

*Women as Evil Mesmerizers/ Manipulators in Arthur Conan Doyle and  
Ramesh Chandra Dutt : a Cross-Cultural Study*

Mesmerism served as the sub-text of a substantial part of Victorian English literature. The 'mesmeric mania' so rife in the atmosphere of Britain made its way through everyone's curiosity to the extent that most of the litterateurs of the time cashed upon this theme for instant success. Not even a single literary artist of the time was unaffected by this phenomenon. And many, by way of addressing this theme, indirectly involved themselves in the complex issue of gender dialectic which the mesmeric process invariably entailed.

Poets like Robert Browning, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and novelists like Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, George Eliot, Bram Stoker were deeply influenced by the mesmeric movement beside other literary artists of the time. But Arthur Conan Doyle is the most pertinent case-study for comprehending the role of women as evil mesmerizers or manipulators leading to the development of a complex gender equation within a mesmeric bond. The Victorian authors who have shown women solely as subjects of mesmeric trance have either portrayed their women protagonists as completely vulnerable and subjugated or as rising above their apparent weakness to counter the mesmerizer's power thereby wielding a parallel influence over him. But, it is only in the case of Doyle that we witness a complete role-reversal in a mesmerizer-mesmerized relationship. In two of his short stories, 'John Barrington Cowles' (1885) and 'The Parasite' (1894), women take on the role of the mesmerizer and men become hapless victims at their mercy. It is rather interesting to note that male operators are less cruel in their handling of female subjects. Their mesmeric hold over female subjects is often, if not always, impelled by amorous desires. Yet, save a few cases, it hardly proves to be fatal. But the she-mesmerizers in Doyle, impelled by equally amorous pursuits, go to the extent of killing their subjects if not reciprocated in love.

The first case in point is that of Kate Northcott in ‘John Barrington Cowles’<sup>1</sup>. She is a mysterious figure whose name is linked to a number of young, handsome and talented men at Edinburgh University including the young, rising scientist John Barrington Cowles. Northcott’s origins are unknown but she maintains a façade of respectability by residing with a chaperone – the pale and bloodless Mrs. Merton who is supposedly Northcott’s aunt. Northcott and Cowles meet for the first time at the Royal Scottish Academy in 1879. Northcott, attending a certain exhibition with her then fiancé Archibald Reeves fixes her ‘gaze’ upon John Barrington Cowles at a strategic moment when both are alone. The narrator, Robert Armitage who had also accompanied Cowles to the exhibition, comments on Northcott’s mesmerizing gaze:

But those eyes – those wonderful eyes! If I could but give some faint idea of their varying moods, their steely hardness, their feminine softness, their power of command, their penetrating intensity suddenly melting away into an expression of womanly weakness...<sup>2</sup>

Armitage even confesses that the surpassing beauty of Kate Northcott engrossed everyone including him. “The more I looked at her the more her beauty grew upon me.”<sup>3</sup> But Kate had already selected her new prey – the uncommonly handsome John Barrington Cowles. She starts wielding mesmeric ‘influence’ upon him right from the outset:

She continued to watch him fixedly, with a look of interest upon her face, until he came out of his reverie with a start, and turned abruptly round, so that his gaze met hers.

She has almost forced John Barrington Cowles to look at her and given her uncommon beauty, he is instantly and fatally attracted.

Very soon Northcott’s engagement with Reeves is called off and after a supposedly “chance-meeting” with Kate in Aberdeenshire, Cowles is profoundly and professedly in love with her. In spite of the naïve narration by Armitage, it hardly takes a drastic sweep of imagination to realize that Kate Northcott deliberately ensnares Cowles and that he may be the latest in a long line of equally capable and handsome suitors.

---

<sup>1</sup> First published in *Cassell's Saturday Journal*, April 1885. First book publication in *The Captain of the Polestar and Other Tales*, Longmans, Green, and Company, London and New York, March 1890.

<sup>2</sup> Doyle, ‘John Barrington Cowles’, 232-233.

<sup>3</sup> Doyle, ‘John Barrington Cowles’, 223.

What is most alarming in ‘John Barrington Cowles’ is the atmosphere of danger looming in the background. We are very subtly and unsuspectingly let to know the hapless fate of Kate’s past two suitors – William Prescott and Archibald Reeves. While the former has died an unnatural death supposed to be a suicide, talented, optimistic and vigorous Reeves has been found intoxicated, in a hallucinating state in front of a local pub. These ominous events are most objectively strung into a series of unfortunate incidents culminating in the projection of the tragic fate of Kate Northcott. Young Brodie, the representative of the student community laments that fate has been “deucedly rough on the poor girl... Now that this other blow [Prescott’s death] has come it will quite crush her. So gentle and lady-like she is too!”<sup>4</sup> (parenthesis mine) But readers hardly take time to relate these ‘not-so-coincidental’ events with the ‘femme fatale’ trope. At the very outset of the story, Doyle in his pseudo-simplistic mode of detached and objective narration puts forth the promise of an iconoclastic female prota/antagonist who will ensnare, chastise and if needed, eliminate any man with her mesmerizing skills.

