SYNOPSIS

of

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IN HEMENDRANATH MAZUMDAR'S PAINTINGS, CRITICAL ESSAYS, AND POETRY

(1919-1948)

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Synopsis

The entire career of Hemendranath Mazumdar can actually be revisited, and significantly reconsidered, in terms of a resistance to the dominant ideology of his times— one that was put together on the basis of a selective historicism at best, by ideologues who advocated— almost legitimized— the lineaments of 'Indian-ness' in contemporary art. Ways of imaging the nation had indeed become a space for cultural contestation— especially in the area of visual arts— in the closing decades of the 19th century. The 'Indian' style of painting that came to establish itself in the succeeding decade marks the success of an already-dominant ideology which had worked in inseparable alliance with the nationalist principles of the *Swadeshi* movement. Intrinsic to the movement was the need to return to one's cultural roots. This constituted in itself a contested terrain which was interrogated by the counter-posture of a certain contemporary critical discourse which steadily burgeoned at the time. Hemendranath Mazumdar played a key role in formulating and propagating this discourse, which he adhered to all through his creative life.

In my thesis I have attempted to examine Hemendranath Mazumdar's consistent discourse of resistance against the dominant ideology of 'Indianness' propagated by Abanindranath Tagore and the other neo-Bengal School painters as the legitimate taste in art in exclusion of all other. I have explored in detail how this discourse is framed by closely studying his art, and also his writing— both poetry and critical essays. His was a time when art, literature and popular culture were very closely, almost inextricably, related— with intertwined strands virtually impossible to separate. In almost everything that he had ever written or painted, there had always been this underpinning of resistance against this insularity of 'Indianness'. He was especially scathingly critical against its inherent historicism that was out of touch with the *here* and *now,* and also objected against the way these painters privileged spirit over form, and denigrated naturalism in art, branding it as a 'Western' import. What seems to be especially ironic is the fact that, the ideals of the Bengal School— and the contemporary art criticism that upheld these— had been drawing heavily from Western aesthetic ideology, especially that of John Ruskin and the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, related to locating the 'idealistic' in art, and also the importance of

literary imagery and symbolism in art. His choice of subjects can also be seen as a part of this resistance: at a time when virtuous womanhood had become almost a national icon (we will recall Abanindranath Tagore's *Bharat Mata*) he painted women in various states of undress in his wet-saree series. In a way his exploration of female sexuality was in itself an exercise in contrariness vis-à-vis the contemporary 'glorified feminine' in art imaged at the intersectional juncture of motherhood and nationalism. I have also examined how his landscapes differ significantly from those of the Bengal school painters.

I have also looked into the way in which contemporary literature played a permeative role in his paintings, as it did in case of some other artists as well. The visual culture of the period was significantly influenced by the way popular literary journals and periodicals carried plates of paintings. This aided not only in the fostering of a close-knit relation between literature and art, but also brought the common educated people in close contact with contemporary art, a practice that is almost wholly lost today. Hemendranath Mazumdar had often used lines from popular literary works as his painting-titles, like *Rohini*, a character from Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Krishnakanter Will*, also lines from from *Baishnab Padabali*, and his unique take on voyeurism as a cross between legitimacy and forbiddenness could be referenced to the character called Karkun in *Mymensingh Geetika* who was admonished for spying on bathing women, as well as the near-legitimisation of such sightings in the myths surrounding Krishna and the Gopis. I have also examined how his resistance was not only against the propagation of an artificial category of Indianness, but also how this line of thought brought about an almost phobic attitude towards anything that was remotely connected to the West. This included the use of oil paint and adherence to the techniques of Western Academic naturalism, and since both of these were adopted by Mazumdar, he had clearly been at the receiving end of certain exclusionary tactics during a certain period of time. I have always felt the way he had retaliated should actually be brought together and seen as a discourse, not only to be able to relate to his views in an intimate manner, but also to connect to that area of art which has been surprisingly written off by mainstream art history. But it was also necessary to observe, and ascertain, the value of his discourse by attempting to separate it from the opinions of other artists and ideologues similarly positioned against the 'Indian-style' paintings. My thesis, especially the first chapter, is concerned chiefly with this.

