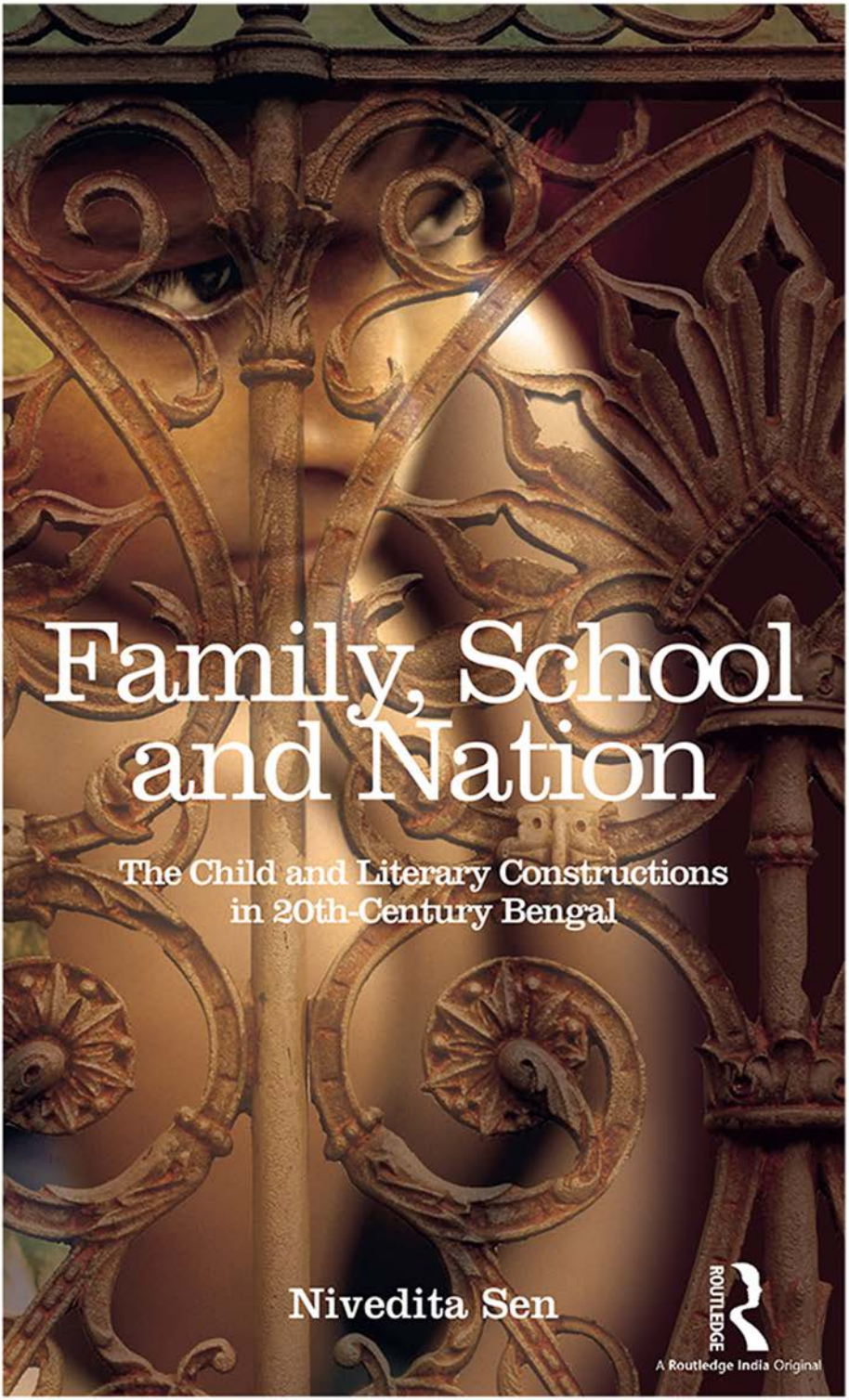
Family, School and Nation
The Child and Literary Constructions in 20th-Century Bengal
Nivedita Sen
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Family, School and Nation

This book recovers the voice of child protagonists across children's and adult literature in Bengali. It scans literary representations of aberrant childhood as mediated by the institutions of family and school and the project of nation-building in India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The author discusses ideals of childhood demeanour; locates dissident children who legitimately champion, demand and fight for their rights; examines the child protagonist's confrontations with parents at home, with teachers at school and their running away from home and school; and investigates the child protagonist's involvement in social and national causes.

Using a comparative framework, the work effectively showcases the child's growing refusal to comply as a legacy and an innovative departure from analogous portrayals in English literature. It further reviews how such childhood rebellion gets contained and re-assimilated within a predominantly cautious, middle-class, adult worldview.

This book will deeply interest researchers and scholars of literature, especially Bengali literature of the renaissance, modern Indian history, cultural studies and sociology.

Nivedita Sen is Associate Professor of English literature at Hans Raj College, University of Delhi. Her translated works (from Bengali to English) include Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire* (*The Home and the World*, 2004) and 'Madhyabartini' ('The In-between Woman') in *The Essential Tagore* (ed. Fakrul Alam and Radha Chakravarty, 2011); Syed Mustafa Siraj's *The Colonel Investigates* (2004) and *Die, Said the Tree and Other Stories* (2012); and *Tong Ling Express: A Selection of Bangla Stories for Children* (2010). She has jointly compiled and edited (with an introduction) *Mahasweta Devi: An Anthology of Recent Criticism* (2008). Her collaborative translation of Sibaji Bandopadhyay's important work, titled The *Gopal-Rakhal Dialectic: Colonialism and Children's Literature in Bengal* is forthcoming.

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Contents

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Preface

1

The acknowledgment that the child is a human being whose identity is different from the adult, and who justifiably desires, at times, to break free of the adult establishment and adult norms, was documented in Western thought as early as the Romantic Movement in Europe. The writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), William Blake (1757–1827), Charles Lamb (1775–1834) and others brought in their wake the recognition that children have a right to judge the world in their own terms. Rousseau celebrated the ways of children in his *Emile* (1762), and granted them a right to seeing, feeling and thinking differently from adults. William Blake perceived the unfair imposition of an adult world view on the child's spontaneous and imaginative participation in life itself. Both these writers, however, were hardly ever read by children and remained inaccessibly esoteric as far as children were concerned. Charles Lamb, known for his child-sensitive writing and writing both *for* and about children towards the close of the eighteenth century, went to the extent of appreciating even the special and complex need for all adults to resort to childlike reflexes now and then. Recently, in a reading of the history of Western discourses on childhood, Hugh Cunningham not only recuperates the rising insistence on seeing childhood as a special time and state but also a growing conviction that it must serve as an antidote to adulthood, suggestive of the need for adults to keep alive their *inner child* and move closer to a childlike mode of being. This view, on the upsurge since the eighteenth century, is of course informed and moulded by Romanticism.

In India, childhood has not been theorized with the same rigour as it has in the West. Approaches to childhood, therefore, have to be collated from writings on education, memoirs and autobiographical works of writers over

a period. Rabindranath Tagore, undoubtedly the Bengali[1] writer who has written most on and for children, however, does not subscribe to the view that there is a child within each adult but acknowledges the *otherness* of the child:

> The recognition of an absolute otherness thus opened the self to a stranger to be approached with laughter, a non-antagonistic otherness, a difference that could be the source of the greatest pleasure to both. This is one way of relating to otherness, not as an extension of the self, or as a supplement, or as something to be ingested or conquered, but as ineffably the other; to be met, therefore, with tender amusement.
>
> (T. Sarkar, *Rebels, Wives, Saints* 280)

The view of identifying the adult with the child, in fact, has not gained much credence over the centuries in Indian society, where 'the notion of children's literature, [too], evolves only after the "child" is understood as a separate category with its own distinct needs, demands and desires' (Chatterjee and Gupta, Introduction 3).

Although literature for children has existed as a distinct genre in the West for these last two hundred years, it has not received its share of serious, scholarly attention till recently. Over the last two centuries, its trajectory indicates not just branching into a distinct subgenre but a preoccupation with a general liberation from the hegemony of adult perspectives, what Nicholas Tucker calls its 'old, semi-pedagogic role' (*Child and the Book* 1981). Twentieth-century writing for children, in particular, is characterized by a movement away from instruction to entertainment. In 1932, F. J. Harvey Darton wrote: 'By "children's books," I mean printed works produced ostensibly to give children spontaneous pleasure, and not primarily to teach them, not solely to make them good, nor to keep them *profitably* quiet' (emphasis author's) (1).

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[1]In my final draft, I had used the word 'Bangla' throughout to describe the language, while I had used 'Bengali' to depict the people. The use of the word 'Bangla' while writing in English is a relatively recent trend that I would have preferred to follow. Indian scholars, critics and academics like me who have been nurtured on a post-colonial sensitization to Anglicized indigenous names feel that it is more politically correct to reject the word 'Bengali' and retain 'Bangla' instead while referring to the language, thereby challenging the universality of spelling our words the way the English chose to distort them. Routledge felt that the word 'Bangla' might be unfamiliar to Western readers, and since this is a text that is aimed at s a global readership, I accommodated their contention that the word 'Bengali', used for both the people and their language, is more reader-friendly.

As late as 1981, however, Fred Inglis conflates the two programmes when he says:

> Only a monster would not want to give a child books she will delight in *and* which will teach her to be good. It is the ancient and proper justification of reading and teaching literature that it helps you to live well. (emphasis added)
>
> (4)

It would seem from Inglis's statement that instruction and entertainment are not just synchronous but synonymous. But by and large, the more recent the children's text, the more it caters to the desire of children to find in the books that they read characters, situations and happenings like themselves and what happens around them rather than have adult writers telling them what they *should* or *should not* do. The author's effort to entertain must be accompanied by an awareness that the child reader would want to identify herself/himself with these characters, situations and happenings.

Also taking into consideration that the writer and reader of a children's book must share a more or less egalitarian relationship, C. S. Lewis says that he talks to the child reader 'man to man' (34), for he 'never wrote down to anyone' (38), and Barbara Wall traces this tendency to treat children at par with adults as a sociological phenomenon that has developed in the latter half of the twentieth century:

> The impulse to give children the best, to treat them as equals, to see them as having rights, and having rights which need not be championed and fought for in what often seems an increasingly regimented and insensitive world, has gained force since the Second World War and manifests itself in many ways.
>
> (14)

The subject under consideration in this book, however, is neither the location of defining moments in the history of Western ideas on childhood nor a study of certain features in children's literature as it has evolved in the West; it is to investigate certain thematic patterns in the new literature in Bengali for children. A major corpus of this literature belongs to a literary phase in Bengali writing which is not so evolved that children could be portrayed as having 'rights which need not be championed and fought for' (see the quoted passage from Barbara Wall ix). Children in this body of texts that I am concerned with, however, at least *demand* their rights. From the perspective of their authors, in fact, aberrant, disruptive child behaviour has begun to be accepted as a new way of looking at the world through a child's eyes.

It is not only in literature but also in many other disciplines that the child had not been recognized till recently as a separate entity whose intuition and awareness of the world around her/him must be taken into consideration. Writing in 1950, Erik Erikson, noted child psychologist, said: One may scan work after work on history, society, and morality and find little reference to the fact that all people start as children and that all people begin in their nurseries (16).

Erikson's position that academic writing across the board has glossed over childhood as the necessary stepping stone to adulthood enumerates one of the first of numerous child-sensitive discourses since the mid-twentieth century. In India, it took half a century more before child-sensitive writing tried to demonstrate that childhood has been consigned to the margins. Writing in 2005 about childhood in colonial India, Satadru Sen says: 'Childhood itself might be regarded as a periphery in a cultural environment in which adulthood enjoyed unprecedented and distinctive privileges' (Introduction 2). But to say that being 'excluded from various forms of political, economic, social and sexual privilege, and consigned to innocence and dependency' (Introduction 2) was specific to Britain and its colonies in the nineteenth century is reading a definitive cultural legacy in something that was actually quite simply a universal approach to childhood, insensitive to its special needs.

In the post-1950s era, literature and literary criticism tried to interpret the world in terms of and militantly raised its voice against discrimination, oppression and marginalization based on class, gender and race. Since the l960s, both Britain and the USA have therefore produced children's books which, in the words of John Stephens, 'critically address tendencies to assume that the world is white, male and middle class' (50–1). But this work is not concerned with how these preconceived racist, sexist and class-biased assumptions have been underscored, dealt with and debunked in children's literature. Instead, I will examine the literary expose of injustice based on *age*, exploiting the physically helpless, financially dependent and socially subservient position of children that also gradually started being noticed and challenged per se.

A more evolved acceptance and legitimization of the active child who refuses to put up any more with this subordination in terms of age, as I have stated already, is relatively recent. Some writers and critics have denounced literary representations that only express adult points of view and taken up the cause of a child-friendly literature. Lissa Paul declares that it is time for women and children, who 'have been invisible and voiceless for so long', to make their presence felt (Paul 2006: 209–10). Paul's argument is that since both women's and children's literature are devalued and regarded as peripheral by communities of people involved in literary and educational theorizing, activities and projects, it makes sense to appropriate feminist

theory into children's literature. In another essay, she extends her agenda and elaborates on *how* feminist theory can be deployed to reinterpret and reclaim devalued texts in children's literature, among other genres (Paul 2005: 114–27). Alison Lurie believes that 'we should take children's literature seriously because it is sometimes subversive: its values are not always those of the conventional adult world' (Foreword xi). Peter Hunt goes a step further in advocating a new critical approach for which he suggests the name *childist* criticism (*Criticism, Theory and Children's Literature* 19). The coinage of this term, in all the novelty and simplicity of the *ism* it seems to propound, will be of crucial significance in my exploration of children's texts and in analyzing the approach of the children's writers who have written those texts.

2

The fundamental change in nineteenth-century children's books in English, says David Grylls, is evident in the move from a didactic, contrived, stilted response to childhood that tended to 'arrest it in moral tableaux' (74) to a discovery of the ingenuous simplicities and joys of childhood. The same transition can be seen in Bengali children's literature around the beginning of the twentieth century. The didactic phase in Bengali children's literature upheld certain ideals in childhood demeanour by portraying examples of the good and the bad boy as early as Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar's Gopal and Rakhal in *Barna Parichay* (*An Introduction to Alphabets*) (1855) but continued till as late as Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Charu o Haru* (1912). Sukumar Roy's Pagla Dashu (1916) was among the first child protagonists who did not fit into the black or white moral compartment. In delineating his deviancy, the author did not brand him as absolutely *bad*, unlike his literary ancestors who hardly measure up to his inimitable ways.

In my readings of Bengali children's literature, I have come across the descendants of Pagla Dashu, and discerned the recurrent theme of an instinctive rebellion of these child protagonists against the *system* represented by their home and school establishment within which they see themselves as trapped. From a reading of the discontent expressed by the child characters emerges a sporadic and unsystematic though valid critique of the *system*. Taking Pagla Dashu as a forerunner of such rebellion, therefore, I will try to examine the views of these unconventional child protagonists regarding the institutions of the family, their own education system and the larger world in which they live.

Child characters based on the prototype of Pagla Dashu are a ubiquitous presence in later Bengali children's literature. Despite not being able to articulate a critique of the system in the adult sense of the term, they profess

irreverence for and show random but perceptive critical insights into the establishment in various ways. Some of them have dreams and fantasies about possible escapes from the system. At times, their escape is tantamount to nostalgia for an unattainable past closer to the rhythms of nature than their routinized and standardized modern urban existence would allow. Other child protagonists speak out against fossils of an outmoded system of education – schoolmasters with little learning and even less of imagination who impose rote learning and inflict physical violence on students. Yet some other child protagonists resist family and school pressures about doing well in studies which will supposedly open out the road to worldly success in the future, placing before them role models who are the epitome of good breeding and diligent studiousness. A few child protagonists actually implement their fantasies of escape from their respective homes and schools, although these may be brief interludes in the drudgery of their routine lives. Ultimately, only a handful of them look beyond themselves to fight some social injustice or actively rebel on behalf of the nation reeling under the oppression of British rule.

I will focus on the refusal of the child protagonists to get stifled within the stringency of the system of which they are a part, but also examine the anomalous predicament because of which they are, by and large, unable to simultaneously break free of it. In a fictional paradigm that demonstrates such a paradoxical situation, the most radical implications of the child protagonists' critical evaluation of the system tends to be contained and reassimilated within the predominantly middle class world-view of the works in which they appear. This work attempts to investigate the causes, nature, form, function and outcome of childhood rebellion in Bengali literature and its accompanying critique of the system.

3

The child protagonist with differing views from those of her/his parents or teachers did not burst upon the Bengali literary scene in an abrupt transition with the serialization of *Pagla Dashu* (*Crazy Dashu*) (1916). It is easy to trace how a transformation in the perception of childhood that commenced during the romantic period in Europe progressively went on to shape the unconventional child protagonist who gained some agency in the pages of nineteenth-century English literature. Understandably, given the cultural encounter between India and Britain, more specifically between Bengal and Britain, the child protagonist of the earlier part of the twentieth century is still in the grip of colonial rule but also inspired by the national movement. Since she/he has such a distinctive identity, it might have been sufficient for my purpose to examine the nature of childhood rebellion up to India's independence in 1947. I have, however, chosen to examine the nexus between

the child, family and school in Bengali literature for a further period because it is also important, I believe, to assess the child within the formative framework of an incipient nationhood, a scenario that is not overwhelmed by the concerns of the freedom movement. The writings of the pre-independence generation are suggestive of a modernity that the British sensitized us to by revamping our education system and making Indian writers aware of childhood in a way they were not amenable to previously. But the writings of the post-independence era in Bengal have definitely demonstrated a more unequivocal position vis-à-vis the rights of children; parents and teachers portrayed in them are more receptive to the ways of children, and in rare cases, the girl child is beginning to be a palpable presence. This genesis eventually contributed towards the unique identity of the confident and assertive child protagonist in Bengali literature of the post-independence generation who does not acquiesce easily to parents and teachers, and is an individual in her/his own right. However, the corpus of this study does not claim to deal with two centuries of child characters in English and Bengali literature, but concentrates on the Bengali child protagonist since Dashu, and distinguishes her/him from her/his nineteenth- and early twentieth-century predecessor.

In my study, it often appears as though I have assumed a kind of simultaneity that is not there around the texts that I will illustrate from. These jumps, overlaps and generalized formulations across almost a hundred years and a wide spectrum of texts occur because the subject of childhood rebellion is universal and omnipresent. Within specifically formulated and configured taxonomies related to childhood rebellion, I negotiate a back-and-forth trajectory through the period because it is difficult to do a reading that follows a rigorously chronological rationale.

4

I must demarcate the broader area within which I conduct my study and make some preliminary qualifications. I do not restrict myself to the monolith of children's literature, but freely marshal examples from *adult* texts for my arguments. Lila Majumdar, one of the most widely read contemporary Bengali writers for children, says: There are no separate categories of books for adults and children. Whatever books from which children can derive their meaning and also pleasure are children's books, and books, by definition, are books for adults ('Sukumar Roy', *Shatayu Sukumar* 109).

Also, children's literature sometimes hardly offers any scope for the child protagonist to interact with people who are older as she/he is only portrayed as part of a peer group. My foray into only such texts would limit my engagement with the child–adult opposition. In some other instances, however, the child protagonist is portrayed in a position of collaboration or confrontation

with adults at home and school. But it is usually in adult literature that the child protagonist is depicted as aware of the larger world beyond home and school and affected by social and national causes which demand her/his participation and involvement. In a chapter that is particularly on the child protagonist's response to the wave of nationalism sweeping the country in the first half of the twentieth century, not finding adequate illustrations of children's involvement in the cause of the nation in children's literature, I depend to a great extent on two adult novels with somewhat older, adolescent protagonists as case studies.

Because of the nature of my subject, I will not be dealing with subgenres of children's literature like myths, folk-tales, fairy-tales, fantasy or science fiction, but with poems, stories, novels and plays in realistic, everyday settings with *the boy/girl next door* as their protagonist. Infrequently, however, I allude to the child protagonist as *hero*, *boy* or *he*. This is likely to provoke gender-sensitive indignation, but I do it in specific contexts where there are no girls or they are not mentioned by the writers and critics in question, as in Rouseau or Tagore's writing on or about children. In fact, girls as active characters are few and far between from Rousseau's *Emile* to a majority of the twentieth-century texts that I have worked on. Wherever present, they are hardly what we understand as children. In the Bengali community, as in the rest of India, the explanation for this is that up to the first half of the century, the customs and cultural practices across religious, caste and class divides validated marrying off daughters before the onset of or soon after puberty. 'Fifty years of independence have not been enough to guarantee the natural claim to childhood for most of our girl children,' says Jashodhara Bagchi (Preface vii). '[Their] mental universe', Bagchi goes on to say, 'is constructed as one long preparation to be a good wife and good mother' (17). A few years before marriage were predictably treated as a rehearsal for living docilely with the husband's family. Since a girl's childhood was, by and large, dispensed with, it left her with hardly any scope for the display of vexing but understandable juvenile traits like impishness and disobedience, let alone defiance. This is an absence that is well worth studying separately; I cannot probe the how and why of it within the ambit of the present study. Sibaji Bandyopadhyay's book *Bangla Shishusahitye Chhoto Meyera* (*The Little Girls in Bangla Children's Literature*) has significantly pioneered the first step towards an in-depth study of the dearth of girls in Bengali children's literature.

5

During the course of my research, I was faced with the problem of trying to understand and differentiate between the literary articulations of childhood rebellion that come across to us through different narrative modes. The

omniscient narrator, who sees and knows all, could be one of the two types; she/he may or may not sympathize with the child protagonist's point of view. Sometimes, the child protagonist takes over the narration, like in some of Rabindranath Tagore's poems, where he presents the entire situation from his own standpoint in a first-person narration. Even in such instances, the author is sometimes discernibly somewhere in the background and endeavours to sway our sympathy according to how she/he perceives it all, either strategically disclosing that the narrator is unreliable or by situating the readers in a subject position effectively identical with that of the narrator (see John Stephens 56). A third kind of narration is focalization, in which a subject-position is constituted as the same as that occupied by a main character from whose perspective events are presented – that is, third-person narrations in which the readers are made to identify with that protagonist. In aligning themselves with a focalizing character, readers undergo textual subjection. My focus will be on what seems to me to be the most authentic expressions of the child protagonist's experiences and opinions, irrespective of the mode of narration of the texts. I will limit myself largely to the protagonist's disagreements and dissensions about those things around her/him which affect her/him adversely in the context of home, school and the larger world around.

6

A critical inquiry into Bengali children's literature or children's literature in any other language, for that matter, can stand on its own feet without invoking other literatures that shaped it. Bengali children's literature, however, sprouted during the peak period of British rule and evolved parallel to the continuing and fluctuating pulse of this colonial encounter. Any consideration of Bengali children's literature, therefore, must take into account Bengal's exposure to English and other Western literatures triggered by the British administration's effort towards initiating an education based on the English model in Bengal. English literature carried within it some seeds of the incipient children's literature in Bengali, which is yet so distinct from its *parent* literature. But children's literature in Bengali as a separate genre was preceded by English forays into the field of education – the establishment of the Serampore Baptist Missionary Society (1800) and the School Book Society (1818) – both of which were dedicated to writing school textbooks and producing children's magazines. The English novel, too, was indisputably the progenitor of the Bengali novel which came into existence after the middle of the nineteenth century.

In trying to trace the source of the Bengali child protagonist's disquiet as well as her/his final reconciliation with the system to certain inadequacies

within the Bengali middle class family and schooling system, I will, therefore, be attentive to the Bengali writers' awareness, absorption and application of certain seminal nineteenth-century ideas from the British in particular and the West in general. These theoretical as well as functional approaches to childhood found expression and took concrete shape in the aftermath of the Romantic movement in Europe and the Victorian period in England. The impact of Rousseau and Romanticism on the imaginative literary treatment of childhood was far-reaching and long-lasting enough to find its way into Bengali children's literature more than a hundred years after the English Romantic movement. It found expression in the children's writers' sympathetic appreciation of childhood resistance. These children's writers took cognizance of the unjust coercion of children into a scheme that was bound by time, routine and discipline, and empathized with the desire of children to escape instead to the boundless freedom and uninhibited joys of nature. The recurrent portrayal of the Bengali child's intolerance of semi-literate and cruel schoolmasters was a concrete criticism that cannot directly be traced to a literary movement, but possibly owes something to representations of various shortcomings of schools in nineteenth-century English fiction. These schools catering to the middle or the lower middle classes have left their imprint on the portrayal of the village *pathshalas* and the local or neighbourhood city schools in Bengali fiction. Unlike the elite English public schools catering to rich boys, which hardly have any parallel in the novels and short stories under consideration, these underprivileged schools have often not been upgraded to date with newer and more creative, child-friendly methods of teaching. The broader canvas of this book will include cross-references to individual illustrations from English works depicting children, and will also try to connect with larger ideas and trends that were part of important historical periods like postindustrialism and extensive programmes like nineteenth-century British educational reforms in India.

Thanks to the power that the British wielded over many aspects of the corporate life/culture of Bengal, many components of the stuff that English literature is made of can be detected in its indigenous literature before and during the Bengal Renaissance. This was because of the *English* educated Bengali writers' eagerness to learn about, assimilate and communicate ideas imbibed from the West, which were occasionally internalized and conveyed even inadvertently. Biographies and autobiographies of major writers for children, from Rabindranath Tagore through Sukumar Roy and up to Lila Majumdar, affirm their exposure to and familiarity with English and other Western authors. Translations and abridgements in Bengali from child-dominated and child-friendly nineteenth-century English literature also testify a dynamic interaction between the two.

My study demonstrates, nonetheless, that the child in Bengali adult and children's literature is substantially different from her/his Western predecessor and contemporary counterpart because her/his natural habitat, social and cultural environment, family structure, schooling system and economic pressures are far removed, despite two hundred years of exposure to British colonial rule, their education system and their literature. Writing in Bengali for and about children has responded to Western literary and nonliterary discourses on the child in a way that they have not impinged on its originality and novelty, or its relevance and applicability to its particular historical, geographical, cultural and socio-economic context. All this has contributed to Bengali literature's own discrete perspectives on the child.

Research in comparative literature not only jumps the boundaries of a single literature and language, but 'takes into account all aspects of life and knowledge that might be relevant to the proper understanding of a literary phenomenon' (Nabaneeta Dev Sen, Preface i). I will therefore not only draw upon English literature for my study of childhood, but also attempt to absorb and deploy ideas from other academic disciplines like education, sociology, adolescent psychology and history to arrive at my formulations.

7

I will now outline and demarcate between the different chapters of this work:

In Chapter 1, I will trace the growth of the idea of childhood in the West, leading to a spurt of creative writing about and for the child in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Educational ideas that kept changing, contributing to a more liberal view of the child in the context of her/his school and her/his studies, were also greatly responsible for the transition in the earlier attitudes to childhood. Some of nineteenth-century literature, although deeply entrenched in the Victorian endorsement of security and stability and primarily didactic, still yearns for something outside accepted norms. At times, therefore, it speaks out against established values, particularly those of the attempted standardization of the very idea of childhood in postindustrial Europe, and the regimentation that resulted thereof.

In Chapter 2, I will chart the background of Bengali writing on children and the representations of children's homes, schools and education in nineteenth-century literary texts as well as in nonliterary works like histories, biographies and autobiographies. Literary representations of the British effort to modernize and westernize education in Bengal starting with the inception of the School Book Society in 1818 understandably do not reflect a fully developed, homogenized system. They portray a far more unformed situation where ill-equipped but comparatively unregimented village

schools rub shoulders with the more sophisticated but emotionally restrictive *English* schools. I will, therefore, examine the nineteenth-century child protagonist, particularly in the context of school, highlighting the poverty of the indigenous system of education as well as the alienating implications of a curriculum based on Western education. I will also try to show how Bengali writing even before the period in question had begun to depict protagonists who are not content to abide by the expected stereotypes of child behaviour, both at home and in school. Yet stability within the context of urban, middle class households with education as the signifier of respectability, rather than an adventurous but unsettled life full of uncertainties that could lead to disastrous consequences, is the primary concern of the Bengali *bhadralok* writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This was irrespective of whether they were greatly nurtured on and unintentionally expressing the concerns of the seminal works of English literature in the nineteenth century or trying to develop an original worldview. The frustration and futility of a life without education and good breeding finally makes most of the youngsters in the texts get reintegrated within the middle class ethos, reinforcing, although with some reservations, the values of Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and his contemporaries.

After the two introductory chapters that will map the backdrop of my inquiry, Chapter 3 will investigate the case of the post-twentieth-century child protagonist in the context of her/his home and family. I will begin with the contrasting views of sociologists on the institution of the family in the last fifty years, upholding and then challenging its complacent insularity. The child protagonists' rebellion seems to espouse some of the latter views, and begins at home, against the figures of authority in her/his family. I will examine the authority patterns and power relationships in the nuclear, joint and extended families – how they embody repression, curb individuality, and ultimately discriminate against the child. After the decline of didacticism in Western literature and the sudden trend of valorizing childhood independence, the Bengali child protagonist, too, started questioning the parents' undisputed position in the family hierarchy. I will discuss the child protagonist's confrontation with mother, father, uncles and aunts, classifying and distinguishing them on the basis of the social class they belong to. I read the extent of the oppression of the child by parent-substitutes as predicated greatly on whether they are consanguineous or affineous relatives. Adult figures in the family, whether they are parents or merely guardians, are the greatest constraining factors in the child protagonist's life, and I will examine her/his potential to be independent from them, although she/he cannot always live up to the independence she/he professes or tries to attain.

In Chapter 4, I will take into account the Bengali child protagonist in the environment of her/his school and try to collate her/his views regarding the education system, comparing her/him with her/his Western, mainly English counterpart of the nineteenth century. Since a large portion of my research is concentrated on the child's debunking of her/his schools and schoolmasters, I will situate this critique in the backdrop of the changing pattern of education in Bengal before, during and after the period that children's literature in Bengali came to have a distinct identity of its own. I will inspect the child protagonist's views about both the formal system of education in Bengal and the older indigenous education system which existed prior to it and more or less continued in backward areas that had neither been exposed to the Western system nor had the wherewithal to change. Both the indigenous and the British systems of education are questioned by these child protagonists, although no viable substitutes are offered by them, their elders or even their writers in the literary works in which they appear.

In Chapter 5, I will investigate the child protagonist's outlets and fantasies of escape from the oppression of her/his home and school. In this chapter, I will analyse the child protagonist in relationship with servants and street acquaintances who manipulate her/him to rethink about the constraints of her/his domestic situation, and in interaction with uncles and cousins who are often portrayed as unconventional, eccentric and are therefore objects of hero worship. I will also examine children's mystery stories and thrillers that offer some liberation from the *chronotope* of domesticity, though it is purely notional and not a real release from the oppression of the child's workaday world. Given that both homes and schools are taken to be bastions of complacency, tyranny and authoritarianism, and that the child is justifiably skeptical and has certain reservations about them, what outlets exist for the nonconformist child from this oppression? And can they create an alternative world that is free of the problems of the prevalent system?

Chapter 6 will broaden the horizon of the child's interaction and survey the fictional child's participation in social and national causes beyond herself/himself and her/his own restricted home and school spheres, trying to locate any radical indictment of larger social evils. During more than half of the period I am concerned with, the nation was permeated by the crisis engendered by its resistance to British colonial rule. Whether and how this patriotic consciousness got internalized in the child protagonists of that era is the focus of this chapter. What does the child protagonist absorb of rebellion in the public sphere through her/his encounter with and experience of nationalism, with all the Western influences that shaped it, the Hindu revival that accompanied it, and its two factions of the extremist and moderate kinds? That the patriotism reflected in adult as well as children's literature

is not self-righteous or unstinted, even during the crucial phase of nationalist awakening and activism, is evident from the relentless distrust expressed by some child characters about the worth of the cause itself.

In Chapter 7, I will consider the outcome of the child protagonist's rebellion as manifested through the resolution of those genres in children's literature that have a narrative mode of articulation, since only these texts trace the child's dissatisfaction with the world around her/him over a period of time. With all the temptations that a variety of role models offer, why is it that the child's rebellion is virtually never carried out to its logical conclusion? In fiction and plays for children in which the child protagonist registers some amount of dissent about her/his domestic and/or educational establishment, why does she/he not altogether run away from or do away with home or school? What is it that tempers the child protagonist's wildest desire to be free and on her/his own? Can some of the conclusions of these fictional texts be explained away by tracing this recursive journey from innocence to experience, demarcating between confidence and cynicism, rebellion and resignation that is so central to the traditional Bildungsroman of European literary descent? Although issues related to the closure of the narratives are broached recurrently but inconclusively many times over in the main body of the book, these are some of the questions I will try to wind up with. They will nonetheless hardly provide any irrefutable and unqualified answers.

8

I have not selectively studied one author or one particular group of authors within a narrow time frame, and as spelt out already, have also not confined myself solely to the genre of children's literature. I have, therefore, had to deal with a vast amount of research material. I make no claim to the exhaustiveness of the primary texts I have used, and cannot assert having made a comprehensive survey of the subject under study. If I had looked through more literary and nonliterary matter, I am certain that some of it could have lent support and helped to substantiate my arguments, while some others might even have tentatively opened up a contrary line of reasoning. It has proved difficult for me to access a sizeable section of recent children's writing. I have scanned texts that have been readily accessible to me, at times gone out of my way to procure some that I thought would be indispensable, but have often had to confine my readings to whatever was easily available.

In spite of being supported by historical data, literary theory and illustrations, psychological readings and sociological perspectives, therefore, the findings I arrive at in this book can in no way be corroborated as absolute, sacrosanct and indisputable. I hope, however, that they will be able to provide leads towards more systematic formulations and insightful interpretations apropos the subject in the future.

1 Western approaches to childhood

An overview

But to go to school on a summer morn
Oh, it drives all joy away!
Under a cruel eye outworn
The little ones spend their day,
In sighing and dismay.

Blake, William. 'The Schoolboy',
Songs of Experience (1794; reprint),
Romanticism: An Anthology.
Ed. Duncan Wu. Oxford:
Blackwell Publishing, 2006, p. 205

The fundamental change in nineteenth century children's books is . . . the move from instruction to entertainment.

Grylls, David. *Guardians and Angels: Parents and Children in Nineteenth Century Literature.* London:
Faber & Faber, 1978, p. 75

1

In the documented history of pre-twentieth-century approaches to childhood and childrearing, there are two stereotypes that have existed in Western thought:

> Rousseau and Calvin stood side by side in the nursery. Since actual children were the focus of such an extreme conflict of attitudes, they tended to be a source of pain and embarrassment to adults, and were therefore told they should be "seen and not heard."
>
> (Auerbach 31–47)

The former stereotype, as is evident, is supported by the Christian doctrine of original sin and evangelical morality; it stresses the child's innate and incorrigible wickedness and incapacity for good. The child, conceived in wickedness, is essentially depraved, and childhood, therefore, is seen as a phase that should be dispensed with as quickly as possible. The latter construct is instituted in the doctrine of primal innocence and swings to the other extreme of romantic stereotyping, which highlights the child's inborn goodness and incapacity for evil. In the eighteenth century, Rousseau pioneered the cult of childhood innocence in his novel *Emile* (1762). Rousseau's theory was in turn seriously challenged by the nineteenth-century psychoanalysis of Freud and others but continued to permeate nineteenth-century thought.

Until as late as the seventeenth century, the complete subordination of the child within the domestic and familial hierarchy was a powerful and pervasive ideal in Puritan thought. Around the time of Rousseau, society in the West became child-centred enough to concede the child's important position within the family. The emergence of nuclear families all over Europe after the breakdown of the feudal order is greatly responsible for a focus on children with their special needs and capacities.[1] In *Emile*, Rousseau advocated that the job of parents and tutors was to study children realistically, and not strive to make them conform to some preconceived adult ideals. However, harshness, severe disciplining and ill treatment of children also continued simultaneously with an added solicitude, curiosity and tenderness for them.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Rousseau's theory on childhood and the bringing up of children had gained ascendancy over earlier and stricter theories, and the child's unequivocal submission to the parents' will was no longer taken for granted. Creative writers for children became aware of a shift in perspective from the unquestioned prerogatives of parents to the validity of childhood rights, necessitating a commensurate modification in the notion of filial duty. Emphasizing what was conventionally believed to be dutiful parenting, David Grylls says:

> The tradition requirements lingered on . . . But [the parents] also had subtler obligations, rarefied psychological tasks which had never been known in the past. They were told to have tact and empathy, to observe and respect the child's character, to guard against any temptation to bully or interfere . . . Parenthood was seen as a sensitive art, with its own skilled methods and its own mystique; incompetence, even though well-meaning, could maim a developing mind.
>
> (37)

The archetype of obedient children in a context where their parents were grossly overplaying their authority had seriously begun to be questioned. Reciprocally therefore, the typical Victorian paterfamilias, 'booming from the Bible and flexing his cane, while his wife bites her knuckles and his children cringe' (Grylls 23) became a caricature of fatherhood in life as well as literature.

The character of the father, with his insensitivity to the child's needs, along with an authoritarian denial of anything that the child might find pleasurable, is found in many nineteenth-century novels for children as well as adults. Fictional mothers (as real-life ones), on the other hand, are not figures of authority in the same way that fathers are in the nineteenth century. Representations of fatherhood range from conscious parenting that tries to make joyless adults out of their children, fathers who cannot tolerate physical proximity and the company of their children to fathers who wish away the intermediary phase of childhood between a newborn and an adult in their children. In Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), the fact-loving, disciplinarian father Mr Gradgrind completely disregards and virtually tries to do away with the childhood of his daughter Louisa, who justifiably reproaches him:

> The baby-preference that even I have heard of as common among children, has never had its innocent resting-place in my breast. You have been so careful of me, that I never had a child's heart. You have trained me so well, that I never dreamed a child's dream. You have dealt so wisely with me, father, from my cradle to this hour, that I never had a child's belief or child's fear.
>
> (106)

In F. Anstey's *Vice Versa* (1882), Paul Bultitude's irascibility about the childlike restlessness of his son when he comes home from boarding school during the summer vacation betrays a child-phobic response that exposes the father figure in all his callousness and lack of involvement with his growing child:

> He was one of those nervous and fidgety persons who cannot understand their own children, looking on them as objectionable monsters. . . . He hated to have a boy about the house, and positively withered under the irrelevant and irrepressible questions, the unnecessary noises and boisterous high spirits which nothing would subdue; his son's society was to him simply an abominable nuisance, and he pined for a release from it from the day the holidays began.
>
> (5–6)

Theobald, the father in Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* (1903), is a father who is so harassed by his real experience with his children that not only does he not acknowledge or appreciate the individuality of each child but also unreasonably wishes for a child who would be no more than an assembly line product:

> Oh, why, he [Theobald] was inclined to ask himself, could not children be brought into the world grown up? . . . if people could buy readymade children at a shop of whatever age and whatever sex they liked, instead of always having to make them at home and to begin at the beginning with them that might do better, but as it was he did not like it.
>
> (84)

Although this novel was written in 1903, a more child-friendly equation between the parent and child had already started to characterize the new power relationship or absence of it between parent and child. By and large, it would be true to say that scholars who have charted approaches to childhood over many decades around the turn of the century have discerned 'a steady evolution that has made the Western ideology of the child increasingly humane and nurturant' (Kakar 29).

2

Rousseau's ideas, meanwhile, had naturally found their way into the writings of widely studied English romantic poets and writers. The writings of Rousseau had granted children a right to feeling and thinking differently from adults. Although Blake's *Songs of Innocence* conceptualizes the child and the lamb as symbols of pure innocence living close to nature in a prelapsarian state, some of its more complex poems like 'The Little Black Boy' (50) and 'Nurse's Song' (50) acknowledge the fissures and frictions between the world of the adult and the world of the child. The former poem takes into account the man-made practices of racial and social segregation that impinge on the unsullied world of the child, while in the latter, despite the presence of adult fears and anxieties, the adult is represented as capable of responding sympathetically to the child by conceding her/his desire to prolong the time allowed for play. In poems like 'The Chimney Sweep' (155) and 'Holy Thursday' (155), Blake's idea of childhood innocence, however, becomes inaccessible and doesn't lend itself to analysis easily. In these, innocence belongs only to the realm of dreams and imagination – what one aspires for rather than the reality. They reinforce the perception that the child lives in the world of the adult, with institutions that suggest incarceration and bondage rather than freedom. Blake's perspective on childhood becomes even

more involved in *Songs of Experience*. Wordsworth's discourse on childhood covers a wide spectrum from his articulations of childhood experience in 'Tintern Abbey' (*Romanticism* 407–11) to the philosophical detachment of 'Ode on the Intimations of Immortality' (*Romanticism* 538–42). 'Tintern Abbey' and *The Prelude* communicate the down-to-earth observation that children who are entrenched in nature, which is at a far remove from worldly and pragmatic preoccupations, eventually gain more knowledge about life and themselves. However, in a completely divergent vision, Wordsworth abstractly perceives childhood as a time of magical 'other-worldliness', and interprets the child's sojourn on earth as something rarefied, 'trailing clouds of glory', living closer than his elders to the 'immortal sea' ('Ode', *Romanticism* 539–40).

The tendency of oversimplified, sentimental, romantic typecasting of children on one hand and that of construing childhood as a phase of innate wickedness on the other continued well into the nineteenth century. In the sudden proliferation of children's books in England at the end of the eighteenth century, we hardly see any attempt to enter into their minds. For most evangelical writers, their concern for the training of children was joylessly embedded within and pervaded by their doctrines of sin. Consequently, child-friendly writers like Charles Lamb condemned the writings of some women writers who were virtually considered authorities on education. Lamb averred that the writings of Sarah Trimmer (1741–1810), which expressed a predilection to repress anything too fanciful, had little to delight the imagination (see David Grylls, *Guardians and Angels* 24). Mrs Trimmer conducted a periodical called *The Guardian of Education* from 1802 to 1806. It not only furnished information about attitudes to children at the beginning of the nineteenth century but also defended the domestic authority of parents over children from a morally indignant position, ironically at a crucial juncture in European history when the French Revolution had just shaken the control of both religious and civil authority in different spheres of life. In *The Family Magazine*, she stated that children should always submit to their parents, emphasizing that the Bible said so and reinforcing that parents pay for the child's upbringing (see Grylls 83–4). She quoted Dr Barrow, who maintained that a revolutionary temperament was the outcome of an indulged childhood – allowed to disobey parents, the child grows up to disobey teachers and then aspires to 'transgress the laws of the country, and eventually to overthrow them' (quoted in Grylls 84).