The prelude to the fate of John Barrington Cowles is sung to Robert Armitage in the scene where Archibald Reeves, in a state of intoxicated hallucination reveals a mortal threat from a beautiful she-devil. He feels safe in Armitage’s company; otherwise, he cannot even sleep at home. “How am I to sleep when I see her sitting down yonder at the foot of the bed with her great eyes watching and watching hour after hour?” This is the ‘suggestive’ influence of the mesmerizer which can act upon the subject even from a distance. All such examples of suggestion in mesmeric literature are usually malevolent. No wonder, Northcott’s diabolical presence “saps all the strength and manhood out of” her victims.<sup>5</sup>

The next encounter with Kate Northcott at Abercrombie place is decisive for the narrator for more reasons than one. Right from the chastisement of her dog to her terrorizing of her frail aunt – her violent character clearly comes up in front of Armitage. But most importantly, in this section, he comes to know about Northcott’s parentage. She does not resemble either of her parents but her uncle Anthony – “the black sheep of the

---

<sup>4</sup> Doyle, ‘John Barrington Cowles’, 237

<sup>5</sup> Doyle, ‘John Barrington Cowles’, 239.

family” in character and countenance. The narrator probes further while unravelling the mystery of this uncle. It is revealed that, contrary to Northcott’s information, he did not fall in action. Captain Northcott was deputed to India and was supposedly a devil-worshipper with an evil eye. It was also rumoured that he “had some strange theories... about the power of the human will and the effects of mind upon matter.”<sup>6</sup> This statement shows the seamless conflation of mesmerism with Oriental dark arts and accounts for the origin of this detrimental pseudo-science in the Orient. This “otherization” also happens in ‘The Parasite’ wherein the mystic mesmeric practice is associated with an exotic Miss Penclosa residing in the West Indies.

On receiving this piece of information from a trusted friend, the narrator immediately recalls having read:

a quaint treatise, which I had imagined to be mere charlatanism at the time, of the power of certain human minds, and of effects produced by them at a distance.<sup>7</sup>

At the same moment he realizes that Miss Northcott is endowed with some exceptional power of this sort. The “quaint treatise” may refer to any of those numerous tracts that were written in Victorian England as a response to the ‘mesmeric mania’, tracts which talked about various aspects of mesmerism including mesmeric ‘suggestion’. It is a certain power wielded by the mesmerizer by dint of which he or she can compel his or her subject to act according to his or her will from a distance. This feature of mesmerism is dealt with at length in ‘The Parasite’.

The next section of the story is undoubtedly one of its high points, second only to John Barrington Cowles’s fatal end. In this section, there is a direct reference to a certain mesmeric session by Dr. Messinger, a name instantly reminiscent of Franz Anton Mesmer. After delivering a detailed lecture and performing mesmeric tricks and clairvoyant trance on his own subject, he tried to exert his will upon an independent member of the audience. John Barrington Cowles was naturally chosen because of his appearance which betrayed a “highly nervous temperament”. Dr Messinger declared “that

---

<sup>6</sup> Doyle, ‘John Barrington Cowles’, 250.

<sup>7</sup> Doyle, ‘John Barrington Cowles’, 250.

a mesmerized subject is entirely dominated by the will of the mesmerizer.” But if there was someone with an even stronger will, he would wield the ultimate influence. In fact,

If there was a man in the world who had a very much more highly developed will than any of the rest of the human family, there is no reason why he should not be able to rule over them all, and to reduce his fellow-creatures to the condition of automatons.<sup>8</sup>

He could not probably guess how his own words would go against him. As he started exerting mesmeric influence upon John Barrington Cowles, he felt an even stronger opposing force resisting his intense and penetrating gaze. Armitage, the silent and astounded witness saw Miss Northcott “sitting with her eyes fixed intently upon the mesmerist, and with such an expression of concentrated power upon her features”<sup>9</sup> as he had never seen on any human countenance before.

This is a very interesting case-study because here we have two mesmerists – male and female – trying to influence two different subjects simultaneously. Whereas the male mesmerist Messinger tries to influence John Barrington Cowles, Kate Northcott tries to influence Messinger. At the outset, Messinger is almost successful in pulling John Barrington Cowles out of his chair against his volition but then suddenly John Barrington Cowles settles down with a “determination not to yield to the influence of the operator.”<sup>10</sup> This reversal is caused by Northcott’s influence over Messinger who finally succumbs to Northcott’s greater mesmeric power. With a short gasping cry and hand over a forehead full of perspiration he declares, “ ‘I won’t go on,’... ‘There is a stronger will than mine acting against me.’ ”<sup>11</sup> So, the female mesmerizer emerges victorious. An alternative reading also suggests that a diabolical mesmerist defeats an innocuous one. In this story, Doyle is not only reversing roles by attributing the position of the mesmerizer to a woman, he is hinting at the woman’s even greater proclivity to unleash evil – given the same function. This hint will become more evident, if not overt, through the character of the evil woman mesmerizer per se – Helen Penclosa in ‘The Parasite’.

---

<sup>8</sup> Doyle, ‘John Barrington Cowles’, 251.

<sup>9</sup> Doyle, ‘John Barrington Cowles’, 252.

<sup>10</sup> Doyle, ‘John Barrington Cowles’, 252.

<sup>11</sup> Doyle, ‘John Barrington Cowles’, 253.

When Armitage reveals to Kate that he has silently witnessed the whole phenomenon of mesmerizing the mesmerizer, he receives a cruel threat from her. But it is surprising why Kate does not inflict any terrible punishment upon Armitage on the spot preventing the future ruin of her relationship with John Barrington Cowles. Two reasons may account for this. First, Kate can only wield influence upon people who are vulnerable and possess a frail and nervous composition. Armitage, with his cool composure and detached point-of-view does not fall into the category of the susceptible. Secondly, Kate is absolutely sure of her fatal grip over John Barrington Cowles. She feels self-assured that no amount of counter-persuasion can break the spell unless it is from an even more powerful force (which is a highly unlikely possibility).