The initial talking point here, of course, would be the way art came to be conceived as a typically indigenous— almost a *Swadeshi*— product, aimed principally to stir up patriotic emotions by re-invoking the history, traditions and mythology of ancient India, with the express purpose of reminding people of the glory of India which was being compromised with by the cultural invasion of the colonialists. This strategy of re-energising the future by presenting figurations of a glorious past— primarily associated with the Bengal School (or neo-Bengal School) of artists, consisting of Abanindranath Tagore and his circle— operated not only upon the choice of mythological or religious subjects, but also of form and technique, which were also drawn from what was considered to be intrinsically 'Indian'. The West, already subject to an ongoing process of being constructed as the cultural other, came to be conceptually associated both with 'academic' naturalism[i] and the medium and technique of oil painting, as a result of which both of these were assiduously avoided by the Bengal School artists. That Hemendranath Mazumdar stands as a rather unassimilated figure at this art historical juncture is only partly because of the fact that he has been primarily known for his sensuous, naturalistic oils. His unrelenting resistance against what he thought to be the rather illogical branding of 'Indianness' imposed upon the Bengal School paintings was primarily responsible for his unique situatedness in his own times. His views were also underpinned by a suspicion that there had been a certain imperialist collusion operative in defining, privileging, and thereby segregating 'Indian' art, a politically devised strategy to keep Indians away from techniques and developments of Western art. My thesis consists of an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion and two appendices, in addition to a number of images of Hemendranath's paintings, and a reference list. In the Introduction, apart from mapping out an outline of the course of my research, I have also addressed the unexpected bends and turns that unfixes the previously envisaged route of inquiry; these are often significant counterpoints born out of the interface between the researcher and her research, which only serve to add additional significance, and dimension, to the final outcome. Having said this, it is also essential that I point out here my deep ambivalence about finality; I should perhaps call this *unfinalizability*. Having worked with Indian Art history for a considerable period, I have closely observed how the political culture of the present adds or subtracts layers of meaning to/from even mainstream history; we construct our past much more than our future. Hemendranath Mazumdar had never been taken seriously by mainstream art history; whatever puny mentions he had had, were invariably related to his regimented status as

the artist who painted erotic figures of wet-clothed women. That he had a strong claim to discursivity, vis-à-vis the cultural politics of his times, had never been noted, let alone analyzed, by our times (except that one chapter in Partho Mitter's book *The Triumph of Nationalism*, which I have drawn from, extensively, in this thesis). There was, of course, the posthumously-published book by Mazumdar himself— *Chhobir Chosma*— which proved invaluable in understanding and theorizing the nature of his resistance. It is indeed regrettable that in spite of having been published (and widely sold, which the number of editions bear testimony to) more than thirty years ago, the discourse evident in the text had not been considered important enough for historians to impel them to revisit and revise the glaring erasures of Indian art history. Therefore, at the very outset, I was faced with a twin problem. The first was, of course, to look closely at Mazumdar's paintings other than the wet-clothed series, to ascertain without doubt whether he is only partially represented— in whatever puny space history had allotted him, and also within the already-fading space of our collective cultural memory— whether something was really amiss about his reputation, about which I had always had a strong conviction. It was then time to collect objective evidence, mostly plates of his other paintings, and proof of both his extraordinary competence and fame in subjects other than wet-clothed women. The second problem was understanding, and formulating, his discourse of resistance from his scattered writings in magazines, his journal editorials, commentary of contemporaries, and his book *Chhobir Chosma*. The way I went about the first problem was primarily exploratory in nature: my principal aim was not to rehabilitate him and his severely limited reputation within mainstream art history, but to perceive and point out his consistent discursivity, something no-one has attempted before. But without getting familiarized with all aspects of his oeuvre, it would not have been possible to identify its ramifications, as I was primarily dealing with a discursive painter whose opinions and reflections were inextricably connected with his art. It is also essential to point out how a close look at his 'evocative' paintings of women opened up a whole new series of oppositional stands that could be clearly and significantly related to the unfolding of his posture of resistance. That he was initiating no less than a revolution by representing women as desiring subjects rather than the usual objects of desire was accompanied by another observation no less important: that he was actually exploring the interiority of women within a private, solitary space, the hiddenness of their thought and feeling (in this drama of concealment and disclosure, the wet cloth that at once revealed and hid the body could also be

seen as a trope). Thus his paintings served as primary texts, but these also yielded valuable, if covert, subtexts, which made the narrative of his resistance deeper and more meaningful. His manuscripts of poems— *Kalpanika* and *Bikreeto Bidhata*— proved to be veritable goldmines, providing me with intimate glimpses into that extremely interesting intertwining of conformism and defiance in his personality, leading me further, thus, towards an attempt to unskein the complex process of social subjectivisation. There is indeed such a contention that it is through the minor/variant works of a creative person of fame that we can actually come closer to his/her personality, as these are free from the need to adapt to the established style and/or conform to the yardstick of public acceptability— a standard already set by his/her previously existing oeuvre. In a sense, therefore, such works open up a space of freedom, even of playfulness— uncircumscribed, really, by the demands of the artist's own fame. We have noticed this in Abanindranath Tagore's *Kutum-katam*, in Nandalal Bose's collages— even in Rabindranath Tagore's doodles before these flowered into full-blown paintings, and created a standard of their own. Mazumdar's poems are similar in the sense that there is an unabashedness about these; he does not overtly highlight his oppositionality, nor is he apologetic about conformism. The artifice of poetry weaves these together— as it does realism and reality, idealism and ideology too— into a multidimensional fabric, without any overt agendum.