Mrs Barbauld's writing, too, was evaluated by Lamb as dull and instructive. Likewise, Mary Martha Sherwood's (1775–1851) moral tales for children were saturated with a religious fervour that called attention to human sinfulness. Sherwood's popular series, *The History of the Fairchild Family* (1818), highlights 'the importance and effects of a religious education'

(Avery 338). In punishing naughty children, moral lessons endlessly follow one another. However, it is also the first of realistic tales for the young and 'an attractive account of family life and of likeable, frequently naughty children' (Avery 338). Yet, Thomas Day (1748–89), in the *Sandford and Merton* (a children's book written serially between 1783 and 87), a story with an overriding didactic concern that recommends the principles of philanthropy, derives his educational theories from Rousseau, and its ideological thrust, therefore, is qualitatively different from the moral tales of his age.[2] Towards the end of the eighteenth century itself, there was a simultaneous crosscurrent in children's literature that was open to new ways of looking at the world through the child's eyes. A decline in the sacrosanct attitude of children towards the teacher, studies and schools on one hand and the parents, the family and the home on the other resulted in an accompanying romantic celebration of children's ways. Literature learnt to accommodate aberrant children, what Nicholas Tucker calls the untamed, potentially destructive nature of childhood, its enmity to all authority, its natural anarchism and threat to the world of domineering adults (*The Child and the Book* 117).

In the early nineteenth century, Catherine Sinclair's *Holiday House* (1839) was one of the first books for children that accepts children as they really are. It, however, cannot keep up its spirit of pure entertainment, and ends with a different agenda from the high spiritedness with which it begins, celebrating a holy death and delivering a homily to the child protagonists, to reform and become sober and dutiful.

Well into the second half of the nineteenth century, there is a resurgence of the didactic strain in children's writing. Maria Louisa Charlesworth (1819–80), in *Ministering Children*, extols the virtues of a pious charity, which, however, cannot be prioritized over household rules or abstract notions of being in debt. Frederick William Farrar (1831–1903), although somewhat liberal in his religious views, describes, in his most popular novel *Eric, or Little by Little* (1858), the young hero's downward path in school, from using a 'crib' as an aid to Greek translation to swearing, smoking and drinking. This degeneration is not triggered off by any real viciousness of character but because he is too weak-minded to counter peer group pressure and stand out against the general trend of schoolboy behaviour. At one point, he runs away to the sea, returns after a thorough moral cleansing and finally atones for his moral collapse by embracing a holy death with his school fellows by his bedside. Mrs Molesworth (1839–1921) wrote tales for children like Tell Me a Story (1875), Carrots (1876), The Cuckoo Clock (1877), The Tapestry Room (1879) and A Christmas Child (1880) that derived from the moral tale. The solemnity and edifying agenda of her writings, therefore, have a distant tone which neither lets children identify with them; nor does she share any fun and laughter with children.

According to Tucker, books about children's literature that attempt to be over-prescriptive seem to do themselves, children and books something of a disservice (*The Child and the Book* 20). However, there followed a handful of nineteenth-century children's writers who actually contravene the moral codification of childhood as either black or white. They deal with child characters living in the everyday world, who share many of its problems and injustices, feel strongly about changing them and are yet often helplessly unable to do anything about it. These children are not exemplary in their morals or manners. In the essay 'How Children Respond to Fiction', Nicholas Tucker reminds us that the reading child would much rather know about somebody with whom she/he can identify as a child than figures of authority like parents telling her/him 'that he has to go to bed at half past eight and clean his teeth' (*The Child and the Book* 182). Catherine Sinclair's *Holiday House* (1839) was the first book to flout the conventions of the moral tale. F. Anstey, in his *Vice Versa, or A Lesson to Fathers* (1882), fantasizes about reversing the roles of a father and child duo, and transplants the father to a ruthless boarding school while the son leads the comfortable life of a city gentleman. As its subtitle explains, it is an attempt to make all fathers aware of a potential predicament in which they are bereft of the authority and power over their children they seem to take for granted. Anstey said about himself: 'I was not a profound thinker; I had no message to deliver, no theories to propound, no cause to advocate' (quoted in Grylls 102). Yet the novel initiated the writing of children's stories that would be different from the conventional moral tale. *Vice Versa* was acclaimed by David Grylls as 'the most artistically successful of the late-century counterblasts to juvenile didacticism' and 'a landmark in the decline of Victorian patriarchy' (102).

Mrs Ewing's *We and the World* (1878) is about two boisterous brothers, a domestic and adventure story which traces a discord between parent and child. She is realistic and not over-sentimental in her portrayal of children, and writes in a readable, straightforward manner without writing down or moralizing. Similarly, Helen Mathers' *Comin' Thro the Rye* (1875) describes a child who rebels against paternity. It also disparages family prayers, regarding them as an institution that perpetuates paternal tyranny, thereby deflating a hallowed idea of the family. Both these books challenge the inequality of parent–child relations, whether analytically or with outright invective.

The *Sunday School Book* was the American counterpart of the moral tale, which was unabashedly didactic. Jerry Griswold's account of the *Sunday School Book* maps a profile of nineteenth-century American children's fiction. These books conclude with maxims like 'Boys who fail to go to church on Sunday morning are invariably struck by lightning in the afternoon; those who climb trees to steal apples inevitably fall and break their arms' (Griswold 875). The trend continued for some time, embodied in Frances

Hodgson Burnett's model for an exemplary boy in *Little Lord Fontleroy* (1885). Stories with an overriding moral concern collapsed with the glorification of the bad boy in Thomas Bailey Aldrich's *The Story of a Bad Boy* (1870) and the much better-known novel by Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876).

Some of the best adult novels on family conflict in nineteenth-century Britain were those that delineated parent–child relations from a child's point of view – Dickens' *Hard Times* and *Dombey and Son*, George Meredith's *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*, in which a long course of Puritanism is blamed for estranging parents and children, and Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son*, which holds a similar religious upbringing responsible for the lack of warmth in the relationship between a father and his son.

3

Attitudes to children and childhood in fiction underwent changes with newer and newer ideas about education in the west. No discussion about evolving ideas of childhood in literature can be complete without delving into the history of ideas about childrearing, educational surveillance and disciplining in the west. Fictional representations of the child in the context of school, who is often a dissident or critic of formal education and its paraphernalia, derived from larger theories of childhood and education in Western thought. Although both the stricter and the more indulgent ideas of bringing up and educating children seem to have filtered down to the nineteenth century, the graph of the treatment of childhood in literature records a trajectory from severer attitudes to a more sympathetic, child-friendly approach. I will enumerate those assumptions that were questioned periodically, those that were proposed as alternatives but may or may not have gained currency in the long run as well as those that were there to stay.[3]

The stricter ideas centred on the institutionalized rearing of children go back all the way to ancient Greece. Though the word 'Spartan' originates from the stern and rigorous regime that was prescribed in classical Greece, the evolution from the Spartan education (sixth to third centuries BC) to that of the Hellenistic age (third to first centuries BC) shows a reduction in the 'Spartan' ideal of self-imposed tortures on the human body. Severe corporal punishment was an ongoing feature, but the early Romans were less strict, and their education was more family centred. The role of the mother was very important, although boys were shifted to their father's educational care quite early in life, and therefore treated less indulgently than girls. These diverse positions were incorporated in literature for and about children, sometimes as classical stereotypes mutated into portraits of Victorian parenting.

During the middle ages, one could trace the beginnings of somewhat moderate approaches to childhood, though they were not pervasive. Courtly education emphasized both the physical and mental development of the child. As far back as 1578, in 'Of the Education of Children', Montaigne (1533–1592) condemned too much study, and preferred to relax the former educational regime by upholding independent judgment against being steeped in knowledge. In 1693, John Locke, in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, suggested that by handling children without any restraint or iron-handedness, their tasks could be made to feel like play. In his ideal education, children were to be allowed plenty of books so long as these were reasonably informative. However, really enlightened, flexible and varied attitudes to education started pouring in after the Renaissance had made its mark on the consciousness of all of Europe.

Much later, in the post-Renaissance world, between 1675 and 1740, the religious movement of Pietism, a kind of Protestantism, developed in Germany, which was similar to the beliefs of the Greeks. It advocated a turning away from the world and its temptations, and influenced the education system likewise. The harsh demands of its educational system were discernible in its daily timetable and syllabus, in its close supervision of pupils and a schooled and regimented care of the pupils. Games and childlike exuberance had no place in this system, making it very taxing for children. It is not fortuitous, perhaps, that this kind of organization just preceded the Industrial Revolution.

In the literary imagination of the end of the eighteenth century, the gap between man and nature had started growing wider. As a result, Rousseau championed education as a joyful experience that enhances the child's proximity to nature, which is the best teacher, not books. 'The image of the child learning best from or in the presence of nature', says Nicholas Tucker, 'remains an important literary ideal right up to our own times' (Good Friends or Just Acquaintances 342). Although Rousseau has come under severe censure in contemporary times for eliding the issue of the girl child and other lapses in his formulations, his slogan, 'Back to Nature', revolutionized educational thinking in an unprecedented manner. His indictment of the school system, the most significant signpost of modern pedagogy, included an appeal for a slowing down of intellectual growth and the need for the child to demonstrate *his/her* own interest in a subject and ask *his/her* own questions. Rousseau believed that up to the age of twelve, the child should not be overtaxed by scholarly instruction and should learn through experience, not words. Rousseau and the Romantic ideology introduced and advocated an outlet from domestic restrictions and urban claustrophobia in the form of nature and the countryside, at least for the male child, while freeing children's books from the tyranny of the adult writer's morally

indignant, self-righteous perspective on the child. The dominant Romantic denunciation of industrial society in the nineteenth century, a natural fallout of rapid industrialization, subsequently sensitized children's literature to the need for a release from oppressive regimes.

After Rousseau, the next important contribution to educational theory was that of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), equally unabashed in being male child-centred. Kant believed in restraining a child's passionate impulses in order to provide an education that would not only discipline *him* but also make *him* cultured and moral. However, he also accommodated a certain amount of relaxation in rigour. He advocated that true freedom is the product of the twin necessities of liberty and constraint, an approach that will be important, as I will demonstrate later, in my subsequent findings on Bengali literature.

Among educationists who were the founders of modern elementary education, Pestalozzi (1746–1827) believed that nature, the mother and life itself are the best educators. Based on his principles, Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) developed the kindergarten in Germany, and stressed on the enlightened and progressive need for both parents to participate in the education of their children. His student, Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776–1841) was one of the precursors of modern scientific pedagogy.

In the last hundred years or so, psychologists have appropriated the child's mind as a subject for study, analysis and interpretation. William James (1842–1910), in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890), elaborated that a child's mind is that aspect of her/his being that enables her/him to adapt to the world, and the purpose of education is to organize the child's powers of conduct so as to fit her/him to her/his social and physical environment. The child's interests must be awakened, accommodated, broadened and then prioritized as the natural starting points of instruction. Sigmund Freud's interpretations of childhood created an intellectual mainstream that accepted the psychoanalytical image of the child. By delving into educational psychology, it also radically restructured the blueprint of authority in the classroom.

Later, the views of John Dewey (1859–1951), who led the progressive movement in US education, and Jean Piaget (1896–1980) got translated to the practical sphere in the teaching methods of Maria Montessori (1870–1952). She construed children to be the unhappy victims of adult repression who need to escape from the domination of parent and teacher. She appealed for the child's creative potential, her/his desire to learn and her/his right to be treated as an individual. Kindergarten schools and teacher training programmes across a worldwide spectrum started being named after her because they followed her methodology. Other important contributions in the field of educational psychology were those of Carl Jung, Melanie Klein

and Vygotsky. All these thinkers on childhood and education, however, overlap conspicuously into the twentieth century, which I am not dealing with in this chapter.

4

The beginning and growth of large scale school education in Europe, according to E.P. Thompson, coincided with the child's resistance against the oppression of the adult world in fighting the standardization and homogenization of the treatment of childhood (*Childhood* 366–84). In the postindustrial age, the child was almost reduced to an assembly-line product. In recent times, Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* has been one of the most scathing inquiries, not only into the oppression of factories, workshops, prisons, barracks and hospitals but also *schools*. His study is predicated on Bentham's nineteenth-century idea of Panopticon as a model of incarceration and surveillance:

> Discipline sometimes requires enclosure, the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself. It is the protected place of disciplinary monotony . . . There were the colleges, or secondary schools: the monastic model was gradually imposed; boarding appeared as the most perfect, if not the most frequent, educational regime.
>
> (141)

Foucault's drawing a parallel between and virtually equating the brutal incarceration present in prisons and schools was a culturally alien discourse to the Bengali literary imaginary. It adopts an extreme position that would perhaps not gain the approbation of even those Bengali writers who have dealt most sympathetically with the child's point of view. But it is a very significant manifesto elucidating a contemporary rethinking of punitive disciplinary systems across time and place. According to Foucault, schools followed the model of the military camp, with the spatial 'nesting' of hierarchized surveillance. They induced 'in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power' (201). It made possible the observance of performance, the drawing up of rigorous classifications and the institution of a precise system of command:

> [F]ew words, no explanation, a total silence interrupted only by signals – bells, clapping of hands, gestures, a mere glance from the teacher, or that little wooden apparatus used by the Brothers of the

> Christian schools [which] contained in its mechanical brevity both the technique of command and the morality of obedience.
>
> (166)

The school timetable was instrumental in establishing temporal rhythms by imposing particular occupations at particular times and ensuring cycles of repetition. Time-discipline was progressively enforced on pedagogical practice, not only in the day-to-day regimen but also for longer periods, separating different phases from one another by the institutionalized grading system of examinations. The examination system with all its documentary techniques, extant then as now, was a contrivance which underlined each individual as a particular 'case' where generality was the norm.

Under a particular school regime or class, too, the members were all supposed to belong to a group that demanded synchronization according to broad parameters. A class, by definition, however, did not acknowledge and probe into the minutiae that make each child an individual human being who responds to the world on her/his own terms. A constant pressure was exercised over students to conform and mould their temperaments in accordance with the same model. Writing about childhood within the framework of schooling systems, other detractors of rigorous school curriculums have also disapproved of the classifying or grouping inherent within the 'modern' school. Philippe Aries, in *Centuries of Childhood*, defines the school class, the fruition of a taxonomical enterprise that assumed a decisive form only by the beginning of the seventeenth century, as

> a stage in the progressive acquisition of knowledge (to a curriculum), to an average age from which every attempt is made not to depart, to a physical, spatial unit, for each age group and subject group has its special premises (and the very word 'class' denotes both the container and the contents), and to a period of time, an annual period at the end of which the class's component changes.
>
> (176)

The conceptualization of the school class carried within it the assumption that there would not be any exceptions to the standard in matters of behaviour as well as academic inclination and competence. Any aberrations, therefore, were not only treated as freakish and eccentric but also chastised severely.

Those who were empowered to exercise 'petty machinations of discipline' (Foucault 194) deployed the model of the school regime to devise punitive measures for the slightest deviation from the norm. The workshop, the school and the army were subject to what Foucault describes as

> a whole micro-penality of time (lateness, absences, interruptions of tasks), of activity (inattention, negligence, lack of zeal), of behaviour (impoliteness, disobedience), of speech (idle chatter, insolence), of the body ('incorrect' attitudes, irregular gestures, lack of cleanliness).
>
> (198)

Demanding that all inmates be cast in the same mould, these exercises in power significantly victimized the individuality of children.

The growing anxiety about the retributive measures practised on school children and their cost in human terms made it a subject of critical inquiry that has been alive for two centuries. The institution of school per se, therefore, met with a just resistance from educationists and child psychologists who tried to empathize with the child's point of view. P.W. Musgrave says 'Schools can be viewed as organisations that are in some ways akin to factories' (*The School as an Organisation* 67). John Holt assesses that the establishment of schools caused 'lasting harm to . . . people, [destroying] so much of their curiosity, independence, trust, dignity, and sense of identity and worth' (188). Child-friendly thinkers, writers and literary critics have almost unanimously condemned the harsher methods of punishment practiced in schools.

5

Notions of childhood and theories of pedagogy in all their various forms, with all the innovative ideas that were put into practice from the nineteenth century onwards, quite naturally found their way into children's fiction. They manifested themselves in the polarized roles of the example to be shunned and the precept to be followed, apart from neutral representation as what was actually practised.

Initially, children's literature in English had tried to accommodate the values of regimentation and discipline within the context of an evangelical morality, but by the middle of the nineteenth century, some writers had seriously started interrogating such a worldview. In England, the bourgeois ideas of time and discipline which led to a hitherto unprecedented regimentation in both homes and schools found its severest critics in child characters in both adult and children's literature, and in greatly divergent genres and modes of expression, all the way from the writings of Dickens in the early nineteenth century to Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear in the later half. And their critique of such regimes begins at home. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* is a novel that is not even remotely about children in a position of confrontation with their schools or education. Catherine and Heathcliff, however, tangentially critique an existence mired in a dull routine when

they resist and show great contempt for lack of warmth and passion in the monotonous, cut-and-dry lives of the Lintons who complacently accept their pigeonholed existence within the norms of middle class society. Catherine, however, gets tempted enough by its comforts and security to temporarily get co-opted into such a life by her marriage to Linton. Far removed from the world depicted by Dickens or Brontë and in children's fiction, Lewis Carroll's child protagonist Alice finds an outlet from the dreary conventions of real life in wonderland. In her foray beyond the looking glass, she contrives a dream situation in which everything is topsy-turvy; none of what she sees and experiences is adherent to the rules of family, school or any other institution. In literature for younger children, like Beatrix Potter's (1866–1943) *Peter Rabbit*, Peter, Tom Kitten, the Two Bad Mice and Squirrel Nutkin, for all their mischief, disobedience and adventures that subvert encoded rules, are more interesting as characters than timid, good squirrels or obedient, dull little Flopsy, Mopsy and Cottontail. The comically subversive situations in the nonsense rhymes of Edward Lear (1812–88) also decry the tedious sameness of things in the postindustrial age, although not from the perspective of children but that of adults who are potentially enabled to take leave of their senses in the conventional sense of the word.

The bourgeois ideas of time and discipline found one of its greatest detractors in Dickens. Dickens' child characters question oppressive regimes which hamper their independence and dignity. They particularly rebel against what Philip Collins calls 'educational schemes which neglected the imagination and which ignored the child's need to develop at a natural pace in an atmosphere of affectionate encouragement and happiness' (199). Dickens' *Hard Times* disparages a rigorous yet unimaginative schooling system that manifests itself in Mr Gradgrind's smug assertion: 'Facts, facts, facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else' (1). In Gradgrind's school, no child had 'ever seen a face in the moon" and "had only been introduced to the cow as a graminivorous, ruminating quadruped with several stomachs' (8). Justifiably, Gradgrind's daughter Louisa accuses him of destroying what had once been her heart. Gradgrind's joyless educational ideology and practice that is inimical to his daughter's sense of values and imagination is offset by an antithesis in the form of the circus with its spontaneous, makeshift functioning and the attendant joys and conviviality. However, the circus as a counterpoint does not really have anything to offer by way of a serious or real alternative plan that could include and impart the benefits of education without perpetuating its austere, drab and often meaningless regimen.

Among the ubiquitous schools in Dickens' novels that are uncaring of children's needs to the point of being inhuman is Salem House in *David Copperfield*. The sordid account of David's first taste of its impoverished

schoolroom causes him to feel an instinctive revulsion and want to turn his back upon it:

> I gazed upon the schoolroom into which he took me as the most forlorn and desolate place I had ever seen. I see it now – a long room, with three long rows of desks and six of forms, and bristling all around with pegs for hats and slates. Scraps of old copy-books and exercises litter the dirty floor, some silkworms' houses, made of the same materials, and scattered over the desks; two miserable little white mice left behind by their owner, are running up and down in a fusty castle made of pasteboard and wire, looking in all the corners with their red eyes for anything to eat. A bird, in a cage very little bigger than himself, makes a mournful rattle now and then in hopping on his perch, two inches high, or dropping from it, but neither sings nor chirps. There is a strange unwholesome smell upon the room, like mildewed corduroys, sweet apples wanting air, and rotten books.
>
> (82)

Mr Creakle of Salem House in *David Copperfield* is 'a small hop-dealer in the Borough, and had taken to the schooling business after being bankrupt in hops, and making away with Mrs. Creakle's money . . .' (91). In situations of even lesser privilege, schools like the one kept by Mr Wopsle's great-aunt in Dickens' *Great Expectations* cater to those who cannot afford a more modernized education. Its virtually single and semi-literate schoolteacher lives a hand-to-mouth existence, simultaneously selling her wares and teaching children. Dickens describes her tongue-in-cheek as

> a ridiculous old woman of limited means and unlimited infirmity, who used to go to sleep from six to seven every evening, in the society of youth who paid two pence per week each, for the improving opportunity of seeing her do it.
>
> (74)

In such schools catering to the middle or the lower classes, the schoolteacher is often an unwilling worker, forced to earn a subsistence living by peddling his or her meagre learning.

The most prominent feature of schools that child protagonists cannot reconcile to is their time-bound curriculum. Dickens' *David Copperfield*, for instance, recalls his routinized life at Salem House:

> the frosty mornings when we were rung out of bed, and the cold, cold smell of dark nights when we were rung into bed again; of the evening

> schoolroom dimly lighted and indifferently warmed and the morning schoolroom which was nothing but a great shivering machine; of the alternation of boiled beef with roast beef, and boiled mutton with roast mutton and the like.
>
> (112)

Not only in England but in nineteenth-century America, too, Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer, who does not live in a boarding school, understands his day school to be a drudgery that is punctuated by the short-lived freedom of the weekend. And Monday morning recurs with unfailing regularity, on which he is in a miserable state 'because it began another week's slow suffering in school. He generally began that day with wishing he had no intervening holiday, it made the going into captivity and fetters again so much more odious' (50).

America's greatest contribution towards a counter-discourse to regimented education is Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn.* The itinerant protagonist of this novel who is given a decent home to live in for the price of putting up with the Widow Douglas' timetable for him ultimately refuses to get tamed:

> She makes me get up just at the same time every mornin'; she makes me wash, they comb me all to thunder; she won't let me sleep in the woodshed; I got to wear them blamed clothes that just smothers me, Tom; . . . I got to wear shoes all of Sunday. The widder eats by a bell; she goes to bed by a bell; she gets up by a bell – everything's so awful reg'lar a body cant stand it . . . It's awful to be tied up so.
>
> (288)

Huckleberry Finn's articulation of his own predicament and his subsequent course of action is perhaps one of the most uncompromising outcries by a child in literature against the imposition of mechanical time that hampers, even wrecks, the individuality of the child.

The illustrations of the dreary homogeneity in the lives of children that I have mentioned above resonate significantly with Catherine Sinclair's introduction to *Holiday House* (1839). Sinclair had censured the bringing up of children who were to be exact replicas of one another. Her description of the raising of children of her time had equated the exercise to the mass production of goods in factories. She decries that

> the minds of young people are now manufactured like webs of linen, all alike, and nothing left to nature . . . They are carefully prompted what say, and what to think . . . All play of imagination is now carefully

> discouraged, and books written for young persons are generally a mere record of dry facts, unenlivened by any appeal to the heart, or any excitement to the fancy . . . In these pages the author has endeavoured to paint that species of noisy, frolicsome, mischievous children which is now almost extinct, wishing to preserve a sort of remembrance of days long past.
>
> (Preface, ix)

Sinclair's preface wistfully evokes the naturally naughty temperament of the child, essentializing children in the past as diverse and individualistic in their nature. Simultaneously, she is derisive of her immediate context, in which children are 'manufactured' as clones of one another. In the postindustrial social, cultural and intellectual milieu in which she writes, she pronounces the creative rearing and parenting of impishly attractive children with distinctively singular character traits to be a hopelessly quixotic undertaking.

Obviously, the corporate body of the school – 'the most settled social system children experience' (Inglis 176) – is the institution that is even more responsible than the family for producing exact replicas without any singular or distinctive features on a large scale. The perspective of other children's writers on the schooling systems that they seek to discredit or undermine through the voice of their protagonists could suture together a comprehensive critical assessment of the system. An unconventional children's story of the late eighteenth century was Maria Edgeworth's *The Barring Out*, *or the Party spirit* (1796), which describes the uprising of boys against masters in a very happy, small, private school. Novels with school settings continued to be a popular genre till the mid-twentieth century. The classic English school stories of the nineteenth century are Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857), F.W. Farrar's *Eric* or *Little By Little* (1858) and Talbot Baines Reed's *Fifth Form at St. Dominic's* (1887). Some lesser-known nineteenth-century novels about schools are Henry Cadwaller Adams' *A Tale of Halminster College* (1861), A.R. Hope's *My Schoolfellows* (1870), Thomas Street Millington's *Some of Our Fellows* (1886) and Edith Kenyon's *Jack's Heroism* – A Story of *School Boy Life* (1883). They are certainly not all critiques of schools. At the intersection of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, school stories like Rudyard Kipling's *Stalky & Co* (1899) and Alec Waugh's *The Loom of Youth* (1917) are judgmental not only of public schools but of the genre of school stories. Although many single as well as serialized stories set in schools continue well into the second half of the twentieth century, P.W. Musgrave declares in *The English School Story from Brown to Bunter* that the genre has outlived its popularity (see Chapter 1, 1–20).

A large fraction of school stories in English were set in boarding schools. Isabel Quigly, in *The Heirs of Tom Brown*, argues that twentieth-century stories dealing with boarding schools are presented as a setting away from parents where children have a certain amount of freedom to create their own experiences. Inglis says that boarding school provides a structure 'which promises safety while making resistance attractive and understandable' (177). Though they do not suggest a suffocating regime for children, they are not represented as unrealistically utopian retreats away from parental tyranny for children belonging to the upper classes either. Adult writing on schools sometimes offer relentlessly sceptical and subversive readings of the schooling system. At the turn of the twentieth century, the first-person narrator in Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* declares: 'Some people say that their school days were the happiest of their lives. They may be right, but I always look with suspicion upon those whom I hear saying this' (180).

6

Given the oppressive system of education depicted in many school stories, what are the outlets provided for the child protagonists of these stories? Rousseau talked of nature as the best teacher, not books. In Rousseau's theory of education, he campaigned on behalf of the child's right to happiness and freedom which could be realized by *his/her* proximity to nature. Education should be a joyful experience and the pupil, through exercise of mind and body, close to Nature, the great teacher, may find out all *he/she* needs to learn. In the early nineteenth-century England, for Wordsworth, nature provided a relief and a retreat from industrial and urban civilization. For Wordsworth the boy, in his autobiographical poem 'Tintern Abbey', nature was combination of friend, nurse and spiritual guardian (*Romanticism* 407–11). The English Romantics, as well as writers in other parts of the world thereafter, tried to counter the damaging repercussions of downplaying a natural environment and instinctive participation in its rhythms in postindustrial society. The dominant Romantic critique of industrial and urban society tried to breach the gap between man and nature. The literary imagination of the period emphasized the importance of nature and involvement in its processes for child characters, for whom it is a more attractive option than a daily struggle with the domestic and school routine. In America, Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, which is far removed in time and space from Romantic notions of nature, offers a different and more challenging take on nature. It also reinforces the child, as Peter Coveney says in his introduction, as the symbol of human intuitive joy, with nature as her/his habitat, although that habitat is not benign or conducive to a joyous and

carefree interaction (21). Huck Finn's intuitive aversion to the sham and the pious fraudulence of his society is an example of an extreme distaste for civilized society and a tuning to nature that is willing to take on its hazards. It prompts him to undertake a voyage down the Mississippi with Jim the Negro slave, turning his back on civilization altogether and befriending nature in all its untamed copiousness as well as in its hostile manifestations.

That the escape from the daily drudgery of home does not necessarily imply a romantic, peaceful basking in the beautiful and gentle aspects of nature but an actual encounter with its harsher realities necessitated by one's underprivileged status in society is underscored by Huck's middle class friend Tom Sawyer's observations. Yet the middle class child fantasizes about emulating such a life:

> Tom was like the rest of the respectable boys, in that he envied Huckleberry his gaudy outcast condition, and was under strict orders not to play with him. So he played with him every time he got a chance . . . Huckleberry came and went at his own free will. He slept on doorsteps in fine weather and in empty hogsheads in wet; he did not have to go school or to church, or call any being master or obey anybody; he could go fishing or swimming when and where he chose, and stay as long as it suited him; nobody forbade him to fight; he could sit up as late as he pleased; he was always the first boy that went barefoot in the spring and the last to resume leather in the fall; he never had to wash, nor put on clean clothes; he could swear wonderfully. In a word, everything that goes to make life precious that boy had. So thought every harassed, hampered, respectable boy in St. Petersburg.
>
> (*Tom Sawyer* 54–5)

These boys 'would rather be outlaws for a year in Sherwood Forest than President of the United States forever' (79).

One way out of an oppressive domestic and schooling system for fictional child characters, therefore, is through forays into prohibited territory with the help of those who live at the peripheries of the middle class. Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer is potentially of the same mental make-up as Huck, but cannot opt out of the system as he is too entrenched in respectable society. He envies Huck his rootlessness in neither belonging to that society nor being governed, for that matter, by the moral and civil codes of *any* society. Reading *Huckleberry Finn*, says Nicholas Tucker, the reader cannot wholly take for granted the respectable principles by which one lives any more without some questioning and irony, for 'the class dictates of moral reason are exposed to be the engrained customary beliefs of his time and place' (*The Child and the Book* 216).

Twentieth-century literary representations expressing the points of view of children are indebted to some major and minor works of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. After the initial groundwork done by some of the texts I mention above, this counter-discourse in which the child protagonist finds a voice amidst adult authority and the grown-up way of dealing with life becomes more pronounced and prolific.

Although Bengali children's literature is perhaps somewhat indebted to Western theories and Western literary illustrations of childhood resistance to adult repression, its critique of oppressive domestic and schooling systems is worked out within its own distinctive context and a space that is usually inhabited by the middle class child protagonist. She/he, for instance, does not go to expensive boarding schools like the upper class English child; on the other hand, she/he also cannot imagine heading off towards an unknown destination in a raft like the homeless Huck. For this very reason, perhaps, the observations and active protests of the Bengali child protagonist are centred around and take into more detailed account her/his constant interactions with parents, parent-substitutes and teachers, which will be discussed in the ensuing chapters.

Notes

1 My outline of approaches to childhood is gleaned from a few seminal works on childhood in the West like Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood*, Ivy Pinchbeck and Margaret Hewitt, *Children and English Society*. 2 vols., Peter Laslett, *Household and Family in Past Time* and Lloyd de Mause, *The History of Childhood*.

2 My charting of didactic and not-so-didactic children's fiction through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some of which I could not gain access to, is indebted to the accounts of Gillian Avery who I have quoted above, Nicholas Tucker, *The Child and the Book: A Psychological and Literary Exploration*, 'Good Friends or Just Acquaintances? The Relationship between Child Psychology and Children's Literature' in *Literature for Children: Contemporary Criticism* and 'How Children Respond to Fiction' in *Writers and Children: Articles from 'Children's Literature in Education'*, eds. Geoff Fox, Graham Hammond, Terry Jones, Frederick Smith and Kenneth Sterck, P. W. Musgrave, *The English School Story from Brown to Bunter* and David Grylls, *Guardians and Angels*: Parents and Children in Nineteenth Century Literature.

3 I selectively use important educational ideas in the west in the accounts of Nicholas Tucker's 'Good Friends or Just Acquaintances?', and the accounts of Srinibash Bhattacharya, *Shikshar Ruprekha*; Kshetrapal Das Ghosh, *Amader Shiksha*; Bishnupada Panda, *Shiksha O Sanskriti*; and Arun Kumar Mukhopadhyay, *Smriti Bismriti*.

2 Literary and nonliterary representations of the child in nineteenth-century Bengal

A background

> Originality in literature lies in its capacity to absorb the universal in all literatures and arts and give it a unique expression characteristic of its particular genius and traditions.
>
> Tagore, Rabindranath, *Kolkata Review* 1933

> That a kind of hyperactivity is natural and healthy among boys is something that the English understand very well vis-à-vis their own country. To suppress it is to create cowards. Those who are the well-wishers of boys accept it as the benign intention of Nature . . . Wise people affectionately endorse such mischief befitting children.
>
> Tagore, Rabindranath. 'Shiksha Sanskar' ('Reforming Education'), *Shiksha* (*Education*) (1908) in *Rabindra Rachanabali XI*. Kolkata: Viswabharati, 1961, p. 557[1]

1

In the backdrop of the changing perspective on child-rearing in the West, it would be appropriate to note some predominant attitudes to childhood as expressed in Bengali literary and nonliterary writing for and about children during the nineteenth century, though it is difficult and perhaps ultimately unviable to sum up entire cross-currents of viewpoints spanning a hundred years.

Among the juvenile literature in the various regional languages of India, the one in Bengali is commonly acknowledged as not only the most prolific but the most distinctive as well. Much of it is inventive and original in the sense that it is not merely a retelling of classical myths and adaptations of literature in other languages. A large component of it is concerned with the average child in the context of her/his everyday surroundings like her/his home and school. The delineation of the child protagonist's interactions with her/his environment in contemporary works has shaped itself through comparable and contrasting exchanges between the child and

her/his familial and social milieu in nineteenth-century texts. Children, their parents and teachers, their schools and education were oft-repeated subjects, not only in Bengali fictional narratives and other literary texts but also in biographies, histories, autobiographies, essays on contemporary society and other longer sociological treatises.

The corpus of Bengali texts dealing with the school-going child was obviously also fashioned to some extent by the stimuli provided through an acquaintance with the literary enterprise of the British in the colonial period. 'Perhaps it was because the interaction of Bengalis with Britishers and Britishness was particularly close and personal that the idea of children's literature took root very early in Bengal,' say Rimi B. Chatterjee and Nilanjana Gupta. 'But the Bengali version, as with much else that was successfully naturalized, soon departed strongly from its European models' (Introduction 10–11). The British initiated Bengali juvenile literature almost two hundred years ago with the launch of the first children's magazine *Digdarshan* (1818) in Bengali. In Chapter 1, I have touched upon some of the Western ideas spanning the larger European and American canvas that might in the long run have filtered down to discourses on childhood in Bengal. Nehru acknowledges the inputs of a body of Western writing in Indian thought in the active domain by admitting 'the impact of a dynamic society, of a "modern" consciousness on a static society wedded to medieval habits of thought' (291). This Western incentive, however, does not undermine the originality or creativity of the indigenous discourses in any way. This derivation from Western thought and literature, in fact, is cloaked within and underlies the unique linguistic identity and ethno-cultural characteristics of the Bengali texts, and highlights their relevance and applicability to their particular historical, geographical and sociocultural context.

By going through some literary and nonliterary sources in Bengali, in this chapter I will try to identify the trends that presaged the recurring motif of childhood rebellion in literature for children in the twentieth century. My study will preclude the genre of literary fantasy in which, too, childhood rebellion is sometimes an underlying premise, because the field that I chart for examining involves only genres in the realistic mode. Children in their school and home environments, interacting with adults whose views they often do not share, continues to interest and intrigue writers and readers alike up to the present day. The findings of educationists and psychologists who have worked on the behavioural patterns of children in situations related to their homes and schools substantiate that real-life children, like the literary characters I will look at, often eventually compromise with the same system against which they register their protest in no uncertain terms. Moreover, writers of literary texts address their works to children as well as their parents and teachers, who are all part of an establishment with its own

class affiliations and social prejudices, its instinctive sympathies, fears and anxieties. They, therefore, do not usually cross a threshold beyond which childhood rebellion is carried out to the hilt. In tracing this concurrent pattern of rebellion and conformity in children's literature, therefore, I recuperate in this chapter some nineteenth-century literary precedents that paved the way for the construction of the twentieth-century child protagonist who is caught in a similar paradoxical situation of her/his own making.

2

Although the educated Bengalis of the nineteenth century gradually learnt to respond to the entire West with open minds, their closest encounters were with the British who had almost taken over the cause of education in Bengal. It was this education based on the British model which served as a window to America and the rest of the Occident. The modern system of primary and secondary schooling, first introduced by the English in Bengal, particularly Kolkata, is undoubtedly a colonial legacy that eventually found us a place in the educational matrix of the developing countries. From its very inception, however, both literary works and other prose writings have exposed its lacunae and debunked its contradictions, sometimes articulating this assessment through the voice of its child protagonists. The scepticism about this education demonstrates the awakening of the nation to one of the damaging consequences of English occupation in India, and it will not be assuming a far-fetched connection to say that it was almost simultaneous with the nation's awakening about its own separate political identity.

To begin with, the English scheme of education had made an effort to promote Christianity along with a certain dose of English Literature in India. The idea, erroneous in its very conception, was to introduce Western education without letting the natives have too much access to English liberal thought. Its objective was the moral edification of the natives without the accompanying danger of familiarizing them with radical ideas that would threaten the English colony in India. Christianity, known to be a harmless repository of spiritual precepts about man's soul and conscience, had hardly ever been linked with inciting the overthrow of existing administrative establishments.

The Baptist missionaries in Bengal were the first group that functioned effectively in contributing to the cause of education there. A discernible emphasis in the venture of the missionaries, however, was on Christian doctrines and practices. Writing in the sixties, the English historian of education, Laird, admits that although the curriculum in their schools consisted mainly of the three R's, simple catechisms, portions of scripture and hymns were not only to be memorized by Christians but 'were simultaneously used

as exercises for reading and writing' (94). The ostensibly secular project, therefore, camouflaged a subtle way of exposing the natives to Christianity. This pattern of elementary education followed that of contemporary schools in England. Carey's school at Madnabati was practically a transplanted replica – with minor changes apropos overt religious training – of the charity school in his home village. Laird goes on to observe that 'the parallel is so close that one is in danger of overlooking the not insignificant fact that the Madnabati boys were not Christians' (94). Yet the Baptist missionaries of Serampore were hailed as evangelists with a passionate commitment to advancing the total well-being (spiritual, mental and material) of the people among whom they lived.

Although Laird offers a predominantly laudatory interpretation of the efforts made by these industrious Englishmen towards improving the condition of the native Indian subjects, he also alerts scholars of Indian education about the subtle evangelizing programme of their schools in Bengal. Postcolonial historians and critics have underlined what they believe to be the real agenda beneath English projects of education and welfare for the Indian people. Gauri Vishwanathan's essay 'The Beginnings of English Literary Study' avers in unequivocal terms that the British Charter Act of 1813 opened up an agenda in which religion was subtly disguised within a secular education that was introduced and propagated with the support of English literature.[2] The orchestrating of the secular ideas that constitute literature would not affront the religious sensibility of Indians or make them suspicious of proselytization. This apparent secularization of the objectives of the English by a commemoration of English literature studies was part of a political programme in India that represented Western literary knowledge as objective, universal and rational. English Literature was broadcasted as the paramount example of empirical reasoning, characterized as equivalent to scientific truth. The corpus of English texts supposedly embodied flawless knowledge, subsuming all branches of study under the sciences, the social sciences and religious studies. This collusion of a political agenda with the promotion of English studies, mainly literary, would facilitate the English in hegemonizing native education, as it were. It aimed at co-opting an influential class that would, in turn, be the conduit of Western thought and ideas. Yet it backfired on the English by opening the floodgates of a liberal education, unleashing dormant ideas of insurgency among educated Indians.

3

As early as 1940, Bruce Tiebout McCully summed up the surfacing of nationalist sentiment among the educated class of the natives by observing that after reading and absorbing the principles of liberty that English

literature is imbued with, it became aware of its own deprivations and degradation and consequently strove towards a political unity that would pave the way for a common nationhood. The word 'nation' or even 'country' did not really exist before the British introduced them in India. According to McCully, the use of the common language English and the establishment and growth of railways facilitated this brotherhood among people of different regions and religions (225–8). A liberal nationalism was born out of half a century of English education.

In a speech by Lal Mohan Ghose in Bombay on 4 November 1880, he acknowledged but warned the English of the consequences of such an education:

> You have for a long time past given us the blessing of a liberal education. Our minds are expanded under the generous influence of Western culture. We are deeply grateful to you for all these benefits. But remember, as our intellectual faculties are developed, so are our aspirations, both personal and national, sharpened and stimulated . . . Remember that the study of European history, and particularly of the history of England and of the English political institutions, is not calculated to deaden, but, on the contrary to rouse and fire those instincts of patriotism which have slumbered in the national breast of India for centuries.
>
> (Report in the *Indian Mirror* November 16, 1880, quoted in McCully 285)

At a macro level, introducing the study of European history and English literature in schools and colleges planted the earliest seeds of a potential revolution that took an ominous shape with the passing of time. It, in fact, contributed substantially to inspiring the rise of the national movement that led to the subsequent independence of India more than a hundred years later. On a much lesser but proportionately vital scale, a re-evaluation of the English system of education was also ironically born out of and reinforced by the study of English literature and European history and philosophy within a Western pedagogical structure that did not exist in India prior to the nineteenth century. My contention is that this critique was sometimes noticeably voiced through indigenous children's literature.

Initially, Western education made the Bengali writer familiar with larger Western movements like the Industrial Revolution and Romanticism. Industrialization and its aftermath had sensitized the Romantic writers in England to urbanization and its consequent standardization of human experience and endeavour (see Chapter1). Child-friendly writers in succeeding periods assimilated the Romantic critique of the post-Industrial situation in England. Colonial education opened out for those Bengalis who benefited

by it ideas that had become the burning issues of America and Europe, particularly during and after the American War of Independence and the French Revolution. Some English texts for children and adults that were readily available, sometimes even used as school textbooks, challenged their own education that had undergone a drastic formalization/systemization since the onset of the Industrial Revolution. The Bengali intellectual elite, nurtured on well-known Romantic responses to industrialization and its concomitant standardization of human experience, had been exposed to currents of Western thought that prescribed alternate values of freedom and spontaneity instead. Some of the nostalgia and the yearnings of Romanticism, for instance, are clearly discernible in the themes of children's poems and stories in Bengali that sympathetically treat the child protagonist's desire to break free of the establishment and sometimes escape to natural surroundings. With an upbringing that not only conformed to Western codes of etiquette but encouraged the reading of English literature, these Bengali writers responded empathetically with the similar denunciation of formal schooling in nineteenth-century English literature.