After this episode, events accelerate towards the climax. Cowles receives a similar night-call from Northcott like Prescott before him. As Armitage comes to know about the impending meeting, he wonders, “Had this woman some baleful secret to disclose which must be known before her marriage?”<sup>12</sup> Predictably enough, the meeting unleashes its disastrous effect on John Barrington Cowles, to the extent that within the phase of a few hours, he is a completely altered man. “His face was deadly pale, and his lips were bloodless. His cheeks and forehead were clammy, his eyes glazed, and his whole expression altered.”<sup>13</sup>

What was the exact nature of Northcott’s revelation remains undiscovered till the end of the story. But in a sudden fit of nervous raving, John Barrington Cowles divulges the hint of a certain terrible secret to Armitage. He confesses that Kate Northcott is a “fiend”, “ghoul” and a “vampire soul behind a lovely face”. He even alludes to the myth of the wehr-wolves and recalls the story in one of Marryat’s books, “about a beautiful woman who took the form of a wolf at night and devoured her own children.”<sup>14</sup>

Kate Northcott is thus the devilish woman mesmerizer who unleashes her hypnotic spell, unlike her male counterparts, not only to seduce but to exterminate. She may be aptly compared to Helen Penclosa, the ‘femme fatale’ of Doyle’s ‘The Parasite’. Penclosa

---

<sup>12</sup> Doyle, ‘John Barrington Cowles’, 257.

<sup>13</sup> Doyle, ‘John Barrington Cowles’, 258.

<sup>14</sup> Doyle, ‘John Barrington Cowles’, 259.

is the anti-heroine who lends her chief characteristic to the title of this story. As the protagonist, the young professor Austin Gilroy comments, “She has a *parasite* soul; yes, she is a parasite, a monstrous parasite. She creeps into my frame as the hermit crab does into the whelk’s shell.”<sup>15</sup> Having been introduced to Miss Penclosa at a party, the extremely rational Prof. Gilroy is intrigued by her outlandish origin. This literally crippled she-devil who is supposed to upset all gender norms is ‘ec-centric’ in that she does not belong to the core continental culture. She is from Trinidad, West Indies, yet her marginal origin is socially validated by the fact that she is Wilson’s wife’s friend. Prof. Wilson, the over-enthusiastic researcher of psychology, is Prof. Gilroy’s friend. So, in spite of ardently wishing it, Gilroy cannot pounce upon this charlatan woman at the party where both are invited. However, what Gilroy does not realize is that his fragile nervous disposition, which he thinks he hides very effectively under the garb of an assumed objectivity, is revealed in front of the experienced eyes of Miss Penclosa. The hierarchical scientific divide between exact physiology and inexact nascent psychology as initially represented by Gilroy and Wilson will shortly be broken down by this mesmerizer.

Unlike Kate Northcott, Helen Penclosa is not physically attractive, nor can she be called young; in fact, she is older than the thirty-four year old “young” professor Gilroy. Yet, her frail figure undergoes a sea-change when, Roman empress-like, she assumes mesmeric control over her “kneeling slaves”.<sup>16</sup> Once the woman gains control over her subjects, she is described in masculine terms by Doyle’s mouthpiece, Prof. Gilroy:

She no longer seemed small or insignificant. Twenty years were gone from her age. Her eyes were shining...her whole figure had expanded. So have I seen a dull-eyed, listless lad change in an instant into briskness and life when given the task of which he felt himself master.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, even at the outset, the gendered relation between Gilroy and Penclosa shows the potential of being reversed on account of their age and given Penclosa’s special power to mesmerize. It is interesting to note that Gilroy is singled out by Penclosa as an excellent subject of mesmerism at the beginning of their conversation in Part I of the

---

<sup>15</sup> Doyle, ‘The Parasite’ ch. 2, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> Doyle, ‘The Parasite’, ch. 1, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Doyle, ‘The Parasite’, ch. 1, 4.

story. But Gilroy's tremendous skepticism about this so-called "hoax" and "stage performance" compels Penclosa to select such a subject for exercising her mesmeric powers of inducing sleep and suggestion which would be acceptable to Gilroy beyond any doubt. She, therefore, effectively mesmerizes Gilroy's fiancée Miss Agatha Marden.<sup>18</sup> Her daring feat of mesmerizing a young man's future wife by influencing her to break off the engagement under mesmeric spell carries in it dangerous future implications of transgression of normative and socially acceptable gender-relationships.

As Helen Penclosa conclusively proves the veracity of mesmeric sleep and suggestion upon Agatha Marden, Gilroy's attitude towards mesmerism undergoes a drastic, rather incredible change within the short space of twenty-four hours. He is intensely startled and consequently relieved at Agatha's act of sudden break-up which is later proved to be under mesmeric suggestion. Thereafter, he decides to probe further into the matter from the vantage point of an objective and open-minded researcher. What he does not realize but we as readers feel is that the fulcrum of this nascent relationship is already tipping towards Penclosa's advantage.

At the beginning of Part II of the story, Gilroy has the uncanny feeling of being followed by the "grey, deep, inscrutable"<sup>19</sup> gaze of Helen Penclosa. He confesses, "She seems to take a singular interest in me. I cannot help observing how her eyes follow me about the room."<sup>20</sup> Gaze is a vital tool to transfix the subject, the stepping stone towards achieving complete control over the same. We find the same in Jasper of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* and in Count Dracula; the only difference being that the perpetrator of this ominous influence is a woman and her subject is a man. This woman is not interested in science and would not let a scientist interpret this mystic phenomenon through any physiological theory. She declares:

'Frankly, Professor Gilroy, ... I am not at all interested in science, nor do I care whether it can or cannot classify these powers... But... If you make it a personal matter,' said she, with the pleasantest of smiles, 'I shall be only too happy to tell you any thing you wish to know.'<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Doyle, 'The Parasite', ch. 1, 3-6.