My timeline mentioned in the title— 1919 to 1948— needs some clarification. 1919 was the year when Mazumdar set up the organization called 'Indian Academy of Art' with a few like-minded artist friends, Atul Bose and Jamini Roy being the foremost of them, and this opened up a discursive space for the artists. This, coupled with the fact that Mazumdar decided to publish an art journal of the same name the very next year (to engage more directly with the unfolding cultural politics, I'd say) convinced me that this was a key year in his life that saw not only the early stirrings of his conviction, but also his agency, and that is precisely why I decided to take up this date to mark the point from which I would begin. 1948 is the year of his death, which also saw the mounting of a significant show of Indian artists at Eden Gardens with Mazumdar as the key figure, though by that time the divide between the two dissenting art camps had become all but irrelevant with all the sea changes that Indian art had gone through.

I have attempted to point out here how his resistance was layered and multilinear; a considerable part of this thesis does indeed deal with his discontent with the Indian-style painting of

Abanindranath and the Bengal School artists, but, as I have pointed out, Mazumdar's main point of opposition was the near-legitimisation of a singular taste in art in his times, something that was supported and validated by extra-aesthetic concerns. In a sense, thus, he was opposed to all schools of thought that contradicted dialogism in art. And this brings me to my primary research question: Mazumdar's 'resistance'— the perseverance of which I have tried to locate, observe, and frame within a consistent discourse— what was the nature (we could also call it the deep structure) of this resistance? Was it, under the garb of being directed at the shortcomings of the Bengal school, really against all kinds of impositions upon the free expression of art, and the artist's right, too, to choose his own way?

I have discussed how he refused to accept naturalistic paintings executed in oil as essentially connected to an overseas culture, avoidable in order to underline and reassert an Indian identity, and considered this stand of the Orientalists to be without sense or logic. This is discussed in detail in the first chapter, which is titled ***Framing a Discourse of Resistance: Hemendranath Mazumdar and 'Nationalist' Art,*** which principally traces his unrelenting resistance against the 'Indianness' of the Bengal School paintings. I have also examined how the principles of the Bengal School finally came to be fixed within an authorized pedagogical category with the introduction of the department of 'Indian Art' in the art school, which enjoyed primal focus in the institution alongside the department of 'Fine Arts' which principally taught naturalist techniques. This division was in itself an absurdity: it seemingly implied that 'Indian Art' was not a part of Fine Arts, but clearly separated from it, and as such, was clearly undermining the former as an artistic category. There was yet another clear policy that was looking at transforming the schools of art into institutions imparting training in crafts and even draftsmanship, with the intention of producing skilled artisans who could be of some use to the colonizers. The entire schema does indeed seem like a special diet concocted for the colonized which would serve the overt— and covert— interests of only the colonizers by containing aspiring artists within a safe boundary fixed by the authorities, betraying what can be read as a certain strand of imperial anxiety.

Looking closely, it does seem that Mazumdar was principally concerned, vis-à-vis the Bengal school's 'Indian-style' paintings, about pointing out how this particular category was both illogical and ahistorical. In fact a close engagement with the scope and meaning of what was

marked out as 'Indian' art uncovers multiple problems and certain gaping inconsistencies. Both Havell and Coomaraswami fashioned their individually-favoured timeline for what they considered to be 'Indian' art. Havell, in his *Indian Sculpture and Painting*, bypasses Gandhara Art (and its Greek influence) and instead focuses on the early Buddhist art of Nasik, Bharhut, Sanchi and Sarnath. Coomaraswamy, in his *Rajput Painting*, differentiated Rajput painting from Mughal secular painting and fitted it into what he saw as an unbroken line of 'Indian' art tradition as the former was predominantly religious, and as such, was allied with, and belonged to, what he saw as the great art tradition of India (Guha-Thakurta 2008, 166). Both were important ideologues of the Bengal school, but their narratives of ancient Indian art were not historically pristine. Illogicality was another considerable point: the component of mythology, history and tradition in Ravi Varma and some others, was indeed carried over to the contemporary definition of 'Indianness' in art by the Bengal school artists, but in point of technique and form realism was exiled, oil paint as a medium was shunned, and what was typically a Bengal-based, regional movement was hailed as authentic 'Indian' art, without taking into account the prevailing taste of the rest of India. In this connection, I have tried to examine whether Mazumdar's ample diatribes against the celebration of the art of Bengal School as authentic 'Indian' art and his accusations against it as a false category do have a logical foundation.