The effort of English education was counterproductive for the British because this handful had access to English language, literature and culture and benefited by learning about Western history, philosophy and literature. They absorbed some of the dissident trends and trajectories inscribed in Western learning within their own theoretical understanding and their first-hand experience of English rule and its economic, cultural and educational policies. Those components in the liberal arts curriculums introduced by the British that encouraged free thinking propagated knowledge about subversive ideologies and movements and trained scholars and intellectuals in the making to question established systems around them that had earlier been taken for granted.

In the twentieth century, Victorian institutions that hindered freedom and threatened the identity of individuals have come under scrutiny in Western treatises. Michel Foucault's pathbreaking study of the prison, designed by the Utilitarian philosopher Bentham, is a scathing critique of schooling systems that are based on the regimentation and surveillance of the Panopticon (see Chapter 1). Some of the subversion of the system of education in Bengali writing was enabled by such Western discourses.

Bengali literature that exposed the unhappy predicament of the school-going child who was subjected to the 'modern' system was initially no radical assertion of an Indian or Bengali identity, but aligned in continuity with the writings of the English. Moreover, the representation of the contrasting indigenous and colonial systems in literary and nonliterary Bengali texts for children as well as adults often underlines a romantic yearning for the freedom and flexibility of the older, indigenous mode of instruction.

I will get back to these more elaborately while discussing the lure of nature for child protagonists in the later part of the chapter.

Romantic longings apart, through Western education in general and English texts in particular, not only ideas of heroism and patriotism but even models of insubordinate behaviour and an unconventional morality insidiously found their way into the Bengali child's repertoire of knowledge. Although we do not have documented evidence in the form of a catalogue of nineteenth-century school and college textbooks in Bengal, one can surmise that Western ideas were transmitted through three kinds of texts introduced by the British nonliterary texts – like those of history and moral science, adult classics like those by Dickens, and children's literature like the tale of Robin Hood and his band of outlaws in Sherwood Forest, the story of William Tell, or poems like 'Casabianca' and 'The Charge of the Light Brigade'.[3] Hagiographic models of the conventional as well as the unusual kind in both children's and adult literature, like the tales of Abanindranath Tagore's *Rajkahini* and Rabindranath Tagore's *Katha o Kahini*, fashioned Bengali literary archetypes of heroism. If we explore a smaller frame comprising of the quotidian interactions of the unconventional prototypes of Bengali children, such literary and biographical examples would include child protagonists with the resilience and pluck not to give in to expected norms of schoolboy behaviour, yet distinguishable from their Western predecessors who have shown a similar spirit.

4

Buddhaveva Basu notes that most writers of the Bengal Renaissance were engaged in translation and adaptations of children's books written in the West (51). It would be pertinent to catalogue a few direct translations and adaptations from English to Bengali for children that were among the first of their kind. Madhusudan Mukhopadhyay's *Katha Taranga* (*Rippling Stories*) was based on Day's *Sandford and Merton*, which was in turn adapted from Rousseau's *Emile* and expressed the desirability of letting children gain freedom from the burden of education and growing up in their own independent ways. In the mid-nineteenth century, Ramnarayan Vidyaratna wrote a Bengali version of *Gulliver's Travels*. By the beginning of the twentieth century, many classic tales had been translated and adapted into Bengali by Upendrakishore Roy Choudhury, Kuladaranjan Roy, Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, Yogindranath Sarkar and Abanidranth Thakur. Some well-known ones were Hemendra Prasad Ghosh's version of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Kuladaranjan Ray's translations of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Charu Chandra Bandyopadhyay's variation of *Aesop's Fables*, Abanindranath Thakur's

Buro Angla (*The Thumbed One*), based on Selma Largerloff's *Adventures of Nils* and *Khatanchir Khata* (*The Notebook of the Book Keeper*) based on Barrie's *Peter Pan*, Hemendra Kumar Roy's *Ajab Deshe Amala* (*Amala in Wonderland*) and Sukumar Roy's *Ha Ja Ba Ra La*, respectively translated and more loosely adapted from *Alice in Wonderland*, Hemendra Kumar Roy's *Adrishya Manush* (*Invisible Man*) based on H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* and Rabindranath Tagore's 'Icchapuran' (Wish Fulfilment) based on F. Anstey's *Vice Versa*. Children's literature in Bengali continued to be dominated by translations up to the 1860s. Some Western writers, however, expressed their scepticism about the viability of such translations and adaptations as they might not be pertinent within the Indian context. Frances Hodgson Pratt says 'There is not only a difference of language between the people of India and of England. We must recognize the far greater difficulty of a difference of ideas, associations and literature' (quoted in Asha Devi 75). She and some other writers of the period were sceptical about merely transcribing from source language to target language because it was hardly feasible to commensurately translate from one culture to another that was far removed.

Meanwhile, a lot of novel work was happening in the field of children's textbooks. The School Book Society, started through the efforts of David Hare, worked on textbook-centred projects that provided very dry and uninteresting reading. The unillustrated articles in its pioneering children's magazine *Digdarshan* were mainly on science, history and child counselling (see Khagendranath Mitra, *Shatabdir Shishusahitya* (*A Century of Children's Literature*) 4). A Sanskritized Bengali, authorized by its Brahminical origin and standing, continued to be the hallmark of children's textbooks as well as whatever little was produced by way of children's reading for pleasure. It was Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar (1820–91), writer, educator, reformer and philanthropist, and to some extent Akshay Kumar Dutta, who worked on the vernacular and freed Bengali prose from its stiffness and verbosity in the mid-nineteenth century. Along with people like Devendranath Thakur and J.E.D. Beaton, they founded the much more user-friendly Bengali Family Library that worked in tandem with the translatory efforts of the Vernacular Literature Committee.

5

The trend of indoctrinating children from a morally righteous position pervaded the writings of Vidyasagar and his contemporaries. However, most of it was aimed at not letting middle-class and working-class children fritter away their time and the meagre material resources of their parents, but to help them realize instead the value of education on the whole – that it would

one day enable them to stand on their own feet, based on their own merit. Understandably enough, such advice could pall and was devoid of interesting avenues of diversion for the child readers. Madanmohan Tarkalankar's (1819–58) advice to children in *Shishushiksha* (*The Child's Education*) was in the form of pious platitudes like 'Do not be disobedient to your parents,' 'Childhood is the time for learning,' 'It is extremely important to be well-behaved,' 'Laziness is the root of much evil,' 'One should not disrespect a teacher's statement' and 'Do not talk while a lesson is in progress.' The first two lessons of *Shishushiksha* were entitled 'Everybody loves a well-behaved child' and 'Nobody can stand a restless child.' Mozammal Haque's (1860–1933) 'Padyashiksha' advocates the following: 'Wake up remembering God and sit down to study with your book. If you study with concentration now, you will be able to spend your future in happiness.'[4] According to Sibaji Bandopadhyay, in every sentence, the tone is that of reprimand, at every step the speaker lets it be known that children cannot have an individual point of view, that they should only be engaged in learning, and that childish/child-like behaviour is intolerable. The assumption is obviously uninformed about the nuanced distinction in the English language between the terms 'childish' and 'childlike' and that the latter is a kind of behaviour that is rather likeable. Respect for age and experience, to the point of unquestioning acquiescence to a parent or schoolmaster, was a major preoccupation of writers of children's textbooks. According to Vidyasagar, the relationship between adults and children is a kind of contract in which children are greatly dependent, and a certain obsequiousness is expected of them as they have no way of surviving except to be at the mercy of their parents (S. Bandyopadhyay, *Gopal Rakhal Dwandasamas* (*The Conflicting Compound of the Good Boy and the Bad Boy*) 12). All these precepts were in accord with the views of Mrs Trimmer and other writers for children in eighteenth-century England (see Chapter1) who, however, did not write primers but story books for children.

One of Vidyasagar's rudimentary moral lessons, that only those who study hard ultimately travel in carriages and horses, was echoed in Akshay Kumar Dutta's *Charupath* (*Enjoyable Lessons*), Parts 1–3 (1853, 1854 and 1859) in which he also emphasized the link between diligence and education on the one hand and affluence and success on the other, giving illustrations of the assiduous character of the British. In Bireshwar Panre's *Aryapath* (*Supreme Lessons*) (1888), he expresses his view that there was a lack of *Nitishiksha* (moral education) among children because of which the English government had set up the education commission. Tinkari Mukhopadhyay's 'Laghupath Padya' (Easy-to-read Verses) (1881) reiterated that neglect of studies leads to a fruitless life, and that education is the be-all and end-all of life. All these texts locate education 'within a bleak and cruel world, not a benign one . . . [not] as a phase in a happy bildungsroman or narrative of

individual progress wherein [it] can provide something more than a minimum of safety and worldly success' (T. Sarkar, *Rebels, Wives, Saints* 291). The 1889 Proposals for Education sought to combat such a prevalent apathy towards studies by rewards for good behaviour, corporal punishment for deviant acts and expulsion as a last resort (see S. Bandyopadhyay, *Gopal Rakhal Dwandasamas* 140–4).

6

When children's literature started as a new genre, writers of texts as well as literary works tended to underscore extremes of childhood behaviour in their portrayals of children. According to Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, Vidyasagar's customary drawing of a line between the 'black' and 'white' categories of 'good boy' and 'bad boy' is just a pretext for the author to moralize about expected norms of behaviour in children, spelling out clearly what does *not* constitute 'goodness' (S. Bandyopadhyay, *Gopal Rakhal Dwandasamas* 134–42). In nineteenth-century didactic tales for children, the Gopal prototype, who was offered as an example of an ideal child, is completely adjusted to the home within which he lives, accepting without questioning the condition of poverty into which he is born:

> Gopal is very well-brought up. Whatever his parents say at whatever time, he obeys. He eats whatever he gets, wears whatever he gets, and does not throw a tantrum about wanting to eat better food and wear fancier clothes. He loves his younger brothers and sisters very much. He never fights with them. That is why his parents love him very much.
>
> (Vidyasagar, Ishwarchandra, *Sahaj Paath*, *Vidyasagar Rachanabali* (*The Complete Works of Vidyasagar*) 129)

The categories of 'good' and 'bad' are watertight and mutually exclusive; one who has fallen into one slot cannot simultaneously possess any of the characteristics of the other. Yet, ironically enough, despite not being able to interpenetrate each other's territories as long as they persist in being either 'good' or 'bad', the 'bad' child can undergo an overnight transformation in order to become a 'good' one, without going through an intermediary 'grey' stage, if the story desires it to further its own didactic agenda (S. Bandopadhyay, *Gopal Rakhal Dwandasamas* 239). Sibaji Bandyopadhyay has read into early primers the pliability of such child characters who have appeared under different names like Gopal–Rakhal, Jadu–Madhu or Nabin–Madhab:

> Although what constitutes good and what constitutes bad was rigidly predetermined, there was an open-minded flexibility about who was

> bad or good. He who is good today . . . could deteriorate to the depths of lowliness. On the other hand, he who is wicked and extremely unruly today . . . could unfold tomorrow with a pure and radiant core. The subject matter of *Barna Parichay* is not 'being' but 'becoming.' That is why the constant back and forth between deform-reform and moral elevation-degradation in Vidyasagar's primer is a metaphor for the social mobility that surfaced through the ebb and flow/of colonial deconstruction-reconstruction.
>
> (*Abar Shishushiksha* (*Children's Education Revisited*) 65–6)

After Lord Bethune's commendable effort at female education, there were a few attempts at literary representations of female models of 'good' and 'bad'. Madanmohan Tarkalankar's *Shishushiksha*, Part 3 (1950) posited the examples of Shyama and Bama, but within a span of ten years, their names got altered to the masculine Shyam and Ram. In a book that claimed to be the first primer for the education of girls which would greatly inculcate an enthusiasm for learning among them, *Bamabodhika* (1868) by Kamini Sundari Debi, a woman writer, the kin of Gopal and Rakhal once again reappeared with the female names of Barada and Sharada (see *Abar Shishushiksha* 52, 53 and 77). The prototypes present a thesis and antithesis that have returned again and again in literature under various names.

In Bengali fiction, Pyari Chand Mitra's *Alaler Ghare Dulal* (*The Spoilt Child of a Rich Parent*) (1858), supposedly the first novel in Bengali, illustrates a notable exception to the homilies exhorting children to study and be 'good'. In fact, the freer, more flexible and more creative attitude of the English regarding their children is held up as an example by the author:

> English children are taught all sorts of games by their parents – games which strengthen their minds and bodies and yet are harmless – some paint pictures, some tend flowers in their gardens, some go out hunting or play manly games. All these are harmless, and the child is free to choose which he will.
>
> (3)

Pramadacharan Sen's *Bhimer Kapal* (*Bhim's Destiny*), the first novel *for children* in Bengali (serialized in *Sakha* [*Friend*] in 1883), also attempted to do away with the boundaries defined for good and bad boys. Although primarily oriented towards regaling the reader with the aberrant escapades of Bhim, the author starts off with the description of two friends who are contrasting in character in the tradition of Gopal and Rakhal: 'Bipin was patient, peaceful, modest; Bhim lived up to his name – obsessive, stubborn, audacious' (23). Yet, there is also a romantic streak in Bhim that is

comparable to a contemporary protagonist, Tarapada, in Tagore's 'Atithi' ('The Guest'), and makes it difficult, even for the adult reader, to fix him in any slot. He is by nature so restive that he cannot stay long within the four walls of a home, no matter how hospitable that home may be. In Sujankhali Mitra's house, where Bhim is nursed back to health by his host's son and daughter after almost starving to death, 'he became restless; he did not want to stay there any more' (49). During his adventures of running away from various situations, Bhim's impetuous, peevish, in fact easily inflammable character is always juxtaposed against the goodness of the people who give him shelter in unknown places. The writer pauses every now and then to remind his young readers that Bhim should undergo some chastening by his encounters with these generous people. After each escape and the hardships and dangers he suffers on the way, Bhim is welcomed by some hardworking, kind, middle- or working-class family, whose stability and lack of mobility his itinerant nature cannot acclimatize itself to beyond a certain point. The author does not maintain a sympathetic or even morally neutral position about Bhim throughout, and does not really succeed in portraying a child character who defies definition by the epithets 'good' and 'bad'. In cautioning young boys against emulating Bhim's nature, the author counsels them with the help of precepts and examples. By the end, when Bhim feels homesick and longs to be back with his widowed mother, the story can hardly escape the mould in which most stories of the age are cast, despite starting off by flouting some conventions developed over half a century.

At the turn of the century, Tagore showed a remarkable openness in not typecasting children as 'good' or 'bad', and was receptive to the Western idea of indulgence towards the natural restlessness of children (see epigraph to this chapter).

7

Apart from literary representations of the relationships between parents and children and how their discords are escalated or resolved, a large component of what I argue in this book will be concerned, I repeat, with the child protagonist in the context of her/his school. I will, therefore, go over some known historical facts about schooling opportunities in Bengal and elaborate on how the British took up the cause anew.

Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal's essay 'Britishpurba Aitihyagata Shikshabyabastha' (The Traditional Education System in the Pre-British Period) outlines the four prevalent kinds of educational systems before the British took up the cause – the *pathshala*, which provided practical education for all without any caste or religious bars, the *Akhara Chatushpaathi* for Baidya and Brahman boys where they learnt poetics, rhetoric, philosophy and law

with special *toles* for teaching Ayurveda, the imparting of Persian learning privately to sons of affluent parents by Munshis, and the *Makhtab madrasas* meant for upper-class Muslims, the first of which was started by Warren Hastings as far back as 1781.[5] Shortly after his arrival in Bengal in 1793, the well-known English educationist William Carey started an elementary school with a few local boys in Madnabati. In 1800, he moved to the Danish settlement of Serampore to join Joshua Marshman and William Ward. Initially, they opened a few local schools in their vicinity, and as missionary operations were extended from the base at Serampore, throughout the province of Bengal. Meanwhile, English education became extremely popular in respectable households.

In 1811, Lord Minto remarked that 'science and literature are in a progressive state of decay among the natives of India' and 'no branch of learning [is] cultivated but that which is connected with the peculiar religious doctrines of the people' (quoted in Sastri 75). The East India Company's Charter for 1813 expressed 'the more interventionist policies of Grant, which aimed at creating a linguistically and culturally homogenous English India' (Krishnaswamy 48). Between 1816 and 1818, over 100 elementary schools were established. By 1817, there were 61 schools being managed by the Church Missionary Society, and in the same year, the Hindu College was also established. The Serampore College for higher education was founded in 1818. All the initiatives in primary and secondary education paved the way for the Christian Missionary Society to launch the School Book Society in 1818. It finally replaced, although it did not eliminate, the older indigenous education system in Bengal.

In keeping with some of the ideals of secular instruction that Carey, Marshman and Ward had propagated in their scheme for primary education, the Serampore College, too, welcomed students irrespective of their caste and creed. Serampore, in fact, soon became the seat of education in Bengal, and pioneered many of the enterprises around the spread of learning in general and literature in particular. William Carey's vision, therefore, was broader than merely brainwashing the children of the natives with Christian ideas and ideology. For instance, he assembled botanical specimens, both indigenous and imported from Britain, hoping to improve the agricultural techniques of the better educated people. His contribution to the development of Bengali prose in particular is greatly acclaimed. As a philologist, he produced dictionaries, grammar books and other textbooks in Bengali and other Sanskritic languages, and he and Joshua Marshman produced over 30 translations of the Bible. Ward established a press at Serampore, which broke new ground by initiating the printing industry in the East and was acclaimed because of its low cost, quality printing. The trio's initial commitment to evangelize culminated ironically in an endeavour towards secular education in Bengal and India.

The initiation of the Western model of education not only started schools in the modern pattern, but gave to those who availed of it exposure to the English language and English literature. Bengali historians like Rajnarayan Basu, in fact, have recorded their appreciation of the initiatives of Englishmen towards founding an education system that found its feet and got institutionalized in the second decade of the nineteenth century (Rajnarayan Basu 3–7). According to Basu, names like Hare, Carey and Marshman were immortalized in the field of education in Bengal, not as much because of their deeds and achievements as for their gut level empathy and involvement with the cause of the Indian people. In the early nineteenth century, when it was not feasible for Englishmen stationed in India to go home on vacation frequently, they were compelled to make India their surrogate home. Consequently, they 'worked industriously towards setting up Bengali *pathshalas* of an improved kind, founding Bengali newspapers and writing Bengali dictionaries' (Rajnarayan Basu 4).

Although Nurullah and Naik claim that by the end of the nineteenth century, 'the old indigenous system of education disappeared almost completely from the field and a new system of education, which aimed at the spread of Western knowledge through the medium of the English language, was firmly established in its place' (xi), the spread and impact of the English system was not uniform. English attempts to modernize and Westernize education in Bengal do not reflect a fully developed, homogenized system but a far more embryonic situation where for every modern school introduced by the British, there were many indigenous schools in an overall system that could not be and still has not been overhauled to the extent that the British educationists perhaps intended to revamp it. In 1833, the East India Company carried forward the cause by undertaking direct responsibility for the education of the Indian people in accordance with Thomas Macaulay's 'Minutes on Indian Education'.

8

This second generation of English educationists in Bengal were perhaps convinced that an adaptation of the British model would prevail over a system that could hardly meet the requirements of the cultured classes who the schools catered to. While these Britishers had a smug confidence that their language, literature and educational methods were the best in the world, many Bengalis who came into their first contact with Western civilization were also greatly impressed by its educational methods.

The English educationists of the post-Macaulay phase honed their efforts to educate the upper and middle classes of urban society as a means of ultimately educating the masses. They envisaged that these beneficiaries

of their education 'might educate their countrymen in their own language' (B. B. Misra 151). Their programme came to be known as the Downward Filtration Theory. However, history has categorically proved the miscarriage of this English enterprise which merely resulted in filling up the lower cadres of English government service. Ironically, it deflected from its principal focus and never really touched the common people. Advantaged by this education, the new elite aspired only to get jobs in the English administration. Suddenly, there seemed to be no impediments of caste or birth on their path to *bhadralok*dom. In fact, the 'English educated, opulent (and not so opulent) men of Kolkata could easily move to this new aristocracy' (S. N. Mukherjee 226). In his essay, 'Lokshiksha' (Educating the People), Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay notes that this privileged class in Bengal was so taken up 'with finding outlets for their own education and intelligence that it did not acknowledge any kinship or empathy with ordinary people and paid scant attention to popular education' (*Bankim Rachanabali 2*: 367). Popular education, he believed, could never be achieved as long as the educated people continued to fear being contaminated by freely mixing, sharing and exchanging ideas with the uneducated (376–7). This class had the prerogative of hobnobbing with the English, making polite conversations in their social circles and working as their subordinates. But it would not stoop to teach the masses, apprehensive that those they teach might aspire to be included within their own coterie. Villagers and the working class of urban society remained neglected and were not covered commensurately by English education.

Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay's novella 'Panditmashai' (1914), although not a nineteenth-century text and yet technically within the purview of this chapter because of its date of publication that predates *Pagla Dashu*, is in a way a fictional representation of the anxiety articulated earlier by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay about the state of education in Bengal, dramatized through the altercation between Brindaban and Keshab (*Sharat Sahitya Samagra* (*The Complete Works of Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay*) 94–134). Brindaban explains to Keshab that his own *pathshala* has succeeded because he has neither considered himself as separate from his team of students nor ever had a patronizing attitude towards them. Keshab, on the other hand, curses the *chotolok* (non-gentlemen) for not sending their children to his *pathshala*, despite the free tuition offered there. At the same time, he is not willing to do away with the hierarchical relationship governing the teacher and the taught. Brindaban is confident that although the school opened by him is a mere *pathshala* and not a school designed on the British pattern, even if one of his students were to grow up to teach his less fortunate brethren, in twenty years' time, there would not remain a single ignorant or illiterate person in Bengal. However, Brindaban's reformistic educational

vision is unrealistically idealist and optimistic, and an exception rather than the rule among the gentility of the Bengal of his time, who found in education a short cut to get clerical jobs in the British government.

And although the gentry class of Bengalis who came to be known as the *bhadralok* espoused English education, their moorings in the culture of Bengal also made them respond somewhat unfavourably to a school curriculum that was affiliated to English education and a home regimen structured along the lines of English parenting. This ambivalent response is evident in their theoretical works as well as in their works of fiction that were appreciative of certain English methods yet alert to their unsuitability in the Indian context. Their greatest scepticism was about the very foundational principles of the formal education that Bengal had inadvertently outsourced from England.

9

Western education, therefore, was not without its lacunae and anomalies – discernible particularly when juxtaposed against indigenous education – that made its beneficiaries also its greatest critics. When introduced in India, specifically in Bengal, this education manifested itself clearly as an offshoot of the changes brought about by the post-Industrial age in Europe. E. P. Thompson's review of childhood, within his detailed study of the resistance in Europe to the rigorous routine of capitalist society (see Chapter 1), resonates significantly as I try to recuperate a somewhat similar transformation that took place in nineteenth-century India, and specifically in Bengal. Both the historical junctures and sites were threatened by the time discipline of the new industrialism that could potentially sever the bond between the child and nature. In Europe, the clock had a slow evolution from the thirteenth century to the seventeenth century. But mechanical time was imposed in India in a far more unexpected manner, and this happened much later, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. 'Time', writes Sumit Sarkar, 'acquired new meaning and disciplinary authority through an abrupt entry of clocks and watches' ('Kaliyug, Chakri and Bhakti' ('The Iron Age, Working for a Living and Devotion'), *Writing Social History* 283). Schools, colleges and offices became experimental in testing the imported ideas of mechanical measurement of time and bourgeois discipline. The sudden transition naturally caused resentment and frustration in those who were newly initiated into the system. The internalization of a rigid bourgeois discipline within the everyday schedule of these institutions 'contrasted sharply with the seasonal variations of labor-tempo . . . which had been bound up with the traditional cycle of religious ceremonies and festivals' ('Kaliyug, Chakri and Bhakti', *Writing Social History* 309). Even Bengalis who had been living in towns and cities for a while perhaps felt too rooted in the rural–agricultural time

scheme to be able to accept the new system. The seasonal lunar calendar with its lax pace was so ingrained in their workaday world that they could not acquiesce in the new work schedule whole-heartedly and with equanimity.

In schools, the new system circumscribed the hitherto flexible routine of the student within a rigid curriculum, and insisted on a time-bound schedule, punctuality and regularity. The monotonous aspects of a work discipline based on time in colleges, offices, factories but particularly schools starkly juxtaposed 'the attractive playfulness and irresponsibility of the child . . . against the goal-oriented instrumental rationality of the adult male' ('Kali-yug, Chakri and Bhakti', *Writing Social History* 300). The underlying Victorian ideologies of utilitarianism and self-improvement in the new set-up left no manoeuvring room for the child's worldview, justifiably free of the liability of estimating pragmatically what returns such an education would eventually yield.

Despite his positive remarks about the English effort at education in India, Rajnarayan Basu referred to English education as 'a machine for killing human beings' (42). Later, at the interface of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Tagore, too, while recapitulating our growing relationship with English education with the hindsight of almost a century, described the teachers of the schools set up by the English as an engine, a phonograph with a brain, and a huge machine in a factory that produces standardized goods, ignoring the fact that these goods are actually human beings ('Shiksha Samasya', *Rabindra Rachanabali XI*: 567). Within the framework of the prior system of education, it was possible, he felt, to have a close, personal relationship between the student and the teacher. We sought to study from Gurus, not technically trained teachers, he said, and the process was so human that there was no contradiction between what one learns from textbooks and the wider attitudes and ideas prevalent in society ('Shiksha Samasya' 569). When the English introduced a mass-scale curriculum of teaching, individual attention could no longer be paid to students according to their requirements, and the relentless mass production could hardly fashion cultivated human beings, engaged in the pursuit of knowledge, with a vibrant interest in the world around them. As a child, when Rabindranath Tagore's father took him along on his excursions, he let him

> wander in the hills and open fields, the streams and the valleys, as he pleased . . . there were no fixed times for work and play, no boundaries between leisure and study. They flowed into each other within the overarching rubric of exploring the unknown horizons. The son was encouraged to set his own schedule to study, select passages to be learnt, offer explanations of natural phenomena that could not be dismissed or

> laughed at even if they were absurdly wrong, their absurdity being recognized as valuable and intrinsic to his imagination.
>
> (T. Sarkar, *Rebels*, *Wives*, *Saints* 281).

I have discussed Philippe Aries's definition of the school class as a group that condemns aberrations instead of appreciating them or treating them with sympathy and care (see Chapter 1). Within the schooling system, an effective instrument of homogenization was also the conduct of the examinations at the end of the term, semester or year. More traumatic than the drudgery of it was the pressure of a uniformly good performance that did not consider the specific mindset, propensity or the circumstances of any particular student. The loss of self-esteem or humiliation faced by individual students for failing to perform well was not taken into account while introducing and conducting this ritual, nor was the psychology of those who were at its receiving end ever probed into. Nabin Chandra Sen's autobiographical account (1907) registers an irreverent protest that destabilizes the complacent adult assumptions underlying this vehicle of tyranny:

> One has to die only once to go to Hell, but why such repeated torture on innocent students? / I do not understand how it is a grave sin not to hold examinations for the lowest classes – and similarly all the way up to the entrance examination every year. Students should be marked on the basis of their daily performance, which would provide an over-all estimate of them over the year.
>
> (50–1)

Sen's recommendation is one of the earliest prescriptions in the history of Indian education of a grading system in which assessment should not be on the basis of examinations.

The enforced regimen of studies of which examinations was only a part provoked Tagore to express the opinion that

> The natural temperament of boys cannot flower healthily by somehow gulping down a meal by nine-thirty or ten, and registering their presence in the fenced-in house of learning and education. What unhappiness has been created at the commencement of human life by confining education within walls, shutting it off by means of gates, guarding it by watchmen, paving its way with the thorns of punishment, and hurrying it on with bells!
>
> ('Shiksha Samasya', *Rabindra Rachanabali XI*: 565)

A childlike reaction to the system of bells, whose inhuman aspect Foucault expounds on at length (see Chapter 1), communicates itself in Tagore's

'Samayhara'. In this poem, the child celebrates an imaginary state of liberation from the shackles of time if all clocks were to stop forever. It would do away with the ominous ten o'clock ringing of the school bell (*Shishu Bholanath*, *Rabindra Rachanabali II*: 581), an apparatus that had been denounced in English and American fiction far back in Dickens's *David Copperfield* and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (see Chapter 1).

The formal education that tried to revamp and streamline the infrastructural inadequacies of the Indian system saw to the founding of a few schools modelled on English schools, particularly in Kolkata. The Roman style of architecture of the Hindu School, Hare School, Hamilton School and South Suburban School was new as well as awe-inspiring. These schools displayed imposing gates, Corinthian pillars, and statues of their founders or patrons in flowing Roman robes. The formality and elegance of the sartorial accessories and architectural flourishes showcased by these schools allured those who aspired to be part of the educated Indian elite. The glamour and the scale of this 'new' educational network engendered respect and trepidation in those who could avail of the system as well as those who remained outside it. Yet these features were not only alien to Indian schools but insidiously assumed the tacit acceptance of the cumbersome, excessive clothing of the West that was superimposed on the tropical climate of the subcontinent, apart from inflicting approbation for some unfamiliar and unnecessary architectural embellishments.

Moreover, English education, whether it meant education in the English medium, education with an emphasis on English language and literature, or the pattern of education after Macaulay's reforms, was based on precise argumentation and formal logic, which incited a simultaneous debunking of it even within *bhadralok* society. The encroachment of a ceremonial format and archives of documented information into our vast reserves of unschooled learning were disputed not only by writers of fiction, poetry and nonfictional prose but even by the greatest pioneer of an unconventional theology in Bengal. One of the cult figures of nineteenth-century Bengal who is still adulated by the middle classes as much as or more than Rabindranath Tagore was Ramakrishna Paramahamsa. His mysticism was artlessly fashioned from oral legends and anecdotes about the quotidian experiences of common people. A vast section of the urban bhadralok was under the spell of his alternative pedagogy. His parables, says Sumit Sarkar, 'seemed to bring back a rural world from which the city bhadralok now sometimes felt they had unwisely uprooted themselves' ('Kaliyug, Chakri and Bhakti', *Writing Social History* 300). The overt glorification of unlearned oral wisdom through fables and analogies, which Paramahamsa's teachings were replete with, was an influence to reckon with in an era when literate knowledge and formal education had made significant inroads into our educational domain.

These two larger-than-life figures who were so far apart in their social and educational background and their thinking thus actually propagated a similar cause in their different but equally unorthodox approach to modern education. Western education versus an evaluation of its damaging outcome thus remained an irreconcilable debate in a forum in which indigenous opinions expressed in literary and nonliterary works had to constantly jostle for space against the policies implemented by the English that dominated the political–cultural–educational sphere. It was no mean achievement for those who dared to raise a vote of dissent that they got heard at all and perhaps gained a minimal agency in this arena in which the new education was being rehearsed and flaunted.

10

Perspectives on the treatment of childhood can more sharply be brought into focus by viewing them within the context of the child's education that has been depicted in both fiction and nonfictional writing of the time. The situation in nineteenth-century Bengal was an unformed one in which the attempts of the British in modernizing Indian education had not eradicated the underprivileged village school, but had merely substituted it by the 'English' school in some pockets of the city of Kolkata. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the fluidity of this situation made it undergo rapid changes, yet there was an innate, stubborn and rigid resistance to any kind of transformation from certain sections, even a lack of openness about accepting the positive aspects of Western education without imbibing its stifling features.

The older system of education as it existed before Macaulay, and continued in many areas even after his reforms, was full of both problems as well as possibilities. Adams's report of 1833, prepared under Lord Bentinck's direction, was an authentic document about the state of education in Bengal before the English took it over. In spite of the crude and underdeveloped pedagogical methods of the traditional schools, Adams acknowledged some of the attractive aspects of the old-fashioned methods of teaching as well as its obvious drawbacks. By and large, however, the inquiry was appreciative of the teaching that was mainly done in natural environments, sustaining the essential link between the student and nature.

All the mechanisms of the English school that seemed to be at odds with the attraction and fulfilment of living in harmony with nature were perceived to persecute the child. In Western thought, the gap between nature and society, or between man and the trappings of civilization, had started growing wider in the literary imagination from the end of the eighteenth century, and had become the basis of the dominant Romantic critique of nineteenth-century industrial and urban society. As discussed in Chapter 1, in Europe,

Rousseau had championed the child's befriending of nature. In India, village schools that held classes under trees enabled a bonding between the student and nature that was completely destroyed by the British (see F. E. Keay, Chapter IX, and Nurullah and Naik 17–42). The pedagogical techniques introduced by the British consequent to Adams's findings, therefore, were not admired unequivocally later but subjected to severe questioning as well.

At the same time, critics of the formal education system posited bucolic simplicity as a value that was regrettably not ingrained within the new educational venture. Biographies, histories and discourses on education looked back nostalgically at aspects of traditional teaching in relation to such upgraded schools in towns and cities. In 'Shiksha Samasya' ('The Problem of Education'), for instance, Tagore maintains that during the process of growing up, the sympathy of nature is greatly desirable, and trees, a clear sky, fresh air, clean water repositories and a liberal vision are not any less important than benches and boards, or textbooks and tests (*Rabindra Rachanabali XI*: 564).

Tagore's views are a prime exemplar demonstrating how the educational agenda of the English rebounded on them. Privileged Bengalis who had exposure to Western education, as I have mentioned before, attempted to holistically assess their own education vis-à-vis the Romantic critique of structures and systems that obstruct individual growth and autonomy. Consequently, they argued in favour of a pedagogical practice that would give some breathing space to individual students and allow them to empirically imbibe a nonformal 'learning' from the natural environment as well. Tagore's founding of Shantiniketan was an attempt to find an alternative to the asphyxiation caused by the English system.

However, Tagore's experimental education, too, sometimes unwittingly fell in line with a regimented curriculum that sabotaged the idea of freedom and spontaneity that was concomitant to an education within nature. Abanindranath Takur for instance, said that Shantiniketan contravened what it set out to achieve, disapproving of a *memsahib* teaching nature study to children in the kindergarten with the help of 'potted plants' and 'caged rabbits'. Abanindranath also alleged that it was destructive of the joys of childhood to make a child engage in hammering a nail all day in the name of learning 'self-help', and derisively called the whole enterprise 'a hammering at the very base of the children's department' (Abanindranath Thakur, 'Shishuder Rabindranath' ('Rabindranath as Children See Him') 371).

11

Fictional representations in children's writing of the nineteenth century, however, also generally did not endorse the urbane model of schooling pioneered by the English, and recalled the days of the past when education was

housed in the very midst of nature. Reminiscing on the natural surroundings of the rural school, they romanticized an indigenous education that was attractive by contrast to the newer regimen of 'English' studies. Children's stories that deal sympathetically with the child protagonist's desire to break free of the establishment and sometimes escape to natural surroundings are rooted in the rural idyll of Bengal, with its verdant countryside, its bountiful monsoons and its overflowing rivers. In fact, they corroborate a compelling view held across the spectrum of East–West scholarship about the child's ability to learn best and fastest in proximity with nature (see Chapter 1).

Since the English scheme for urban education did not take into account the affinity of the Indian mentality with nature, the ambience in their schools restricted free play and the expression of unbounded energy. The child protagonist's frustration about her/his claustrophobic surroundings often manifests itself in wanting to do away with the institution of school altogether and finding an outlet in an unpolluted, untamed natural surrounding. Bengali writing of the late nineteenth century depicts nature as 'a sentient being' (Priya Ranjan Sen 246) that acts as friend, philosopher and guide. The ills of Western and urban education, as represented in fictional as well as critical texts, could only be reversed by upholding the value of a remote past with an education close to nature. Abanindranath Takur's *Khirer Putul* (*The Cream Doll*) (1888), for instance, seems to desire an unambiguous return to nature. In this long short story, a description of the natural and placid beauty of the countryside of Bengal is preceded by the fantasy about 'a new land, a dreamland where they could just run around and play; there would be *no school, no teacher, no hand holding a cane*' (emphasis added) (51).

Nature has a central place in the romantic lyricism of Rabindranath Tagore. Much of his poetry expresses the child's normal and instinctive identification with the joyous aspects of his natural surroundings. To quote one illustration from his poetry, the protagonist of the children's poem 'Murkhu' ('Stupid'), would rather be considered a fool and remain outside a stiff and formal education system than not be allowed free access to the world of nature that is familiar to him (*Shishu Bholanath* 582). Children's poetry of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, by and large, expresses the child's normal and instinctive identification with the happy aspects of her/his natural surroundings.

Child protagonists who feel more at home in the natural environment rather than within the constricted framework of schools are ubiquitous in Tagore's fictional narratives. In the short story 'Chhuti' ('Holiday') (1892), the appeal to nature finds a voice through the child protagonist Phatik, who is forced to live in his maternal uncle's house and attend school in Kolkata. Longing for the freedom of his village home and surroundings, he fondly remembers flying a kite, singing his self-composed songs in gay abandon,

and wandering aimlessly along river bank, taking a swim whenever he wanted to.

The adolescent hero of Tagore's 'Atithi' (1895) too, is more accustomed to and in harmony with natural environs than within the middle-class institutions of home and school. He is described as a deer cub who refuses to get tied down or controlled by anything. His imaginative temperament energizes him to fearlessly befriend 'the loveless freedom of the unknown outside world' (319) although it means giving up certain comforts of a regulated life. Tarapada expresses his nonconformity to the values of the establishment in not merely running away from school education, but from the tedium of being constricted within the defined set-up of a home and a family. Tarapada has nothing against learning per se, but cannot accept an education with a specific curriculum. His complex response to his own education is demonstrated in the involvement with which he avails of the opportunity given to him to learn English seriously, a language that opens out the world for him. He engages pleasurably with the subject while concurrently participating wholeheartedly in the unpredictable movements and the exhilarating turbulence of his natural surroundings. Tarapada's situation does not problematize nature and studies as two mutually exclusive options. He is at least mature enough to realize that there is no contradiction between being one with nature and learning English, at least not until his consent to a marriage proposal is sought as remuneration for his lessons. This involved counter-discourse that values 'English' education because of lack of access to it, though not necessarily within the stringent routine of school or when it is simultaneously threatened with the condition of being incarcerated within the institution of marriage, deserves a closer and more nuanced reading that I will take up in Chapter 4.

An illustration from Tagore's short story 'Byabadhan' ('The Gap') (1891) (which is a story for adults with adult concerns) calls attention in an oblique and unusually suggestive manner to the inhumanity of English education and the Western way of thinking. 'Byabadhan' does not have anything to do overtly with schools, children, or education. Banamali and Himangshu, who are distant cousins and also the greatest of friends, represent two different approaches to gardening as well as to human relationships. Himangshu is an educated gardener who learns to scientifically take care of his garden with the help of Western knowledge and techniques. He embarks on gardening with a lot of intelligence, and therefore probes the 'how' and 'why' of natural phenomena and processes, while Banamali's approach to his own garden is intuitive and emotional, not rational. Banamali's garden is to him like his own children. He nurtures a heart-felt concern for it because it means a lot to him, and is averse to any kind of logical questioning about it. A dispute over the actual ownership of a lemon tree instigates a long drawn-out and heartrending court case between the two families. After this, Himangshu

stops visiting Banamali altogether. His is a modern, educated response that is rationally explicable. Meanwhile, the guileless, uneducated, gut level and ungrudging affection of Banamali, untainted by any sense of reasoning that has been internalized through English education, leaves his call for a renewed friendship with Himangshu utterly unreciprocated.

12

Such readings notwithstanding, traditional pedagogy contained within itself the seeds of a potentially harmful impact on the learner, as has been borne out by extremely sharp indictments of it by essayists, poets as well as novelists. Despite our own more relaxed practices of learning, it is not a viable alternative to the Western pattern of education because it made the system relapse to its primitive state with all its deficiencies like rote learning, corporal punishment and inadequacy of infrastructure. It would, therefore, be a regressive and self-defeating enterprise to attempt to cure the ills of the English system simply by reverting in an escapist manner to learning amidst nature, not learning English or reinstating an education that was informal, unregimented and made feasible a one-to-one human interaction. Continuing to espouse the pre-colonial system would perpetuate the Guru–Shishya tradition, whose inherent inadequacies were the uncreative emphasis on rote learning of the three R's and the heartless cruelty of corporal punishment meted out to innocent students by ill-tempered and unduly arrogant taskmasters.

Prior to the British taking up the cause of education in Bengal, teaching was restricted to reading, writing and arithmetic, and there was no place for history, geography or science. Some practical needs like maintaining accounts and bookkeeping were sometimes taken care of, and learning was mainly verbal, with multiplication tables, Sanskrit grammar and Bengali religious poetry forming its core (see Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal 13–15). In writing, the students were intended to graduate from the palm leaf to the banana leaf and finally to paper (Rajnarayan Basu 7). Keay denounces the unimaginative method wherein 'all the scholars stand up twice a day with a monitor at their head and repeat the numerical tables' (158), and the unsuitability of textbooks, containing, for example, 'an account of the amours of the God Krishna with his cowherd mistress Radha' (157).

A very early denouncement of a Guru who was clueless about what constituted a balanced education for his students is that by Kartikeya Chandra Ray:

> The youth of today will be unable to imagine the heinous conduct of the gurus of those times and their terrible methods of teaching. They did not

> have a single book that was fit for children in their pathshalas and no sweet moral lessons entered the ears of their students.
>
> (*Atma Jibancharit* (*An Account of My Life*), 6–7, quoted in Tithi Bhattacharya 167)

In the attempt to cultivate good manners and morals among children, textbooks for children merely encouraged learning religious and moral precepts by heart. One of the most pioneering critiques of nineteenth-century education is to be found in Pyari Chand Mitra's *Alaler Ghare Dulal* (1858):

> The kind of education that is imparted in government schools these days does not accomplish the real objective of education because the strengths and qualities of the mind are not put to use properly. Students merely learn by rote, which activates the memory, but keeps the power of thinking dormant, not to talk of analytical and other skills.
>
> (59)

Histories, autobiographies and books on education have confirmed the existence of corporal punishment both before and after the British took up the cause of education in Bengal. There are numerous examples of 'masters punish[ing] with cane or rod, or a truant [being] compelled to stand on one leg holding up a brick in each hand or to have his arms stretched out till completely tired' (Keay 159). This dual problem of cruel punishments and unproductive learning continued to disturb historians, educationists, creative writers and critics throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century.