<sup>19</sup> Doyle, 'The Parasite', ch. 2, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Doyle, 'The Parasite', ch. 2, 1.

<sup>21</sup> Doyle, 'The Parasite', ch. 2, 1.



She refuses to be defined by normative male rationality represented by science and prefers to stay in the incoherent and undefinable female zone of irrationality. She further confesses to Gilroy:

‘I am afraid I express myself very badly... but of course I don’t know how to put these things in a scientific way. I am just giving you my own experiences and my own explanations.’<sup>22</sup>

A little probe into the context will make Penclosa’s position clear. The advent of mesmerism in Victorian England was received in such a manner by the scientific world that would sound the death-knell of female autonomy temporarily attained through assumption of power as mesmeric operator. While mesmerism did much to reanimate the scarce buried fears of the witchcraft era, it also promised deliverance from their continued haunting by a repossession of, and a ‘scientific’ control over uncanny medium and mesmeric operators like Miss Penclosa. Claiming scientific status and demanding appropriate scientific investigation and recognition, the advocates of scientific mesmerism used it to render the female body amenable to law. No wonder, Penclosa refuses to be contained. However, it must be made clear at this point that the medium and the operator are not the same. While the position of the spiritualist medium in seances was relatively more empowered than that of women who had no such claims to occult power, such a ‘medium’ was nevertheless visibly vulnerable to control on both sides of the visible and the invisible world. The powerful woman as mesmeric operator is more alarming because she possesses the technology, but no knowledge about the sources of her power, and can therefore lend herself to evil forces under subjection to those who remotely manipulate her. But the female mesmeriser labours under the illusion that she is in charge of her own will.

The power of such a deluded female mesmeric operator actually starts growing on Gilroy. He is gradually won over into believing that his hard reasoning and devotion to fact are giving way to acceptance of the “gossip” that this woman is trying to pass for fact. In fact, in order to lend himself more amenable to these mesmeric experiments, he starts reading Binet and Ferre’s *Animal Magnetism* and emphatically states, “I KNOW that mesmeric suggestion is true; I KNOW that I am myself sensitive to this force. That is

---

<sup>22</sup> Doyle, ‘The Parasite’, ch. 2, 2.

my present position.”<sup>23</sup> Mesmerism completely loses its therapeutic, rational and therefore patriarchal connotation as the young scientist Gilroy declares:

Professors have demonstrated these things upon women at Nancy and at the Salpetriere. **It will be more convincing when a woman [Penclosa] demonstrates it upon a professor [Gilroy], with a second professor as a witness [Wilson].**<sup>24</sup> (emphasis and parenthesis mine)

Here, Penclosa will not act as the mesmeric healer. But she will channelize the universal fluid through her to show her power and control over men. Yet, it is doubtful whether Penclosa’s mesmerism can be called an occult science. Occult science attempts to empower a medium to act as a transformative social agent. Here Penclosa is undoubtedly an empowered medium. But she uses her power for her selfish acquisitive tendencies.

The status of a women mesmerist in Victorian England would have been ambivalent in that it would have been poised half way between a theological discourse with its suppressed demonologies of Satanism and witchcraft and new scientific paradigms of reality which would dialectically transform those demonologies into the Victorian concept of the New Woman. However, whether Doyle wants to project Penclosa as a witch or a New Woman in ‘The Parasite’ is very clear. She is portrayed as a deformed demon that does not show any of the accomplishments and refined sensibilities of a New Woman. She is not particularly inclined towards academics, nor is she working. Though she is shown at a particular juncture of her life (during one of her prolonged vacations), there is no reference to her professional involvement throughout this lengthy story. But she is interested in choosing a partner from the literary community in England which is proved from her initial, unsuccessful attempt at mesmerizing Charles Sadler and then Austin Gilroy. The case of Miss Helen Penclosa perhaps convinces us to believe that the distinction between medieval women’s dubious healing methods in demonology/witchcraft and the New Woman’s altruistic attraction to the medical and human sciences in modern times is deliberately blurred by Doyle to make both appear equally prone to evil.

---

<sup>23</sup> Doyle, ‘The Parasite’, ch. 2, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Doyle, ‘The Parasite’, ch. 2, 3.

Occultism seeks to identify a medium for its operations. All theories of occult posit the existence of a mode of interaction between people that is deeply disturbing to the concept of individuality, since individuality is erected largely through the structures and conventions of patriarchal language in opposition to such a sphere of interaction. Witchcraft in the sense of ‘maleficarum’ and healing both operate through this medium, as do all notions of sympathetic magic. In identifying this arcane body language as essentially a female medium, nineteenth century critics and commentators on mesmerism found themselves restating and reinvesting with contemporary meaning, the powerfully misogynistic witchcraft tracts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The authors of the notorious *The Malleus Maleficarum*, the fifteenth century ‘Hammer of the Witches’ talk about the essential sinfulness of the female body and to its horrible magic:

...the sin which arose from woman destroys the soul by depriving it of grace, and delivers the body up to the punishment for sin.

...woman is a wheedling and secret enemy...