In fact I could trace a deep ambivalence within the school itself, especially seen vis-à-vis the discourse of Orientalism. It could only work upon the technique of creating images of an essentialised nation which was both idealized and exotic, thus falling neatly into the trap of Western figurations of the East. As a tool to combat the colonialists, this was, ironically, a product of the very structure it was purporting to oppose—"a compliance with colonial goals", really (Banerji 2010, xix). In fact it was this Oriental nation-construct that was vehemently opposed and relentlessly criticized by Mazumdar throughout his artistic career, both through his art practice and recorded opinions. I have looked at the issues of the magazine published by him— "The Indian Academy of Art"— which were published mainly to counteract the influence of *Rupam*, the art journal of the Society of Oriental Art (which enjoyed considerable Government subsidy), with slim personal funds, chiefly with an aim to combat the monologism that was threatening to overcome the many-stranded artistic culture of India. But in the articles

published in the journal and in the tone of the editorials as well, one could detect a serious note of inclusivity, rather than any underpinning of challenge.

I have also examined his articles and essays, as well as his 1940 manuscript of art-related articles called *Chhobir Chosma* (Spectacles for Art) — published posthumously, decades later— in 1991. In the latter his attitude becomes much more unyielding, almost outright vitriolic though, in trying to expose what he saw as the monologic stance intrinsic to the conception of a singular style that aspired to define the art practices of an entire nation, and in it he insisted on exposing the falseness of the very category of 'Indian-style' art. He also criticizes the excessive importance given to bhava, along with the negation of naturalism in the work of the Bengal school artists. But it is also important for us to remember that he is not negating the essentiality of the 'spirit' or *bhava* of a painting, but only its excess, which tends towards the denial of all other formal qualities. For him realism was not only about merely representing external appearances, but— notwithstanding all his protestations against the 'spiritual' art of the Bengal school— he was also concerned about capturing the *essence*, the 'spirit', really, of the subject one chooses to paint. But, for him, the 'spirit' is not only the essence of an artwork, but also a unifying force, to a certain extent akin to Coleridge's 'esemplastic' imagination. Also, the subjects and addressivity of Mazumdar's works were rooted to a community which is real, recognizably local, and rooted in contemporaneity, while the Indian-style painters evoked the sense of community/s somewhat indeterminate in terms of time and space— *imagined* communities, in a sense, with no contemporary moorings whatsoever. I have also noted, and commented on, how Mazumdar's twin points of contention— the futility of avoiding Western contact, and the need to accept, and to encourage, a dialogic artistic climate—were to prove predictive in the later unfolding of Indian art history.

The second chapter is titled ***A Story of her Own: Women in Hemendranath Mazumdar's Paintings***. I have examined how the need to fabricate an opposed selfhood, vis-à-vis western culture, found in the domain of motherhood a perfect trope; this was attended with underpinnings of chastity and domestic confinement, avoiding all the while even the merest acknowledgement of female sexual subjectivisation. Motherhood was often invested with power, and connected directly with nationalist contingencies, by imagining the nation as a goddess, as is clearly noticeable in Abanindranath Tagore's *Bharat-Mata*. In order to perpetuate the glorifying

of the motherhood legend, it was imperative that the female subject's sexuality be suppressed, as that familiar binary of mother/mistress was already firmly in place. The mistress could also be the wife, therefore, the matter of female sexuality would include within its broad domain both the wife and the courtesan, both the permissible and the non-permissible, the domestic and the extra-domestic. The chief problematic here is the question of entitlement of desire: the admission of the possibility that the object of desire could be subjectively desirous as well would be perilous territory, as it would then bring about yet other questions of entitlement, interrogating, possibly, the easy and accepted boundaries of containment and subordination. And this is precisely why Mazumdar's treatment of female sexuality was contested, and ambiguously received, in his own times. Unfortunately this attitude has continued till this day in an almost unmediated manner: Mazumdar is still faintly present in our collective cultural memory as the painter of evocative— even titillating— oils of semi-nude women, especially wet-clothed women (of his *Siktabasana* series). He is imagined to be drawing the viewers deliberately within a circle of erotic gratification— an experience that is voyeuristic, hence non-legitimised, morally and socially. The deeper nuances of his paintings' narratives have been entirely overlooked both by his own generation and our own.