Rajnarayan Basu, for instance, censures the unsophisticated and crude pedagogical practices of the Gurus, particularly punishing naughty children by making them kneel down for hours on end holding heavy bricks in each hand, letting bugs loose and rubbing *bichhuti* (leaves of a prickly plant) on their bodies (7). Lalbehari Dey, in *Gobindo Samanta*, delineates two of the cruellest punitive practices in vogue – the *narugopal* method of detention and that of tying the student to the jackfruit tree and then tormenting him with *bichhuti* all over his body. The Guru would deliberately use his cane on the students' knees or the joints of the fingers which hurt most. These were his only means of maintaining discipline in his school (50).

Rabindranath Tagore has analysed both these shortcomings in detail in 'Shiksha Samasya'. He laments that there is no relevance of what we memorize day in and day out from ten to four in our lives, our homes and the people around us – in fact, they are at odds with one another. Within such

a scheme of things, the function of the Guru in shaping up his students is equally pathetic:

> At an age when children in other countries are letting down their hair to play, ours are swallowing bitter pills of reprimand and digesting unadulterated doses of caning. Such a hopeless picture will continue as long as we go on learning by rote what is absolutely essential without experiencing the joy of learning.
>
> ('Shikshar Herpher' ('Educational Alterations'), *Rabindra Rachanabali XI*: 537)

In autobiographical writing, too, such scepticism about our traditional teaching methodology expresses itself repeatedly. In his memoirs *Shatwar Batsar* (*Seventy Years*), Bipin Chandra Pal admits that he could not tune his mind to confinement within the stringent discipline of an urban *pathshala*. He reminisces about how his mind and heart would inevitably fly to the river bank as he would unwillingly struggle to fulfil the gruelling task of memorizing multiplication tables without understanding them (68). One of the reasons why Rajnarayan Basu, too, disapproves of this kind of learning is because it completely neglects physical training and the exercise of the body, an imperative of all-round development. He is irreverent about the title *shanto chele* (peace-loving child) given to young lads who are seen poring over books all day, because an exercise of the mental faculties without a proportionate exercise of the limbs is likely to lead them to more harm than good (41). Pramadacharan Sen also acknowledges having developed an aversion for a system of education that inflicted such cruel punishments on him (see Introduction, *Bhimer Kapal* 9).

Rabindranath Tagore recalls having yawned and slept through his first lessons at home (*My Boyhood Days* 5). His awareness that children always have to play an acquiescent role before their elders, who use studies as a weapon of oppression, causes his concentration in studies to flag. The grinding mill of studies continues from morning till night (*My Boyhood Days* 33). The monotony of going to school and studying during a large portion of the day, with its preparations and aftermath occupying the early mornings and late evenings, goes on ad infinitum (*My Boyhood Days* 43). Somewhat like Amal in *Dakghar* and the little boy in the poem 'Murkhu' who finds the proposition of being a hawker more attractive than the constraints of his home, he seeks his only refuge from this boredom in the terrace where the suffocating skyline of the city mingles with the infinity of the sky beyond, promising the incorrigible romantic in him a possibility of an escape (*My Boyhood Days* 49). In *Jibansmriti* (*My Reminiscences*), he reminisces having wanted to run away with the possible help and connivance of servants,

bangle sellers, Jews who came to sell home-made perfume and *kabuliwallas* (*My Reminiscences* 26 and 59). His sense of imprisonment is manifested in his description of school as a big box with the walls as sentries to guard the prisoners inside. It is this colourless and joyless environment which provokes him to perpetually fantasize running away from school. In his own school, therefore, he treats any student who cannot adapt to the curriculum of the school with indulgence, and does not measure them by adult standards and expectations as other teachers normally do.

13

Some of the better-known child protagonists in nineteenth-century English literature are the forerunners of child protagonists in Bengali fiction who abhor the imposition of learning their lessons by rote, as they cannot see any relevant connection between what they are forced to learn and real life. In Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*, David is made to memorize grammar, history and geography without understanding them by his stepfather; the entire exercise is not only futile, but also frightening, as it is combined with a dire threat of punishment. In the ensuing passage, Dickens describes David's trauma provoked by his father's educational regime:

> I hand the first book to my mother . . . I take a last drowning look at the page as I give it into her hand, and start off aloud at a raring pace while I have got it fresh. I trip over a word. Mr. Murdstone looks up. I trip over another word. Miss Murdstone looks up. I redden, tumble over half a dozen words, and stop. I think my mother would show me the book if she dared.
>
> (26)

In Dickens's *Hard Times*, the emphasis is on a dry learning of facts, based on a practical, utilitarian attitude to studies and self-improvement, which has no place for the imagination. Though perhaps more goal-oriented and constructive than the mindless learning by rote enforced by the Bengali *Pandit*, it accomplishes learning only in terms of quantities, emphasizing how much rather than what is being learnt.

Critical opinion on the inadequacies of the Gurus who resort to violent punitive practices and impose learning by rote as I have enumerated above can be found in nursery rhymes, poetry and plays for children as well as short stories and novels for adults. By the end of the nineteenth century, the unquestioned deference to the Guru propagated by Vidyasagar and his contemporaries was no longer taken for granted. There were prolific representations of the Guru as a type who was not only fearsome and cruel, but

also insensitive to human needs and not a very competent teacher. Although the conventional Guru–Shishya tradition underwent a questioning because of a new psychological awareness of the student as a complex human being, the Guru, on the other hand, got oversimplified into a pompous and ridiculous figure who intimidates rather than shares his learning with his students.

Some of Tagore's poems illustrate this point. To take a few examples, the Guru in 'Putul Bhanga' (*Shishu Bholanath* 582) throws away a child's favourite doll because he recites a multiplication table wrongly. Another one, in 'Primary Ishkule Prae-mara Pandit' ('The Oft-Beating Master of the Primary School') (*Khapchhara* (*Out of Sync*) 447), frequently practises violence on his pupils. The imagined Guru in 'Chotobaro' (Child or Adult) (*Shishu* (*The Child*) 24) civilly bids his student goodbye only when he feels threatened by the student's announcement that he is now grown-up like his father and no longer needs to be taught.

One can chart some historical reasons for the progressive degeneration of the Guru in fiction into a laughing stock among the children he ostensibly teaches. Prior to the British infiltration into the arena of Indian education, the Guru was often an object of ridicule because he was entirely dependent on fees and gifts from parents and the goodwill of the zamindar. Hitesh Sanyal's historical survey confirms, on the other hand, that many Gurus were devoted to imparting learning selflessly although they taught in *pathshalas* with little or no monetary remuneration. But it is perhaps because of this that they had to keep shops, do farming and go around collecting students in order to supplement their meagre earnings (11–12). Consequently, their frustration sometimes found an outlet in chastising students unjustifiably. The Gurus accepted gifts to supplement their meagre salaries, or students collected voluntary funds from among themselves for the Gurus. Being at the mercy of students, and virtually in a subservient position, therefore, these Gurus commanded scant respect for themselves. Reviewing education within the growing political awareness at the turn of the twentieth century and for two decades thereafter, Aparna Basu says: 'The low salary, the want of prospects, and in some cases the squalid conditions in which they worked, were the cause of a good deal of the discontent among schoolmasters' (193). She reiterates that being 'underpaid, ill-trained and discontented' and 'housed in insanitary and inadequate buildings, cramming their pupils instead of educating them', they were not likely to produce responsible or good citizens (206).

The inadequacies of this older class of Gurus were sought to be overcome by the model teacher fashioned by colonial education, with his new printed books and scientific teaching methods, who epitomized the virtues of the new bhadralok class. The entire schooling system, in fact, was revamped by the pioneers of colonial education in Bengal:

> The pathshala regime, previously allowing for a long break in the middle of the day, was changed to a continuous session from ten to four. The palm and plantain leaves for writing were replaced by slate and chalk. Payment to gurus by pupils were strictly regularized and the previous system of part payment in 'cash' and part in 'kind' was replaced with a predetermined/school fee. Attendance registers were introduced and the spatial imagination of students scrupulously territorialized by teaching them to draw maps.
>
> (Tithi Bhattacharya 170 and 171)

Tagore's fiction provides a complex variation of the formidable Guru in the short story 'Ginni' (The Housewife) (1891). It offers a rare and subtle psychological insight into the Guru's utter lack of sensitivity in addressing his young *male* student Ashu as *ginni* or 'mistress of the house' because he had seen him playing 'Doll's Wedding' with his sister in order to keep himself busy on a rainy day that forecloses any outdoor activity. Guru Shibnath Pandit is equally guilty of the grosser forms of child abuse like beating and scolding. But his ruthlessness and complacency are captured in the single act of crude unconcern with which he proceeds to eat his snack and smoke his pipe while Ashu, accused of effeminacy, not only becomes a butt of ridicule, but finds himself exposed in a way that impairs his self-esteem forever.

In Sukumar Roy's *Jhalapala* (*Riotous*) (*Sukumar Rachanabali* 163–81), a play for children, once again, the pedagogical malaise of an underdeveloped educational enterprise unfolds in the person of the semiliterate, pretentious and brutal *Pandit*. The students in the play are able to see through the *Pandit*'s hypocrisy in asserting the primacy of studies over any form of entertainment, while he is himself not above leaving his classes in order to go and attend a local musical performance. The morally self-righteous rhetoric of the *Pandit* only makes the children want to turn away from learning. According to Keshta, the schoolmaster's behaviour justifies overturning the whole nexus between diligence in studies and success in later life that was so integral to the emergent Bengali middle-class consciousness. Keshta obviously parodies Vidyasagar when he says that anybody who studies hard is likely to get run over by carriages.

Amal, the bedridden hero of Tagore's *Dakghar* (*The Post Office*) (1911) spurns the appellation of *Pandit* (learned man, particularly a Sanskrit teacher) if it involves theoretical knowledge that is strictly confined within the walls of homes and schools. Unable to overcome the claustrophobia brought about by his terminal illness, his untamed spirit asserts itself in a romantic hope of enablement, if only by becoming a curdseller, so that he can step outdoors into the big, wide world and see all its lands and peoples.

Among Tagore's poems, for instance, the child hero of 'Prashna' (*Shishu* 18) wants to just *play* at studying with his mother while Motilal Nandi of 'Paathshaale Hai tole Motilal Nandi' ('Motilal Nandi Yawns at School') (*Khapchhara* 443) throws the pages of his grammar book into the Ganga, reckoning it as the only progress he can make vis-à-vis his lesson. A third variation is the visionary boy of 'Bichitra Shadh' ('Strange Wish') (*Shishu* 19) who wants to identify with a hawker by destroying the slate that he writes on in a symbolic gesture. It would also liberate him from the observing the norms of regularity and punctuality. In each of these, the child protagonist fantasizes a life without school and its accompanying irritants like the behavioural rules it imposes on the students.

The domestic Indian system of elementary and secondary education also proved irksome to the students because of its paucity of the implements necessary for study and its bedraggled, penurious condition. Schools in rural Bengal could hardly attempt to simulate havens of sylvan bliss that were glorified by the Romantics or inspired by literary genres like the pastoral. Housed in '*shabby* straw-built structures' (B. B. Misra 429) or held out of necessity in open air under whatever shade trees could provide within the harsh weather conditions, theirs was not a conscious incorporation of Rousseau's doctrines as an exercise of choice.

Mohammed Azhar Ali describes the premises of schools in rural and backward areas, corroborating that they did not have buildings, not even tin sheds but that classes were held under trees, in temples, in the courtyards of houses or in guest houses (11–12). Secondary education lacked the most basic aids of teaching, the masters were ill equipped to teach, and the school buildings were unkempt and dilapidated. In a fictional account, Lalbehari De's *Gobindo Samanta* describes two *pathshalas* of the village Kanchanpur. One of them is housed in a *chalaghar* (makeshift shed), and the other in the backyard of Ramrup's house, under a jackfruit tree, the venue of which shifts during the rainy season to the verandah of his house (46). Hitesh Sanyal's research, going back to the period before the English took up the cause of education in Bengal, unearths that there was no infrastructure or furniture in schools, no school building as such, and no stationery except what the students got themselves. One teacher would be responsible for all the students of the school, whose number would not exceed about twenty (13–19.) The teacher had no fixed pay scale, often not even a regular salary. The perpetual shortage of funds needed to run a school was a significant disadvantage of the indigenous system of education.

Why, then, could it not simply be overcome by a blind imitation of the British pattern, with its modern buildings and its chairs and benches, apart from a regular and institutionalized source of funds for maintenance, which the Britishers seemed only too keen and apparently had

the wherewithal to provide? In an uneven development, in some urban areas, English education went a long way to overcome the deficiencies of schools with improvised arrangements and minimal facilities. But both the historical and the fictional examples I have offered above corroborate that no substantial and uniform facelift and no unequivocal appreciation of Western education was achieved even after the British overhauling of the machinery of education.

Despite not being able to settle the matter of education by adopting this or that method in toto, by the end of the century, Englishmen and Indians alike expressed a considerable amount of despondency about the viability and use of the English system of education. In 1901, Lord Curzon admitted that 'there exists a powerful school of opinion which does not hide its conviction that the experiment [of English education] was a mistake, and that its result has been disaster' (quoted in B. B. Misra 284) and deprecated the efforts of Englishmen in separating Indians from their past heritage. English education, however, proliferated and has prospered well into the twentieth century and has simultaneously continued to be a matter of literary and nonliterary deliberations. Although such debates that continue into the twentieth century are beyond the scope of this chapter, both fictional themes as well as dissertations in other branches of learning also intermittently persisted in commemorating a tranquil but obsolete pedagogical environment with its liberating absence of paraphernalia. This questioning of English/Western education with a concomitant valorizing of the indigenous order has endured in literature for children and nonliterary prose until present times.

In the twentieth-century Bengali child protagonist's interaction with her/his family and school education, although she/he registers a substantial amount of protest about not wanting to accept any 'system' as such, she/he has to ultimately compromise with the domestic and educational structures around her/him. It shows that despite their critique and their envisaging of breaking loose from these structures, and notwithstanding involvement with causes bigger than home and school, these child protagonists usually retract and return to the fold through the discursive manoeuvres of the adult writers.

Notes

1 All the quotations from Rabindranath Tagore in this work, unless they are from English translations, are from the 1961 Viswabharati centenary edition of *Rabindra Rachanabali*. The ones that have been taken from English translations have been footnoted as such but the details of the original texts in the same edition of *Rabindra Rachanabali* have also been given alongside.

The translations of quotations from all the Bengali texts in this work that have been referred to are mine except where mentioned otherwise.

2 Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989; reprint, London: Faber & Faber, 1990) is a significant landmark among postcolonial readings of English education which, in her opinion, initially devised a merger of the study of Christianity and English literature, targeting the easily assimilation of Indians into it.
3 Robin Hood is heroic outlaw in English folklore, known for 'robbing from the rich and giving to the poor', assisted by a group of fellow outlaws known as his 'Merry Men'. William Tell is a folk hero of Switzerland whose legend is recorded in a late fifteenth-century Swiss chronicle and later disseminated in English. 'Casabianca' is a poem by British poet Felicia Dorothea Hemans, first published in the *Monthly Magazine* in August 1826. It tells the story of the young Casabianca who loyally remained at his military post as against deserters all around and perished in the flames of an enemy attack. 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' is a poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson. It describes an episode during the Battle of Balaclava during the Crimean War that demonstrates both the heroism and the brutality of it.
4 See a detailed discussion of the instructive capsules provided by these writers in Sibaji Bandopadhyay, *Gopal Rakhal Dwandasamas* 134, and Khagendranath Mitra, *Shatabdir Shishusahitya* 116.
5 For a detailed mapping of education in Bengal in the pre-colonial period, see Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal, *Britishpurba Aitihyagata Shikshabyabastha* and Sivanath Sastri, *Ramtanu Lahiri o Tatkalin Banga Samaj* (*Ramtanu Lahiri and Contemporary Bengali Society*) 71–5.

3 The twentieth-century child versus the home and family

> [T]he family proves to be the central mediatory institution between the psychic drama and the social or political realm . . . in which the psychic drama is ultimately acted out and 'resolved.'
>
> Jameson, Frederic. 'Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan' (1977) *The Ideologies of Theory 1*. London: Routledge, 1988, p. 78

> We knew the ways of the grown-ups, and we had no faith at all in their promises – after all, they were adults and we were children.
>
> Tagore, Rabindranath. *My Boyhood Days*. Trans. Marjorie Sykes. Kolkata: Visvabharati, 1948, p. 26

1

Since the middle of the twentieth century, Western sociologists have taken two diametrically opposing standpoints on the family. Led by the well-known American sociologist of the fifties, Talcott Parsons, the functionalists validated the institution of the family as a haven, a unified entity that is a retreat from the alienation, the incomprehensibility and the anonymity of the public world. As I will demonstrate, such a view is compatible with the Indian worldview and is reinforced by the resolutions of many children's stories under consideration in this study. Other sociologists like Laing and Goldthorpe have been severe in their evaluation of the family as an institution, questioning its very prophylactic role. For them, the family, designated by Bertrand Russell to be 'the strongest and most instinctively compelling of social groups (5)', is merely a convenient social construct that views the world as alien, dangerous, hostile and persecutory. Robert Laing's stance on the family was one of the first to interrogate the 'conjugal-family-is-a-haven' thesis. Laing believes the cloying insularity of the family to be responsible for perceiving the world in terms of 'our family' and 'others', engendering for us a world of differences rather than

similarities, and antagonisms rather than solidarities. The group of sociologists who support this position underscore a glaring gap in the family's interactive dynamics with the world beyond, and observe a corresponding promotion of interests within a certain small group, facilitating what Leach calls 'its narrow privacy and tawdry secrets' (*The Listener*, 30 November 1967: 695, quoted in Goldthorpe 77).

Although the family is the intervening institution or the stepping-stone between the child as an individual and society at large, it is equally true that the middle-class family also poses the greatest obstacles in the way of the child's intermingling with the outside world (Elliot 122–4). Introducing the child to the world outside, the middle-class family concurrently imposes sanctions on her/him not to transgress certain thresholds of class, caste, discipline and safety in the process of negotiating with the outer realm. It deploys its protective apparatus to tighten a suffocating hold over the child. This is because of a fear that the world outside might harm the child in an irreversible manner.

Yet Elliot also feels that there is much that is injurious and even violent *within* family life (124). Goldthorpe takes an extreme position about power politics within the family and goes on to say that not only does the family embody authority and repression, but like all social systems, it depends in the last resort on force or the threat of force (80). Patricia Uberoi cautions us that 'the family is *also* a site of *exploitation and violence* . . . of adults over children' (emphasis added) (36). This position needs to be qualified by the condition that it is generally true only in economically deprived class contexts. Despite the occasional resort to corporal punishment by middle-class parents, such inferences about parental violence are not universally and ultimately applicable in the protected, middle-class settings of children's literature that I will by and large be concerned with. Bengali children's literature, by and large, spans the sites of middle-class families, and such cases of severe misuse of parental rights, therefore, are not within its range and consequently beyond the scope of my investigation.

Andre Beteille challenges yet another aspect of family life by condemning the regeneration of private property within it, as Engels had done more than a hundred years ago ('The Family and the Reproduction of Inequality,' Patricia Uberoi 435–51). Stretching Engels's argument, however, Beteille not only holds the institution of the family responsible for perpetuating inequalities by engendering and safeguarding material capital from one generation to the next but social and cultural capital as well.

It is, however, not relevant for my study to delve into the validity or otherwise of this Marxist reading of the family. My concern is the organization of the family involving parents and children in all its indifference and hostility to the world outside as well as what sociologists have perceived to

be even more unacceptable about it- the intra-familial play of power within its own walls. In shielding children against the outside world, not only does the family protect the interests of a core group at the cost of everything that lies outside it but also produces a situation in which children always have to acquiesce to adult opinion:

> Within the family itself . . . the member with the greater strength and willingness to use it commands more force than others do. This is usually the father, and . . . the parents as compared with the children.
>
> Goode, W.J. 'Force and Violence in the Family,' *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Nov. 1971.
>
> Pag, N. quoted in Goldthorpe, *Family in Western Societies,* p. 81.

Parental authority has been a timeless ideal, and has solicited acceptance without questioning by children till present times, more specifically in the Indian cultural context (Raghuvir Sinha 101). Indian children have almost always been expected to owe permanent deference, in fact devotion, to both parents, respect their will, obey and avoid hurting their feelings.

Roland Lardinois, in a study about family relationships in India, observes that the child 'gradually internalizes the subordinate and hierarchical relationships within the family' (597–8). Yet the widespread rebellious propensity and dissident desires of the child are simultaneously triggered by the environment of her/his home and family, its figures of authority, inclusive of parents, grandparents and parent-substitutes, and the rules and regulations which it imposes on her/him. Writing within a Western context way back in the first half of the twentieth century, long before Parsons's formulations on the family, the sociologist Fingel believed that

> A child who never disobeyed his parents and who never felt their authority as irksome would in all likelihood be sadly deficient in individuality and initiative in later life . . . the incompatibility between the desires and points of view of children and of adults makes such a tendency to rebellion and hostility to some extent inevitable.
>
> (24)

Apropos the Indian child, Sudhir Kakar elaborates on the common phenomenon of a sudden outburst of subversive energy that is caused by 'inflexible standards of absolute obedience and conformity to familial and social standards' (35). This unequal relationship within the family because of which the child is always at the receiving end is a very serious shortcoming of the functioning of the family. Most societies in India, says S. Anandalakshmy,

> invest age with respect and authority, the most traditional ones carrying this to the point of becoming gerontocracies. The age-status link is often more apparent in an intra-familial situation.
>
> (90)

Respect for age is often so ritualized and formal that interpersonal communication between the young and the old becomes tortuous and virtually impossible. In common parlance, the phrase 'generation gap' is used to describe an insurmountable difference between the attitudes, behaviour, interests and ways of thinking of the elder and the younger generation that makes communication between them unfeasible. 'The maladjustment between the two generations is growing at an alarming rate' writes Nirad C. Chaudhuri at the onset of the seventies. 'It is the rebelliousness in the family which is spilling out into a wider field' (191). Inter-generational conflict had by then started expressing itself more freely, with children focused on replacing parental values or at least rearranging certain priorities.

2

Robertson Elliot has summarized the ongoing debate about the institution of the family, encapsulating the conflicting sociological views:

> Laing sees the family's influence as baneful while the functionalist tradition sees the family's influence as generally beneficent . . . Laing emphasizes the importance of individual autonomy, freedom and self-awareness, and . . . sees the close bonds of family life as suffocating. For Laing, the family restricts individuality and smothers self-awareness while expectations of reciprocal concern accumulate constant and unremitting obligations.
>
> (124)

My study will be predicated on unravelling paradoxical situations within the family set-up in Bengali literature that would subsume both these viewpoints. The conflict that goes to make the very stuff of children's literature is attributable to what Robert Hess and Gerald Handel describe as the children's 'connectedness' with as well as 'separateness' from their family ('The Family as a Psychosocial Organisation', *The Psychosocial Interior of the Family* 10), which has them caught in a bind. The extent of parental authority and the manner in which it is exercised is one of the forces that shape the pattern of separateness–connectedness in the parent–child relationship. Laing seems to say that family bonds are supportive though suffocating, and this anomaly lies at the heart of the functioning of the family (Elliot 26).

To sum up, twentieth-century thinking and writing about children vis-à-vis the family has questioned smug adult assumptions of the deference due to status and power irrespective of valid disagreements of opinion that children might have with parents. Also, sociologists who interpreted the domestic milieu of the nuclear family as a sort of sanctuary that protects the child's vulnerability to the outside world met their rejoinder from sociologists who perceived the family's exercise of power as an impediment to the child's freedom and unrestrained participation in life. More recent scholarship views the family as a self-obsessed cocoon that is not only blind and apathetic to but also suspicious of the real world outside. What I intend to uncover from my study of Bengali children's literature is the coexistence of the ambivalent attitude of the child to the familial institution apropos its power play as well as its protective role.

3

The seemingly polarized opinions I have referred to above might explain the literary child protagonist's complex movements and conflicting trajectories within the same story. The way the plots of some of the stories are unravelled, which I will explain in detail in Chapter 7, might enable further understanding of these. Child protagonists in literature as perhaps also the child-friendly authors and critics who write with some empathy about them have found the power nexus represented by adults in the family difficult to accept and endorse. The corpus of juvenile literature dealing with children in the context of their families that I have studied sees through adult authority and seems to substantiate Robertson Elliot's view that the family 'serves the interests of those who have power but oppresses and represses those who do not' (19). Children are, therefore, its greatest victims. My inquiry is based precisely on the *internal* workings and power relations within the family. These have been and continue to be a major preoccupation in literature for the age group of child readers that has passed the phase of fairy tales.

In children's literature over the last hundred years, the difference between the response of child and adult characters in the family is manifested in the disjunction between the child's freer, more innocent impulse that is receptive to the world and the adult's cautious, worldly-wise response to everything around. The child protagonist must either passively accept or speak out against whatever does not agree with her/him within the family set-up. Many child protagonists of the twentieth century have become progressively more outspoken and spirited than their earlier counterparts about not accepting the oppression of parents and home. They seem to challenge the more conformist assumptions about the sanctified space of the family and the commensurately predatory nature of the outside world. The

twentieth-century Bengali children's fiction, in particular, abounds in portrayals of children struggling to overcome parental and familial restrictions regarding the world beyond the home and family. Craving to leave the apron string of the family, she/he longs to confront the world outside, disregarding parental commands and reciprocal filial obligations within the domestic space. This categorical refusal to acquiesce in the accepted system is perceptibly complemented by an authorial sympathy that no longer subscribes to a black and white depiction of childhood. Nonetheless, the child protagonist ironically finds it convenient to return within the protective matrix of the family after acting contrary or breaking out for a while. The experience of the outside world, as I will demonstrate later, is somewhat counterproductive towards positively nurturing her/his initial rebellious predilection and energies. This renders retraction from a definitive move of noncompliance almost inevitable. The endings of the stories mostly appear to uphold the functionalist valorization of the family that is somewhat dated, at least in the West. The evidently divergent ideas interwoven within an understanding of the family structure usually operate and are charted within the same narrative.

4

Entering society at the age of four or five, the child in almost any Indian context, encounters

> the contrast between an earlier, more or less unchecked benevolent indulgence and the new inflexible standards of absolute obedience and conformity to familial and social standards.
>
> (Sudhir Kakar 35)

Despite perceiving a threat to her/his individuality, whether at home or school, and notwithstanding her/his dynamic and at times seemingly uncompromising response, the child protagonist hardly has the agency to resolve or alleviate the problem. There are hardly any intra-domestic situations in which parents do not impede the freedom of the child. To illustrate with the help of a few examples from relatively recent perspectives of literary children, in Asha Purna Devi's 'Kishe Kharach Holo' (Taking Stock) (1976), Gautam spells out his annoyance clearly and specifically:

> Don't talk about getting scolded at home. Tell me what it is that we don't get told off for. Getting up, sitting, eating, lying down, yawning, breathing – parents are forever ready to tick you off. My father is also the type who won't stop imparting advice if he spots you. Dreading this,

> I don't go anywhere near him as far as possible. And my mother? She finds fault with everything from my hair to my nails.
>
> (*Sharadiya Kishore Bharati* 1976: 19)

Once again, in *Ek Samuddur Anek Dheu* (*So Many Ripples on a Single Sea*) (1980) by the same author, the child protagonist Shanu candidly sums up: 'Whatever young people want to do, the elders have to say something adverse about it' (8).

Even in 1993, the situation does not seem to have changed much. The child protagonist of Sisir Kumar Das's *Argos*, while acknowledging that she knows better than her elders, says, 'Let it be- one must not argue with one's elders, never mind how stupidly they talk' (9).

Such a state of frustration and helplessness seems to be shared by the writer and the first-person narrator, and also solicits the reader's empathy.

The transition in the sub-genre of children's literature that I engage with – that expresses the disgruntlement, dreams, discoveries and disillusionments of middle-class children trying to find some kind of release from being incarcerated within their homes – was not all that sudden. The later part of the nineteenth century, as I have demonstrated in Chapter 2, even more definitively paved the way towards according the place of a 'hero' to a hitherto unacceptable and morally outrageous rebel child protagonist who speaks up for her/his rights, whether in an overtly confrontational or a moderate manner. Till the turn of the century, as I have demonstrated earlier, an over-prescriptive, normative tone persisted apropos all interactions between adults and children in Bengali literature for adults as well as children, and stories generally ended up exemplifying the Vidyasagarian Gopal–Rakhal types of the good and the bad boy. Those children who were submissive to their parents' will were held up as archetypes of 'goodness', whereas those who rebelled set bad examples. The trend overlapped into some later writing too. Well into the twentieth century, in Dakshina Ranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Charu O Haru* (*Charu and Haru*) (1912), Haru, the poor but good boy, is also the better student by far and beats the rich but bad Charu hollow in studies. In his story 'First Boy, Last Boy' (1927), Majumdar charts the trajectory of the 'last boy', who, in keeping with the role model of the bad boy once again, is not only bad in studies but also in behaviour, but turns into a new leaf with the help of the love and affection he gets from his elders at home and school.

The didactic strain in Bengali children's literature and textbooks not only demarcates the good child from the bad child and places them in watertight compartments, but also generally suggests that the good child is necessarily poor and the bad child rich. The nineteenth-century writer Kaminisundari Debi (mentioned in Chapter 2), had woven a story around the extreme exemplars of Barada and Sharada. They exemplify not only good versus bad but also good

and poor as against bad and rich, respectively. Sharada is the bad–rich girl who ultimately emulates Barada the good–poor girl (discussed in Malavika Karlekar 104–5). The correlation of goodness with poverty and wickedness with riches has recurred again and again in much of later writing in examples with different names, particularly in popular stories in magazines for children. I list some of these examples from children's magazines (Table 3.1):

Table 3.1 Child Stereotypes

Story	*Author*	*Magazine and year*	*Good–poor vs. bad–rich boy/girl*
Shankhachiler Daake (serial)	Sukomal Basu	*Pathshala* September–May 1964–65: 31 and 294	Ritu vs. Ratan
Pratidwandi	Narayan Chandra Chanda	*Shishusaathi* Annual 1945: 96–102	Binay vs. Ajit
Parajay	Akhil Neogi	*Shishusaathi* Annual 1931: 125–32	Shefali vs. Ashoka
Gariber Chele	Prafulla Chandra Basu	*Shuktaara* Annual 1932: 88–95	Harinath vs. Kritanta
Pariksha	Indira Debi	*Mouchak* September–October 1962: 293–5	Tapan vs. Bikash

The bad–rich girl/boy who tries to harass the poor–good girl/boy usually does not succeed, whereas the good–poor girl/boy, though thwarted in whatever she/he is doing at every step, wins her/his way to good results, popularity, success and riches through honest hard work and dutiful behaviour and eventually forgives the bad–rich girl/boy. Hackneyed as the equation sounds, writers for children from the age of Vidyasagar onward have tried to indoctrinate children and perhaps also their guardians and mentors into assuming that poverty and want helps the child to learn certain human values through the challenge of a sheer struggle for existence, while being born into riches and luxury and living a life of indulgence only spoils them. This strain of preaching moral values to children through the stereotypes of the good–poor girl/boy and the bad–rich girl/boy, therefore, continues well into the twentieth century. Despite an evolving complexity in the portrayal of childhood which did not necessarily demonize the child for questioning some aspects of her/his home and school, a handful of writers for children continued to advise and instruct children with the help of the oversimplified good–poor girl/boy role model.

No closing date eventually helps in separating the literary phase that typecast children as good or bad from the a more modern, rounded depiction of them. A handful of nineteenth-century English children's books pioneered the portrayal of children as not flatly 'good' or 'bad' but as complex characters whose 'wickedness/naughtiness/defiance' might make them more attractive to the reader. A wholesome, positive attitude to children who deviate from the norms defining the 'good' girl/boy had started developing in the nineteenth century. Likewise, in Bengali children's literature, certain valorization of the naughty boy's antics, initiated greatly by *Pagla Dashu*, continued in the juvenilia produced subsequently. Priyambada Devi's 'Subodh Chhele Noi' ('Hardly a Good Boy') is an early example of a poem that celebrates a spirited boy's assertion of himself as the one who will hold his own against adults who are both unduly harsh on children and equally unjust to less privileged human beings:

> I'm not the kind of boy who could be tamed by a scolding
> I'd leave all aside to obey orders strictly given
> But seeing a poor person getting harassed or exploited
> I would refuse to walk away silently from the scene
> I am not afraid of punishment if that is my due
> But I'm not the kind of boy who'd be tamed by a scolding.
> (*Sandesh,* October–November 1917: 193)

By qualifying with serious exceptions his unwavering acquiescence to adult injunctions, the first-person protagonist of the poem shows himself to be of a new breed of a 'Rakhal' and 'Gopal' combination which has consciously rejected the role model of a straightforward Gopal and yet will do his parents and elders proud. In Biru Chattopadhyay's 'Dushtu Chhele Sangha' (The Naughty Boys' Association), the organization openly declares that it will not admit boys who have neither faced the wrath of their elders nor confronted them about anything (*Mouchak*. April–May1962: 13). Nihar Ranjan Gupta's Shankar, in a story by the same name, who starts off as a 'Rakhal' can hardly be contained within a reductive definition of a naughty boy:

> Shankar was so restless and impetuous; like a whiff of the wind, he was carefree and indomitable. He was noisy and ran around all day and night; his brain was full of mischief, and his body was full of mobility. It is doubtful whether there was anything in the world that he could not do.
>
> (*Kishore Sahitya Samagra* 3)

The last sentence warrants the reinterpretation of Shankar's reputation as a reckless and mischievous boy: it emphasizes that naughty boys are capable, courageous and competent – perhaps even more so than 'good' boys.

Writing about girl child protagonists, the tendency to compartmentalize them into good and bad continued well beyond independence. Among the early-twentieth-century stories about a naughty girl is Punyalata Chakrabarty's 'Shantashila' (which means a girl with a peaceful temperament 'The Good Girl') describes the eponymous protagonist's transformation from a bad to a good girl (*Sandesh.* May–June 1918: 59–62). Sukhalata Rao's poem 'Dui Rakam' ('Two Kinds') (*Sandesh,* September–October 1918: 161) clearly distinguishes between the good and the bad girl, citing their attitude to studies as one of the primary factors determining their good or bad nature. Reba Sinha, in 'Dushtu Meye Chai' ('Naughty Girls Wanted'), a post-independence poem, however, demands appreciation of the naughty girl who will no longer subscribe to the passive gender role determined for her and will not be afraid of confronting obstacles on her way (*Mouchak,* April–May 1951: 56).

In acknowledging the naughty or mischievous child as a thinking human being with certain rights of her/his own, children's writing has progressively become more and more sceptical about parental authority; it is something that is not to be taken for granted. A parent–child conflict, therefore, is as fundamental as life itself, and becomes the subject of many poems, stories, plays and novels.

The suffocating aspects of the family and parental care have, as one would expect, also taken up and seriously dealt with in twentieth-century nonfictional works. In his autobiographical reminiscences in *My Boyhood Days,* Tagore recalls the dictatorial regime of the adults in the household. They do not allow him to see a *jatra* (a traditional open-air drama, although they do not impose the same embargo on themselves (127–63). They indulge themselves by permitting a disruption in their own routine and the discipline of the household to witness *jatras*. The late-night timings during which *jatras* are staged are a privileged threshold that adults can cross but to which the child is denied access. This is both for fear of initiating her/him into indiscipline and of letting her/him gain entry into a domain that deals with adult themes and subjects.

The family is also responsible, at least to begin with, for relentlessly imposing the joyless rigour of school and studies on child protagonists, from Abanindranath's Nalak in the first decade of the twentieth century to Lila Majumdar's Ghoton in the 1970s. The actual details of the tyranny of schools and their curriculum, however, will be discussed in Chapter 4.

One way for children of circumventing a deadlock with their parents is to attempt to find succour outside the four walls of their home, and usually in

the heart of nature. The long-lasting and far-reaching implications of Rousseau and Romanticism started being felt in India at the turn of the century. It found expression in the child's resistance to being coerced into a domestic organization that is administered by overbearing adults and her/his escape into the boundless freedom and uninhibited joys of nature instead. In the twentieth-century Bengali children's literature about the city child, a ready access to nature is not always available, but she/he often wishes to elude the asphyxiation caused by an urban existence. The child protagonist's trying to find an outlet in nature in order to escape the oppression of studies, parents and the monotony of her/his life at home and school will be discussed in Chapter 5.

5

It would be useful, at this juncture, to look into some variations of the mother and father figures as perceived by the child protagonist and delineated with sensitivity by the authors of the works in which they appear. The classic bond between mother and child that David Mandelbaum says is still celebrated in sacred writings, romanticized in popular tales and upheld in actuality of family life in India cannot represent the intricacies of mother–child relations in the modern family that does not abide by abstract, idyllic notions (see Raghuvir Sinha 107). Contemporary sociologists, however, have studied variations and distortions of this within the modern Indian family. Ashis Nandy acknowledges that the mother–son bond is 'the basic nexus and ultimate paradigm of human relationships in India' (37) but takes into account its present-day reconfigurations. Roland Lardinois explores the implications of motherhood in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when he observes that the father's preoccupation with his profession and the world outside home 'often enables the mother to appear as the strong personality in the family, in practice if not in law' (598). In most families in the literature under my purview, barring exceptional cases of the contemporary urban, educated nuclear family in which *both* parents work, the father is usually the only one responsible for activities outside home; he, therefore, is compelled to remain away from his children for a long time. Children, therefore, have extended interaction only with their mother. She is the main source of emotional support, and the one to whom the children sometimes communicate their fears and anxieties. She is also the one who has mostly to deal with children and their forays into the uncertainty and anarchy of the outer world, and is mainly responsible, therefore, for curbing their unrestrained freedom whenever she considers it expedient to do so.

In children's literature, therefore, the mother has had a more significant role to play than the father, usually rubbing the child the wrong way

because she, unlike the father, presides over the domestic space and deals with the child day in and day out. Paradoxically, she is also portrayed as the more indulgent parent, likely to put up with the child's misdeeds – the ever-forgiving, ever-protective refuge. In Rabindranath Tagore's *Shishu* and *Shishu Bholanath* (*The Innocent Child*), she has been depicted as such an archetype. In either case, she is largely indispensable in the world of children's stories and poems.

In real life, the views of contemporary sociologists seem to confirm that upper-class and upper-middle-class mothers are often distant and uncaring. They have less of direct interaction with their children in comparison to their counterparts of the middle and working classes; they, however, also impose fewer constraints. Upper-class families live in comparatively spacious houses and the children, therefore, do not cross the paths of their parents or get in their way very often. The mothers are often engaged in outdoor and extra-familial activities and are not as involved in the nitty-gritties of the household or child-rearing because of the presence of servants. Sociological surveys done in metropolitan cities corroborate that children belonging to the upper class spend time with their mothers only occasionally (Srivastava 1986: 77).[1] The mothers of middle-class children, on the other hand, directly deal with their children and expect their children to follow a certain code of conduct which will contribute towards maintaining a genial ambience and stable order in the house. Sociological studies like the one by Srivastava infer that children of middle-class homes identify more with their mothers (78).

Mothers in children's stories and poems, similarly, can be classified and qualified according to where they belong in the class hierarchy and the associated conventions that they follow. In stories that are set in affluent households, the mothers either do not appear at all or are usually not very involved in the lives of their children. In Satyajit Ray's *Phatikchand*, for instance, the character of the mother does not appear at all. Her mental state and views therefore go unnoticed even while her son has been kidnapped. In Kabita Sinha's *Char Palataker Kahini* (*A Tale of Four Truants*), Pranab, the rich boy who runs away from home, says: 'My mother never thinks of me. She doesn't have time to think of me' (85). These mothers come through as somewhat indifferent, unfeeling and insensitive to the requirements of their children. Unlike middle-class mothers, however, they do not inflict on their children overdoses of rules and regulations which they would find difficult to put up with. They are, therefore, not excessively protective of and authoritarian with their children.

In children's literature, working mothers are few and far between in middle-class contexts. The housewife mother, because of her presence at home all day, has to tackle the child in a way that the father does not, and

the more she curtails her/his freedom, the greater defiance she provokes in her/him. In Sukumar Roy's stories, among the handful of female characters, 'the mother or the elder sister are for ever ready to create conflict within the house' (Lila Majumdar, 'Sukumar Roy', *Shatayu Sukumar* (*A Hundred Years of Sukumar Roy*) 132).

Several stories, on the other hand, corroborate the child's closer interaction with the mother which is also logically accompanied by a greater fear of her. In Shashtipada Chattopadhyay's 'Pandab Goenda' (The Five Ace Detectives) series, Bichchhu is apprehensive about helping herself to an indispensable household prop that she and her gang need for an exercise of detection. She is afraid that when her mother finds out, assuming that it is only to be used for some childish amusement, she 'would first give her quite a few wallopings; the explanations could follow later' (5).

One could conjecture that Bichchhu's mother, like most middle-class mothers in her situation, harassed by housework and children, would beat her merely because Bichchhu's action would inconvenience her and disrupt the order of the household, without reasonably enquiring about why Bichhu has transgressed its obvious rules. The frustration and relentless pressures that middle-class mothers have to put up with on a daily basis could partially explain from the mothers' perspective why they unjustifiably resort to corporal punishment every now and then. Notwithstanding, one of the major causes of resentment of child characters against their family is the reprimands and beatings they get from their mothers.