...And when it is said that her heart is a net, it speaks of the inscrutable malice which reigns in their hearts.<sup>25</sup>

Penclosa is projected as a similarly mysterious and sinful influence that brings up the worst in Gilroy. He says, “... when I am near her... she rouses something in me, something evil, something I had rather not think of.”<sup>26</sup> In another place he says:

I was dragged away as if the noose of a rope had been cast round me. I can no longer disguise it from myself. The woman has her grip upon me. I am in her clutch.<sup>27</sup>

But if all women are born guilty, some are born guiltier than others, and the *Malleus* makes clear which women in particular are likely to make use of their hellish arts:

...three general vices appear to have special domination over wicked women, namely, infidelity, ambition and lust. Therefore they are more inclined towards witchcraft, who more than others are given to these vices. Again, since of these three vices the last chiefly

---

<sup>25</sup> Kramer and Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*,

<sup>26</sup> Doyle, ‘The Parasite’. ch. 2,5.

<sup>27</sup> Doyle, ‘The Parasite’ ch. 2, 6.

predominates, women being insatiable, etc., it follows that those among ambitious women are more deeply infected who are more hot to satisfy their filthy lusts.<sup>28</sup>

Helen Penclosa has all three vices. She may not be an infidel herself but provokes infidelity in Gilroy. She is extremely ambitious in that she is a social climber and wants to belong to the erudite English community by befriending young academicians. Last but not the least, she is lustful and wants a man, even if younger in age than her, to satiate her physical desires.

Thus, she is a malevolent mesmerizer akin to a witch, who refuses to be contained by science. Gilroy can only cry in desperation, “Was ever a man so placed before?”<sup>29</sup> But then Providence, if not science, comes to his rescue as religion would inevitably appear to sanitize society from witches. During one of those uncontrollable fits of passion artificially induced by the seductress, Gilroy suddenly realizes that Penclosa’s powers are waning on account of too much nervous exertion. It is then that he becomes his true self and expresses his sheer disgust for her. After this incident, a desperate Penclosa tries to achieve Gilroy’s love through fear. In the sheer spirit of revenge, she forces Gilroy, the leading professor to deliver garbled lectures thereby turning him into “a public imbecile”<sup>30</sup>. As if this was not humiliating enough, she influences the law-abiding citizen Gilroy to attempt to break into a bank at the dead of night under mesmeric trance.

When all epitomes of scientific rationality, even icons like Pratt-Haldene fail to deliver Gilroy from his unique predicament, and Miss Penclosa becomes ready to deliver the final turn of the screw, Providence finally and decisively comes to Gilroy’s rescue. As Gilroy waits with a bottle of sulphuric acid at Agatha’s boudoir, he feels a sense of deliverance from yet another nervous fit. The unsoiled bottle suggests to him that no harm has been done yet. He thanks God for having regained his senses in time. As Agatha enters, she apologizes for being late as “The vicar was in the drawing-room”<sup>31</sup>. The alarm that was set on Gilroy would have done the fatal harm of destroying Agatha’s beauty, had she been on time. The final intervention of religion, albeit unconscious,

---

<sup>28</sup> quoted in Diana Basham, *The Trial of Woman*, 76.

<sup>29</sup> Doyle, ‘The Parasite’ ch. 3, 1.

<sup>30</sup> Doyle, ‘The Parasite’ ch. 4, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Doyle, ‘The Parasite’ ch. 4, 8.

delivers Agatha and Gilroy from a fatal mishap. Its power is proved even farther when Gilroy discovers that the moment of his regaining his consciousness and of the vicar's timely interference is precisely the time of Miss Penclosa's death. Too much transgression against the laws of nature, too much exertion of will have caused the untimely death of this she-monster.

That is the fate of the only truly powerful woman mesmerizer in the corpus of Victorian English literature. If she cannot be contained, she has to be exterminated. Scientific mesmerism can heal a woman of her essential sinfulness induced by the hysteria-producing parts of the body, as in the case of the eminently rational Harriet Martineau's brush with mesmerism. But if the same tool is deployed for wielding power by a so-called irrational woman, she is surely to be effaced.

The history of reception of mesmerism in India – especially colonial Bengal – is extremely intriguing for different reasons. The root cause behind its ready acceptance in Indian society has to be traced in India's rich traditional past of indigenous healing. When an avid researcher attempts to locate mesmerism in the universe of healing across geopolitical divisions during the latter half of the nineteenth century, it is found to be occupying an in-between space between various Western and colonial Indian modes of healing. While the use of mesmerism for alleviating physical illnesses could be subsumed under the rubric of Western therapeutic restoration (which was by no means a homogeneous field of practice), its use to revive mental equanimity could make it a close affiliate of indigenous healing traditions used in colonial India.

Restoration of mental health – which was one of the main, though mostly unacknowledged aims behind practising mesmerism in colonial Bengal and even in Victorian England – meant restoration of ethical and spiritual well-being, integration of psychological functioning, effective conduct of personal and social life and above all the absence of incapacitating symptoms. This found an exact resonance in the aim of various indigenous “healing” traditions which targeted at restoring someone from evil conditions or affections like sin, grief, despair, unwholesomeness, danger and destruction, thereby saving, purifying, cleansing, repairing and mending the body and mind.

In India, the trend of evoking indigenous curative healing methods and presenting them vis-à-vis mesmerism had already been introduced by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, an iconic Bengali fiction writer in the second half of nineteenth century. He celebrated indigenous traditions through his works which were mainly based on historical realism. In his two novels *Chandrashekhar* (1875) and *Rajani* (1877), he celebrated the curative power of ‘sammohan’ and hailed it as a more potent healing agent than western medicinal cures. He seemed to be making the point that, mesmerism was already known to the Indian subcontinent, way before it created ripples across Europe. Our concern, however, is not Bankim but his slightly junior contemporary Ramesh Chandra Dutt who was considerably influenced by Bankim like many other fiction writers of the time. Moreover, Dutt was present in England for not an insignificant period of time in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Under these circumstances, it is not difficult to understand Dutt’s choice of ‘sammohan’ or the Indian equivalent of mesmerism as a parallel theme in one of his historical novels. Most importantly, he was perhaps the only Indian writer who showed woman as an evil mesmeric manipulator in this novel entitled *Madhabikankan* (1879).

