius and assume his own desire only once he is mortally wounded by Laertes and thus only at the point of death. Bhuvan is able to realize the truth of his desire and effect a separation from his aunt, by way of a passage to the act, only at the point of death in his being-towards-death. The dialectic of the ear (of the Other) and the mouth and biting teeth (of the subject, hitherto caught in the Other) passes from the symbolic axis of speech to the real of the waste object, thus unconcealing the aporetic articulation of life and language where truth and lie are (onto)logically coterminous.

Sibaji Bandyopadhyaya rightly points out that the relation between boys and their parents and teachers, the paternal and pedagogic Other, in *Barna Parichay* is of the order of a social contract. But as Carol Pateman and others have pointed out, a social contract is also always already a sexual contract, where the subject is liable to confuse the maternal Other qua feeding Other and sexual Other. Bandyopadhyaya also points out that woman qua mother is largely written out of Vidyasagar's narrative. This can be the subject-matter of another study. But ~~Woman~~ figures in the interstices of the text as the mother who feeds, and thus gives life, and the aunt qua faux mother whose negligent indulgence takes away life; ~~Woman~~ ordering herself in the narrative as an ouroboros. The elided, enigmatic figure of ~~Woman~~, written under erasure, comes to focalize the problematic of duty, desire and death. Why does Vidyasagar foreground the problem of theft? Possibly because pedagogy and pathology both pivot on desire. To take another's property without telling them is theft; it is wrong. But man's desire is stolen from the field of the Other's desire, unconsciously, unbeknownst to either party, and as we have seen, at times perceivable only at the point of death. Desire is thus articulated with symbolic debt. Desire is the desire of the Other in which the subject is alienated insofar as s/he speaks. Vidyasagar's valiant attempt to familiarize his young readers with not only the alphabet but also an axiology and axiomatics of ethics and thus a good life effectively serves to defamiliarize the problematic of the subject of/in/as desire.

NOTES & REFERENCES:

All translations from the Bengali are mine.

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