Where the child protagonist has grown up in poverty and want, the mother, sometimes a widow or driven to single parenting due to the difficult circumstances within which she has to operate, is usually portrayed as having sweated and toiled in order to bring up and educate her child. The moral balance of the stories naturally tilts towards her; she deserves some respect and consideration from her children as a reciprocal gesture. In these stories, the child usually refuses to carry out any kind of serious protest or attempt to escape that will hurt the mother. The mother, too, is usually not as tyrannical but portrayed sympathetically. An example is Ashapurna Devi's *Ek Samuddur Anek Dheu*, in which although Dinglai, the Adivasi Santhal boy's mother, cannot offer him much by way of food, clothes, toys or schooling, she refuses Shanu, the rich boy's offer of taking him home with him in order to educate him:

Dinglai shook his head and said: I don't want to be a Babu.
Shanu: Do you like living like this?
Dinglai: Indeed! What will I gain by becoming a Babu?
Shanu: Think of the stupid things you are saying! You will become educated, what else?
He [Dinglai] shook his head sadly: But my mother will cry! (41)

In Hemendra Kumar Roy's *Der-sho Khokar Kando* (*The Episode of the Hundred and Fifty Boys*), yet another story dealing with a child from an underprivileged social and economic background, the child is unusually obedient and submissive to his mother, and does not actively defy her or run away, but accidentally gets into an adventure which compels him to be absent from home for a while. However, he understands his minimal duty as the only child of his widowed mother, emphasizing throughout that he should be considerate to her because she has to handle the financial as well as the logistical responsibilities of the household:

> Why should Ma always be saddled with household chores while I play around? My mother certainly gives me time off to play, but I know that she is happy to see me close to her. That is why *I don't want to do just what I please*. (emphasis added)
>
> (99)

For a child born into such a situation, the question of rebelling against her/his mother does not arise, much less the prospect of wanting to run away from her. In this instance, however, he is ridiculed by his city friends who have not been brought up single-handedly by their mothers under trying circumstances.

In another literary example, the poor boy gets tempted into running away from home in order to escape extreme poverty and want, but regrets his move towards the end. Amal, one of the truants in Kabita Sinha's *Char Pal-ataker Kahini*, feels a pang of regret later for having left his home, where his father and mother sacrificed so much in order to educate him:

> Amal became distracted. He remembered his little brothers and sisters, his mother and father. Baba used to take so much pain to teach him. Ma would use up all her savings so that he could study. But Amal never liked to study. Amal suddenly burst out crying as though he felt wrenched from inside. If he ever went back, he would never be disobedient to his parents. He would put his mind to his studies. He would act according to their wishes. He would make them happy.
>
> (67)

Amal's resolution of turning into a new leaf not only classifies him among the good–poor 'Gopal' prototypes of Vidyasagar, but actually explains the rationale behind the underprivileged boy's greater compliance with his parents. He is considerate of the sacrifices they have had to make in order for him to get a conventional education that all middle-class children take for granted but sometimes spurn.

In such cases, the 'poor' girl/boy is necessarily the 'good' girl/boy, following the Vidyasagarian model that I have discussed. She/he sensitizes herself/himself not to cause her/his mother any more toil and anxiety than she already has to cope with, although she might be unable to provide her/him with anything more than the minimal requisites for a child's healthy existence and growth.

In all the three examples aforementioned, the poor boy with a careworn but devoted mother does not get sufficiently tempted by anything outside his home that might make him want to go away for good. The three variations cover an extensive range of children's rebellious possibilities against mothers who have had to forego a lot in order to provide for them. In the first, Asha Purna Devi's *Ek Samuddur Anek Dheu*, taking into account his mother's love and care, the poor boy Dinglai refuses to be defiant at the very outset. In the second, Hemendra Kumar Roy's *Der-sho Khokar Kando*, the poor boy accidentally gets into a scrape which he wants to resolve before finally and decisively going home, knowing that his adventure is only temporary, and his place is at home with his mother. And in the last, Kabita Sinha's *Char Palataker Kahini*, the poor boy actually tries to escape with friends, only to regret his decision later.

It is only very rarely that a child belonging to a deprived family desires to cross the threshold of her/his home in a decisive and irrevocable manner, and fantasizes overstepping the geographical, social and economical constraints within which she/he lives. Shankar, a village boy in Bibhutibushan Bandyopadhyay's *Chander Pahar* (*The Moon Mountain*), has no quarrel with his mother, father or anybody at home. But once he gets an opportunity to navigate his way out, his indomitable spirit does not allow him to remain confined within the small world defined by the little village where his home is situated. He justifies his decision by simultaneously and voluntarily taking on the role of the bread earner.

Likewise, in contexts where the mother is physically absent from the setting, the child protagonist not only does not come into confrontation with her but also recalls her with sensitivity, nostalgia and even respect though each child has a different way of alleviating her/his lack of maternal presence and affection. Three examples from disparate periods illustrate the child's coping with an absent or a dead mother. In Rabindranath Tagore's 'Chhuti' (1892), although Phatik is punished by his mother by being sent away to his *mamabari* (maternal uncle's house) in Kolkata, he longs to be back with his mother to his dying day. His hope of getting liberated from his *mami*'s tyranny and reunited with his mother lies in his vision of going home for the *puja* vacation, but ironically and tragically, his real liberation or vacation comes when he dies. In Lila Majumdar's *Tong Ling*, Chand, the hero, sent away to visit relatives in an unfamiliar setting, yearns to be with his mother

and younger brother, and creates a private den for himself in an abandoned underground shelter at the back of the house in order to overcome his loneliness. Although he fantasizes going away to exotic places with Bishe, an itinerant adult role model he nurtures in his imagination, he also undergoes pangs of guilt as he does so, anxious that his mother and younger brother would cry for him (*Lila Majumdar Rachanabali III*: 39–77). In Samaresh Majumdar's *Ani* (1992), the mother dies midway through the story, and Ani can hardly comprehend the abstract consolation offered by his new schoolmaster: one can overcome the loss of a mother by invoking the country as a mother and repeating Bankim Chandra's slogan, *Bande Mataram*. In the first of the aforementioned three examples, the dream of freedom cherished and kept alive by the child protagonist in reuniting with his mother ironically finds a figurative fulfilment with his getting liberated from life itself. In the second instance, the child tolerates the mother's absence by creating a solitary retreat that is an allegory of escape from the world of alien relatives. In the last case, the child is taught to substitute a patriotic metaphor and moral abstraction for his mother, which he can hardly grasp, let alone find a real solace in. Having to come to terms with the mother's absence or death is one state in which the child cannot possibly recall her as an impediment to his freedom, and instead learns to value her love and affection for him. And no abstruse representation or imagined retreat can serve as a substitute for the actual mother.

Wherever the mother is a real presence, sociologists more or less have the consensual view that despite being constantly annoyed with the child and constantly badgering her/him with do's and don'ts, she is not as formidable as the father, and therefore a refuge from the rage and terror which the father personifies. In some poems in Rabindranath Tagore's *Shishu*, however, this terror is often imagined more than felt because the father hardly comes in contact with the child's quotidian activities. Ironically, it is because of the mother's more immediate and palpable presence in and around the child's activities that despite being less intimidating than the father, she is the parent who is often a more nagging source of irritation, an obstruction to any interesting deviation in the child's life, and a constant reminder to her/him about routine things she/he does not want to do. She could, therefore, also be the greater tyrant of the two parents because she is always at home and can detect what the child is up to, as in numerous literary representations spanning the twentieth century. Indian sociologists have, by and large, hardly taken into account this aspect of the mother; by epitomizing as a real presence all the moral values of her society, she is a constant irritant for the child. In Western sociological readings of the sixties, the mother is also often defined as the child's 'principal surrogate of societal morality, later reinforced by such mother-substitutes as schoolteachers' (Alfred and

Elizabeth Lee 103). This definition, of course, does not take into account how oppressive this 'societal morality' can be for the child. Children's literature in Bengali sometimes demonstrates a complex conflation of both these variations of the mother – a personal sanctuary for the child as well as a tyrannical pillar of societal morality.

Popular as well as scholarly opinion about the mother being indulgent and ever-forgiving as against the father has fashioned this predictably contrasting portrayal of the mother in literature. Laing's reading of the family as a complex set of dyadic (two-person) relationships, each of which is played out within the frame of a triadic (three-person) relationship (quoted in Robertson Elliot 122) elucidates the typical situation of the Bengali child protagonist like the narrator of *Shishu*. An alliance is formed between the mother and the child in which the father occupies a space outside their shared confidences; he is almost an alien. However, the child's manipulations are often also based on her/his observations and first-hand experience about who is the stricter parent. The political power play within the family is such that the child exploits 'the coalition patterns within the family', forming 'an alliance with the favoured parent, when the other refuses his wishes' (Bell and Vogel, 'Introduction: Towards a Framework for Functional Analysis of Family Behaviour', *A Modern Introduction to the Family* 22). This usually contributes to a mother–child intimacy excluding the father.

Maternal pampering, which is singular, and usually in opposition to and threatened by the father, finds many variations in children's stories. A typical example of a mother who is more forgiving of the child's excesses than the father is in Sibram Chakrabarty's *Bari Theke Paliye* (*On the Run from Home*) (1937) in which she continues to pander to Kanchan who has misbehaved with the *Purohit*'s son, although it earns him the reprimands of his father. In some such cases, the mother spoils the child to a point where she cannot exercise any control over him, even in basic matters like going to school. In Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Am Atir Bhepu* (*The Mango Whistle*), in a situation where the father is physically absent, not being able to handle her son's defiance, Apu's mother, in a desperate attempt to educate her unwilling son, even tries to bribe him into going to the *pathshala* (47). Ironically, Apu learns to value his school education as he grows older and thereafter undertakes great effort to be educated in a good school in order to ensure that his professional options are not predetermined by his lineage as a Brahman *Purohit*'s son.

Curiously enough, some extreme illustrations of maternal mollycoddling are provided by foster mothers. In Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay's 'Ramer Sumati' ('Ram's Good Sense'), it is the *Boudi* (brother's wife), a mother-substitute barely thirteen years older than Ram, who spoils him to the extent that he misbehaves with everybody in the house, including the *Boudi*'s mother. Whenever Ram's elder brother, compelled to step in as the

orphan Ram's father-substitute, punishes him, his wife protests, and even blackmails her husband, refusing to eat, in an attempt to lessen or revoke Ram's punishment. In Rabindranath Tagore's short story 'Apad' ('What a Nuisance!') (1894) the childless mother-surrogate Kiran shields Nilkanta to the point where she is prepared to hide from the rest of her family the fact that he has stolen from her brother-in-law. In such stories, the father or surrogate father is either a presence to be reckoned with, or lurks somewhere in the background as a figure of authority, even if he is absent. For many child protagonists, therefore, the surrogate mother becomes a confidant while the relationship with the father is formal, distant and stressful.

6

In the nineteenth-century England (see discussion of Victorian fathers in Chapter1), in juvenile as well as adult literature with child characters, the father appears more conspicuously and perhaps oftener than the mother. Examples of patriarchal domination and aggression are common, and may perhaps have contributed to some extent in fashioning the fathers of Bengali child protagonists.

A typically uncaring father in twentieth-century English children's fiction, a true inheritor of the Victorian tradition of fatherhood, is Mr Brown, the father in the William series by Richmal Crompton. He is 'adult authority incarnate: confiscating favourite toys, prohibiting noise and grimly watchful over his domestic empire' (Tucker, *The Child and the Book* 118). The scrapes engineered by William that Mr Brown gets into allow readers, according to Tucker's child-friendly reading, 'a good chance to pay off any lingering Oedipal grudges of their own' (118).

The father is unapproachable and hardly present or the lenient parent who does not have to keep track of the specificities regarding the household and children. But he is usually, sometimes notionally, the major disciplinarian in the family, although he spends less time with the children than the mothers, being compelled to expend most of his time and energy in earning a livelihood. According to Alfred and Elizabeth Lee:

> the father as the prime representative of the male world is . . . a remote ideal, tantalizingly unrealistic, only imperfectly perceived. He comes from and returns to the world of practical affairs that lies beyond the annoying restraints of the maternal sphere.
>
> (96)

The upper-class father in children's literature, however, has more time to spend with his children than the middle-class or working-class father.

Father–child relations in the middle-class and below are less intimate with a few exceptions in which the father and son come together in some unusual venture.

In Western thought, the father was conceived as God's deputy on Earth till the end of the nineteenth century. A child's disobedience, therefore, would count not only as a domestic offence but also as an affront to one's religious convictions (see Chapter1). In India, traditional family roles are based even more on hierarchical authority, headed by the eldest male in the joint family. The nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Indian father in a traditional familial establishment was meant to be deified as much if not more. The Assamese word for addressing the father is *devota* or 'god'. In Bengali too, the word *thakur* or 'god' was used to refer to the 'father' as well as the senior males in authoritative positions within the family, like the 'grandfather', 'father-in-law' or 'elder brother-in-law'. 'Father is heaven, father is religion, father is the greatest', asserts a Sanskrit aphorism. Terms of address in modern urban society in India, however, disregard servile appellations like 'devota'. The father in Bengali children's literature, in fact, is generally vulnerable to the censure of his children for being dictatorial with them, whether he is actually present or absent, the latter of which I have looked into while discussing the mother as virtually a single parent.

In the sixties, David C. Aberle and Kaspar D. Naegle, observe that the 'separation of the occupational and domestic role' ('Middle Class Fathers' Occupational Role and Attitudes Towards Children', *Bell and Vogel* 129) for the father makes it virtually impossible for him to interact with the child on a day-to-day basis. This argument stretches across geographical frontiers and literary periods to explain why the Indian child has 'difficulty in identifying with a father who is often absent and always distant', resulting in a 'great institutional distance between father and son' (Lardinois 597). In the Indian cultural context, and specifically the Bengali, the father's role at home is marginal except as a figure of authority that is not supported by a commensurate involvement in familial matters. This authority, therefore, extends to the absent father as well. For the Bengali child at the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly one born and brought up in a rural setting, the father is often away at work in a distant city, but evokes in the child's mind the image of a similar or even more formidable personality than that of an actually present father. The most obvious instance of a child whose father is perpetually absent occurs in the poems of Tagore's *Shishu*, in which the father presumably lives in a distant city or town, while the mother is constantly around, having to answer the child's innocently absurd queries, and deal with the problematic aspects of parenting. In order to overcome both paternal terror and absence, the child often fantasizes substituting the father, illustrations of which I will discuss in Chapter 5.

On the other hand, there are numerous fictional instances in which the child protagonist counters being persecuted and intimidated by her/his parents by looking to the extended family for succour, using people like uncles and cousins as props. They offer the child something promisingly shackle-free and energizingly enabling. Belonging to the same socio-economic background but in certain cases having opted out of school and studies, these uncles and cousins stir the child's imagination to believe that it is not only exciting but also quite feasible for her/him to 'escape'.

Not all uncles and cousins, however, are agents who enable the child to elude the captivity of the domestic space. The child protagonist's interaction with uncles and aunts exposes them more often to be a restraining influence than a liberating agency. In Western society, and therefore in their literature, uncles, irrespective of whether they are the father's or the mother's brother or brother-in-law, are all homogenized under a single appellation and inhabit a distant space outside the home, with possibilities of actual contact with the children being few and far between. Western sociologists of the sixties like W.J. Goode foresaw the collapse of the joint family the world over. Goode said that large families that include grandparents, unmarried or widowed uncles and aunts, married children, their spouses and unmarried children, and other more distant kin are likely to disappear as industrialization, urbanization and Westernization gather momentum (see Kolenda 2). Talcott Parsons also notes: 'There has been a historic trend to whittle down the size of kinship units in the general direction of isolating the nuclear family' (see Kolenda 2).

But in India, particularly Bengal, what Inden and Nicholas call the 'maximal family' or joint family is still very much in existence. In an inference that is all too apparent, Victor D'Souza notes that 'Not all studies on family in India indicate a change from the joint family type to the nuclear' (Inden and Nicholas 74). In a joint family, according to Aileen Ross:

> the uncle's behaviour was expected to be much like that of a father. The uncle's relation to his nieces and nephews could be of great influence . . . particularly if the uncle was head of the household. The relation was supposed to entail affection on his part, respect and obedience on theirs. (166)

What Ross does not mention, however, is that the uncle could also epitomize power – sometimes greater power than the father if he is the father's elder brother, and arouse fear in his nephews and nieces. In the Western model of the nuclear family, on the other hand, the uncle's role is negligible.

The child protagonist in the Bengali familial organization has a lot of opportunities for interaction with uncles – even those of them who do not live in the same house. Each uncle, unlike in the West, is not only addressed by a different name, but closeness or distance is predicated on their position in the extended family. These relationships can neither be generalized nor be reduced to one-dimensional archetypes. In literary texts, they are delineated apropos their specific socio-cultural associations but are also further individualized according to the dynamics of the particular families within which they function. In the Indian context, particularly the Bengali middle-class, important sociological factors governing an uncle's rapport with the child are whether he is a consanguineous or affineous relation, whether he has a wife and children of his own, whether he has to be a father-substitute to the niece/nephew, whether he stays in the same house as part of a joint family or is an occasional visitor, the age difference between him and his niece/nephew, and the like.

In stories depicting the joint family as it exists in a somewhat truncated version through a large part of the twentieth century, the father's brother/brothers with his/their families often stay in the same house, and are therefore father-substitutes for the child. They take up the responsibility, now and then, of enforcing an exhausting, clockwork regimen of studies and imposing restrictions on the child at every step like the parents. An example from pre-Independence Bengali fiction is Bibhuti Bhushan Mukhopadhyay's *Ranur Pratham Bhag* (*Ranur Pratham Bhag*) (1937) in which the father's younger brother, *Mejokaka*, stays in the same house, is unmarried, greatly concerned about his niece's education and tries to force learning down her throat in an attempt to educate her.

The case of the *mama* (mother's brother) who can never be part of the same household is the inverse of the *kaka* (father's younger brother), who usually lives as part of the same joint family and is sometimes an extension of the authoritarian father. One *mama* who is just two years older than the child protagonist appears in Shaila Shekhar Mitra's 'Knecho Khurte Shap' ('Inviting Trouble'), in which he is a great friend of the child protagonist. He has given up his studies long ago, and instigates Jhantu to leave aside his studies and shadow him, as he believes that too much concern for studies and books make children completely dull. Jhantu's hero-worship of his *mama* is summed up in the words: 'Jhantu listens wonderstruck to Mama's stories of prowess. Hearing these accounts of his heroic deeds, Jhantu's unadulterated respect for him swells up like a balloon' (*Roshnai,* July–August 1967: 76).

In stark contrast to one's own home with its stern requirements of routine and discipline, the institution of the Bengali *mamabari* (mama's house), which children visit only during vacations, is proverbially associated with fun and games. A popular saying, *Mamabari bhaari majaa kil char nai* extols

the mother's parental home as a haven that offers a no-holds-barred freedom with no threat of punishment for any kind of misdemeanour or excess.[2] The maternal uncle, the paterfamilias in the absence of the maternal grandfather, is usually extremely indulgent, and has no disciplinary role. In a traditional Bengali marriage, the wife, who is likely to be quite a few years younger than the husband, could have a younger brother whose proximity of age with the nephew enables a rapport between them. In children's fiction, the mama and the nephew often go together on spine-chilling adventures which would be impossible within the domestic structure in which they live. A very typical case in contemporary fiction is the *Chotomama* in Lila Majumdar's ubiquitous Gupi and Panu stories. Panu, who has been physically impaired in an accident, is amazed to hear about the achievements of his friend Gupi's *Chotomama*, who has dropped out from college but is ostensibly building a rocket to go to the moon. The experiences and fantasies that *Chotomama* boasts about and fabricates are far removed from the reality of the children's school and home. A vicarious participation in *Chotomama*'s innovative ventures allows Panu to create an imaginary world in which he can transcend the limitations of his physical handicap for a while.

The divergent roles of *mama*s and *kaka*s, however, hardly follow an irreversible norm. The heterogeneity and complexity of family life in India make the exceptions to the norm more intricate, life-like and vivacious. For instance, the *Kakababu* in Sunil Gangopadhyay's children's stories, a detective hero with his nephew Santu as assistant, despite being the father's brother and living in the same joint family, is not an oppressor like the father. Being unmarried, he has the freedom to set out on the trail of an adventure whenever he pleases, yet his position as father's brother gives him the authority and the right to take his nephew along, even at the cost of making him miss school and displeasing his mother at times. Another example of a father's elder brother who flouts the stereotype is the *Jetha* or father's elder brother in Asha Purna Devi's 'Barnachora' ('Masquerade') (*Shono Shono Galpo Shono* 114–24). He starts off as a stock character – the intimidating, venerable head of the family who would not allow the children to stage a play they had written and rehearsed themselves, but surprises everyone by finally saving the play that is about to collapse by taking on a role that was going abegging.

Uncles in literature, as in life, therefore often defy the general distinction I have made between paternal and maternal uncles. The *Mejomama* in Sanjib Chattopadhyay's *Boromama* stories is another case who illustrates the variation (Mama Omnibus). He is one of the two *mama*s in these stories. As a scholar and a teacher, he does not fit the prototype of the *mama* in children's fiction. He tries to divert his nephew away from the mad schemes of his elder brother and channelize his energies towards studies and academic

pursuits instead. Being a lecturer in a college, an absent-minded intellectual and poet, he would rather teach his nephew some abstract and impractical philosophy than have him get involved in *Boromama*'s offbeat ventures. *Boromama* is an archetypal deviant and fits the bill of the unconventional maternal uncle, but also demonstrates that theories about the maternal uncle cannot be reduced to a stock formula. Unlike many other *mama*s in children's literature, he is neither close to the narrator in age nor goes against the establishment in the sense of having dropped out of it, for he is a respected doctor with a roaring practice in a suburban town. What he has in common with all interesting *mama*s is his expansive imagination, and the fact that he makes his nephew an accomplice, willingly or otherwise, in all his weird initiatives, thereby conjuring up a world of fun brinking on disaster for him. The nameless narrator-protagonist is torn in a quandary between enchantment at being introduced to so much aberrant entertainment and uneasiness at its potential to disrupt the pleasant, cheerful, status quo of things in a provincial middle-class household.

In Satyajit Ray's story, 'Atithi' (filmed under the title *Agantuk* [*The Visitor*]), the uncle is actually the child protagonist Mantu's mother's *mama*, who had run away from school forty-five years ago and has not been seen ever since, but comes back to live with them as a guest for a short while. Although Mantu's parents are very suspicious about the old man's claim to unclehood, Mantu is greatly excited at the prospect of meeting an enigmatic great-uncle who could also be a criminal. If not a criminal, he at least promises to be a freak, a Bohemian and refreshingly different from his professionally successful lawyer father and traditional housewife mother:

> Does one like to see only one's parents all the time? What about a great-uncle who might not be a great-uncle – was this not fun? This was getting to be something like a detective story! If he turned out not to be a great-uncle, if he was a mischievous man with devious motives, and if Mantu could expose him, what drama it would be!
>
> (*Aaro Baro* (*Twelve More Stories*) 81)

Such a *Mama* cannot evidently fit the requirements of a respectable uncle as he has not had much by way of education, is wilful and anarchic and has led a wild, helter-skelter life. Mantu's father periodically taunts him about the contrast between them and him. According to Mantu's father's own decent, middle-class way of life, the man or the householder is answerable to his family for earning a livelihood, responsible for the well-being of his wife and required to bring up his children according to acceptable norms, none of which standards the *Mama* has ever subscribed to or fulfilled. Mantu's child's instinct is to accept the *mama* as a friend, defying his parents'

self-righteous scepticism about him. The uncle, despite being a maverick, unpredictably turns out to be an authentic and incredibly generous uncle towards the end of the story.

Over and over again, however, although the child protagonist identifies more with the eccentric *mama* than his parents, any attempt to escape from middle-class family life with the school at its centre, using the *mama* as a crutch, necessitates an eventual reabsorption within the family. The child is almost always eventually reinstated within the safety, security and complacency reinforced by home and school.

8

The aunt in the Indian context is also a much more complex and variable character than the nondescript English word suggests. Western society views aunts and uncles as 'structurally . . . of senior generation; not members of the natal family but closely associated with parent they imply respect without authority. Functionally, they have no clearly defined roles, but broadly imply support and friendly social contact' (Firth, Hubert and Forge 7).

However, in Bengali writing for children, the aunt, in certain situations, lives in the same house as part of a joint family and plays mother to the child protagonist. She is often in a position of authority and has a much more clearly defined role. Her function differs, like that of the uncle, according to whether she is a consanguineous or an affineous relation, whether she lives in the same house, how often she meets the child, whether she has a husband and children of her own, whether she is compelled to be a mother-substitute to her/him and the like. The *mashi* (mother's sister) is usually someone that the children meet on weekends or holidays. She is, therefore, nonjudgmental about and kind towards them. The *mashi* in Asha Purna Devi's short story 'Khela' (A Game) is an exception to this rule. In this story, Devi takes a sympathetic view of a child tormented by an authoritarian *mashi*: 'The fact that children are human beings with hearts, minds and a sense of self-respect is something that such 'mejomashis' don't know! It is as if children came into this world as puppets made to order by adults' (*Shono Shono Galpo Shono* 39).

Although the domineering figure in this story is not the mother but the aunt, in using the plural 'mejomashis' (aunts), the child classifies most adults as an oppressive group, with rare exceptions like her modern parents democratically bringing up a child in a nuclear family. On the other hand, *Mejomashi*, the great upholder of the joint family system, cites corporal punishment and depriving children of food as the only ways of bringing up children. She goes on to pontificate: 'Is this education? Education exists in *our* home – yes it does. The children/are petrified by the temper of the adults' (emphasis added) (37–8).

Mejomashi upholds her terroristic regime in a typically insensitive, adult manner and does not take into consideration that studies can at times become tedious and unproductive for the child.

The *mami* (mother's brother's wife) is generally represented as a stereotype who cannot tolerate her husband's lenient attitude to his niece or nephew. In Arun De's story 'Ghotnar Jatra Dekha' ('Ghotna Goes to See a Play'), the *mami* chastises the protagonist for the going to see a jatra late at night, a transgressive act that his *mama* is equally answerable for (*Shuktara* April–May 1981: 198–200). Ghotna faces the *mami*'s wrath for not taking permission from her while his *mama* maintains a neutral position in the conflict. Right from Rabindranath Tagore's 'Chhuti', there are numerous illustrations of *mamis* who harbour some hostility and malice about the nephew or niece, particularly if the *mama* treats the nephew/niece at par with his own children.

The *jethi*, the father's elder brother's wife, if living within the same household, is also often partial to her own children or envious of the achievements and successes of her nieces and nephews. In cases where she does not have any children of her own, however, she is as fond of them as if they were her own. In Asha Purna Devi's 'Sadhu Sankalpa' ('Noble Resolve'), the widowed and childless *Mejojethi* of Tapa is a substitute for his dead mother, and therefore has immense affection for him but also enjoys a great deal of control. Although not a blood relation, she feels for Tapa the same anxiety that a mother would feel, but shares equally with his father the right to scold and discipline him. When he runs away from home, after worrying about his whereabouts, she catches the rediscovered boy by the ear and brings him home (*Shono Shono Galpo Shono* (*Come Listen to My Stories*) 162–72).

The *pishi* (father's sister), if she is married, usually lives far away with her husband and is indulgent to the child on the rare occasions that she meets him. But if she is single or a widow without any earnings or the support of her in-laws, the *pishi* is forced to stay as part of her brother's household. In situations where she stays in the same joint family, she could be a figure of authority who has the license to scold and reprimand the child if necessary, and keep track of the child's deeds and misdeeds almost as much as the mother. In the literary examples that I have come across, however, she is usually not only maternal but more generous to and understands the child better than the mother. In Asha Purna Devi's 'Barnachora', the *pishi* who has stayed in her brothers' home ever since she was widowed is reputed to be a *dajjal* (tyrannical) personality but actually has the heart of a child. This is unfolded through her gradual transformation as she becomes more and more involved and excited at the prospect of acting in a play with the children. In Indira Bandyopadhyay's 'Manda Chele' (bad boy), the mother and the *pishi* offer two methods of curing the child's mischievous predilection, and

it is the *pishi* who adopts a more compassionate view (*Sandesh,* November–December 1974: 2–8). While the mother threatens to send the naughty, destructive boy to an ashram, where he will not be able to go out and have to do everything by the bell, the *pishima* says she will cure him by taking him to Jatadhari Baba, a self-proclaimed spiritual healer. Even the *pishi's* effort at amelioration of the wayward child turns counter-productive as Jatadhari Baba grows very fond of him, asks him to be sent again and again because he likes talking to naughty boys, and ironically takes an even more tolerant view about the boy than the *pishi*. The Baba's appraisal of the 'manda chhele' ('Bad Boy') asserts over and above differences between mothers and *pishis* the universality and innately likeable nature of mischievous children. The child-sensitive adult has an inherent propensity to identify with and partake of the world of the child, something that children's literature of the last hundred years has recognizably taken into account.

Whether it is mothers or fathers, aunts or uncles, children's writers writing for a chiefly middle-class readership usually work out a precarious balance between endorsing parental protectiveness and respecting the child's individual freedom, between an unnecessarily harsh and authoritarian control and an extremely easygoing, indulgent attitude, between repression and a no-holds-barred liberal approach which can lead the child to trouble if she/he is not prudent about how she/he uses it.

Notes

1 See A.K. Srivastava, *Social Class and Family Life in India*: 77. Indian sociologists like Srivastava are often not content to maintain an objective stance about such findings and tend to maintain an underlying morally judgmental tone about them that is really not the business of a sociologist and therefore uncalled for.

2 This maxim, the third line of a children's rhyme, has almost acquired the status of a proverb in Bengali households. It was passed on by word of mouth from generation to generation and has no documented origin that I could trace. It is anthologized in every other compilation of rhymes for toddlers who are just about learning to speak. It also typecasts the mami, the mama's wife who is related to the child only by marriage, as one who would always be ready with a stick to beat the child because she/he is an encumbrance in their household.

4 Growing resentments

The school and the education system

> Schools seem to me one of the most anti-democratic, most authoritarian, most dangerous and most destructive institutions of modern society.
>
> Holt, John. *Escape from Childhood: The Needs and Rights of Children*. New York: Penguin, 1974, p. 188.

> Getting up every day, brushing my teeth, preparing my lessons, eating my food after bathing, going to school, coming home after wasting the whole day at school, month after month, year after year – until some uncertain future, when I would grow up to be 'good' and show the results of all these – I couldn't tolerate it any more.
>
> Majumdar, Lila. 'Ghoton Kothae', in *Chhelebelar Golpo* (*Tales of Childhood*), *Lila Majumdar Rachanabali 1*. Calcutta: Asia Publishing Co., 1976, p. 217.

1

The world of the child protagonist who is above five or six years of age revolves not only around her/his home and family, but expands to include school, where she/he spends a sizeable portion of a normal day. A significant corpus of children's literature has to do with the exploits of child protagonists in their respective schools. Although critics like Isabel Quigly and P. W. Musgrave feel that the English school story has reached its peak and died a natural death, Sheila Ray writes:

> At the end of the 20th century, school . . . remains an attractive setting for a story for young people, providing a stable and safe environment in which children from different environments meet, develop relationships and share experiences. School stories continue to appeal to children at an age when peer group is all important, when they are seeking independence and curious about what lies ahead.
>
> (358)

In Bengali literature, too, the space provided by the school is a familiar setting for stories, novels and poems for and about children of the school-going age. Most of the formulaic stories accentuate the enjoyable aspect of schools, but in the more unconventional stories, the school children protagonists critically examine their schools, usually unselfconsciously and in an unstudied manner. Consequently, they often voice views and undertake actions that express their differences with a system that has been imposed on them to ensure their 'proper' bringing up. They also find friends and classmates in school who echo or support their stance. According to Michael Mitterauer and Reinhard Sieder,

> The young organize themselves in formal and informal groups at school . . . and in their free time, prompted by common opposition to parents, instructors and teachers as well as to the adult world in general. They search for values and identification . . . adopt[ing] the subculture of their generation, which seems to give them the self-esteem and fulfillment they seek.
>
> (111)

Trying to look for identical and corresponding views among one's fellow students and thereafter garnering some solidarity among themselves against the oppression of the adult world, it becomes unacceptable to children that parents should set standards of improvement by endorsing competition among a group of friends, thus building up a kind of peer group pressure. David F. Aberle and Kaspar D. Naegele suggest that the current behaviour of middle-class children is all the time scanned by parents for 'general character traits conducive to success, on symbolic manifestations of those traits, and on a modicum of success in school as an almost essential step toward middle class occupational status' ('Middle Class Fathers' Occupational Role and Attitudes Towards Children,' Bell and Vogel 131).

The schoolchild protagonist, therefore, resents the authoritarian adult's self-righteous rhetoric about the scholarly exemplars she/he should emulate among her/his peer group as well as the models she/he should shun. The memoirs of Tagore stand testimony to his bitterness in being made an object of unfavourable comparison:

> I heard over and over again of the virtues of my master's other pupil Satin, a paragon of a boy with a wonderful head for study, who would rub snuff in his eyes to keep himself awake, so earnest was he. But as for me – the less said about that the better! Even the awful thought that I should probably remain the only dunce in the family could not keep me awake.
>
> (*My Boyhood Days* 5)

In Premankur Atarthi's autobiographical work *Mahasthabir Jatak* (*The New-Born Old Man*), which is not a children's text, the father, having been deprived of a good education because of his status as an orphan, constantly pressurizes his son Sthir to do well in studies, stand first and get a place for himself in Presidency College. Finding no way out of acknowledging the relevance of his father's driving him to this standard of excellence, Sthir replies weakly in the affirmative (7).

Some fictional child protagonists, however, are more intolerant of the constant pressure to do well in school and studies. Asha Purna Devi's Juljul, in 'Debadhan', speaks out against the stress of having to suffer such a morally charged adult perspective:

> Juljul's life is full of advice. 'There is no hope of success without doing well in studies; one can feel proud only after coming first . . .' etc. That means everything would come with backbreaking effort. It means that whatever one likes to do, one does not get to do, and whatever seems as deadly as poison, one is compelled to do.
>
> (*Roshnai*, April–May 1967: 453)

Similarly, Lila Majumdar's Kolu, in 'Badyinather Bori' ('The Doctor's Pill'), resents the demand made on him to copy Bidhushekhar: 'What a boy this Bidhushekhar was! Kolu was tired of hearing about him. It seems he never yawned, never made screeching sounds with his chair, never shook his slippers to and fro restlessly' (*Chhelebelar Golpo*, *Lila Majumdar Rachanabali 1*: 201).

Lila Majumdar's Ghoton in 'Ghoton Kothae' ('Where Is Ghoton?') (*Lila Majumdar Rachanabali* 1, 217–24), too, calls into question a system in which achieving success and academic brilliance comes with a heavy price. His initial investment of diligence in studies would yield no immediate profit but entail an endless wait for an uncertain date in the remote future for him and his family when they could reap some dividend from it (see epigraph to this chapter).

In most cases, the children rebel against being cast in a mould according to which they are expected to lead a disciplined and industrious life like other but more perfect children. They would, however, rather be restless, naughty and unpredictable, which is more in keeping with their essential nature.

2

The school scenario is also not one in which the student can always be relaxed and comfortable, even among friends. Sukumar Roy's Pagla Dashu, as I have argued earlier, is virtually the precursor among those Bengali child

protagonists who refuse to conform to the norms of the school. He often plays a trick on a fellow schoolmate in order to get even about some injustice shown to him. But Dashu's retaliation is usually expressed jointly and reinforced by the partnerships and alliances he forms within his peer group, and makes a case against the very way in which his school functions.

When Dashu is not given a role in a play that is going to be performed on the school stage, for instance, he bribes a younger boy to back out, appropriates his role and then wrecks the play on the final day by blurting out lines that he makes up himself ('Dashur Khapami' ('Dashu's Caprice'), *Pagla Dashu*, *Sukumar Rachanabali* 83–6). In another case, when a classmate leaves him out while distributing sweets on his birthday, he bursts a cracker under the master's chair inside the earthen vessel that contained the sweets ('Chinepatka' ('Fire Cracker'), *Pagla Dashu, Sukumar Rachanabali* 86–8). When caught, he reasons illogically, audaciously and preposterously that only the owner of the container could be blamed for this. In a larger sense, therefore, he questions the undemocratic functioning of school activities and the partiality of teachers as well as classmates, thereby laying out the parameters within which subsequent schoolchild rebels operate. However, his literary descendants never seem to measure up to him. His is a criticism of the class that conforms to the norms of the school from the standpoint of someone who belongs to the same society but chooses to dissent. His subversion of school and all its accompanying paraphernalia exposes school to be a microcosmic representation of society itself.

In a lot of later children's stories, the child protagonist perceives herself/himself to be a victim of the schooling system, as in Shaila Shekhar Mitra's 'Hariye Jabar Nei Mana' ('On Getting Lost'): 'Of course, Chandu does not much like going to school. Who invented studies he does not know, but from his very early childhood, Chandu has boycotted that gentleman' (*Roshnai*, March–April 1968: 339). His familiarity with the moon as a subject in a geography class inspires him to let his imagination take flight and fantasize a trip to the moon instead.

Chandu's geography class, however, is part of an education system that is open only to the affluent, urbane, post-independence generation of children. The child protagonist's primary reason for disinterest in studies, however, is usually not the subject of study per se but the backward but still-in-existence *pathshala*, its impoverished and minimally educated teachers, its imposition of a parrot-like learning which is both arduous and unproductive and its crude and violent methods of punishment.

3

In the historical context of Bengal, even after the introduction of British reforms in education and well into the twentieth century, many educational

institutions, particularly in villages and small towns, continued to reel under underdeveloped modes of imparting education. The data that emerges from a reading of historical, biographical as well as fictional accounts of village schools highlights their lack of infrastructure and adequate facilities. Even a post-independence story, *Ani* by Samaresh Majumdar, speaks of such a sorry state of affairs that its lack of amenities is comparable to schools in the nineteenth century. Bhabani master's school is housed in one room. When the single-teacher school expands to include the new *Didimoni* (the term by which young female teachers are addressed) with progressive ideas who introduces music in the curriculum of the school, it necessitates the taking of a class in the verandah if one is already in progress in the room. The financial condition of the school is such that the salary of the teachers is paid by voluntary donations from the people.

Yet authors belonging to a previous generation look back nostalgically at such makeshift schools of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because they did not impose the rigorous curriculum of present-day schools that are based on the Western model. In Upendra Chandra Mallik's poem 'Chotto Amar Bondhuguli Raag Koro Na Bhai' ('Don't Feel Hurt, My Little Friends'), he remembers his own childhood, when schools were not as modern or well-equipped as today, but on the whole, studies seemed much cheaper, easier, lighter and above all more enjoyable. Spelling out the positive in-built features of education in the good old days, he says:

> When I was little like you, it was so much easier and cheaper to study. The school fee was one or one and a half rupees, and at home, fathers and uncles would help with our studies . . . We were not weighed down by the load of bags, and would make do with slates and pencils which cost one anna, and studies would go on in a carefree vein.
>
> (*Roshnai,* July–August 1967: 629)

Even up to the early twentieth century, the tools used for reading and writing, at least in backward and remote areas of Bengal, were crude by modern standards. The scarcity of implements for writing, furniture and a proper roof overhead were, therefore, some of the shortcomings which the British reforms in education tried to do away with.

However hard the British may have tried to provide the basic requisites for the imparting of learning, they could not do it homogenously and eradicate the poverty at the root of the system which forced many people to take to education as a side business. It is this compulsion which makes Prasanna Gurumahashay in Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Am Atir Bhepu* (an adaptation for children of *Pather Panchali*) run a *pathshala* by the side of his grocery store, and engage in buying and selling while the students wreak havoc in the class. In *Anubartan* (1942) by the same author, 'no poor

teacher at the junior level dares broach the subject of why their salary has remained stagnant over the last ten-fifteen-twenty years' (11). Jadubabu, a schoolteacher, pays an exorbitant rent that he can hardly afford for a room in a house that he shares with three other families (16).

In independent India, the situation does not seem to have improved. In 'Jadumasterer Pathshala' ('Jadu Master's School') by Bibhutibhushan Mukhopadhyay (*Mouchak,* July–August 1968: 364–73), the lone master of a village school cannot make ends meet with his single salary. A school inspection exposes that he takes the salary of two teachers, runs a shop simultaneously and gets the students to help him gratis in the shop. Statistical data about the penurious state of education in Bengal would reveal similar corruption that was virtually unavoidable. Aparna Basu believes that low salaries, want of prospects and squalid conditions in which they worked 'were the cause of a good deal of the discontent among schoolmasters. There was in Bengal what Bismarck had called a "proletariat of passmen"; but in addition, there was also an army of discontented schoolmasters' (193).

Nineteenth-century children's fiction in English, and adult fiction with active child characters, also often describe schools catering to the poorer classes with their crude educational methods, which had not yet come up to the standards of efficiency of schools in post-industrial England. Mr Wopsle's school in Dickens's *Great Expectations*, and Salem House in Dickens's *David Copperfield*, as I have already elaborated in Chapter 2, speak of such a destitute condition. In these English schools catering to the middle or the lower classes, the schoolteacher is often an unwilling worker, forced to earn a living by imparting his or her meagre learning. These schools that I also mentioned in Chapter 1, rather than the English public school meant for the elite classes, therefore, warrant comparison with many of the schools in Bengali fiction.

4

At a deeper and perhaps more serious level, it is not the poverty or lack of tools at the base of the system of teaching but the very people with supposedly academic credentials who are involved in the business of teaching who are answerable for the poor quality of education they impart. In spite of that, they wield an immense clout over their students and always enjoy a much more privileged place in the power equation. Apart from a few exceptionally idealized portrayals, the teacher–student relationship, like the parent–child relationship, is depicted as one in which students are at the receiving end of the teachers' persecution. The school is a graded hierarchy in which, according to P. W. Musgrave, 'power is exerted by the head over his staff, by members of staff on other teachers, by teachers over pupils and by pupils over other pupils' (*The School as an Organisation* 79).