The story, like *Chandrashekhar* deals with two children Narendra and Hemlata separated at the prime of their adolescence. Hem’s father is the zamindar of Virnagar, an estate which previously belonged to Narendra’s illustrious father Virendranath Dutta. Hem’s father Nabakumar, who was also Virendra’s friend, had risen in power completely forgetting his debt of gratitude towards Virendra. At a point, after Virendra’s death, he was left in charge of Virendra’s son Narendra. Nabakumar could easily have married his daughter off to Narendra to retain his new found property. But his towering ego forbids him from taking this logical step. Instead, he takes a protégé, Shrish – an orphan child, with the aim of getting him married to Hemlata and transferring everything in his name after his demise. The blossoming love between Narendra and Hem is nipped in the bud when Narendra decides to leave Virnagar after a rude fallout with Nabakumar. Both the adolescent children are shattered for life at this decision. Before leaving his beloved, Narendra ties a bracelet of the Madhabi creeper on Hem’s wrist as a mark of their love.

The narrative takes a drastic leap after this point as Dutt's historical imagination comes to full play. Narendra's wanderings take him from one dangerous battle into another. He is a hindu soldier fighting for the Rajputs and is eventually held captive at the Mughal capital of Delhi. In course of these adventures, Narendra comes in contact with Jelekha - a Tatar girl who is the attendant of Shah Jahan's eldest daughter Jehanara. The theme of mesmerism is introduced through this outlandish but extremely attractive character by Dutt into this narrative.

This woman Jelekha is a "Tatar". Historically speaking, Tatars are Turkic-speaking people living primarily in Russia, Crimea, and Uzbekistan. They are largely Sunni Muslims. She admits being a free woman before being captured as a prisoner of war by the Mughals and brought to India. In India, her services were utilized by the Mughal princess to accomplish all sorts of daring and dangerous feats. She divulges the whole truth to Narendra in a letter where she states:

Prasade Tatar-ramanidiger ki kaaj bodhoy tumi jano na. Amra begumdiger mahal raksha kori, khorgo o chhurika byabohare amra apatu nohi. Begumdiger adeshe kotosoto bhoyonkor karjo sompadon kori, taha jagatsadharan ki janibe? Ami e somosto byapare lipto hoiya sokoler asadhya karjo-o sadhon koritam. (You are perhaps unacquainted with the nature of work done by Tatar women in the palace. We protect the quarters of the empress and are experts in the art of using knives and other sharp weapons. How will ordinary people know what risky feats we accomplish according to the orders of the empresses? I have accomplished rather impossible feats of daring for them.<sup>32</sup>) (translation mine)

Jelekha falls in love with Narendra the moment she sees him injured and unconscious in Raja Jaisingh's camp during the war of Varanasi. The entire period of Narendra's recovery in front of Jelekha with her constant help and support – only deepens her all-consuming love for Narendra. She excuses herself as insane after confiding in Narendra about how she embraced and kissed his unconscious body when they were alone in the recovery room. After Narendra has been brought from Varanasi to Delhi, she artfully manages to hide him inside her room. Her all-consuming passion for Narendra increases with every passing day approximating the level of obsession. She is finally reported against and both Narendra and Jelekha stand guilty awaiting verdict in front of Jehanara. But, on seeing the frail health of Narendra, justice is postponed. Wily Jelekha takes this

---

<sup>32</sup> Ramesh Chandra Dutta, *Madhabikankan*, 94.

opportunity to flee the palace with Narendra. Narendra, however, is still unfit enough to understand the desperation of love or extent of help offered by this outlandish woman. Upon being extricated from the palace, Narendra gradually recovers. After his complete recovery, he adopts the attire of a hindu soldier and leaves Delhi. But, by that time, Jelekha's passion had reached such a height that she camouflages as a young boy Dewana and accompanies Narendra in his forthcoming adventures.

During the next few months, Jelekha, very craftily, extracts all information about Hemlata and Virnagar from an unsuspecting Narendra. All she wants now is to replace the name of Hem from Narendra's mind with her own. She uses the route of religion to accomplish this. Seeing Narendra's faith in Hinduism, she goes to the 'Ekalinga' temple and tries to buy the priest to do her bidding. The first priest rudely refuses her but the second one - Shaileshwar – turns out to be saleable. Jelekha buys him with valuables received as gifts from Jehanara.

Narendra had already had a face-off with Shaileshwar at a well once. He had been decisively defeated by this Rajput 'Goswami' or priest. He meets him again at the shiva temple. But this second meeting is crafted by Jelekha disguised as Dewana. Jelekha knows that Narendra wants to meet Hem once before death. So, she convinces Narendra to meet this ascetic to know whether his dream will be fulfilled in future. Narendra arrives at the temple hopefully and is rather pleasantly surprised at finding Shaileshwar as that so-called renowned fortune-teller. He is further entrapped by Jelekha as the sadhu effortlessly recalls everything about Hemlata and Shrish to gain his absolute trust. In fact, Shaileshwar takes very little time to convince Narendra that he is a great sinner and should not enter the temple since in his heart of hearts he covets another man's wife. No counter arguments from Narendra can win over the forceful rhetoric of Shaileshwar.