I have attempted to trace how, while not really being averse to the central space claimed by the trope of motherhood and domesticity, he is actually recalibrating it in a noticeably distinct manner. The fable of feminine fulfillment that was carefully constructed around the containing space of home is interrogated in several instances by the artist; he has brought out the discontent, even irritation that this domestic role provoked in women, implying, thus, that this space is not the singular and uncontested habitat for women's happiness. His paintings like *Grihalakshmi* (His-iss) and *Sangsar-bandhan* (Family Bonds) are ample illustrations of this, in which he is seen to subvert the imagined non-negotiability of domestic bliss. He was more concerned about their own space, distinct from the habitual, repetitive chequerboard of customary domesticity: it is possible that he wished to unroot them from the order of the social performative and observe them closely once they were thus freed. I have argued that the numerous instances of self-absorbed, seemingly happy women, who appear to reflect upon a fulfilling relationship (possibly conjugal), even when they are seen within the confines of a home, are not specifically referred to any implied ideation of familial domesticity or the fixity of settlement.

Hemendranath's treatment of female sexuality hinged on the exploration of a space with an interplay between the female body and the tangled strands of anxiety, effulgence and even indifference that went on to subjectivise it; this brought about a decided rupture in the notional patterns of representing womanhood. His painted female figures were so intrinsically grounded to the *presentness* of experience— most of the women were fair-skinned, conceivably high-brow Bengali *bhadramahila*— a class recognized from real-life experience, who remained known yet unapproachable, hence perpetually out-of-bounds for most of the male viewers. It was possibly "the frisson of spying on a 'respectable' housewife, the proverbial girl next door," (Mitter 2007, 138) that initiated such a response. Among other things, Mazumdar was at best impatient with the contemporary preoccupations of the neo-Bengal school to make temporally located culture/s, their *pastness* to bear upon the much-changed present: his paintings were clued to the presentness of the Indian experience, even at times to the anxieties and negotiations of the colonial subject. This is amply clear even in his handling of female subjects. It can be argued that he was not alone in portraying women as inhabiting the present moment; certain other Academic painters had been doing the same during his times, noted among them being Jogesh Chandra Seal and B C Law. But there had been significant features that separated Mazumdar's work from the others working in a similar genre. For one, the others mostly opted to capture women in their socially ascribed roles, which, frequently, carried undernotes of idealized morality. This is the point where Mazumdar radically differed from his milieu, in the way he situates his solitary women within moments of introspection, divested of social trappings and expectations, engaged, as it were, in interior dialogues with their own selves. In a way, their thoughts and musings, unworded and mysterious, are as much on display as their bodies are— problematising, thus, the boundaries of *knownness*, adding a further element of inscrutability to the narratives.

I have also argued how, in the figures of his wet-clothed women, he, in a sense, naturalises their exposure to the public eye. The interesting point to note here is, almost all of Hemendranath's wet-saree paintings capture the subject *after* the completion of the actual activity of bathing, and also that most of them are placed out of doors. This mediates with the space of intense privacy conceptually associated with the bathing woman, especially so because in rural Bengal bathing was usually an outdoor activity, undertaken at nearby waterbodies. It was thus natural that after bathing, the women might need to use semi-public paths to return home, often covering themselves with homespun towels. Thus, while retaining the aura of privacy, the artist also

partially naturalizes the sightings. Privacy, in Hemendranath's works, frequently becomes the space for the unfolding of self: most of his female subjects are solitaries, who both define and are defined by the unpeopled space, or context, that they inhabit.

I have also tried to analyse the narratives in Hemendranath's numerous figures of the mirror-gazing woman, a frequently-occurring trope in his works. Many of his subjects frequently appear absorbed in the act of looking at themselves intently, in a mirror or other reflective surfaces like unmoving water. In these paintings in question, the mirror-gazing women look intently at their own reflections, their expressions often betraying pensiveness and anxiety. The 'double' of the subject/object created by a mirror brings about a continuous and endless exchange of positions between the twinness of selves, the continuity between which is ruptured by the agency of the mirror. "This also relates to the dual identities of the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* in women, co-existent yet distinct, where she shifts from being herself to being an imaginary male who gazes at her (when she appraises herself critically and considers the probability of appreciation) back to the role of the passively 'surveyed', her selfhood now heavily mediated and thereby modified by the appreciative/critical gaze of the man whom she has imagined and inhabited." (Ghosh 2012, 48). In fact I have felt that Mazumdar's attitude towards women is summed up adequately by one painting-title of his: 'A Story of her Own'- this story is really about a space that is not hers at all: the women in his works may not be aware of the spectator, but she is indeed aware of the pressing circle of normativity that she must conform to if she is to retain her value. And this submerged sense is possibly what subjectivises her as strong and substantial.