In nonliterary prose like Tagore's *Shiksha*, there is a nostalgic yearning for the older Guru–Shishya tradition which brings into sharp contrast the present-day teacher's lack of involvement:

> We exploit those who we make our schoolteachers in such a way that very little of their heart and mind are put to use . . . however, if you seat these same teachers in the position of the Guru, then their hearts and minds, in all their strength, get naturally and wholly directed towards their students.[1]

Most teachers who are portrayed in twentieth-century Bengali literature, however, cannot live up to the standards of the traditional, ideal Guru of the remote but not mythical past. Under the earlier system, it was possible to have a close, personal rapport between the student and the teacher. Tagore pointed out that the process of learning from Gurus was so human that there was no contradiction between what we learnt from textbooks and the wider attitudes and ideas prevalent in our society ('Shiksha Samasya', *Shiksha*, *Rabindra Rachanabali XI*: 569).

We get an insight into Tagore himself as a teacher in 'Ei Ja Dekha' ('As I Saw Him') by Lila Majumdar through an account of her brief exposure to him. His identification with his students is obvious in the following two incidents that she describes:

> He did not like scolding anybody. Sometimes, the masters would bring mischievous students to Gurudev for punishing them. He would then find himself torn by conflict. He would feel all the mischief of his childhood standing in a line before him, and laughing at him in derision. It would then be impossible for him to castigate those boys.
>
> There is another amusing story we hear about the poet. Once, there was a great downpour; the boys left their studies, abandoned their room and ran outside singing, not obeying anybody. Finding no way out, the masters went to Gurudev. He made them stay back and went to scold the boys himself. In a while, the masters could hear that the clamour of the boys' merry-making, instead of being restrained, had increased to twice as much. Not being able to hold out patiently any more, the masters also followed them there. Gurudev was standing amidst the boys, getting wet and singing songs heralding the monsoon showers.
>
> (Das, Sisir Kumar, ed. *Shatayu Sukumar* 127)

When the British had introduced a mass-scale curriculum of teaching, individual attention could no longer be paid to the students according to their requirements, and this was responsible for the widening gap between

a teacher and student. However, upper-class families sometimes did not allow their children to go to school, but engaged tutors for them at home instead. Literary instances generally demonstrate that child protagonists of the twentieth century are usually unable to build a rapport with such teachers too. They often resort to playing pranks on private tutors to get away from their lessons. To counter the joyless teaching of his live-in master, for instance, Mukul, in Swapanburo's 'Maner Mato Master' ('A Teacher After One's Heart') (*Mouchak*, April–May 1957: 31–5) lets loose some spiders on the master's bed which forces him to leave. Mukul's travails, however, are far from over, because the new master insists on an even more rigorous routine, comprising of physical training and a strict healthy diet. A one-to-one ratio between teacher and student, however, has been a waning phenomenon since the beginning of the present century, and examples of such private tutors are therefore rare.

5

Teachers who make it their life's mission not only to reform wayward students but the very system of education within which they operate are, in a way, the twentieth-century counterparts of the selfless *Pandit* of the remote pre-British days, but they have been exaggeratedly romanticized. Usually, these teachers are depicted as a set apart from the run-of-the-mill teachers of the school. In Samaresh Majumdar's *Ani*, the new 'Sir' does not get along with any of the other teachers because they, unlike him, do not subscribe to developing friendly relations between students and masters. But he is an ideal teacher with such a heightened patriotic fervour that he inspires Ani to substitute his dead mother by his motherland (see Chapter 3). In Manoranjan Ghosh's *Paribartan* (*What a Change!*), the focus is on the idealistic teacher Shishir Babu, who leaves a cushy job to be the warden of a hostel, so that he can reorganize the entire system of the school. His great achievement is curing one of the boys in the school, Ajay, of a tendency to mischief with the help of Ajay's physically challenged friend Shakti, who pays with his life for it. To quote another illustration, the new teacher in Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Anubartan* (*Submissiveness*) is introvertish, shy, extra indulgent towards students, but unlike the other teachers inasmuch as that he dares to talk back to the headmaster. He answers accusations logically, and protests against unfairness and discrimination.

A perfect teacher who is friend, philosopher and guide to his students, and whose attempt to eliminate not only the evils of the school in which he teaches but of the entire town is Manjil Sen's Sadananda Sir, in a novel by the same name. But the teacher's efforts are simultaneously but unnecessarily accompanied by sacrificing the life of his invalid son. Like Sharatchandra's

Brindaban in 'Panditmashai', who tries to overcome a 'me and mine' insularity by refusing to acknowledge the death of his son as a heartrending grief and announcing that all the children in the world are his own (see Chapter 2), Sadananda Sir claims that although he has lost one son, he has gained many more in his students.

However, the majority of Bengali children's fiction in the twentieth century does not depict sentimentalized abstractions of committed schoolteachers undaunted by personal misfortune. There are 'lesser' teachers who are neither perfect nor willing to sacrifice all in favour of their greater involvement in teaching, yet they handle children efficiently and tactfully in a way that they are able to win them over. In Premankur Atarthi's 'Dushtu Cheler Diary' ('The Diary of the Naughty Boy'), while the other teachers give up on Pramatha, the 'last boy' of the class, because they cannot make him take his studies seriously, the *Panditmashai* diplomatically handles Pramatha in a way that he cannot get away without doing his studies (*Mouchak*, April–May 1920: 19). The new teacher in Mira Chaudhuri's 'Ulta Shaja' ('The Reverse Punishment') indulgently puts up with the girls' whiling away her teaching time in fraudulent fainting, coughing and bleeding fits despite seeing through it all, but eventually wins them over to a more productive work ethic (*Mouchak*, April–May 1921: 23–8).

It is usually within the framework of the sentimental school story in Bengali but quite rarely that some amount of indulgence is shown towards the natural naughtiness of children by schoolteachers like the idealistic Shishirbabu. Most of children's fiction and poetry abound in caricatured portraits of half-literate, pretentious and cruel *Pandits*, particularly epitomizing the inadequacies of rural schools.

6

In *Paribartan*, apart from Shishirbabu, the ideal teacher, the other teachers fall far short of expectations that one could reasonably take for granted from teachers, and they are portrayed in a manner that they highlight the contrast. The *Panditmashai* of the school goes to sleep while his class is in progress, but does not miss the slightest opportunity to physically assault his students for their impudence in pointing this out. All this contributes to a total picture of academic incompetence, administrational ineptitude and poverty of educational methods. Yet all these lacunae in teaching and administration are accompanied by a moral indignation that exposes the pomposity and fraudulence of most of the teaching community of the school.

The *Panditmashai* or the Guru is either portrayed as a mere clown or as a parody of a lazy, greedy and selfish person; he has also been proverbially associated with intimidating students and therefore has a more damaging

role to perform in the set-up of the school. A very early version of a schoolteacher who is as formidable as he is pathetic is Hemendra Kumar Roy's 'Nilmoni Master', who not only uses violence on his students but is also a butt of ridicule because of his ugly and unkempt physical appearance (*Mouchak*, May–June 1923: 103–6). The *Dadu* in Lila Majumdar's 'Porider Deshe' ('In the Land of Fairies') recollects his extreme fear and anxiety as a child about encountering such a teacher: 'One day I forgot to learn my lessons. In the evening, as soon as I heard the sound of the Panditmashai's slippers in the outer courtyard, we ran all the way up to the attic' (*Nepor Boi*, *Lila Majumdar Rachanabali 3*: 337).

In Lila Majumdar's 'Ganshar Chithi' ('Gansha's Letter') (*Chhelebelar Golpo*, *Lila Majumdar Rachanabali 1*: 177–80), Gansha confides in a letter to the magazine *Sandesh* that he does not want to attend school as the schoolmaster is known to be some sort of evil wizard who changes boys into goats.

Fear of the schoolmaster often brings out the witty and the ironical streak in the child, as in Sukumar Roy's poem 'Parar Hishab' ('An Account of Falling-Failing') (*Khai Khai*, *Sukumar Rachanabali* 36) in which, when accosted by the master's queries on what everybody had studied during the vacations, Gada's rejoinder is in the form of a pun on the word *para* (studies), which also means a fall. Gada expounds at length on how he accidentally fell from a tree during his vacation in an attempt to circumvent the master's inquisition about the progress of his studies.

Apart from teachers, other staff of the school also come under the assessment of children whenever there is some interaction with them. The headmaster of the more modern school, however, is usually in a position of advantage, as he is English-speaking, affluent, well-dressed and awe-inspiring. The children usually keep their distance from him, and do not make fun of or play pranks on him. But they sometimes rag fellow students they dislike by getting them into uneasy confrontations with the headmaster, as in Lila Majumdar's story, 'Natun Chele Natabar' ('The New Boy Natabar'). (*Nepor Boi*, *Lila Majumdar Rachanabali 3*: 188–93). In Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Anubartan*, 'Clerkwell [the headmaster] was about sixty years old, white-haired, plumpish, always dressed neatly, with his tie forever in place. The front of his shirt would be ironed perfectly, his collar would sparkle, his well-tailored pants displayed a perfect, so-called "knife-edge-crease"' (3). Clerkwell's dress makes him an embodiment of meticulousness over detail and sartorial perfection. Visually conveying a sense of the strict disciplinarian that he is, all this fuss over clothing is ostensibly aimed at the improvement of the students and the progress of the school (41).

In the handful of stories depicting residential schools, the hostel superintendent or warden is usually ridiculed for his inept handling of and apathy to the well-being of the children. In *Paribartan*, the superintendent Nandadulalbabu, who is finally replaced by Shishirbabu, complacently devours the delicacies cooked specially for him by the hostel cook while hypocritically refusing to entertain the students' complaint against the monotonous hostel fare (45 and 47). On the other hand, Mrs Oliff, the wife of the principal and the hostel supervisor in Shachindra Majumdar's *Harano Din* (*Those Days Gone By*), is a role model. She is really involved with the education of the students in the hostel, and 'education' means to her not just stuffing learning down the throats of children. She attaches scant importance to studies, but believes that sports and all-round development might help the children to become better citizens of the world. Her philosophy is identical with the ideology of the school where Ashok, the child protagonist, learns cosmopolitan values and much else that becomes a part of his total education. Like Shishirbabu in *Paribartan*, Mrs Oliff is an ideal teacher who wins the heart of the children by her unconventional attitude to studies, play and even schoolboy mischief (70).

However, in the more usual cases, some of the nonteaching staff of the school show total lack of sensitivity in dealing with the child protagonists. In Sachindra Majumdar's *Harano Din*, the lean, impoverished drillmaster is a pathetic figure who is an object of derision for the boys (19). Similar representations in nineteenth-century nonfictional writing predate such portrayals of nonteaching staff whose idiosyncrasies and inadequacies students find amusement in. In Nabin Chandra Sen's real-life account of his school, the librarian cuts a sorry figure whenever he is given the dual task of teaching arithmetic, for which purpose the school can obviously not afford another teacher. His being a Muslim, his lameness and meagre knowledge of arithmetic contribute towards the students' assessment of him as a caricature, however politically incorrect. If one overlooks his 'otherness' in being physically challenged or belonging to a minority community, however, it is the comicality arising out of a librarian being compelled to teach arithmetic despite his scant knowledge of the subject that actually highlights the inadequacy of the penurious system (23).

7

The child protagonist's fear of frustrated and unduly arrogant taskmasters is born out of her/his unwillingness to cooperate with an extremely uninteresting and unproductive learning process of what were known as the three R's – reading, writing and arithmetic. From the very middle of

the nineteenth century, autobiographical accounts testify that writers have repeatedly resented having been compelled to learn by rote during their childhood (see Chapter 2).

Rabindranath Tagore expressed his dissatisfaction with a system in which what we memorize from ten to four (six hours of the day) has nothing to do with our lives, the people around us or our homes ('Shiksha Samasya', *Shiksha*, *Rabindra Rachanabali XI*: 561). Within such a scheme of things, the function of the Guru in shaping up his students is equally pathetic. He laments that such a hopeless picture would continue as long as we go on learning by rote what is absolutely essential without experiencing the joy of learning ('Shikshar Herpher', *Shiksha*, *Rabindra Rachanabali XI*: 538). This very idea has been taken up repeatedly by children's writers in depicting the child protagonist's unwilling acquiescence in the tedious, mindless chore of memorizing by heart without understanding. Tagore's 'Totakahini' ('The Tale of a Parrot') allegorizes the meaningless ritual of memorization in the figure of the parrot, which is proverbially known for imitative learning. The parrot dies of being educated according to the instruction given by the king to make it learned, while the dry leaves of the book used for its education rustle inside its body, making a mockery of the king's educational enterprise.

Many years later, creative writers continue to point out the presumptuousness of schoolmasters who expect their students to learn everything by heart without comprehending what they learn. Banaphul's Jogen Pandit, in a story with an eponymous title, 'asks his students to learn everything by heart, and punishes them if they cannot' (*Kishore Rachana Samagra* 63). In Manoranjan Ghosh's *Paribartan*, it is the reformist Shishirbabu whose views are an eye-opener for Samarbabu, the headmaster. Samarbabu is compelled to admit that 'We are only creating a lot of parrots with some rote learning through the education that we impart. Innumerable learned fools! Only one in a thousand turns out to be truly educated' (83).

8

Illustrations of the schoolmaster's reiteration of dry facts to students, expecting them, in turn, to flawlessly spew them out, particularly focuses on the Sanskrit teacher, who teaches what is by and large perceived to be a dead language that is almost impossible to learn. In Sibram Chakrabarti's 'Guru Chandali' ('The Tale of the Guru'), Sitanath Pandit's insistence on the children speaking in a kind of pure, Sanskritized Bengali meets with disastrous consequences. Ganesh, his student, after being reprimanded many times for not speaking in a bookish kind of Bengali, carries the

injunction to an irrational extreme. At a critical juncture, when his master's pocket is getting picked, he tries to alert him by speaking to him formally in immaculate Bengali, replete with Sanskrit words. Ganesh's warning that someone is trying to make off with his master's purse, articulated in a pedantically tortuous, obscure and erroneous manner, is interpreted by the master as three unrelated words in a muddle of colloquial Bengali and English. The protracted process of Ganesh's consciously innovated but flawed *saadhu bhaasha* (classical Bengali) followed by its misleading construal that is wide off the mark, is devised as a clever word play by the author which causes the master to lose his bag of money. The story demonstrates the inapplicability and dysfunctionality of Sanskrit or even Sanskritized Bengali in real-life exigencies.

The Sanskrit teacher is portrayed as utterly helpless when confronted with anything outside his limited knowledge of his irrelevant, almost obsolete subject. The *Pandit* portrayed in Sukumar Roy's *Jhalapala* displays his ignorance of the English language in a confused bilingual interpretation of two simple English phrases, 'I go up' and 'You go down' (*Sukumar Rachanabali* 164–5). Having been brought up in a world where the language of the colonial masters commands more respect than the vernacular or even the classical language, his students naturally look down on him when he degenerates to completely nonsensical translations from English to Bengali. The Sanskrit *Pandit's* futile effort to educate his students is described not only in fictional but also autobiographical accounts like Tagore's *Jibansmriti*: 'It was Pandit Ramsarvaswa's duty to oversee our progress in Sanskrit. He gave up the fruitless task of teaching grammar to his unwilling pupil, and read *Sakuntala* with me instead' (*My Reminiscences* 86).

It is only rarely that the Sanskrit teacher can make his reluctant student learn, with the help of corporal punishment, as illustrated in Premankur Atarthi's 'Dushtu Cheler Diary': 'Panditmashai twisted his ear, and with that one twist, his mind got tuned to the Sanskrit letters in a way that . . . he never made a mistake in his Sanskrit studies even for a day' (*Mouchak,* April–May 1920: 19–29).

In Lila Majumdar's 'Porider Deshe', the grandfather of the child sums up the unproductive yet formidable process of learning in the preceding generation, when the Sanskrit tutor's emphasis was entirely on rote learning:

> In the evening, *Panditmashai* used to come to teach us Sanskrit. How would you realize how painful it was to learn those unpronounceable words under an oil lamp? And how he would twist our ears if we had not memorized the different forms of a particular figure of speech!
>
> (*Nepor Boi*, *Lila Majumdar Rachanabali 3*: 337)

Nabendu Sen's comment on the marginalization of the *Panditmashai* is an apt summing up of the Bengali child protagonist's irreverence towards him:

> The character of the *Panditmashai* can be sketched independently of the others. He is merely an object of ridicule, and does not evoke our respect or awe. In fact, this stock character seems to have been created for such school humour.
>
> (283)

However, it is not true to say without qualification, as Nabendu Sen has done, that the Mathematics, Bengali or English teacher (the last of these is also often the headmaster) inspire more awe and hero worship from their students. The Bengali teacher, in fact, is almost as vulnerable to the mockery of his students as the Sanskrit teacher. In a nineteenth-century work, Nabin Chandra Sen's real-life account recalls the students making fun of the Bengali *Pandit* of his school in spite of his being an excellent teacher who gives his students a solid grounding in the vernacular:

> *Panditmashai* was quite a coward. A student of my gang used to stay near his house. In the night, he would put a funnel into a cooking vessel, and through it, he would make a horrible noise like a tiger. In fright, *Panditmashai* would wet his pants. The next day, a storm of laughter would reverberate through the school.
>
> (27)

In fictional accounts, the Bengali teacher is typically portrayed as one with a meagre income, unable to make both ends meet and fulfil the justifiable demands of his nagging wife and ill-fed, ill-clothed children. He is usually insufficiently clad in a ragged *dhoti*, and walks barefooted as he cannot afford footwear. A standard example can be found in Achintya Kumar Sengupta's 'Jharer Jatri' ('Travelers Who Braved the Storm'), in which Ram, the child hero, is humiliated by his friend Dipak's English-aping family because his father, a Bengali teacher, has made him wear a *dhoti* rather than shorts (*Kishore Rachana Sangraha*, *Achintya Kumar Rachanabali 9*: 268). They talk disrespectfully about Ram's father, Pulin Banerjee, because his professional identity places him in the *taldesh*, the lower strata of society. When Ram returns from the opulent surroundings of his friend's house, he is struck by the squalid and suffocating environs in which he has grown up that he rightly attributes to the fifty rupees salary of his schoolmaster father. Even a Bengali professor cannot escape

the contempt of Lilabati, Dipak's mother, who habitually reveres anything English and spews an equal amount of scorn on anything that is Bengali. The status of the Bengali teacher reaffirms the deteriorating status of the mother tongue in Bengali society ever since the encroachment of the British in the field of education. The unequal relationship between English and Bengali determines the position of the teachers of these languages.

In Sibaji Bandyopadhyay's opinion, 'A universal feature of education-related Bangla children's literature is its reverence for teachers of English literature and contempt and negligence of Sanskrit *Pandits*' (*Gopal Rakhal Dwandasamas* 160–1). As opposed to not only the Sanskrit *Pandit* but also the teacher of Bengali, the English teacher described in Bengali children's fiction is 'suited-booted' (a standard epithet used in colloquial Bengali to describe Westernized and prosperous people), and is often comfortably ensconced in the elevated position of the headmaster by virtue of his 'superior' education. Wherever his family life is depicted, it is not a portrait of poverty and hardship. The English teacher assumes the foreign language not only to be the most important subject in the curriculum but that it must come effortlessly to his students. Even when English is taught at home, the teacher's intolerance of the student's failure to absorb and internalize the foreign tongue is disproportionate to its actual use in real-life situations, as is displayed in the outraged reaction of Ani's grandfather to his making mistakes in English (Samaresh Majumdar, *Ani* 97). The knowledge of English is always valorized, not taking into account that the learning of it mostly results in parrot-like recitation without comprehending what is being learnt. In a comic poem 'Olot Palot' ('Topsy Turvy'), Promila Bala Ray describes the plight of the boy who is forced to learn the meanings of certain English words, but gets them all jumbled when asked to reproduce them to his teacher (*Mouchak,* May–June 1932: 75–6).

On the other hand, Subodh Chandra Sengupta, in his real-life account, acknowledges that although English posed a great handicap to his generation, the language was much more easily absorbed by succeeding generations. He is impressed to hear his seven-year-old granddaughter utter the sentence 'I am no impostor', but is thankful that he did not have to undergo a complex learning process involving so many languages and so many subjects (2). In the Western style of education introduced by the British which covered this range of subjects, English was not only the medium of instruction but evolved from a language of reading and writing into a language of conversation among affluent, educated sections of society with the passing of decades. Ironically, among post-independence writers, it hardly remains a subject that provokes commensurate fear or ridicule any more.

The mathematics teacher is a uniformly disliked, often dreaded figure in children's fiction, mostly because of the unintelligible subject he teaches. In *Mahasthabir Jatak*, Premankur Atarthi confesses: 'I couldn't stand mathematics. My brain was made of such components that I could not differentiate between numbers. When the masters used to get tired of explaining, I used to say I have understood' (64).

In Hemendra Kumar Roy's *Der-sho Khokar Kando*, Gobindo and 'Professor' confess that they have been compelled to learn mathematics only due to the beatings and humiliations they have suffered at the hands of their respective mathematics teachers (72).

In order to get even with this formidable subject, the child protagonist often takes recourse to demonstrating what she/he analyses as its faulty postulates and imprecise reasoning. In Prabir Gangopadhyay's *Jhapardahe Jhakamari* (*The Trouble at Jhapardaha*), the *Chotka* (father's youngest brother) assumes the role of a mathematics teacher who does not spare his narrator-nephew the rigours of brushing up the subject even during the school vacations. Consequently, the nephew presents the reader with a unique argument that he cannot be held responsible for not getting his profit and loss sums right, as the seller is always trying to make a hundred per cent gain while the buyer is constantly trying to cheat the seller. Faced with an utter sense of helplessness in grasping the subtleties of mathematics, the child's retort makes a desperate effort to expose the illogicality, unreasonableness and unpredictability in human terms of this supposedly logical subject. An early example of a similar commonsensical but inverted reasoning, trying to outdo the so-called logic of the subject, is in Sukumar Roy's *Ha Ja Ba Ra La* (*Gobbledygook*). In the story, the erudite crow with a slate and pencil in its hand says that seven twos are not fourteen at all times because the time spent on the calculation also has some value, and should be taken into consideration (*Sukumar Rachanabali* 128). In Nanilal De's 'Khokonbabur Anka Kasha', likewise, the child refuses to do sums which deal with abnormally unrealistic and outdated prices of things (*Mouchak,* July–August 1975: 169). Similarly, the travails of learning mathematics are expressed with frustration by child writers who write from first-hand experience in the children's column 'Hat Pakabar Ashar' in the magazine *Sandesh*, Kailash, the hero of an untitled poem by a child poet, Khukumoni Ray, is unable to solve the problem of how much one seer would cost if one and a half costs a rupee (untitled poem, 'Hat Pakabar Ashar', *Sandesh,* November–December 1920: 226). Kailash, who had been promised a job by his uncle if he could answer the question, declares that it costs a full rupee, never mind the half seer. Another child poet, Shubhabrata Ray, sums up the utter futility of trying to learn mathematics:

Its futile to try and teach us Maths
By scribbling on blackboards with those chalks
Rubbing chalk on our bodies day and night
The master wondered how much beating
It would need to get the boys to learn
Mahapatra launched his teaching of Maths
Wielding no less than a cane in his hand
He beat the boys till they got bent
But they still could not solve any sum.

('Anka Shiksha' ('The Learning of Mathematics'), '*Haat Pakabar Aashar*' ('The Forum for Improving Your Writing'), *Sera Sandesh* 1964–89: 348)

9

Corporal punishment, however, is not usually associated with the teaching of any particular subject but a standard ritual inscribed within the school curriculum. Unable to befriend or tame their students, teachers resort to thrashing them mercilessly when they do not come up to their expected standards of learning and discipline. The Guru who thrives on corporal punishment can be found in nursery rhymes as well. With a pen poised over his ear and a stick in his hand, the snub-nosed and bespectacled Guru in Jogindranath Sarkar's 'Pathshala' in *Hashi Rashi* (*Heaps of Laughter*) (1899) is one such example who simultaneously inspires terror and derision.[2] Narayan Gangopadhyay's *Shilalipi* (*Written in Stone*), which is not a children's novel, gives an account of the physical punishment that the *pathshala*'s *Pandit* doles out to his students:

> Spare the rod and spoil the child - this great proverb has immortalized the English teacher who invented it. Some Indian *Pandit*s have recommended beating a donkey into becoming a horse . . . their regular practice was to make seven-eight year old boys stand with bricks in their hand while doing a *surya pranam*, to get them to stand on one leg with a dunce-cap on their heads, to line up a procession of boys holding one another's ears, to place a pencil between their fingers and press them, to cane them with the branch of a prickly bush, to have the students kneel down half way as they beat their oiled heads with a pair of canes.
>
> (*Narayan Gangopadhyay Rachanabali 3*: 328)

In post-independence stories, too, the school curriculum does not seem to have become civilized and enlightened enough to do away with corporal punishment. For Banaphul's 'Jogen Pandit' ('Jogen the Master'),

> Wringing their ears, slapping them, making them stand on the bench, compelling them to kneel down on their knees holding their ears - these are quite routine. But he also canes them and sometimes renders stubborn boys half-dead with his beatings.
>
> (*Kishore Rachana Samagra 6*: 63)

Lila Majumdar's Sanskrit *Pandit* in 'Porider Deshe' revels in perversely twisting the ears of his students (*Nepor Boi*, *Lila Majumdar Rachanabali III:* 337). Yet Sanskrit, an obsolete language with an unintelligible grammar, is neither the only source of irritation for the student nor the only subject because of which he gets beaten. The *Dadu* in Samaresh Majumdar's *Ani*

> was very good, but while teaching, he got so angry that Ani could not escape a beating by him. . . . Why, he could not understand, did an ordinary English word became such an earth-shattering issue that physical punishment had to be used as a remedy for it?
>
> (97)

The pulling of the child's ears is a kind of first step in a heavier regime of corporal punishment. Sunirmal Basu's 'Ki Bipad' describes a boy who leaves aside his studies to go on a donkey ride, but is inevitably pulled by his ear by his master (*Sunirmal Rachana Sambhar 2*: 38–9). The same poet writes about Petuk Das, whose daydreaming during a study session about the delicacies he might get to eat is rudely interrupted by his masters tweaking his ear ('Petuk Daser Swapna' ('The Glutton's Dream'), *Sunirmal Rachana Sambhar 2*: 52–3). Although in these poems, the poet maintains a neutral position about the master and is banteringly critical about the child who is neglectful of his studies, in the more usual cases, the teachers or parents indulging in mindless violence are vulnerable to the censure of the poet or writer for attempting to establish authority over their students or giving vent to some personal frustration.

Among the few unusual teachers who openly condemn corporal punishment and refuse to continue with it as an accepted disciplinary measure are Shishirbabu and Brajenbabu in Manoranjan Ghosh's *Paribartan*. Hitting students, they feel, only terrorizes them and turns them away from learning, and distorts their innocent minds out of shape at a time when they should be developing. Yet the *Panditmashai*, who often gets caught sleeping while his class is in progress, cannot accept the leniency of the new regime and

complacently resorts to more and more novel methods of punishment when beating is banned in the school (47, 62, 84, 85 and 91).

The insistence on learning by rote and the crudeness of using corporal punishment in order to tame students were both integral parts of the system which could have been rectified once the British took over the cause of education in Bengal. In 'Shiksha Samasya', Tagore described the unhappy combination of these two gaping shortcomings of our indigenous system of education, even after it came in contact with more modern ideas imported from the West (*Shiksha*, *Rabindra Rachanabali XI*: 567). They have remained in a large or small measure, particularly in schools in backward areas, over the last two centuries.

10

Western psychologists and sociologists have tried to establish that psychological torture tends to leave an even greater impact and destroys the child's healthy and uninhibited development in a far more grievous way than beatings and spankings. John Levy and Ruth Munroe, in *The Happy Family*, illustrate with the example of the child who says to her/his mother: 'I wish you would lick me instead of refusing to talk to me' (280).

The child protagonists of some Bengali stories seem to reiterate this point of view. 'Ginni', a late nineteenth-century story by Rabindranath Tagore, captures the poignancy and pain of a child protagonist who is subjected to such a mental torment by his schoolteacher (discussed in Chapter 2). Later, in Hemendra Kumar Roy's *Dersho Khokar Kando*, the child character nicknamed 'Professor' argues that getting beaten up is the lesser evil when compared to mental forms of torture. Comparing it with Gobindo's account of the beatings given by the schoolmasters in his provincial town, the Kolkata-bred 'Professor' is convinced that the psychological pressure exerted by the Kolkata masters is much worse, although it is a less violent and more sophisticated way of establishing their authority (69). Psychological punitive measures are perceived as the greater evil and explored in greater depth and detail in more recent stories. Shyamal Gangopadhyay's schoolchild characters in *Class Sevener Mister Blake* (*Mister Blake, Teacher of Class Seven*), for instance, nurture a grouse that 'getting beaten would be much better than this' (39).

11

In twentieth-century popular school stories for children, no matter how interesting the deviants from the norm may be, conformity is advocated at every stage. In English boys' school stories, too, 'an upper middle class moral

code was valued which included deference to authority' (P. W. Musgrave, *The English School Story* 244). The same rule, needless to say, is reiterated with greater emphasis in girls' school stories. Bob Dixon, writing about the first of Enid Blyton's Malory Towers school series for girls, *First Term at Malory Towers*, elucidates the symbolic significance of hair as a marker of either abiding by the system or rejecting it. Gwendoline, the 'spoilt' new girl who refuses to plait her hair, espouses an unacceptable nonconformity. By forcing Gwendoline to plait her hair, she is broken in (5). In *The Naughtiest Girl in School*, the school is once again seen as an institution with a principal aim of enforcing conformity as a good in itself.

One of the tools by which an attempt is made to homogenize school activities and thus make the students conform is the school bell, an institution that I have already introduced in Chapter 1. In Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Anubartan*,

> The first bell of the school signifying the start of the school day kept ringing for a long time, clanging and echoing all around, as if it wouldn't stop. The hearts of many small boys became depressed; this ringing of the school bell is only the beginning of the bad times. They wondered among themselves whether there was any possibility that the bell was ringing to declare the end of the school day. It was only a quarter past ten; half past three seemed a long time away. Half past three was the time for the closure of the school for the junior boys.
>
> (4)

The poem 'Chhuti' by Phatikchandra Bandyopadhyay (*Sandesh,* October–November 1925: 225) captures some standard associations of the bell – those that signify the ten o'clock start of the school day and the end of all fun and games, the child's mind and heart aflutter with each recurring bell at the thought of somehow escaping to the fields again, and the final bell of the school, ushering in *chhuti*, or freedom of studies for the day. The school bell, therefore, although accountable for imposing an unpalatable routine on the child, also has some happier connotations like the mid-day break for tiffin, or heralding the end of the school day. Even the regular ringing of the bell after every study period elicits an anticipatory pleasure at the thought of the bell that will declare the children's respite from school till the next day:

> School! School! our School!
> The clock strikes 'Dhang Dhang' every hour
> And awakens dreams in our restless minds.
> (Mohanlal Gangopadhyay,
> *Boarding School* 1)

In an essay on sounds, 'Shabda' ('Sounds'), Jagadananda Ray acknowledges the final ringing of the school bell as the sweetest sound, because it ushers in *chhuti* (*Mouchak*, May–June 1920: 226).

The word *chhuti* in Bengali does not only mean 'vacation' or 'holiday', as in English, but also the end of the school day or the daily respite from the school curriculum. With its connotations of freedom, fun and play, it is a complex word in the Bengali vocabulary while its counterpart in the English language has only one dimension to it. The nearest English equivalent to *chhuti*, the school's 'closure' for the day, is not known by the same word that means 'holiday' or 'vacation' and is merely a functional term which does not take into account the pleasurable implications of this closure. The Bengali word *chhuti* conjures up the school as nothing but a prison house, not resembling the modern day school, in which a serious attempt is made to include fun and games within the curriculum, making it an enjoyable place to spend a third of the day. The child in Tagore's *Shishu Bholanath* who interrogates his mother about why all the weekdays come so fast while *Rabibar* (Sunday) is in no hurry to reach him (579) or the child in Sukumar Roy's 'Harishe Bishad' ('Killjoy Sorrow'), who looks up the *panjika* (the annual book of festival dates) to find out his holidays (*Khai Khai*, *Sukumar Rachanabali* 46) eagerly await their freedom from the captivity of routine school. Even the adolescent Apu of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's Apu trilogy who trudges to a school that is far from his village because he cannot resign himself to a life without education cannot help but rejoice at the prospect of a two-day closure of school after a routine inspection carried out there (*Am Atir Bhepu* 29). However, Apu is so impressed and awestruck by the paraphernalia that distinguishes his Western style school that he expresses in no uncertain terms his reverence for the big clock's bell signifying the end of a class, unlike the beating of an iron sheet in his village school (38).

Satyajit Ray, in an autobiographical account, similarly recalls being impressed by his school bell in his childhood:

> The bell hung on the veranda on the first floor, just above the railing where the stairs ended. Only the chowkidar could ring this bell. A cord had to be pulled, so that/no more than one gong sounded at a time. How the chowkidar managed to make it ring properly remained a mystery.
> (*Childhood Days: A Memoir* 62–3)

The school bell is not the only apparatus that separates one time slot from another in the functioning of the school. Terms, semesters and the academic year are demarcated by and culminate in tests and examinations. For most child protagonists, the school routine is a kind of drudgery that is punctuated by the dread of examinations at the end of the term, semester or year.

Samaresh Majumdar's *Ani* describes the ambience surrounding a school final examination, replete with attempts to cheat by means of hand-written notes carried into the examination hall. It also exposes parental anxieties accompanying a son's Board examination.

Asha Purna Devi's description of the institution of examinations highlights and contrasts the mental state of children before and after the dreaded event:

> Before the examinations, the children's faces are dry, hair unkempt, stomach bloated, mouth bitter, temper evil, head confused . . . the next phase after the examinations shows the typical scene of the same children floating in the air, and flying lightly like birds' feathers. Their faces are then radiant, hair shining, they desire to eat anything and everything all the time, their temper is mild, head stable, eyesight clear and speech perfect!
>
> ('Kishe Kharach Holo', *Kishore Bharati* 1976: 77)

12

The bell and the examination system were both contributions of the Western system that met with an understandable resistance when they were introduced here. Another important lacuna of the Western system, documented in Tagore's tracts on education as well as in subsequent writing, was that it never really touched the common people, despite the English government's attempt to do so by means of putting into practice what is known as the Downward Filtration Theory. A few Bengali writers were sensitive to the anomaly of 'English' education which made them more familiar with an alien tongue rather than their native language. In 'Chhatrader Prati Sambhashan' (An Address to Students) (1901), Tagore, who was particularly aware and judgmental of the damage caused by this acquaintance with the English language, says:

> Such were the days of yore, when we did not have any respite from English. When we came home, school would follow us. We would address our friends in English, write to our fathers in English, express our private thoughts through English poetry and lure our countrymen to assemblies by means of English lectures.
>
> (*Atmashakti* (*One's Innate Power*), *Rabindra Rachanabali XII*: 725)

He goes on to say:

> From our very childhood, we have been reading the textbooks of English schools which are written for English children. This has kept our

> own country indistinct to us although we are quite familiar with things belonging to a foreign country.
>
> (726)

Even when English educational schemes reached the people, they could not really 'educate' them, and their effort was counterproductive, something that Tagore has analysed incisively in 'Shiksha Sanskar':

> From the age of thirteen or fourteen years, our mind wants to flower by imbibing the light of knowledge and capturing the many moods of our emotions. At that very time, if the grammar of a foreign tongue and a hailstorm of rote learning are thrust upon us all the time, how will it get any nourishment?
>
> (*Shiksha, Rabindra Rachanabali XI*: 556)

13

In indigenous education, on the other hand, the natural surroundings of the rural school contributes to a picture that is attractive by contrast to the newer regimen of 'English' studies, and yet inadequate in the modern context. In English literature, the pastoral idyll that came down from classical times had in turn been questioned by the counter-pastoral movement. Poets who celebrated the ease, contentment and plenitude of a life close to nature simultaneously met with their appropriate rejoinder in the works of poets who highlighted its social and economic exploitation and protested against the illusory simplicities of the neo-pastoral (see Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* 23–6). Romanticism in the West that filtered down to Bengali literature in the second part of the nineteenth century revived the idea of nature as a retreat – in fact, even as a utopia. Themes of children's stories which deal sympathetically with the child protagonist's desire to break free of the establishment and sometimes escape to natural surroundings, though rooted in the rural idyll of Bengal with its abundance of nature's gifts, are also inspired by Western Romanticism. I will try to examine in what way the ideal of nature has been incorporated in twentieth-century Bengali children's literature, attempting to put right the wrongs done to it by Western and urban education.

Upholding the value of a remote past with an education close to nature is almost the only alternative that Bengali child protagonists have by way of speaking out against modern schools with an English method of functioning. In the haste of the colonial administration to incorporate the British educational agenda, however, actually finding a retreat in nature was not the way that things were moving. In Chapter 1, I have discussed nineteenth-century

heroes with such a romantic longing for sylvan bliss. In the early twentieth century, in Abanindranath Takur's *Nalak*, the child hero's dream of escape does not materialize. Contrary to his wish, his home, village and school do not get washed away in the rain, which would compel them to go and live in the woods.

The outside and inside, the attractive wildness of nature and the tamed, structured nature of modern education can never merge in a happy combination that would equalize all the needs of the child to grow and develop. This finds an allegorical representation in Tagore's poem about the caged bird and the free bird in which both of them refuse to acclimatize themselves to the other's environment, but prefer the familiar to an unknown surrounding (*My Reminiscences* 25).

Most post-independence children's literature leaves behind the rural setting and shifts to the life in cities with mainly Kolkata as its locale. A nostalgic yearning for the past and the countryside can be discerned in some of the older characters in these writings, while the child characters often long to discover nature as an alternative to the claustrophobia of city life, the only setting they have ever known. In Dinesh Chandra Chattopadhyay's story, 'Natun Desh' ('A New Land'), Chotka's life in his village seems like a distant and unattainable dream to him:

> Whenever Chotka talked about his village, he would forget to even eat and bathe. In his mind's eye would arise image after image – a green, peaceful, sheltered village under a big open sky, the fields to the south stretching infinitely, ponds and canals, the river Bibha to its north, the people of the village, its houses, paths and streets, its fields of mango-berry-jackfruit and palm-coconut-betel and the untamed wildernesses surrounding it. As his mind wandered, he would imagine traversing those paths, fields, streams and forests. His mind would get so saturated that he would not want to remain in Kolkata for a moment longer.
>
> (*Sharadiya Kishore Bharati* 1976: 24)

In Lila Majumdar's writings, the child protagonists are often tempted, even guided, to consider nature as a viable substitute for school. In 'Ghoton Kothae', Ghoton is taken by surprise to hear a man in the tram ask him why he goes to school when he hates it so much. When Ghoton asks him what he could possibly do instead, he comes out with a romantic description of nature that makes studies and school seem pale by sheer contrast:

> See the small white clouds roaming in the sky. The moist, green leaves of the trees are adorned with a golden splendour. And right next to the

> field, look at the pond – it is a shimmering green in colour. And can you sense the south wind?
>
> (*Chhelebelar Golpo*, *Lila Majumdar Rachanabali 1*: 219)

Nature is used by the street tempter to conjure up visions in the child's mind which he is not normally responsive to because of being incarcerated in an unimaginative, rigid and regimented home and school curriculum. Not only the mention of penguins in a distant land but even the violence involved in the killing of whales by using harpoons contributes to an exotic and attractive image of nature, which is at complete variance with what school and studies stand for: 'My whole mind became restless. I thought to myself – does anybody go to school on such a day? Does anybody *ever* feel like going to school in such a world?' (emphasis added) (221).

Ghoton listens in almost hypnotized amazement and rapture to his tempter's description of nature's products as an addiction that will eradicate the drudgery and monotony of his schoolgoing routine, and virtually as a feasible substitute for Kolkata and school:

> Do you know that in the Santhal Parganas, when the mahua fruit ripens, the whole jungle gets addicted to its scent? The wild beasts gorge on these and remain inebriated under the trees. The next day, woodcutters find them in that condition. Did you know that one can get intoxicated by the mahua fruit?
>
> (221)

The old and reliable servants in Lila Majumdar's stories, like Phagu and Jhagru in 'Gun Kora' and 'Holde Paakhir Palak' ('The Feathers of the Yellow Bird'), respectively, offer their own ideology about nature, superstitions and black magic all rolled into one, whose value, they claim, far exceeds that of school and studies. The role of servants in furthering a critique of city life far removed from nature will be discussed in the next chapter.

Amita Ghoshal's story 'Natun Pathshala' ('The New School') nostalgically evokes the memory of a rural school that provided the ambience for a free interaction with nature in all its aspects; it, however, could not boast of having achieved much by way of 'modern' education:

> Imagine a village far away from your homes with your classmates having horrible names. The school is held in muddy enclosures with mats to sit on. *Pandit*s with long *tiki*s twist your ears, as a result of which they have become enlarged . . . Imagine that when the school bell rings for the school day to be over you can see a rainbow forming among the clouds. With greenery on either side, the silver stream is at the centre,

> on which students from far-flung areas go and come in boats. Imagine a day exactly like this in the monsoon months, when frogs croak by day, corresponding to the call of fireflies. Courtyards and gardens are neck-deep in water. You will never see such fun during the monsoons anywhere else. Remember that all this goes hand in hand with studies. This was the happy school we poor folks went to.
>
> (*Sharadiya Pathshala,* September–October 1964: 27)

As in the example above, nature is not always contrary to or an outlet from studies. In Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Aparajito* (*The Unvanquished*) (*Bibhutibhushan Rachanabali* 2), Apu's life is emblematic of the simple pleasures of living close to nature, but in conjunction with and not contradictory to the pleasures of education. Apu's situation, like that of Tarapada in 'Atithi' (see Chapter 2), does not demand perceiving nature and studies as alternatives that are mutually exclusive. It demonstrates instead that they are two equally viable, attractive and harmonious aspects of life. Nature, in all its beautiful and romantic aspects, can be savoured even on the way back from school without encroaching on or hindering the modern, Western-style education that has been initiated. The adolescent Apu, like the adolescent Tarapada, can learn with enthusiasm despite partaking wholeheartedly and taking pleasure in the natural ambience around him.