Upon conceding defeat, Narendra asks for a solution to his situation. Like all hindu ascetics, Shaileshwar might have suggested penitence as the only route to purification of the soul. But his advice is a little weird. He states if Narendra genuinely loves Hem and is willing to sacrifice everything for her benefit, then he must either practice life-long celibacy or become Muslim and marry a Muslim woman. Narendra shudders at the thought and pleads with the sadhu for another solution. But he sticks to his suggestion and states, "Tomar bishom paaper ei bishom prayaschitto." (Your tremendous sin calls



for tremendous penitence.) and that “Utkat rogey utkat oushadh aboshyok.” (A weird disease calls for a weird treatment.)<sup>33</sup> (translation mine)

Finally Narendra accepts Shaileshwar’s suggestion to look for a partner fit enough to match up to his martial way of life. At this, the latter summons him to a cave and orders him to drink up the contents of a pitcher. The drink is alcoholic, confesses Shaileshwar and will instil in Narendra a dream. This dream will lead him to the ideal woman whom he should take up as his wife. “Adyo swapne dekhibe.” (Today, you will see her in your dreams.<sup>34</sup>) (translation mine) Shaileshwar adds that if he has true yogic power, Narendra would surely dream about the woman who loves him more than Hem, being spiritually guided by Shaileshwar. So, here we see a direct correlation between indigenous yogic practices and clairvoyance similar to Shaibalini’s mystical feat in *Chandrashekhar*.

At this point, one cannot but observe the reiteration of the motif of trance and dream as tools of clairvoyance in colonial Bengali literature. This has striking similarity with the-then popular mesmeric discourse in Victorian English literature. In fact, the description of the dream vision of Narendra in this part of the novel is reminiscent of the spiritual visions of Harriet Martineau as described in her *Letters on Mesmerism*. In chapter 24, Narendra’s dream vision is thus described, “Narendra... swapna dekhitechhilen. Etokkhon durostho joler sabdo jaha shuna jaitechhilo, Narendrer bodh hoilo, jeno taha sahasa poribortito hoiya swargiya sangeetdhwani hoilo. Gobhir ondhokare jyano krome alokochchhota bikirno hoite lagilo.” (Narendra was dreaming. He felt that the sound of water coming from afar till now was suddenly transformed into heavenly music. As if, pitch darkness was gradually illuminated.<sup>35</sup>) (translation mine) It is more than a coincidence that both English and Bengali literature of this period are relying on similar tropes of dream vision. This cannot but be seen as a fallout of the mesmeric mania in England which had its far-reaching effects on one of its largest colonies at the peak of imperialism.

---

<sup>33</sup> Dutta, *Madhabikankan*, 67.

<sup>34</sup> Dutta, *Madhabikankan*, 69.

<sup>35</sup> Dutta, *Madhabikankan*, 70.

In chapter 24, Narendra is seen drinking up the contents of the pitcher and falling into a fit of tremendous intoxication. In this state, where he can hardly differentiate between reality and dream, he has the mystic vision of the lovesick Jelekha singing the most poignant and painful song of unrequited love. At first, Narendra shudders in his dream upon discovering that Jelekha is that “birnari”<sup>36</sup> [valiant woman] who loves him most in this world. He is rendered speechless by the glamour and beauty of this attractive woman. Gradually the vision fades and he falls completely unconscious. He returns to civilization the very next morning. But in chapter 32, we discover that this was only a plot created by Jelekha and Shaileshwar in order to make Narendra interested in Jelekha, by making him aware of the Tatar girl’s emotions for him. Shaileshwar has no such yogic powers. He has been bribed by Jelekha to gain the confidence of Narendra so that his pretension of instilling this dream in Narendra does not seem to be fake to him. In fact, when Narendra thinks that he is dreaming about Jelekha, he is actually in a heightened state of intoxication. Jelekha appears in person to sing in front of Narendra in order to woo him.

After that night in the cave, Narendra spends three days and nights thinking about the feasibility of this choice of woman for his future. But he realizes that it is impossible for him to forget his true love for Hemlata. Therefore, at the end of three days, he goes back to the cave to convey his decision to Shaileshwar as promised. The yogi flies into a rage upon hearing Narendra’s decision. He talks about murdering Narendra upon which the two have a sword fight. Narendra is convincingly defeated in this battle but the yogi does not kill him. He binds Narendra with rope and forces him to drink another pitcher of intoxicant. This time too Narendra cannot but oblige. Yet the vision he has following this, is absolutely different to the one he saw three days back. Now, the same woman whom he had seen in his previous dream as lovelorn, is seen threatening Narendra with a knife in her hand. Jelekha has again appeared in person. But this time, she is desperate. In fact, her desperation for gaining the love of Narendra continues since their first meeting. Later, in her revelatory letter to Narendra she confesses of her daring feat of disguising herself as Dewana – a young wandering minstrel to accompany Narendra in his adventures. However, in her second appearance inside the cave, her desperation reaches its zenith.

---

<sup>36</sup> Dutta, *Madhabikankan*, 69.

She has to convince Narendra at any cost, even if she has to resort to violence and mortal threat. Narendra is intimidated by this so-called dream and wakes up with a shriek.