The title of my third chapter is **Hemendranath Mazumdar's Landscapes: Framing Locality, Encoding Culture.** Here I have attempted to explore how his landscapes differ from not only the Bengal school artists, but also from his contemporary Academic painters, and how these are, in the true sense of the term, 'cultural' landscapes, with underlayers of the located history, customs, morality, as also visual and social culture rooted to the region. Though he does have a sizeable number of paintings which can be considered as landscapes in their own right, in most cases he uses landscape as a background for his solitary, female figures. But in both instances his intent of place-making is clear and unwavering: he roots his paintings— almost without exception— to his own land, Bengal, and all the features it is known by, both physical and emotional. His landscapes, to a considerable extent, engage in the art of 'place-making'— encoding markers

relating to the identity of a particular region, both the topographically real and the perceived. I have looked at a number of his paintings of the Himalayas— of Kanchanjungha, in particular— (especially paintings like *Premer Rajyo*, *Premer Swargo*, *Kanchanjungha* and *Tushar-giri*) and have tried to understand whether the contemporary fascination with the Himalayan picturesque, was mediated by other concerns as well. Darjeeling was considered to be comfortable and 'home'-like by the British, especially because of its climate and distance from the politically turbulent plains. Thus it is possible that to conceptually annex this space to the common Bengali citizen's idea of the visual expanse of Bengal was also an indirect impulsion, as Darjeeling had then been carefully constructed as a separate socio-economic and cultural zone, almost the 'other' by the British. I have tried to point out how Mazumdar's hillscapes essentially differed from the Bengal school landscapes in spite of the atmospheric quality and the insistence on a certain mood that are common to both. In his hillscapes, we never lose sight of the actual locale, which is recognizable and provides a strong mooring to the narrative of the landscape. Looking closely, one may observe with wonder how a moment actually becomes a narrative. He is painting the famous range as both mighty and mellow, other-worldly, yet accommodative of human emotions.

Though some of his landscapes do deal with subjects that are undistinguished and receive their regional reference only from their title, I have also tried to point out how he is also concerned with painting the landmarks of Indian history and culture, rather like the way in which the Kanchanjangha appears numerous times in his works chiefly as a glorious presence. I have discussed this point in detail especially with reference to two of his paintings, *Jagannath Mandir* and *Chet Singh Ghat*. Primarily it does feel that in these he is attempting to connect to the strands of Hindu religious culture, but a close look at these paintings makes us wonder whether he was at all concerned with organized religion. While the former fixes the image of the temple as an unwavering cultural emblem, apart from encouraging a point of spiritual connection by bringing the viewer extremely close to the revered structure, in the latter the specifically religious 'feel' of the place, or even the identity of holiness that Benaras enjoys in common perception, is not explored at all. What claims central focus is the almost royal presence of the grand historic building, along with all its details, the unmistakable underpinnings of patriotism, and the emotional journey of objective history towards a space of inspirational myth.

I have tried to observe how the objective framework of the locale, and the 'imputed' meaning that local inhabitants, with their history and customs, bring to this frame are combined especially in those landscapes of his that have cultivators and cultivation as their chief subject. Agriculture, in a sense, is an 'ordering' of nature for the purpose of community and is therefore related to negotiations between nature, individual, community and civilisation. It is also notionally related to the wider rhythms of life that are repetitive and cyclical, holding moments that are seemingly eternal and untouched by time. In many of Hemendranath's works that involve the rural landscape of Bengal it is the agricultural activity that shapes and defines the terrain, and animates it with a sense of community: I have explored this closely, especially with reference to Mazumdar's *Palli- Krishan* and *Sanjher Palli*. Paintings on cultivation and cultivators took on a significant dimension post-1921, with Gandhiji's *satyagraha* bringing about a renewed emphasis on the empowerment of the rural masses: the image of the docile and dutiful peasant came to be subjectivised with will and conscious political agency. Such landscapes can be perceived to literally engage, therefore, 'the senses of place, region, country and land.' (DeLue and Elkins 2008, 167). Considering that these landscapes were painted during his extended stay at Gachihata during 1941-46, it is possible that there was already the looming shadow of the Bengal famine of 1943 in the offing: I have also tried to examine whether this would then, change our very perception of the artist's strategies of representation and their intent, bringing in the strands of not only anxiety, but also longing for that rapidly-vanishing *placidity* of rural agrarian life.