However, nature, in most examples from children's literature, is usually projected as a substitute for school and studies, particularly to the Western pattern of education. But it is also a choice that necessitates the education system's reverting to its primitive, indigenous state with all its deficiencies. It is, therefore, a self-defeating and regressive enterprise to attempt to cure the ills of the British system – regimented and suffocating within its urbane sophistication – simply by an escape to nature, for it would only perpetuate the inadequacies of the pre-British system.

14

Although some fictional adults reminiscing on their schooldays are shown to be nostalgic about nature and rural simplicity, teachers are hardly ever portrayed as being aware of something that is lost in adopting the urban model of colonial education. It is also very rarely that the teacher realizes with some sensitivity his own uninteresting method of imposing joyless learning on students and decides to take some action based on it. Bibhutibhushan Mukhopadhyay's *Ranur Pratham Bhag* (1937), although neither a children's nor a school story, is an exceptional case in which the narrator, *Mejokaka,* is himself the surrogate teacher. It is also an unusual story because the recalcitrant student is a girl. Being greatly concerned about and

involved with the learning process of his niece Ranu, he slowly but surely recognizes that Ranu's refusal to be induced into learning has something to do with his monotonous and uninspiring teaching methods. Although clearly not a story about schoolmasters, it is the study of an insightful teacher who grows to realize his own unimaginative handling of his student. *Mejokaka* has the sensitivity to introspect on his own lack of imagination in teaching Ranu that might have caused her resistance to being initiated into learning.

On the other hand, *Ranur Pratham Bhag* is a crucial text that illustrates the girl child's limits of possibility, both in terms of the education she receives as well as in exercising the choice of playing truant from it. A girlhood that does not last beyond the early teens indeed misses out both on the prospective improvement through education that school offers as well as on subversive acts of mischief both in and outside school. Jasodhara Bagchi talks about this species of girls who were married off around puberty – not the 'school-going, game-playing girl child' (Introduction VII). The cultural phenomenon is explained through a discussion of womanhood as represented in Indian literature:

> It is partly because of the importance given to marriage that the childhood of a girl did not receive proper attention in pre-twentieth century literature. Once the girl, whatever be her age, is married she is not treated as a child any more; the marital status obliterates, as it were, her childhood.
>
> (Das, Sisir Kumar, ed. *A History of Indian Literature 2*: 325)

'Early marriage', says Jashodhara Bagchi, 'meant depriving the girl not only of education but of the pleasure of childhood itself' (Introduction VII). That the premature adulthood that was superimposed on the girl child virtually destroyed her childhood also underlies Tanika Sarkar's rhetorical questions: 'Was there a separate stage in the woman's life called childhood? If yes, was it compatible with marriage?' (*Hindu Wife*, *Hindu Nation* 242).

But these were not the kind of questions that troubled writers in the pre-independence period. Adult as well as children's literature were complicit in reinforcing the socially accepted gender stereotypes. A matter of concern for Ranu's *Mejokaka* is the girl child's studies as well as her resistance to it; both are domains that were hitherto the privilege of boys. The author mediates and supposedly resolves the problem but actually circumvents it by concluding with what would be considered socially expedient during the time in which the story is set – Ranu's marriage while she is in her early teens and a minor. Would Mejokaka's pedagogical creativity, therefore, have enabled Ranu to elude the incarceration inherent to marriage and domesticity that awaits her at her in-laws' place? The empowerment consequent to

getting on with the business of learning would never be the reward of the likes of her, and in that sense, the conflict between the uncle's educative programme and Ranu's unwillingness to learn are just glossed over. It is not surprising, therefore, that girl child protagonists who show some potential resilience in wanting to have a normal childhood like boys, by and large, have obviously and consciously been dropped like hot bricks from the wide canvas of children's literature.

In many nineteenth-century stories, I have discussed the case of the bad boy who undergoes an overnight transformation and becomes good. Stories with a commensurate formula about teachers sometimes show him as greatly repentant about having made some drastic mistakes in his interaction with students. In an enabling and liberating gesture, the teacher eventually frees the child from his tyranny. A typical example is Amitabha Chakrabarty's 'Ahimsa' ('Non-violence'), in which Asit Master, who, during teaching the concept of nonviolence to his students, ironically and abruptly hits a boy who is sleeping in the class, and is then so regretful about this act that he resigns. He is then persuaded by the same boy to take back his resignation (*Shuktara*. April–May 1959: 211–14). In the first of the above examples, Mejokaka's shortcoming is described from the teacher's perspective as a growing awareness, and in the second, not only is the teacher contrite for abusing the student physically but the student who has been wronged is equally humane in understanding and forgiving the teacher because he is penitent.

15

Child protagonists therefore are not always critics of their teachers and their education; there are also instances, few and far between, of fictional children who appreciate the value of their teachers and education, particularly if they have a socially, economically and sexually disadvantaged status. A handful of child characters, because of the resentment and insubordination they feel at not having been born into the comforts as well as the restrictions of a middle-class homes and therefore deprived of any kind of education, aspire for it all the more, believing it to be the gateway to success and emancipation. Being outside the purview of parents and teachers who are pillars of the establishment deprives them of the security of home and the opportunities offered by school education. They, therefore, hopelessly aspire to avail of the facilities of the system, and thus realize some of its values.

Rare autobiographical accounts of nineteenth-century women writers denied education because of they are expected to observe the gender code of the time and focus on their aspiration to study. Rasasundari Debi's *Amar Jibon* (*My Life*) (Tanika Sarkar, Ed., *Words to Win*), for instance, recapitulates

a life of dependence and subordination, starved of education because she is a woman, and therefore aspiring to that education all the more.

The same aspiration can be seen in child characters in fiction who are deprived of education because of their social and economic status. A typical twentieth-century example is Kanchan in Sibram Cakrabarty's *Bari Theke Paliye*, who feels ashamed at not knowing English when he is humiliated by the brother of a prospective girlfriend, and says to himself: 'Shame! Shame! No, he must learn English at all costs' (36).

Unlike many of Lila Majumdar's child protagonists who are comfortably ensconced in the middle class, the protagonist of Lila Majumdar's 'Taka Gachh' ('The Tree of Money'), Kanu, a bootpolish boy, cannot afford to disparage the system or want to run away from it as he is grateful for the little education he had received while he was still within its control as a schoolboy:

> Kanu will never forget that *pathshala*. The master used to cane them till they turned red . . . everyday he used to order them to get this and that for him; but at least he had taught Kanu how to read and write.
>
> (*Lila Majumdar Rachanabali VI*: 191)

Kanu craves the very education that his social superiors scorn because it comes too easily to them. While the rich boy is tired of his regulated yet secure life with all the education and the entertainment it provides that he takes for granted, the poor boy usually cannot afford to disown the little he has by way of family and education.

The obverse of the middle-class boy who does not want to study appears also in Ananda Bagchi's 'Kanamachhi' ('Blind Man's Buff'), in which Dukhu, the child protagonist, has been forced to give up his studies in order to make a living, and therefore yearns for it all the more:

> Whenever he got time, Dukhu . . . opened his tin suitcase and took out his books carefully covered in newspaper. He had preserved his treasures secretly; he gently caressed them as if they were precious toys, and got a certain joy out of quickly running his eyes over them. Whenever he turned a page, he could sniff the familiar smells of so many days and nights: he could hear the school bell, the voice of the masters, and the bustle of his friends.
>
> (*Roshnai*. May–June 1967: 439)

His school books, which he looks at longingly every now and then, represent for him not only his school and his home but the stability of a way of life that he has had to leave far behind. Ironically enough, this is the

education and accompanying stability that middle- and upper-middle-class child protagonists spurn because they have a surfeit of it.

In Asha Purna Devi's 'Aparadhi' ('The Wrongdoer') (*Kishore Omnibus* 1986: 46–9), the servant boy who is unjustly accused of stealing Sukumar's examination fees actually compensates for it out of his own saved up money, kept aside to pay for his own studies. Having lived and worked in an ambience that values education above everything else, he has always nourished a dream about acquiring such an education.

Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Aparajito* captures the poignancy of a life of poverty and want, aspiring to the Bengali *bhadralok*'s access to culture through education, against heavy odds. The same Apu who had threatened to run away from his village school as a child finally finds a school that can give him the kind of education he wants at some distance from his village. He voluntarily undertakes the tedious chore of walking back and forth from his distantly situated school, if only to escape from the hereditary role of a Brahman *Purohit*, whose life, according to the rational way he has taught himself to think, is steeped in meaningless superstitions and rituals (*Bibhutibhushan Rachanabali 2*: 31).

Although they contribute to a complex discourse on the child protagonist's engagement with her/his studies, the above instances are exceptions rather than the rule and they usually happen outside the space inhabited by the middle-class child protagonist, the real subject of my study. The middle-class child protagonist is so complacently entrenched in her/his secure position in the social hierarchy that she/he can afford to intermittently raise a voice of protest against the education system without the accompanying threat of losing it and getting destabilized in the process.

Notes

1 Rabindranath Tagore, 'Shiksha Samasya' in *Shiksha*. *Rabindra Rachanabali XI*, pp. 567–8. Tagore's *Shiksha* was first published in 1908 and therefore has already been discussed in Chapter 1 as a background to this chapter. A detailed exploration of literary representations of the child protagonist's interaction with her/his studies and her/his school, however, necessitated that I reopen certain seminal ideas about adult attitudes to schooling and education which are critiqued in *Shiksha.* I discuss these in greater detail in the context of the literature of the post-1916 period in this chapter. Discussions of specific aspects of teaching in other works written in the nineteenth or early twentieth century before 1916 have also been included in relevant contexts in this chapter.

2 Jogindranath Sarkar's rhymes were so popular that they continued to be printed both in his own compilations of rhymes as well as in anthologies of verse for children.

5 Escapes
Real and fantastic

By the ruins of terror's triumph children build their castles.
Motto in 'Campus Scene', a painting
by Benode Behari Mukherjee

Jhagru says it is difficult to tell where reality ends and where dreams begin.
Majumdar, Lila. 'Holde Pakhir Palak' in
Lila Majumdar Rachanabali 1. Kolkata:
Asia Publishing Co., 1976, p. 66.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I have discussed the home and the school as oppressive institutions that provoke the child protagonist's desire to escape and find her/his freedom and fulfilment elsewhere. In this chapter, I will further examine how she/he deploys her/his link with the world outside to visualize and actually find some release from these circumscribed spaces.

To recapitulate, the domestic milieu of the nuclear family has been perceived by sociologists of the functionalist school as a retreat that shuts out the anomalies and injustices of the world beyond. It protects the child's vulnerability to the outside world. However, more recent scholarship views it as a cocoon that is self-obsessed and also blind and apathetic to as well as suspicious of the real world outside. It is, nonetheless, the institution that facilitates the child's first and subsequent contact beyond the private space, and is therefore also the primary agent in the socialization of children.

In Bengali children's fiction, the family is not only ubiquitous but also quite perceptibly the mediatory institution or the stepping-stone between the child as an individual and society at large. Introducing the child to the world outside, the family concurrently imposes injunctions to her/him not to violate certain codes in interacting with it. Paradoxically, therefore, it restricts the child's intermingling with the outermost layers and the marginalized community of people outside who do not live in accordance with middle-class structures and institutions (see Robertson Elliot, *The Family: Change*

or Continuity? 122–4). Like the proverbial forbidden apple, therefore, child protagonists have been attracted to the 'outside' and the 'other' all the more, and thereby questioned the nuclear family's status as a haven. The twentieth-century child protagonist, time and again, has not known where to draw the line or has refused to draw the line according to filial directives or family norms. No longer compliant in being held back by the do's and don'ts of the family, she/he longs to confront the world outside, disregarding parental counsel and familial conventions.

1

Children's stories that are located within the complacent existence of middle- or upper-middle-class homes often negotiate the impermeable interface between the 'inside' and 'outside'. They legitimize the child protagonist's desire to find an avenue of escape from the structured homogeneity of life within the family. These stories do not necessarily highlight the protagonist's yearning for a retreat to the countryside, representing the city and country as mutually exclusive options that I have already discussed in Chapter 4. To illustrate from a contemporary Indian children's story in English, Ruskin Bond's *The Room on the Roof*, the demarcation between the 'inside' and the 'outside' is *within* an urban context. It is instantly recognizable in the contrast between the neat and sanitized English houses where Rusty lives and the bustling street life of the Indian bazaar. The excitement of being able to explore this dissimilarity incites Rusty to transgress the sacrosanct terrain of the English, insinuating his way into and mingling with the proscribed crowd of the *chaat* shop. In Bengali stories, too, the outside is often portrayed as dirty, noisy, crowded, but also great fun. The child protagonist, therefore, is often tempted to imagine and carve out a seamless interface between the two.

Irrespective of whether the outside beckons the child either in the form of its vibrant market places or its sylvan joys, the child protagonist sometimes attempts to run away from the drudgery of home and school to befriend the world at large. Yet the course of escape is usually neither linear nor a path that frees her/him of her/his anchor in the real world. It is not as if she/he has nothing to lose but her/his chains. An empirical confrontation with the outside, followed by a pragmatic need to return to the reality of home and school, is an oft-repeated cyclical trajectory in children's fiction. Once again, a story by Ruskin Bond, whose writings English-reading children across a pan-Indian spectrum are familiar with and which are as popular with adults as with children, is paradigmatic of the theme. An archetypal malcontent among school-going children who want to take flight but are eventually absorbed back into the familiar and safe nucleus of home

and school is Suraj in Bond's story, 'The Great Train Journey'. The story is a notable contemporary illustration of the pattern because it represents it both metaphorically and literally through a circular train journey. Suraj, the teenaged schoolboy protagonist, harbours the illusion of running away from home and school as he boards a train for an unknown destination. At the end, however, he hopelessly realizes that he has been journeying on a goods train that followed a circular hilly path. The train, his instrument of escape, ironically traces its way back to the very station from which it started, virtually compelling Suraj to reluctantly make his way back to his home and its accompanying baggage, the school.

2

Although the school is initially the child's only forum for interacting socially without the presence of his family members, it is also a kind of extension of the home that can become as or more oppressive than the home itself. The enforced disciplinary regimen, the unimaginative methods of learning like memorizing by rote and the fear of corporal and other less violent though possibly more demeaning kinds of punishment, in certain cases, makes schooling a worse nightmare than having to put up with an uninspiring domestic situation. The literary motif of running away from school, therefore, has been a favourite with twentieth-century writers (see Chapter 4). Again, Ruskin Bond's Rusty in *The Adventures of Rusty* (1981) is a case in point who is an amalgam of many child protagonists who have thought and acted along similar lines. The story introduces the subject of Rusty's futile attempts to run away from school by linking it with a tradition:

> Running away from school! It is not to be recommended to everyone. Parents and teachers would disapprove. Or would they, deep down in their hearts? Everyone has wanted to run away, at some time in his life, if not from a bad school or an unhappy home, then from something equally unpleasant. Running away seems to be in the best tradition. Huck Finn did it. So did Master Copperfield and Oliver Twist. So did Kim . . . Most great men have run away from school at some stage in their lives; and if they haven't, then perhaps it is something they should have done.
>
> (50)

To trace the genealogy of adolescent heroes in Bengali literature who are lured by the outside world to run away would show up so many instances that one would have to be selective. A starting point could be the autobiographical reminiscences of Rabindranath Tagore in *Jibansmriti*

(*My Reminiscences*) and *Chhelebela* (*My Boyhood Days*). Tagore nostalgically recalls his fascination for everything that lay outside the restrictive ambience of his home, to which he was denied any kind of access:

> To leave the house was forbidden to us, in fact we did not even have the run of the interior. We had to get our glimpses of Nature from behind barriers. Beyond my reach stretched this limitless thing called the Outside, flashes, sounds and scents of which used momentarily to come and touch me through interstices. It seemed to want to beckon me through the shutters with a variety of gestures. But it was free and I was bound - there was no way of our meeting. So its attraction was all the stronger.
>
> (*My Reminiscences* 26)

Again, the terrace offers him as a child his only contact with the outside world:

> My chief holiday resort was the unfenced roof of the outer apartments. From my earliest childhood till I was grown-up, many varied days were spent on that roof in many moods and thoughts . . . the journey to the roof held for me the joy of a voyage through the seven seas . . . to climb to that roof was to be raised beyond the swarming habitations of man. When I went on to the roof my mind strode proudly/over prostrate Kolkata to where the last blue of the sky mingled with the last green of the earth.
>
> (*My Boyhood Days* 49–50)

In a quasi-autobiographical narration, Premankur Atarthi's *Mahasthabir Jatak*, the child character Sthabir remembers being fascinated by his classmate Madhu who 'used to strike us dumb by his variety of stories about running away from school. There is no account of how many kinds of strange experiences he told us about, which included both truths and falsehoods' (163).

Sthabir's vision of eluding the tedious blandness of school *and* home acquires a specific ideological agenda when it champions the cause of the eternal itinerant:

> That person inside me who never let me build my nest anywhere, that romantic shook his head and woke up one day. My mind started ringing with the belief that 'everything is a lie'. I somehow kept my family responsibilities in abeyance and tried to stifle that Bohemian spirit in

> me, when my attention was drawn to that precious advice from the Upanishad – *Jadhareba vivajetodhareba pravajet*. In other words, a soon as the Bohemian in you troubles you, free yourself and set out.
>
> (81)

One of the first child protagonists in twentieth-century literature to give up going to school for good is Indranath in Sharatchandra Chattapadhyay's *Srikanta* (1915):

> [A]s soon as the headmaster had unjustly made arrangements to put a dunce's cap on his head, he felt so hurt that he . . . distastefully climbed the railing of the school to return home, never to go back again . . ./Once you have jumped the fence to make your way home, the way inside through the gate usually does not remain open any more for you. However, Indranath did not have the slightest desire to see if it had remained open. What is more, although he had ten-twenty guardians looking after him, none of them were successful in helping him to retrace his steps backs to school. Indra rejected the pen and took the oars of a boat in his hand instead.
>
> (11–12)

Indranath is completely at ease not with just the benevolent and beautiful aspects of nature but its formidable and dangerous features as well. He actually makes the jungle his natural habitat. He chooses to find his way around inevitably through the dense woods rather than through easier, smoother, but obviously longer man-made paths. Rivers and turbulent waters, snakes, tigers, bears and other wild animals cannot restrict his movements.

Unlike her/his earlier counterparts, the post-Tagore child protagonist who sometimes desperately wants to identify with any character, place or situation outside the known and the familiar cannot find in nature and the countryside the potential answer to the claustrophobic experience at home, because the vast expanse of rural spaces is usually unknown to her/him. Even if she/he lives in a village, poverty makes her/him want to escape from there. In Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Chander Pahar*, Shankar is not content to be a *pater kaler babu* (a clerk in a jute mill) because his father is ill and he has to earn a living. He refuses to take up the only job that his village can offer him, which would be the simplest and most shortsighted solution before him. Instead, he wants to seize the opportunity of taking up even a petty job in a rail company in Uganda, not intending any defiance or disrespect to his mother, who will have to cope at home by herself although he will earn the money. This is because

> [his] mind flies to the faraway lands of the world, imagining himself to be in the midst of all kinds of adventures, like those of Livingstone, Stanley, Harry Johnston, Marco Polo and Robinson Crusoe. He has prepared himself for this since boyhood, though he has never paused to think that what is possible for boys of other countries is virtually impossible for Bengali boys. They have been reared to be clerks, schoolmasters, doctors or lawyers. To cross over to unknown paths in unknown regions is indeed a hopeless dream for them.
>
> (*Bibhutibhushan Rachanabali 9*: 4)

Two classic examples of Bengali children's stories about running away from home are Sibram Chakrabarty's *Bari Theke Paliye* and Khagendranath Mitra's *Bhombol Sardar* (*Captain Bhombol*). In the first, Kanchan, the hero, returns home after wandering through the streets and alleys of Kolkata. But in the second, Bhombol reaches his destination, the Tatanagar factory, where he wants to work in order to liberate himself, only to realize that passing through its gate will mean for him a greater captivity than home and school. Most other fictional narratives usually underline the child's *desire* to run away but do not culminate in an *actual* act of trying to escape.

Like Ruskin Bond's Rusty who reels off an intertextual catalogue of classic literary characters who have run away from school in order to validate his own predilection and subsequent actions, Lila Majumdar's Ghoton in 'Ghoton Kothae' is inspired by the life of the most prominent figure in the Bengali literary imaginary. A stranger on a tram in 'Ghoton Kothae' indoctrinates Ghoton to run away from school by citing the case of no less than the literary giant Rabindranath himself: 'Why do you remain in Kolkata and go to school? Do you know that Rabindranath became such a great poet by constantly running away from school?' (*Lila Majumdar Omnibus* 221).

The provocative, rhetorical question is intended to stir up in the child protagonist as perhaps in the child reader the exhilarating prospect of playing truant from school forever. Yet neither Ghoton nor Sthabir or any of the other fictional characters ever succeed in permanently dodging home and school.

3

The showcasing of the outside as a utopia is timeless in literature and has existed in Bengali writing for adults and children at least from the end of the nineteenth century, by which time urban and rural spaces had become clearly demarcated. The child protagonist's romanticizing of the outside is sometimes such that it lures her/him without his making a realistic assessment that could moderate between its attractive and dangerous aspects. Tagore's

autobiographical reminiscences, poems, plays and short stories could serve as the best exemplars. His memoirs articulate the angst of a lonely child in an affluent household. The romantic desire to be out in the streets is so overwhelming for him that it does not take into account the hardships and difficult lives of the people outside. The *churiwala*'s (bangle seller's) call in the middle of the hot afternoon when the rest of the world is sleeping beckons him to the attractive outside, without cautioning him about the rough living and working conditions of such a man (*My Boyhood Days* 50). In 'Bichitra Shadh', the same ignorance about the harsh lives of people making a living out of selling wares or serving the socially higher placed bhadralok class finds poetic expression and characterizes the child's longing to be a *churiwala*, a gardener or a night watchman in order to escape his routinized existence inside his home (*Shishu*, *Rabindra Rachanabali II*: 42–3).

A similar lack of actual experience shows through in Amal's fancy about wanting to be a curdseller in *Dakghar* (*Rabindra Rachanabali VI*) without reckoning the daily grind that the curdseller has to go through, fantasizing it as much more desirable than the arduous course of studies that is his daily regimen. In the post-Tagore era, such a quixotic picture of the world outside, particularly that of working-class people living barely at the peripheries of existence, has been demystified by other poets. In a parody of *Dakghar*, Paresh De's 'Anya Rakam' ('How Different!'), Deep, the child protagonist, is reprimanded by the *moawalla* (sweetmeat seller), whose life he idealizes as a covetable one, spelling out how hard life actually is for him (*Sharadiya Kishore Bharati* 1987: 146–9).

In Sunirmal Basu's poem 'Kabuliwala', there is an ironic reminder to the reader that the *Kabuliwala*'s, or for that matter, any hawker's life is not as full of thrills as it sounds (*Sandesh*. June–July 1926: 82–4). This cautious reminder is necessitated by the very innocence of the child's query to the *Kabuliwala* about whether there is no mother in his home who stopped him from coming out in the afternoon sun. To the child's imagination, going out in the afternoon, irrespective of harsh weather conditions like unbearable heat and cold, is an exciting prospect that is denied to him. There is an incongruity underlying the child's question which he innocently expects to be taken seriously. However, Tagore's short story 'Kabuliwala', which is not really a children's story and belongs to a much earlier period, charts a trajectory that eventually absorbs an equally valid perception of reality. It ends by highlighting a young adult's sensitization to the man-made social and economic disparities that she as a child had not taken into consideration in exoticizing and glorifying the *Kabuliwala*. The discrepancy in socio-economic background between her and the *Kabuliwala* had eluded the protagonist while she was a child, and she realizes it only at the end, when she is on the verge of adulthood. In this story, the *Kabuliwala* is once again

a glamorous and romantic figure from Afghanistan who seems to have taken in his stride and absorbed all the hardships he faces. The child protagonist Mini constantly reminds him of his estranged daughter, who he has left behind in Kabul to earn a living in distant Kolkata. But the child's imaginative recreation of this outlandish figure who narrates interesting stories that she revels in is deconstructed by her very interaction with him in the climactic scene. In her adolescent state as a bashful bride on her wedding day, when she meets the *Kabuliwala* after many years that he has spent in prison, she seems to instinctively sense that her world and the world of the *Kabuliwala* can never meet.

4

The domestic set-up is not only dreary and dull for the child but one in which she/he is always in a position of disadvantage vis-à-vis her/his elders. An imaginative way of triumphing over this situation is to wish for a fantastic situation which will allow a male child to replace a figure of authority, particularly the father, in order that he can exercise his power over him, or compensate for his absence. Tagore's story 'Icchapuran' is an adaptation of the classic English story *Vice Versa* (1882) by F. Anstey in which both father and son are actually granted a wish for an exchange of roles with each other (see Chapter 2). Nonetheless, they are eventually only too glad to get back their original identities after availing of what they had believed to be a dream-come-true existence.

However, for those child protagonists who cannot realize through a magical intervention the dream of parenting their own fathers, it is not possible to keep such a fantasy alive except by imagining it. In early twentieth-century Bengal, the father often worked in a remote place to earn his livelihood, and only visited home on occasions. The child protagonist of Tagore's poems in *Shishu* and *Shishu Bholanath* who finds himself in such a predicament with an absentee father often visualizes an interchange of role with the father. The substitution can potentially bring him closer to the mother and entitle him to some of the privileges his father enjoys in his relationship with her. It also empowers him with an authority that he does not and cannot enjoy as the youngest member of the family.

The family network often puts children in a bind, unable to balance conflicting injunctions from family members (see Elliot, *The Family: Change or Continuity?* 125). Children also exploit differences between parents while resisting and redefining parental definitions that are imposed on them (discussed in Chapter 3). To illustrate from a few poems in *Shishu*, in 'Byakul' ('Anxious'), the child wants to assume his father's role and write

letters to his mother in order to relieve her of her anxiety at not receiving any letter from her husband who lives and works far away from home (*Rabindra Rachanabali II*: 23). In 'Chotobaro' the child hypothesizes a scenario in which his mother will find him paying the maid's salary, and his father will come back from the city to find him so grown-up that the clothes he has brought for him will not fit him (*Rabindra Rachanabali II*: 24). Even when the father is actually present, the child protagonist of *Shishu* often shares an alliance and a bantering relationship with his mother in which he betrays a wish for an Oedipal appropriation of his father's role. In 'Samalochak', he reprimands his mother for not objecting to his father's endless writing, while scolding him for disturbing his father or making paper boats (*Rabindra Rachanabali II*: 26), an activity that uses the same raw material, and in the child's perception, as enabling and worthy of reverence as writing.

Being greatly imitative, the male child enjoys emulating his father in order to free himself from the subordination of childhood, but is also willing to play surrogate to anyone or anything that will confer on him a position of authority. Tagore's children's poems envisage situations in which the child could enjoy the alternation of roles with a teacher or even God. In 'Master Babu' 'The Little Master', for instance, the child wants to be the stern task-master of his unwilling student, his cat, in an attempt to reverse the power equation, however temporarily:

> Today, I am Kanai Master, and my pupil is my kitty
> With a stick in my hand I sit, but don't cane him out of pity
> Choosing to come late every day, he's not focused on his study
> He raises his right leg to yawn when I ask him to follow me
> He wants to make merry all day, and ignores his studies somehow
> Asked to repeat the alphabet, he merely purrs "miaow, miaow."
>
> (*Rabindra Rachanabali II*: 21)

In Bibhutibhushan Mukhopadhyay's 'Ulto Chhiri', the child is granted a wish to become the teacher of Saraswati, the goddess of learning. She/he can thereby retaliate and give vent to all her/his pent-up frustration about always being at the receiving end of the educational regime, thus giving the goddess a taste of her own medicine (*Mouchak*. April–May 1969: 34). In Hemendra Kumar Roy's 'Ulto Baajir Deshe' ('In the Land of Upside-Down'), among the many topsy-turvy situations he conjectures in which the roles of the oppressor and the oppressed are reversed, he demonstrates vicious pleasure in conceptualizing a transposition that has 'The son reprimand[ing] his mischievous father by twisting his ear' (*Mouchak*. May–June 1923: 84).

5

Another significant kind of outlet for the child protagonist in which she/he is able to recreate a more interesting life for herself/himself and realize some of his fantasies, albeit within certain spatial and temporal constraints, is to meaningfully interact with figures inhabiting a space outside the established sanctity of home and school. These 'different' but peripheral characters are looked upon as suspect by parents, teachers and other figures of authority. They are usually domestic servants, streetside magicians and jugglers or good-for-nothing uncles and cousins. Sometimes, she/he not only emulates but confabulates with such unconventional and disreputable persons, whose company creatively liberates her/him from the do's and don'ts of her/his own life for sometime. Being larger-than-life repositories of exciting tales about far-away places and weird happenings, the child hero-worships them. She/he invests a lot in redefining and relocating himself in relation to the alternate figures who open out new opportunities for her/him. There also seems to be a considerable authorial sympathy for the child who lionizes this 'other', wishfully identifying with the alterity that this person offers. Of course, by their very definition, those attributes of the 'other' that the child wants to internalize cannot be subsumed within the system with which the child has to make a compromise. Neither can the child protagonist go off the beaten track completely and finally nor be ultimately 'othered', but is reclaimed by the system she/he had sought to escape, in order to perpetuate a status quo within a middle-class family situation. The person who entices her/him with an imaginative release from the oppression of her/his own life, which is no more than a reprieve, is also usually not allowed to be a part of the child's life once the adventures are over; the post-adventure situation of the child protagonist vis-à-vis such adults will be discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

These persons – the aforementioned group comprising domestic servants, streetside magicians and performers, and good-for-nothing uncles and cousins – are usually outside the mainstream or dropouts from it, living at the margins of middle-class existence and yet sufficiently close to it to allow them a glimpse into its dullness. They instigate the child protagonist to emerge from the sheltered life she/he has led so far, introducing some variety in her/his life and suggesting that she/he follow untrodden paths. These 'strangers' begin, according to sociologists Alfred and Elizabeth Lee,

> as the general out-group, the people to be avoided, the children with whom one does not or should not play, the adults whose candy must not be accepted. In their anxiety to build a shield against harm into their children's minds and to bind their children to themselves and to their own kind, parents project many fantasies of evil into these 'strangers'. (111)

6

Domestic servants in the middle-class household are one such 'out-group'. To substantiate with autobiographical writing once again, Tagore reminisces happily about being relegated to the guardianship of servants most of the time: 'We lived under the rule of servants . . . the neglect was also a kind of independence . . . It left our minds free, unhampered and unburdened by all the usual bother over food and dress' (*My Reminiscences* 22).

In fictional narratives, the old, reliable servant is an oft-repeated figure who holds some surrogate authority and has some credibility with the children of the house, particularly in the absence of their parents. Being of an impressionable age, the children get taken in by the fantastic stories that their servants tell them about the wonders of a life far removed from their urban homes and schools. Phagu, the servant in Lila Majumdar's 'Gun Kora' ('Magic'), for instance, scoffs at the school education of his master's children, supporting the knowledge of black magic at the cost of denigrating science and geography: 'What do you know and what do you understand? You go to school, cram a few books, and think yourselves very learned. I dare you to change a tamarind leaf into a tiger – can you?' (*Chhelebelar Golpo*, *Lila Majumdar Rachanabali 1*: 391).

In *Holde Pakhir Palak*, too, the uneducated servant Jhagru's scathing attack on formal education mesmerizes the children. Jhagru makes a case for a hardworking, fulfilling life close to nature, something that the city-bred children are deprived of (*Lila Majumdar Rachanabali III*: 3). One cannot, of course, disengage Jhagru's celebration of nature, pastoral simplicity and even superstition from the degradation accompanying his own subaltern position within middle-class and upper-middle-class urban society. Living in their masters' houses as virtual outcasts from their society, the pressure and shame of their own underprivileged status provokes domestic servants to nurture and underscore a divergent worldview that is valid enough within its own cultural templates.

Recalling some nineteenth-century English classics that are more *about* children than *for* them, the servants in them enjoy a considerably proactive role vis-à-vis the children of their masters. Written during a period when keeping servants was still within the reach of upper- and middle-class English society, the child protagonist is occasionally given some amount of leeway to actually experience the world of the servants, however different it may be from her/his.

One illustration from an English classic that used to be a great favourite as a school textbook would be adequate to demonstrate the difference between the child's interaction with the servant portrayed in it and that depicted in Bengali children's fiction. In Dickens's *David Copperfield*, David is allowed to go away with his servant Peggotty to Yarmouth on a visit to her

brother while his widowed mother is getting married for the second time. David's trip with Peggotty circumvents an unbridgeable gap in social position between the two families. Peggotty's brother, who is a warm-hearted and affectionate person, lives in an abandoned boat, and within his limited resources and the restraints of his social and economic status, offers shelter to many orphaned and widowed people. It is a sunny, joyous, comfortable home that opens out a world of fun to David. On the other hand, the Bengali child protagonist is often left to the care of servants in her/his *own* home, enabling her/him to gain an access to a different world only notionally. But she/he usually cannot freely and easily encroach into the servant's home in the manner of David, because not only would such hospitality not be feasible within the economic constraints of the servants' household but it would entail infringing on the more well-defined and rigidly hierarchized class and caste organization in the Indian context.

In nineteenth-century America, the case of Mark Twain's Huck Finn, who goes away with the slave 'nigger' Jim on a raft, is a serious and radical assertion of a child protagonist trusting and colluding with a character who, in this case, is racially disadvantaged. Together, they undertake a venture that is perhaps more hazardous than that undertaken by any middle-class Bengali child protagonist. One basic qualification, however, has to be made. Resisting efforts to 'sivilize' (*sic*) him, Huck has nothing much to lose as he does not really belong to the respectable middle class. It is, therefore, easier for him to go away altogether.

7

Magicians and streetside performers who the child protagonist is exposed to also sometimes offer an alternative to the home and the school. Magic always opens out liberating possibilities to school-going middle-class children, satiated by their dull lessons and homilies from parents about conformity to conventions. But just as servants cannot ultimately facilitate their masters' children to fundamentally sever their ties with home and school, magicians, too, do not have the agency whereby they could provide the child protagonist a serious and viable option of breaking with middle-class life. In fact, sooner or later, they let the child protagonists down, or incite them to follow a more conventional life.

In Lila Majumdar's story 'Borolok Howar Niyom' ('How to Become Rich') (*Lila Majumdar Rachanabali III:* 346–50), for instance, the child hero gets sufficiently taken in by a man to trade his ticket at the football stadium with him for the magic code of becoming rich. In an anticlimactic turn of events, however, the instruction he finds inside the paper supposedly containing his key to wealth asserts the Vidyasagarian moral dictum

that prosperity and success in life are directly reciprocal to the amount of diligence one puts into one's studies. Similarly, in Lila Majumdar's 'Jadukar' ('Magician') (*Lila Majumdar Rachanabali III:* 350–7), the ill-tempered Jagaida wants to become a magician and give up his studies. He seizes his opportunity when he comes in contact with a magician. Ironically, it is at the request of the magician that he resolves to finish his studies before attempting to explore magic as a profession.

Magicians like the one mentioned above turn to magic as a profession in order to make a living because they lack or spurned at some phase of their lives the education required for more respectable jobs. Living a subsistence level existence, they sometimes understand the value of education much more than the child protagonists who smugly denigrate education and the security of middle-class life from a position of privilege, without realizing the consequences of being deprived of these props. Satyajit Ray's story *Phatikchand* could explain the situation more clearly. Getting kidnapped and a subsequent accident caused Nikhil, a boy from an affluent home, to lose his memory. He is then renamed Phatik by Harunda, a juggler who ran away from a middle-class home, who he befriends during his adventure away from home. Harunda, his new friend and mentor, takes him through a world of slum dwellers and roadside teashops, refreshingly different from Phatik's opulent yet stuffy home and school surroundings. During the course of his adventures, Phatik realizes his latent affinity with the warmth and vitality of this other domain that he has never known. However, the far-from-genteel people and places that Phatik subsequently builds a rapport with are not viewed through rose-tinted glasses beyond a point. Reservations about them are articulated through Harunda's introspection about the instability and insecurity of his own life: 'If I had abided by all the rules, during this end-of-the-day office hour rush, Arun Mustafi [alias Harunda] would possibly have been going back from B.B.D. Bagh to Ballygunge comfortably in his Fiat car' (17).

It sounds a warning knell to Phatik about the relative discomforts and hazards of such a life. Curiously, it is Harunda who ultimately insists on taking him back to his protective home environment and entrusting him to the custody of his parents, which also entails for him the resumption of school and studies.

Conversely, magicians sometimes lead the child protagonist dangerously close to the world of crime. For example, in 'Ghoton Kothae', the two street tempters who could also be a part of Ghoton's subconscious initially promise to open out a vista after vista of marvellous happenings before Ghoton, including trips to an exotic land where penguins freely run around, and a strange site where they can see whales being killed by harpoons (*Chhelebelar Golpo*. *Lila Majumdar Rachanabali 1*: 217–24). They also acquaint him with the indolent rhythm of life in a locale where bears lie inebriated, merely

by imbibing the aroma of the mahua fruit (see Chapter 4). However, these two men, in fact, turn out to be criminals, either in real life or his dream, who lure him to a dark street corner and eventually entice him to kill people. In Lila Majumdar's 'Diner Sheshe' ('At the End of the Day') (*Lila Majumdar Rachanabali III:* 376–83) a magician exploits the brother and sister pair's admiration for him by stealthily seeking shelter in their garden shed. Soon after, he disappears with everybody's belongings. In these stories, sooner or later, the children themselves realize the potential danger of associating with such magicians, and retrace their steps back to the refuge of their homes before some serious harm can come to them.

Retrospectively, an illustration of a classic nineteenth-century English text that similarly offers children a temporary retreat from the pressures of school and studies by impressing them with pedestrian performative acts is Dickens's *Hard Times*. The children, living in conditions of oppression, find in the circus an antidote to Gradgrind's schooling system, which is iconic of the larger repression of the industrial system. This tradition of the child protagonist finding amusement and release through entertainers from the lower walks of life continues well into twentieth-century popular English children's fiction. At the other end of the time range, a striking illustration of such a child protagonist is Richmal Crompton's William of the popular schoolboy series who

> gets along well with slightly broken-down characters who pose no threat to his own rampant individuality, such as out-of-luck Punch and Judy men or inefficient shop managers. Rough, lively children from William's own gang, well-named 'The Outlaws,' or drawn from the whole, socially outcast world of travelling circus or gypsy-camp, meet with his full approval.
>
> (Tucker, 'Good Friends, or Just Acquaintances? The Relationship between Child Psychology and Children's Literature', *The Child and the Book* 118)

Bengali children's stories about the child's encounters with magicians eventually emphasize her/his need to concentrate on studies rather than fancy herself/himself as a magician or be susceptible to a project that will supposedly transform her/his own life miraculously. They demonstrate that the alternatives that are offered by magicians cannot outwit the system at all, and suggest instead that compliance with the establishment would be more worthwhile in the long run (see Chapter 7).

In other analogous fictional instances where the child protagonist counters in a hands-on manner being persecuted by the family, ironically s/he sometimes has to look to the extended family for fulfilment of latent

desires, using people like uncles and cousins as props. They offer the child something different and significantly shackle-free. Belonging to the same socio-economic background but having opted out of school and studies, they stir the child's imagination to believe that it is not only thrilling but also quite feasible for her/him to 'escape'. The enticing role of uncles and cousins, the third group of people who promise the children something more stimulating than their own lives has already been discussed in Chapter 3.

8

A variation of the proactively rebellious child protagonist is one who is quite content to be a passive member of a household until some accidental occurrence makes her/him experience a brush with the unusual experiences, unpredictability as well as the freedom of the outside world. In a children's story with a protagonist who has just stepped into adulthood, Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Maraner Danka Baje* (*The Drums of Death*), Sureshwar gets inside an adventure without intending to do so:

> There are certain people who valorize the prospect of facing new dangers in faraway lands – Sureshwar is not exactly one of these. He is an innocuous and home-loving kind of person – the kind who is content, like other sundry Bengali bhadralok, to hold on to his regular and safe job and fulfill his domestic duties without any disruption whatsoever.
> (*Bibhutibhushan Rachanabali 9*: 85)

Once he has embarked on the adventure, however, there is no looking back.

In Hemendra Kumar Roy's *Der – Sho Khokar Kando*, Gobindo is a docile and obedient son who lives with his widowed mother in a village before setting off to visit relatives in Kolkata. On the way, his adventures begin when his pocket gets picked, and he resolves not to go to his aunt's house in Kolkata until he has been able to round up the thief with the assistance of many friends he makes on the way. Gobindo, therefore, is not a truant but one who compulsively takes on the world outside in order to crack a petty crime that he has been a victim of. In the process, however, he also enjoys every minute of the adventure that befalls him. In Asha Purna Devi's *Ek Samuddur Anek Dheu*, the protagonist Shanu is the pampered only child of well-to-do parents, and is completely unacquainted with the roughness as well as the fun of the outside world. Setting off on a holiday with his parents, he fantasizes about the sea and fields of Puri that must be much more attractive than Kolkata, but has no desire to run away from home or mingle with people who are not a part of his world. An unexpected opportunity for adventure comes his way when he actually goes for a walk and gets lost.

Having had a taste of making friends with a Santhal boy working in a tea-shop, and another boy who has run away from home, when he finally gets back home, he cannot help but conclude 'Home is nice. Very nice. *But it is nicer to get lost*' (emphasis added) (114).

Phatikchand, Satyajit Ray's hero in the story with the same name who hails from a similarly wealthy background, gets a chance to go beyond the confines of his affluent home when he gets kidnapped. His memory lapse, which causes him to forget his name, only to be renamed Phatikchand, is suggestive of his desire to erase everything about his past and his new-found love for the world outside his home, although it is more hazardous and rough. He becomes so attached to his juggler friend Harunda that he can hardly reconcile to the idea of going back to his home without him, and almost suffers an identity crisis in not wanting to be addressed by his real name Nikhil any more.