Thus in this story, Ramesh Chandra uses the negative implication of mesmerism, much in keeping with the prevalent trend of the West. Unlike Bankim the stalwart, he is not at all keen to glorify the indigenous tradition of 'sammohan' or inducing dream vision by dint of sheer spiritual power of the Indian yogi. On the contrary, this is one of those few works which uses the nefarious connotation associated with mesmerism in a colonial context. Wilkie Collins's novels *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868) and Charles Dickens's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870) might have had a considerable impact on Dutt, more so because he was present in England from 1868 to 1871. Understandably enough, the indigenous mesmerizer or Shaileshwar is projected as a pretender who fakes yogic powers of clairvoyance. But he is not even shown as one who uses his occult power for achieving material benefits or to fulfill his carnal desires. In this matter, he is neither a Fosco, nor a John Jasper. He is rather a cheap trickster who sells himself in order to abide by the orders of an outlandish woman. By showing the Tatar girl in complicity with the fake yogi, Dutt is somehow otherising mesmerism as a phenomenon residing outside the ethical parameter of India and the evil manipulator Jelekha outside the ethical domain of Indian morality. But, rendering a colonial inflection to the phenomenon of mesmerism is not Dutt's target. In fact, Jelekha is shown committing suicide towards the end of this novel, unable to bear the pain of unfulfilled love. It appears that Dutt does not wish to keep his representation of mesmeric manipulations confined within ethical parameters alone, by giving his readers a comfortable opportunity to judge Jelekha and write her off as an outsider with skewed morals. Instead, Dutt portrays her as a woman wasted and destroyed through the consuming passion of transgressive love, and thereby introduces a shade of human compassion towards her in death – making his readers wonder why the relationship of Jelekha and Narendra could not have worked out if Hem was unavailable and married to another man. Perhaps this was also meant to hint at the implicit connection between desire and the vicissitudes of karma, where unfulfilled longings were expected to be fulfilled beyond death – whether of Narendra for Hem or of Jelekha for Narendra, and thus indefinitely prolonged without any final settlement.

The general trend of reception of evil female mesmerisers or manipulators in Victorian England and Colonial Bengal reveals a set pattern. Whereas the predominant motive for using this figure is 'revenge', at times bordering on sexual appropriation in Victorian literary discourse, colonial Bengali mesmeric discourse uses the character of a 'femme fatale' chiefly for the purpose of achieving unrequited love. But an interesting observation in this direction is that, no matter how the evil woman's motif is used, the direct or indirect application of mesmerism by women is repeatedly subordinated to 'divine authority' as its ultimate sanction or rejection. Be it the timely intervention of the vicar in Conan Doyle's 'The Parasite' or resorting to orthodox Hindu religion in *Madhabikankan*, mesmerism is shown to possess an inherently diabolical power, especially at the hands of women only to be sanitized and sobered down through timely and ultimate religious interference.

## Bibliography

- Arnold, Matthew. "The Scholar-Gypsy." [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org).  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43606/the-scholar-gipsy>.
- Basham, Diana. *The Trial of Woman: Feminism and the Occult Sciences in Victorian Literature and Society*. London: Macmillan, 1992.
- Browning, Elizabeth Barrett. *Letters of the Brownings to George Barrett*. Edited by Paul Landis and Ronald E. Freeman. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1958.
- Browning, Robert. "Mesmerism." [ebooks.adelaide.edu.au](http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au).  
<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/b/browning/robert/dramatic/poem7.html>.
- "Paracelsus." [ebooks.adelaide.edu.au](http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au).  
<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/b/browning/robert/paracelsus/complete.html>.
- "Pauline: A Fragment of a Confession." [www.telelib.com](http://www.telelib.com).  
<http://www.telelib.com/authors/B/BrowningRobert/verse/misc/pauline.html>.
- Chattopadhyay, Bankim Chandra. *Chandrashekhara*, Edited by Dhruva Kumar Mukhopadhyay. Kolkata: Suman Chattopadhyay, 2004 (1410 bangabda).
- *Rajani*. Knatalpara: Radhanath Bandyopadhyay, 1880 (1287 bangabda).
- Collins, Wilkie. *The Moonstone*. [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org).  
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/155/155-h/155-h.htm>.
- *The Woman in White*, Edited by Julian Symons. London: Penguin, 1974.
- Collins, Wilkie. (1860) 1975. *The Woman in White*, 3 vols., Edited by H.P. Sucksmith. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dickens, Charles. *The Mystery Of Edwin Drood*. [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org).  
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/564/564-h/564-h.htm>.
- Doyle, Arthur Conan. "John Barrington Cowles," in *The Captain of the Polestar and Other Tales*, (London and New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1890): 230-266.  
[https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The\\_Captain\\_of\\_the\\_Polestar\\_and\\_Other\\_Tales/John\\_Barrington\\_Cowles](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Captain_of_the_Polestar_and_Other_Tales/John_Barrington_Cowles).
- *The Parasite*. [www.pagebypagebooks.com](http://www.pagebypagebooks.com).  
[https://www.pagebypagebooks.com/Arthur\\_Conan\\_Doyle/The\\_Parasite/index.html](https://www.pagebypagebooks.com/Arthur_Conan_Doyle/The_Parasite/index.html).

Dutta, Ramesh Chandra. *Madhabikankan*. Kolkata: Annapurna Press, 1960.

Kramer, Heinrich and James Sprenger. *The Malleus Maleficarum*. Translated with an Introduction, Bibliography and Notes by the Reverend Montague Summers.

[www.malleusmaleficarum.org](http://www.malleusmaleficarum.org).

<http://www.malleusmaleficarum.org/downloads/MalleusAcrobat.pdf>

Martineau, Harriet. *Letters on Mesmerism*. London: Edward Moxon, Dover Street, 1845.

SHREYA CHAKRAVORTY

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR

AND

HEAD, DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

BUDGE BUDGE COLLEGE

KOLKATA

WEST BENGAL

INDIA