Mazumdar's use of symbolism is another significant point which I have explored. In *Chatak* the landscape is somewhat overtly symbolic (which has both a watercolour and an oil version, with interesting variations in narrative). This is one clear example of how the features of the objective framework— that is the defined area within which the subject is placed— refer closely, at times allegorically, to the psychological, often ideological underpinnings that loosely constitute the scheme of narrative. A similar symbolic painting is *Maya*, which also has both oil and watercolour versions. I have dealt in detail with a most unusual landscape of his— of a wilderness— titled *Gachihata: Mymensing*, in which he totally does away with the concern of both place-making and picturesque-ness, and, in a sense, reconstructs the structure of our usual expectations from a landscape. The wilderness stretches away in the distance into nothingness, within an area of atmospheric light. This builds on a phenomenological experience of the landscape that essentially includes the perception of the painter as an embodied observer. This is

a painting that is meant to capture the artist's consciousness rather than the elements of nature; this is the filter which transforms the seen reality, even the temporality of his birthplace. I have argued that in most of his other landscapes, the carefully-deployed apparatus of place-making is supplemented by variant cues that indicate the existence of a deeper, submerged layer of meaning. At times we find these in the titles, or in the way he arranges elements within the pictorial space, or even in perspectival adjustments and shifts in points of view. And this is how, in his landscapes, the alternate reality of the ideal and the ideological mediates with the surface of the seen, the experienced, and the purportedly *real*.

My fourth chapter is titled **The Oppositional Self: Poems of Hemendranath Mazumdar**. Here I have translated and analysed his Bangla poems, contained in his unpublished manuscript of poems, *Kalpanika* (Born of Fancy), and also a long narrative poem titled *Bikreeto Bidhata* (The Sold Deity). In most cases, both the discourse and the imagery in these connect with his innately oppositional self that we have observed in his paintings and also in his critical writings; certain poems also offer explanatory cues to some of the narratives that are left open-ended in his paintings. There is, almost always, an oppositional selfhood that the poet erects within the space of poetry: be it the indignation at the state of a subjugated, bereft motherland, or trying to correct the misconceptions of people about the true value of art, or even scathing criticism directed at iniquity in social transactions, and social hypocrisy as well. His attitude is both critical and reformist, always passionate, and one also notes just that hint of sad resignation at times when he is forced to confront the fact that changing deep-seated, monolithic patterns of belief and behavior is really beyond him. The first section of this chapter deals with the sizeable number of poems that he had written on the state of his subjugated country— almost all of these were written before India's independence, and have the ring of that passionate intensity that we encounter in most of his critical writings. The 'mothered' country was seen as both rich and bereft, powerful and trodden, the image taking shape through the interlacing of reality and an optimistic imagination. His main point of opposition was against the conduct of his countrymen, which, he believed, had brought the nation to this sorry state. His poems on Vidyasagar and Rabindranath regretfully observe how their passing served to submerge the country in gloom, while his poem on Netaji envisages the arrival of a glorious dawn in the country.

The second section of this chapter deals with his devotional poems. In most of these the poet insists on the intrinsic connection between God and human beings, and opposes the priest-centric rituals of organized religion. For him, God is a 'lifelong companion' (*chiro jeeboner sathi*) who does not care for formal worship but is eager to see people return to their ethical senses and be contrite about the moral slips they may have committed. In most of these poems God is seen more as a keeper of moralities; he is never the God of scriptures who is enraged by the slightest slip in the ritualistic process of worship. In that sense these are not strictly religious poems, though Hinduism is almost always present as a loose backdrop. In some of these poems, Mazumdar has also related suffering to self-discovery and subsequent wisdom. This pattern of suffering leading to wisdom is most clearly seen in his long narrative poem *Bikreeto Bidhata* (The Sold Deity). What is most interesting here is the discourse regarding ideal kingship, as also God's revelation of the profound, almost physical connection that he shares with his true devotee.

His poems which have women as the central focus have varying attitudes, often opposing one another, something that we have noted (though to a much lesser extent) in some of his paintings as well. We have observed earlier how in his paintings, even while trying to remove the restrictive trappings of society in order to glimpse the innermost self, the painter also carefully preserves the value of the marital bond. In fact transgressions are not taken kindly— neither in his poetry nor in the intended narrative of his paintings. I have tried to examine this further by closely referring to his poems *Abidya* (The Tainted) and *Patita* (The Fallen Woman), and I have reiterated here that in spite of his rebellious attitude towards the consideration of the space of domesticity as the singular, uncontested habitat of women, he had never rejected the social bounds that fixed chastity as an unquestioned given for female marital commitment. It is as if his female subjects are allowed to connect with their own desire, even indulge in fantasy— as we see in many of his painted women— but the fulfillment of this desire is endlessly deferred, as it falls within the space of the impermissible. And this is indeed a curious ambivalence in the painter-poet, which in fact deepens when we read his unusual poem *E Dhoronee Goro Punorbar* (Create this World once Again). It is indeed difficult to reconcile the aggressive hedonism of the poem with the poet's persona that the other poems reveal. It does feel that the poet is exhausted with the efforts to keep up appearances, to pay court to propriety, and this one poetic moment

allows him to vent his oppositional interiority. What is most interesting to note is that he sincerely appears to believe that freedom from social dictates— and, more importantly, entitlement of desire— will actually be conducive to social happiness. When he considers pleasure and renunciation as non-binaries (*bhog-tyag ekakar*) he is covertly criticizing how his times had eulogized renunciation as the coveted spiritual destination, while sexual activity (not necessarily sexual *pleasure*) received modest sanction purely from a practical point of view. He is, in a way, envisaging a recalibrated society where the entitlement to sexual pleasure is accepted unquestioningly— which, he believes, would result in a happier world and a welcome amalgamation of practical life and traditional 'wisdom'. Here he is closer to the visual discourse of his major paintings, where he is consistently defining sexual desire as a thing of beauty.

I have also discussed the only poem of Mazumdar, which is somewhat known— *Shilpir Daan* (Gift of the Artist) — which directly refers to his own brand of realistic painting, and attempts to justify it. The subject is an age-old one— transient life vs. eternal art—but the theme is considerably rejuvenated through the passionate intensity of the neat contextualization. Here again, we note how he roots abstract formulations— which, here, is the oppositionality of time, and youth/beauty— to his immediate space of lived experience, also to his belief in the enduring value of realist art. In this poem we observe how he directly refers to his wet-saree paintings, and eulogises the process through which youth and beauty, fleeting in real life, are captured forever within the still, unchanging moment of art. I have argued that his poems will always remain significant, not merely for providing contextual narration for his famous paintings, but also for bringing about that added dimension of redefining the world of reality that his paintings open up for us; as also for allowing us a glimpse into that private, creative space— locked away from the public eye— that nurtured the deep structure of his oppositional self.

In the **Conclusion**, I have explained how the course of research provided me with a clear vision of that grand narrative shaped by the mainstreaming of history— the tale of erasure and overwriting— and its unquestioned, possibly uninvested replication decade after decade, and that continuing critical nonchalance that all but evaporated the very need of revisit and revision. I have also written about how the projected outcome of research, envisaged at the very outset, varies substantially from what it actually turns out to be after the project is finished. What I have principally gained in learning from this process is the understanding that I am as contained by

my temporally located culture, the resultant choices, ways of seeing and of thought as the people who are the subjects of my research. My initial focus was on the oppositionality of Mazumdar vis-à-vis the Bengal school's propagated doctrine of 'Indianness' in art, in point of technique, subject and ideology. But as the research progressed, other directions opened up: I observed how his opposition had gone beyond this singularity of intent and provided space for unabashed interrogation of most unmoving structures, political or sociocultural, with their usual impositions on freedoms of all kinds. I have also speculated a little about about whether Hemendranath's trajectory would have taken a avant-garde turn in the steeply changed art scenario of independent India; as we have seen how he had been in dialogue with his milieu all through his artistic career, it is unlikely that he would refrain from reinventing himself and his work had he lived beyond his fifty-four years.

My thesis has two appendices: Appendix 1 is titled **A Short Biography of Hemendranath Mazumdar,** and it attempts to trace briefly the outline of his life and work. This is not directly connected to the exploration of my research question, but it is quite possible that these details of his life might actually provide an additional dimension to the understanding of an artist whose trajectory we have surveyed largely in terms of his oppositionality. We have indeed seen that biographical details often open up lateral avenues of perception and assessment. Appendix 2 is titled **The Models of Hemendranath Mazumdar,** which attempts to uncover the identities of known and unknown models of Hemendranath's paintings, especially his wife Sudharani Devi, his niece (eldest brother Jatindranath Mazumdar's daughter) Gauri Chowdhury, and 'Malati', a distant relative of the painter, taking into account all available information and documentation.

In addition to these, I have also provided in the thesis a number of images of Mazumdar's paintings, those I have discussed in the thesis, most of which have not been seen by our generation. These have been photographed from old magazines and journals, albums, calenders, and from private collectors as well as the family of the artist. A reference list has been provided at the end of the thesis, a short version of which I am appending with the synopsis.

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