The oft-repeated paradigm of the child protagonist getting into a scrape which not only shows a dormant desire in her/him to be part of the 'other' but also opens up new possibilities for her/him other than those offered by his restrictive home environment is usually cautiously presented by the author along with a fictional 'loop' whereby the child has to ultimately return to the fold. The 'loop' of these stories will separately be discussed in the last chapter.

9

One genre within adolescent literature marginally steps beyond domestic fantasy, because it intermittently allows the child protagonist to participate in and *accomplish* juvenile efforts at criminal investigation. I am including such stories of detection, which are usually part of some mystery series, within the umbrella genre of domestic fantasy for two reasons. First, the children involved in these tales of thrill and adventure belong to ordinary, middle-class, urban families. For them, the uncovering of a mystery during vacations or some time that they take off from school offers a break from the boredom of the workaday world, just as a fantasy situation would. Also, the detection, although it is not just an unreal, implausible and wishfully thought out adventure and is meant to be taken seriously by its child readers, is configured like a fantasy realized for sometime, leaving the domestic structure untouched. In these stories, the child protagonist is already placed in an advantageous situation at the beginning of the story, predetermined by the author to play a leading role in the disentangling of the mystery. The escapade allows her/him to freely cross the threshold of home and school to step into and negotiate the big, bad world where a routinized, formal regimen of time and restrictions regarding spatial violation are not in operation. Being a detective or a detective's sidekick offers a welcome change from everyday life. And all this happens quite

smoothly, without any arguments with parents and elders, quarrels or rebellious moves in order to demand her/his right as an individual, which is taken for granted anyway. It enables the child to live in a domain that is beyond the limited and limiting boundaries of her/his home and school. Once she/he has stepped outside, there is no gnawing pressure from home to curtail her/his movements. In all the formulaic Pandab Goenda stories (named after the five Pandav brothers in the *Mahabharata*) of Shashthipada Chattopadhyay, for instance, five teenagers go around solving criminal cases in the neighbourhood. With obvious resonances of Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* or *Five Find-Outers* series, they work out the mysteries during the summer vacations, roaming about freely in the streets all day, without their parents being overly concerned about their studies, welfare or safety. When they come back late in the night, they get away with just mild reprimands.

Hemendra Kumar Roy's stories were among the first mystery stories for children/adolescents in Bengali. Although Roy's detective duos – Bimal–Kumar or Jayanta–Manik – are not child protagonists themselves, they are idolized as heroes by child readers, and it is partly their being free of parents that makes them the intrepid young men that they are, having no reservations about braving perilous situations in order to penetrate and solve a mystery. Bimal, Kumar, Jayanta, Manik and Nihar Ranjan Gupta's detective hero Kiriti Roy are not merely dauntless and adventure seeking. They also belong to a class and family background that permits them to leave home and family liabilities without having to worry much about making a living, so that they can voluntarily confront and take up the challenge of precarious situations outside. In 'Jayanter Kirti' ('Jayanta's Exploits'), the author explains their social and economic standing:

> Jayanta and Maniklal used to study in the same college, but they were both orphaned by the non-cooperation movement, and are therefore free. They both have some family property, so there is no danger of their freedom being snatched away from them.
>
> (*Hemendra Kumar Rachanabali 10*: 13)

These heroes are not run-of-the-mill, middle-class, *gharkuno* Bengalis, incorrigibly tied to the interior of their homes. In Hemendra Kumar Roy's *Sonar Paharer Jatri* (*En Route to the Golden Mountain*), Bimal, the adult detective, makes an attempt to win the child readers' confidence in him and Kumar as heroes, vehemently denying the popular allegation about Bengalis as unadventurous:

> Wherever there is a sense of an unusual exploit, our excitement is aroused. It fans the flames of adventure that course through our veins

> and the various layers of our heart. And in spite of being born inside the homes of home-loving Bengalis, we want to be related to the cosmopolitan, the universal man. We do not desire wealth, respect or fame; we only want to plunge into the whirlpool of events, relish excitement after excitement, and drown our senses in perpetually novel scenes of beauty. We desire a dynamic life wherein we will be inundated by the heady pace of events around us, and to celebrate the dangers that we get into.
> (*Hemendra Kumar Rachanabali 5*: 29)

More recent mystery stories for children cater to the popular taste without any such preliminary explanation, and explicitly portray the child detective as recklessly solving mysteries around her/him irrespective of the life-endangering positions she/he sometimes gets into. In the Gogol series of Samaresh Basu, the little boy accidentally gets led into positions of advantage and strategic importance which make him play a very crucial part in unearthing criminal doings wherever he goes. Other examples are Sunil Gangopadhyay's Santu in the *Kakababu* stories and Satyajit Ray's Topshe in the Feluda stories. The narrator–protagonists Santu and Topshe are not the detective heroes of the stories in the literal sense. Yet they wholeheartedly assist and contribute in the resolving of the tangle, and therefore confront all the hazards on the way. Conveniently, the heroes or mentors of these child protagonists, *Kakababu* and Feluda, apart from having no financial worries, are also bachelors, and therefore free of domestic responsibilities. A few other child detectives work in pairs – for instance, Lila Majumdar's Gupi and Panu, who solve mysteries with the help of *Chotomama* and Binu Talukdar, and Asha Purna Devi's Tapa and Madna, two self-styled investigators who live in a slum and at times try to simulate some thrill in their lives by reading criminal goings-on into everyday situations.

Shasthipada Chattopadhyay's Pandab Goenda, already referred to, faithfully follow the format of the stories of their English literary predecessors. However, their English counterparts study in expensive boarding schools and meet during holidays to sometimes go off on camps or to the seaside. For obvious reasons, this kind of life style would seem unreal if superimposed on the Bengali middle-class context. Consequently, the five Bengali child detectives have to make do with being in their home ground during holidays, with very little interference from parents. They even have a faithful dog, a recurring appendage in many English children's adventure stories. Pet dogs usually serve the detectives in times of crisis, sniffing out suspicious characters who eventually show criminal propensities, carrying messages from one to the other of the children at critical junctures and making their way out through narrow openings which the child detectives are trapped behind. All this leads to the protagonists being rescued from dangerous situations and

exposes the villains for what they are. Ponchu, the dedicated dog, like his English predecessors, Blyton's dogs Buster and Timothy, shows an instant dislike for criminals, attacks them when they are about to assault the children, gives distress signals, and leads the way by unearthing the hideouts of crooks, where one or more of the children may be imprisoned.

In all serialized adventure stories for children, the child protagonists are allowed to move out of their middle-class existence for sometime, as long as they are able to unravel their cases and earn the goodwill of family, neighbours, friends and even the police who otherwise believe that they are nothing but young busybodies. After having proved that they have evolved much beyond making a nuisance of themselves, they must, however, necessarily get back to their respectable homes and schools in the intervening period between two stories.

Space, in such adventure stories, loses its confinement, is no longer restricted to the home and its neighbourhood, and becomes alluring in its novelty. It is an expanse that is without any historical, geographical, economic, socio-political or quotidian concreteness. Time, too, loses its regular rhythms by allowing the child protagonists unlimited freedom to operate outside a disciplined framework. Time is also not shown through the interrelations between characters over a period. Rather, it acquires the unreality of 'adventure time', which, in Bakhtin's words, 'is an extra-temporal hiatus between two moments of biographical time' ('Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel', *The Dialogic Imagination* 90) The adventure in the serialized detective or adventure novel leaves no impact on the lives of the characters, which remain as innocent and sanitized as when they start off. Not only does it not have any effect on the protagonist's worldview or subsequent thought and action; it does not even record her/his aging in the biological sense of the term. The child detective is usually as young, fit, strong, agile and alert in the first story as in the last. However, by then, her/his actions and interactions lead her/him many times to probe and accomplish solutions of intricate cases that are usually the prerogative of adult detectives. In the process, she/he breaks every barrier of space and time in domestic fiction.

The genre of children's detective or crime fiction demands that the child protagonist should be securely back in her/his home environment once the case is wrapped up. As most detective stories or novels do not stop at one, allowances for breaking conventional rules for children are made in the next story or episode again. Despite a respectable starting point from which the child detectives get involved in their next mystery, in the course of it, they breach accepted adult parameters of safety and propriety once again without encountering any opposition. After achieving their heroic feats of detecting criminals, however, the children must reconcile to abiding by all the rules of

the system, but only in the interim between two stories. These are the intervals during which their lives are not narrativized. The happy combination of being naughty as well as clever that is usually attributed to them makes them appeal to both child and adult readers. Their qualities of intelligence combined with physical prowess and daredevilry remain constant throughout.

These serialized episodes are articulated through a variation of the Bakhtinian notion of adventure-time, which is external to and unreal in the context of the daily course of life. In the literary context of the middle-class Bengali child protagonist, the Bakhtinian adventure chronotope offers her/him a release from incarceration within domestic spaces and a rigid work-discipline. The very notion of adventure becomes a credo or a way of life. It is an agency that legitimizes, even valorizes, the child protagonist's transgressions from routine. It lets the child temporarily appropriate perilous adult spaces and experience the pleasures of unstructured time. But the entire exercise is constituted as a loop that brings the action back to where it had started from, reasserting the status quo from which it had ostensibly departed, leaving everyone and everything in it unscathed. The format of the detective story for children, therefore, is such that it can provide no real test for the quality as well as the extent of the child protagonist's rebellion. Within it, the child does not have to execute a choice between rebellion and conformity. Having a definite closure that brings the child protagonist back to the starting point, it cannot elucidate how far she/he is willing to deviate from the norms and conventions of her/his home and school.

At the end of the stories, the child detectives must return to the establishment of their respective households and be good and obedient children to their parents, as also bright and hardworking students in their schools, which would stand them in good stead when the need to display their proficiency as detectives arises again.

10

Among the child protagonist's experimentation with modes of escape from her/his routine life, I have already discussed stories that express the child's wistful yearning for the natural and the rustic. I have also illustrated from children's texts her/his desire to partake of the *joie de vivre* of congested but vibrant places, interacting with full-blooded characters. Besides, I have exemplified stories that chronicle a fanciful exchange of roles with a father or a figure of authority. Dreaming of being in the father's shoes gives the child protagonist more flexibility and autonomy in her/his day-to-day interactions. The other narrative paradigms I have tried to elucidate are actual situations in which the child uses human props to enliven the monotony of home and school or participates in real-life adventures to unearth a mystery or a crime.

There are yet other interesting variations within the formulaic stories about the child within a domestic set-up, trying to alleviate her/his boredom for a while. These stories map out virtual, vicarious or sham enactments of imaginary situations that are impossible to attain or doomed to fail within the domestic frame. All of these are to do with consciously fabricated, larger-than-life encounters. The child protagonist conceives of fictitious and unconventional persons, places or happenings, but the domestic enclosure cannot eventually and actually stretch to accommodate the sensationally thrilling capers she/he enacts. Examining several ways by which the child tries to overcome the dullness of the familiar and the familial, they are eventually discredited as illusory, even demolished by the anticlimactic turn of events in the resolution of the stories.

Domestic fantasy is worked out at its fullest by the child protagonist alone, without indulging in romantic rural idylls or the use of creative bolsters like the trading of roles with parents. These stories also do not outline the child's colluding in exciting jaunts with servants, relatives or streetside acquaintances who have alternative entry points into real-life situations. They neither depict her/his grabbing of opportunities for actual adventure nor her/his real participation in the detection of mystery and crime. In these stories, the banality of everyday life gnaws at the child till she/he contrives a mystery around herself/himself, much like the books she/he is fed on. When there is no next of kin, stranger or servant to motivate her/him, the child typically follows one of the methods I enumerate below to offset the routine and humdrum in her/his life.

The first is the concoction of a person, animal or thing with whom/which she/he can sustain a communication that is absent between her/him and her/his parents. The child protagonist enlists the support or approval of this imaginary friend in a world of her/his own creation. For younger readers, a typically make-believe situation occurs when the incongruity between the child protagonist's imagination and the adult's rational view of the world induces her/him to subsume fantasy within real life. Writing about domestic fantasy, Louisa Smith says:

> The chief human actors in these fantasies are children imbued with the key attribute of being parent-free; parents, after all, would get in the way by providing cautions which would inhibit the child characters from stepping through wardrobes or time travelling, or worse, by chuckling indulgently when children mention that their stuffed animals talk.
>
> ('Real Gardens with Imaginary Toads' 295)

Usually, the child discovers or devises a magic being or thing that has the resources to alleviate the dullness of her/his life. The friendless existence

of single children in well-to-do households often has them carry on secret communications with imaginary friends, which could be animals or even supernatural creatures. In Asha Purna Devi's 'Tai Jonnei To' ('That is Why!'), for instance, the lonely, single child Tushu feigns the presence of a friendly ghost under her bed. Somewhat contrary to Smith's premise, she is not free of adults or parents, but persists in believing that she shares confidences with this ghost despite adult outrage and admonition.

As corroborated by the psychologist Jerome L. Singer, real-life children also imagine such interactions:

> A very important aspect of make-believe is the occurrence of an imaginary companion . . . to [whom] they regularly address communications. Parents sometimes are upset by indications that their children have nonexistent friends, either in thin air or in the form of teddy bears or bits of blankets or merely a stick to which they regularly address communications. All findings indicate that such imaginary companions are quite common in children.
>
> (*Daydreaming and Fantasy* 29)

However, the child protagonist of an older, pre-teen age group no longer believes in stuffed animals talking, and is disenchanted by ghosts, wicked monsters, evil wizards and selfish giants. There is no place for the magical or the fantastic in her/his life. When 'inner fantasy and outer reality split from each other', says Eva Frommer, the fracture causes the child 'to meet the impact of a new, impersonal outer world suddenly shorn of its glorious magic mantle' (63). With the growing perception that fantasy and reality are mutually exclusive, the pall of boredom around the child protagonist often compels her/him to actually build bizarre castles in the air within the home. These imagined ventures are theoretically just about feasible but empirically unsound.

A unique kind of fictitious binge in which the child protagonist carries on a heartfelt exchange with an imaginary human friend about the strange behavioural traits of adults is profiled in Lila Majumdar's long short story 'Tong Ling' (*Lila Majumdar Rachanabali* 3). Its hero, Chand, who is tired of adult company, invents a friend called Bishe who comes from across the river with his dog to meet him. Chand discourages people from entering the abandoned shed where he carries out his so-called clandestine communications with Bishe. Together with the hypothetical Bishe, he longingly watches passing trains, visualizing all the romantically remote places that are inaccessible to him. In these two stories I have illustrated from, the child protagonist is aware of the limitations of her/his situation, and tries to convince parents and other family members of a power and prowess that she/he supposedly has, thanks to her/his interaction with a ghostly creature or an

outlandish human being respectively. In the second instance, the imaginary friend does not affront the credibility of the reader because of the compelling way in which Chand, the hero, recounts his growing bonding with him. In both cases, the child's repeated charade and histrionics woven around her/his invented companion almost seem to make her/him believe in the authenticity of the fake companion. Within the confines of a hostile family set-up, she/he fantasizes her/his own enablement with the moral support of the make-believe companion.

In the second kind of story within this subgenre, the child radiates a mysterious aura around herself/himself and carries on a pretence of being more daringly adventurous, incredibly heroic or abominably wicked than she/he is. Obviously, the adolescent child's rhetoric of bravado does not quite match her/his deeds. These stories describe the child in a context where she/he is not hounded by loneliness, but as a part of a more sociable milieu. Eva Frommer describes such situations contrived around the child:

> 'What do you think would happen if . . .?' they ask us, the busy preoccupied adults, and get a dusty answer. They ask each other, and lo! A marvellous fantasy world immediately wraps both or all of them and they are lost.
>
> (62)

In communication with a peer group, therefore, unlike the two aforementioned friendless children, some child protagonists devise fantasies about their own abilities and talents. A common theme in this second cluster of stories, I repeat, is the child protagonist's fancying herself/himself to be more inherently bold and brainy than she/he really is. These narratives are, however, somewhat divergent from Frommer's reading, because the peer group is not always complicit or proactive in furthering the fantastic exercise. It is usually a passive recipient or a reluctant accomplice, subjected to the charm of the 'heroic' child's boastful imaginary exploits.

An early-twentieth-century example of such a story is Sukumar Roy's 'Detective' (*Sukumar Rachanabali*), in which Jaladhar, with his *mama* in the police and his *kaka* who is a private detective, is proud of a lineage that qualifies him to undertake the unearthing of a crime in school when the occasion arises. Using his self-proclaimed talents, he pursues various suspects, but eventually discovers the thief who had been eating everybody's lunch to be none other than a big, fat cat. The child's conviction about his own abilities is represented throughout with some degree of authorial irony and ambivalence. The heroic mode in which Jaladhar sees himself is not just something to fool others with, but commensurately self-deceptive about his own self-confidence.

In Lila Majumdar's 'Harinarayan' (*Chhelebelar Golpo*) however, the eponymous hero certainly does not secretly nurture the fantasy of being what he claims to be because he is too far removed from the context of his pompous assertions about himself. As the new boy in the class of the neighbourhood school, however, he is immediately recognizable as an archetypal self-professed hero. Trying to impress his friends, he brags of a pedigree that is famous for being dacoits. He also announces that his schooling is just a dull hiatus in his illustrious career, for he intends to leave his studies and go to Bhubandanga, his ancestral village, to be a dacoit. His classmate who is also the narrator, despite being saturated with Harinarayan's accounts of his exploits, also secretly invests a lot of vicarious thrill in imagining the future feats of Harinarayan. Simultaneously, he laments his own lot inasmuch that he cannot do the same. The revelation at the end that Harinarayan is the harmless, honest and obedient son of the head clerk of the school disappoints the narrator tremendously, besides deflating such delusions of 'grandeur' that exist in the minds of many ordinary children.

Stories that follow a plot in which the child flaunts her/his competence as a sleuth are also condemned to collapse. In Lila Majumdar's 'Guptadhan' ('Hidden Treasure') (*Chhelebelar Golpo*), Jagai has gone through a laborious process of deciphering some scribbled notes of a wealthy ancestor. This leads him to believe that he will unearth some hidden treasure at a particular spot, and he actually revels in the fantasy that he will live a life of leisure as he has so much family property. After taking the narrator on a tortuous expedition to find this priceless treasure, it is detected to be just a packet of playing cards that Jagai's great-grandfather had confiscated from his idle progeny who were habituated to a decadent lifestyle, mainly devoted to playing cards. The anticlimax of the story is worked out like the solution of a puzzle in which everything fits in place.

Similarly, the effort of a self-proclaimed detective to catch the criminal sometimes ends in a fruitless venture that shows that there was no crime to begin with. In Lila Majumdar's 'Guper Guptadhan' ('Gupe's Buried Fortune') (*Chhelebelar Golpo*), the plot, once again, is woven around an unrewarding treasure hunt. On a dark, moonless night that enhances the ambience of a spine-chilling story, Gupe tracks down two dacoits who seem to have buried some treasure. They, however, turn out to be two innocuous and poor village women. Pathetically, they had merely planted some fish to be dried for future consumption at the spot where Gupe believes the hidden treasure to be. Both the stories deploy the recurring motif of children hankering to discover unearned wealth and riches that could phenomenally transform their lives.

In Asha Purna Devi's story 'Murder Case', the child protagonists' craving to prove their expertise in detecting crime leads them on a wild goose

chase. Tapa and Madna, two slum-dwelling boys who are also self-styled detectives, suspect a man of carrying a dead body in his trunk and pursue him through a train journey. The content of the trunk is discovered to be the man's pint-size wife whom he has always hidden in this manner for no more outrageous reason than to avoid buying a ticket for her. The comical exercise in futility exposes Tapa and Madna's far-fetched interpretations through which they had hoped to demonstrate their talents as detectives.

Yet a third fictional variation of inventive situations and ideas illustrates the child's desire to satisfy a perhaps more covert and subliminally grim human instinct. The child protagonist is sometimes willing to simulate a criminal situation in which she/he implicates an innocent person in a criminal deed, posturing as or even *willing to be* a victim of crime to glean some excitement from the quotidian world around herself/himself. She/he is capable of great brutality, demythifying all the age-old romantic notions of childhood innocence. Bored to distraction, the middle-class child in a lonely home does not stop short of even demonizing other people, knowingly attributing criminal actions to them if it promises some novelty in her/his life.

In these stories that I have identified above, the spine-tingling excitement of crime is not just imagined but deliberately conjured up by the child protagonist. The let-down of these stories depends on an exposure of the child's consciously invented allegation of attempts to murder or kidnap, implicating harmless people in criminal motives. In the first example, Michki in Asha Purna Devi's story 'Jemon Na Bari' ('What a House!') is a rare girl child who conceptualizes a way out of insipid reality through a fake adventure. The brother and sister in the story are satiated by their domestic situation because nothing as exciting as the stories they read ever happens to them. The sister finally and incredibly opens the door to a hanger-on outside, and insists that he should kidnap her. She is extremely disheartened when he refuses to do so, pleading that he is only a carpenter, looking for a house where he has been called to repair a window. In order to provide some diversion on a long, listless day during a school vacation, her wish to get kidnapped is blissfully unaware of the traumatic consequences that a kidnapping might entail.[1]

In Sibram Chakrabarty's 'Abanchhaniya Upasanhar' ('An Unsolicited Ending'), the child hero, Pulakesh, goes to a very cruel extent to bring some colour into the dull scenario around him. Feeling frustrated at being left alone at home, he shouts out 'Murder!' for the sake of a thrill. When a passer-by comes in to help him, Pulakesh goes one step further and informs the police that the stranger has intruded into the house with the obvious intention of theft or murder. The anticlimax of the story is in the police's trying to handcuff the man and discovering that under his coat, both arms of

the intruder are amputated. Pulakesh's fabrication of such a serious criminal intent in an innocent and physically disabled person with a helpful instinct who had only come in to rescue him from the hands of criminals is a testimony of the ruthless length to which a desperately lonely child could go in order to challenge the status quo of her/his environment. The frustration with the monotony of her/his life, and not some darker motive, that underlies the child's implicating of innocent people in grisly crimes can be deduced from these internally focalized third-person narratives. The punch lines of the stories underscore the deconstruction of the fantasy rather than the attempt to construct it.

The prototype of all these stories in the domestic fantasy mode in which the protagonist imagines the fulfilment of a fantasy of adventure can be traced back to Tagore's poem 'Birpurush' ('The Hero'), (*Shishu*, *Rabindra Rachanabali II*: 27–8)[2] a poem for a younger age group. Khoka, the child narrator of the poem, who paints a graphic verse picture of riding on horseback while his mother is inside a palanquin, inventively narrates an encounter with dacoits who he vanquishes single-handedly. By way of conclusion, he laments:

> Each day we hear all kinds of news,
> Oh why can't they really come true?
> It would be like the books we read:
> Folk would be stunned to hear the deed.
> (44)

All the imagined adventures in the above-mentioned examples, including the extremely far-fetched one in 'Birpurush' attempt to elude the joylessness of the domestic situation but do not and cannot ultimately materialize. They barely invoke a sense of real adventure and add some spice to the child protagonists' life for a short interlude, but do not allow a longish retreat from the drudgery of home and school. By their very erroneous assumptions, these fantasies are inevitably doomed to collapse even before they take off.

Notes

1 Although such instances are few and far between, children's literature, even during the pre-independence period, demonstrated an unusual sensitization to the passive role played by girl children and now and then came up with subversive girl children. Hemendra Kumar Roy's Minu insisted on accompanying Bimal and Kumar on their adventures and Nalini Das' Gandalu was a quartet of amateur detectives who were all girls.

2 I have slightly altered Sukanta Chaudhuri's translation of the poem as 'The Hero' in *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Writings for Children*, 42–5.

6 Encounters with the world beyond

Responding to the nation in crisis

> There is a possible relation between periods of intense nationalism and the children's literature at the time.
>
> Martin, Helen, *Library Quarterly*, *VI,* p. 403

> Ma said: Is the nation only a piece of land, Shibnath? One has to look for the nation inside the slums of the villages.
>
> Bandyapadhyay, Tarashankar, *Dhatri Debota,* p. 140.

1

Although the child protagonist's conscious interaction with the world outside is a frequent occurrence in the poems, plays, stories and novels that I am concerned with, most of them do not go beyond furthering the child's interest in being able to get out of the regimen of her/his home and school and participating in what seems to be a more attractive world beyond their confines. Among narratives that were taken up for consideration in the previous chapters, the detective and/or adventure story, by the very nature of its genre, is one exception in which the child takes up and is successful in fighting on behalf of people other than herself/himself. In such stories, a package comprising 'the analysis of crime, the tracking down of the criminal, and if possible, his punishment according to judgment' (Sukumar Sen 53) automatically does a good turn to society by bringing to justice anti-social elements or eradicating them. But a fictional detective's more basic preoccupation is somewhat egocentric, whether she/he is a child or an adult. By demonstrating the exercise of sharp logical skills and stupendous physical prowess in solving how, why and by whom the crime has been committed, she/he is primarily desirous of earning some credit for herself/himself. In the process of pursuing and zeroing in on criminals and furthering a social cause, the detective/child detective achieves heroic dimensions that set her/him apart from other, more ordinary people/children.

Apart from those in detective and adventure fiction, however, one can hardly locate in children's literature any overtly larger cause that is completely outside what affects the child protagonist directly. However, in rare instances, some injustices in the outside world provoke the child protagonist sufficiently in order for her/him to mastermind and lead a crusade on behalf of communal harmony, social equality, human rights, gender-sensitivity or some equally important cause. Such socially conscious campaigns, therefore, are more serious and crucial in the larger context than the voice of individual protest she/he registers in order to improve her/his *own* quality of life in an adult-dominated world.

Those who consciously and militantly take up a social cause because they feel very strongly about it are usually slightly older children or adolescents. In Nihar Ranjan Gupta's 'Shankar' (*Kishore Sahitya Samagra*) for example, Shankar is a *Rakhal* or bad boy prototype whose social conscience prompts him to beat up a *zamindar* who has treated a poor, lower caste man badly. Ironically enough, the *Gopal* or good boy prototype, Satyaban, is not morally outraged enough by the incident to do something about it. The story substantiates Tagore's explanation of the paradoxical phenomenon:

> The good, well brought up boys will pass out, get good jobs, and earn lots of dowry during their marriage, no doubt. But we can expect a lot more from bad, disobedient, restless boys for the sake of their country.
>
> ('Vidyasagarcharit', *Charitrapuja, Rabindra Rachanabali VI*: 339)

In another case, Abanindranath Takur's *Shib Saudagar* (*Shib the Merchant*), the two typically opposing factions of the students and the teacher of a school, representing the usual divide between the oppressed and the oppressor, unexpectedly come together in a remonstration against the tyranny of the system, once again epitomized by a tyrannical *zamindar*. Something greater than the imparting and receiving of an abstract and pedantic education is at stake here, necessitating a unity and solidarity between two groups that start off representing two obvious extremities of a power relationship.

However, because of the volatile political scenario in the pre-independence context, the child protagonist in the first half of the twentieth century sometimes also tends to get involved, voluntarily or otherwise, in the political cause of fighting for and helping to build an independent nation. At times, there seems to be a seamless interpenetration between a social and a political/national cause. In Narayan Gangopadhyay's *Shilalipi* (1937), which is not a novel for children although the principal character

is a child who grows to his youth, Ranju's comprehension of *nationalism*, which to him is an inclusive term for Gandhian non-cooperation, *ahimsa* (non-violence), the Indian National Congress, terrorism and Khudiram, extends to his mentor Abinashbabu's humanitarian activities. Abinashbabu, who is a follower of Mahatma Gandhi, sacrifices his life in trying to save some people stranded during the 1930 floods in Bengal. Although Ranju's father tries to dissuade Abinashbabu from undertaking the risky project as the country cannot afford to lose a patriot like him, this is Abinashbabu's *satyagraha*, his service to his country, a social and a political cause all rolled into one. Abinashbabu does not see his responsibility to society as distinct from his duty to his nation:

> I am a Satyagrahi, Chaterjee Moshai. For me, it is not a big thing to die; it is far more important to observe the path of truth. I am going to work towards that goal. If I can save even one person, I have no cause for regret.
>
> (314)

In Tarashankar Bandopadhyay's *Dhatri Debota* (*Mother Goddess*), in which the protagonist's life as a child is traced for the first part of the adult novel, Shibnath starts with serving the poor people of his district in times of crisis, but takes to militant nationalism in the following years. He, however, reverts to devote his energy for the cause of the downtrodden when he is disillusioned with terrorism in the name of the nation, and joins Gandhian non-cooperation only when he is sure that he will be serving his society in the process. Likewise, most child protagonists who begin by serving the *nation* almost inevitably realize that serving the people around them in their struggle against poverty, hunger or disease is of much greater worth and relevance, and contributes more towards serving the nation in the real sense.

In a significant corpus of writing beginning with those of Tagore that demonstrated his cosmopolitan, liberal humanist vision, the nationalist cause in itself became something that called for reconsideration. Espoused for its own sake, it had the potential to lead to disastrous results; Tagore therefore suggested warring against the evils incorporated within our *own* society that could harm the nation as a more worthwhile effort. Fiction of the period centred around the making of the independent nation often traces a full circle and leaves off at a point where poverty, illiteracy, inadequate health care, injustice to women, casteism and other problems in our society's comprehensive situation – at times even the havoc caused by natural, not man-made calamities – deserve to be addressed more seriously than an organised protest against British colonial rule.

2

The nation was, nevertheless, a major preoccupation in Bangla literature, including children's literature, in the first half of the century. Definitions of the nation across East-West scholarship and spanning the entire twentieth century acknowledge that the foremost principle behind the formation of a nation is pride in one's common cultural past and the agreement to live within the boundaries of a certain place in a unified manner, despite diversities.[1] This description, however, does not adequately explain how India became united in a nationalist struggle after hundreds of years of feudal rule in scattered states over a large sub-continent, and two centuries of British governance. Nationalist uprising, as distinct from the nation but rooted in its very spirit arises out of the common will to oust another people, race or nation from what a certain people have defined as their own nation. In the case of India, although the very awareness of India's nationhood was born out of the will to oust another people belonging to another nation, it was a significant phenomenon initiating its struggle for freedom.[2]

More recent historians and critics, however, have been more sceptical about the formation of a nation and have conceptualized the nation to be a creation of the mind rather than a socio-political space defined by cultural roots and geographical exigencies, triggering a unified rebellion against foreign rule.[3] One way of exposing the irreconcilable diversity and that prevails in post-independent India among members of a so-called united nation is the understanding that the nation as a convenient rhetorical construct to ostensibly forge a supposed unity among a group of people who are irreversibly heterogeneous by factors of heredity and environment. It is perhaps too benign and utopian to say that 'in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (see Benedict Anderson, quoted in footnote 3). Literary representations that I have surveyed, in fact, largely demonstrate that only the affluent, the so-called *educated*, the city-bred, the upper caste and the privileged seem to have experienced some sense of empowerment by the forming of the independent and united nation, while those who are not have been relegated to a more peripheral existence. In literature for and about children, an amorphous but intuitive understanding of this often results in the child's questioning of the idea of *nation* and *nationalism*. The child protagonist, as I will try to demonstrate later, is confronted by her/his encounter with the rhetoric of pre-independence nationalism juxtaposed against its failure to solve the basic day-to-day problems of the people who belong to the nation in the making. Consequently, in an unstudied way, she/he often realises nationalism to be not just a mental exercise and a theoretical concept but also a fruitless one, and cannot understand what the fight is all about. For the child protagonist, the cause of the nation, if any, and if it

can at all be considered as a rebellion or dissidence from the mainstream, therefore, often implodes within her/him. And it results in a stronger protest *against* the very discourse of the nation that inspired the national movement.

Yet no amount of introspective and retrospective reasoning about the idea of nationhood by recent thinkers and writers that would corroborate the opinion of literary protagonists can deny the fiery spirit of nationalism which unleashed a wave of self-sacrifice for the country from the last quarter of the nineteenth century to the gaining of independence. Historically, it is not an exaggeration to say that two hundred years of colonial rule provoked even the ire of children and made them resist some aspects of British rule. To that extent, they too participated in the struggle for India's freedom. The exploits and accomplishments of children's armies like the *vanara sena* or monkey brigade are well known and historically documented (see Tanika Sarkar, *The Politics of Protest* 95). It is not difficult to infer from readings of children's participation in the cause of the nation, however, that for the child, apart from being an idealistic cause, it was *also* an excuse to find adventure outside the home. Involvement with the nation necessitated a brush with what lay outside home and school; yet it was a programme that was morally and culturally consecrated by adult judgment. It, therefore, put to test and sometimes showcased the heroism and bravado of children.

This brand of heroism is evidently absent from the thought and action of the post-independence generation fictional child. The involvement of the pre-independence child in the cause of the nation, therefore, can be included under the rubric of children's *rebellion* with some qualification based on the specific context. One can say unequivocally, however, that the impact of the spirit of nationalism and revolutionary activities centred around the nation that spread all over Bengal and the rest of the country before, during and after Curzon's partition was significantly represented in the literature of the period for children as well as adults.

3

There was no political nationhood in India before British rule. Ironically, it was the British who made the educated middle class, particularly the Bengali middle class, aware of its national self-respect and dignity. Western scholars like Max Mueller acquainted the educated middle class with India's ancient history and glorious culture and made it aware of the geographical as well as political unity of the country that was brought about by British rule. The establishment of a university in Kolkata produced a sizeable number of educated youth, whose training in the liberal arts gave them access to ideas like liberty and freedom, and familiarized them with nationalist struggle in the countries of Europe.

This nationalist fervour in Bengal inspired a profusion of songs, poems, plays and novels which became extremely popular and struck a sympathetic chord of patriotism among a vast readership. The *Swadeshi* movement opened a new era in Bengali literature. In adult literature, nationalism manifests itself in different ways, covering a large spectrum, sometimes conflating ideas as divergent as devotion to one's religion or love of one's beloved with dedication for the nation.[4]

My concern, however, is with literary portrayals of youth and children inspired by nationalist ideals. In history, there are examples of how carried away common people got by nationalist zeal among adolescents and youth. Many songs and poems were inspired by the highly emotional response to the dead body of Kanai Lal Datta, a revolutionary youth belonging to the *Yugantar* group, being taken out of Alipore jail and the hanging of the nineteen-year-old Khudiram, one of the youngest terrorists to be executed for anti-British activities. Tagore's contribution to patriotism was

> not only through magnificent poems and short stories evoking the beauty of the Bengal countryside and describing the life of its people, but also more directly through . . . repeated calls for *atmasakti* (self-reliance) through Swadeshi enterprise and national education, and extremely perceptive suggestions for mass contact through melas, jatras and the use of the mother tongue in both education and political work.
>
> (Sushobhan Sarkar 99)

The nationalist faction that had the most recruits from the younger generation had taken to terrorism as a disillusionment with and retaliation to the moderate policies of the Congress. In particular, most Bengali youth were anxious to remove the social stigma that they were incapable of physical exertion and cowards, and consequently took to terrorist activities with bombs and firearms. They embraced a *do or die* creed and came to be termed as the extremist faction, whose greatest achievement was the annulment of Curzon's partition in 1911.

Students and youth riding the nationalist wave, not pausing to consider the inhuman aspects of their terrorist methods, felt drawn much more to this creed of a more political extremism (Sushobhan Sarkar 123 and 124). Most historians, belonging both to the right and left wing, have acknowledged the noteworthy role of students during the national movement. In *Swadhinata Sangrame Bharater Chatra-Samaj*, G. Chattopadhyay predicts that this pattern of student radicalism would last for at least a generation. Aparna Basu says about students that they

> took a prominent part in the Swadeshi movement. . . . The swadeshi pickets and patrols were composed largely of schoolboys and college

> students, and the boycott of foreign goods depended for such success as it had on picketing maintained by students. They formed the body of the audience at the political meetings, processions and parades . . . the 1905 circulars attempted to prohibit students from taking part in politics.
> (*Hemendra Kumar Ray Rachanabali* 5: 138)

A note on 'Terrorism in India', prepared by the Government of India in 1933, says, 'Give a boy a few seditious books to read, [and he is likely to be permeated] by a spirit of unreasoning resentment against the government, and of defiance of authority' (quoted in R. C. Majumdar, *History and Culture of the Indian People XI:* 413).

This national awakening was neither to be judged by standard moral yardsticks, nor could it be dismissed as the wild pranks of a few misguided youth. 'What we have to reckon with, especially in Bengal, is the revolt of the younger generation' said the imperialist British historian Valentine Chirol (quoted in R. K. Ray, 'Three Interpretations of Nationalism,' *Essays in Modern Indian History* 2. Ed B.R. Nanda). It is from 1919, feels Tirtha Mandal, that the youth became an indispensable factor in our national politics, and Bengal set an example in this process (27). Students who formed a sizeable section of the general unrest were mostly college-going, marginally older than the age group under consideration in my study.

From historical accounts, we also read of the training of terrorists in national schools which were centres of physical education, where 'constant exercise in *lathi*, sword and dagger play was a prominent feature of the curriculum' (Rajat K. Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal* 155). Accounts of *lathi* play, dagger and sword play, drilling, boxing, riding, gymnastics and the like appear in the contemporary accounts of Hem Chandra Kanungo's historical work as well as the memoirs of other writers.[5] These regimens of exercise and body-building were part of the volunteer movement. The 'physical culture movement', notes Mrinalini Sinha, 'had become a base for terrorist organizations against the British' (21). The Dacca Anusilan Samiti graduated from a national volunteer corps to a secret terrorist society. Hem Chandra Kanungo gives an account of the secret society *Yugantar,* in whose office the duty of looking after and repairing all the arms kept in a wooden chest devolved on an anonymous boy leader. Not only were young boys enrolled in these Samitis to learn various exercises, but the promising ones were selected to carry on the work of spies, messengers and guards, sometimes even without knowing or understanding the bigger cause that they were serving. In the *akhara* of Sarala Debi Choudhurani, even young women were trained in *lathi* and sword play in order to stand them in as good a stead as terrorists as their male counterparts.

The terrorists rejected the older methods of peaceful and constitutional agitation and adopted European revolutionary methods to counter British

Imperialism. They practised the cult of the bomb and argued that an ounce of lead could be more effective than a ton of arguments. In their fanatical zeal, they sometimes resorted to bloody and objectionable methods of organizing dacoities and robberies to finance their movement, which were, in turn, denounced by the followers of Gandhian non-violence.

4

I will focus on literary constructions of protagonists who are inspired by the patriotic fervour sweeping through the country, although some of them belong to a somewhat older age group than the one that I am predominantly concerned with. I will try to gauge in what way they contribute to or are at variance with the cause and methodology of nationalism, as well as how they, as individuals, interact with the broader social spectrum outside their homes and schools in the course of their involvement with nationalist politics.

In Narayan Gangopadhyay's *Shilalipi,* the story climaxes with Ranju's unsettling realization of his friend Parimal's involvement in terrorist activities. He becomes aware that such a participation in the struggle for the country's freedom involves a mental attitude that is quite different from the Gandhian non-violent non-cooperation of those of his friends and contemporaries that he has witnessed so far. Parimal decries the older ideology and the moderate methods of the former group. When told by his Gandhian friends that independence would come soon, he tauntingly asks them which train it would come by. Ranju, the protagonist, however, maintains an ideologically and morally neutral position about terrorism when he hears about it.

On the other hand, it is the terrorist method of young men like Parimal that is demolished by its critics in several texts – an illustration is the *Dada* who is disillusioned by it in Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay's *Dhatri Debota*. In this novel, terrorism becomes an obsession with Shibnath who wants to do something for his nation during his college days. Sushil, Purna and he become blind followers of this cult till they are urged to introspect by *Dada*, their mentor, on the madness of a method that is borrowed from Western philosophy. *Dada*, the reformed terrorist, explains to the young Purna and Shibnath that petty skirmishes over kingdoms, using the slogans and tools of terrorism and guided by a European ideology, will not attain freedom in the real sense (208). This interaction, during which his terrorist friend Purna kills *Dada* because of his differences with him, makes Shibnath turn away from nationalist politics altogether for some time, and later adopt social service as his creed, finally finding his vocation in Gandhian non-cooperation and civil disobedience. In recent studies of nationalist history, scholars like Partha Chaterjee have similarly undermined the kind of nationalism that

upheld violence as its creed, because 'it could also give rise to mindless chauvinism and xenophobia and serve as the justification for organised violence and tyranny' (*Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* 2).

5

Scanning the canvas of juvenile and adolescent literature, one could begin with Hemendra Kumar Roy who imbued his youthful heroes with nationalist ideals in order to create role models for children. His detective duos Jayanta and Manik or Bimal and Kumar are not children themselves, but on the threshold of youth. They are of a strong build, healthy physique and a height that is much above average. Jayanta and Manik both studied in the same college, but they gave up their studies as a result of the non-cooperation movement.

Patriotism is ingrained in their blood to the extent that it is a part of their daily life, their more unusual social encounters and their out-of-the-way adventures. Their training is like that of terrorist activists, and they can take on the challenge of the enemy (in most cases, hardened criminals) in far-flung countries in Africa or the West Indies. Bimal and Kumar or Jayanta and Manik are not so blinded by the love of their country that they cannot see the practical advantage of combining the best of their Bengali background with their *English* education. They can sense that in order to beat the English, one has to adopt their ways, eat their kind of food and don their kind of clothes. Jayanta and Manik's use of prohibitively expensive and technologically advanced equipment and weapons like machine guns is something that shows their easy familiarity with advanced Western methods of combat. They are quite used to eating Western food and can make do with soups and salads. Unlike most Bengalis, therefore, they can live temporarily in any part of the world with ease. Of the other detective duo, Bimal and Kumar, Bimal has the sense to advise Kumar against *desi* clothing like the dhoti and the kurta when it comes to setting off on a real adventure because these are cumbersome while confronting the enemy head on and would also not be able to withstand exposure to the elements (*Jaker Dhan* 25).

Jaker Dhan (*Mammon's Treasure Trove*) is the first of the series involving the two detectives; they are still in college at the time. The patriotism of Bimal and Kumar is best manifested in the love and defence of their *desi* pet dog. Kumar says about his *desi* dog Bagha that he serves their interest as detectives better than any classy dogs of English breed:

> My Bagha is not English, but an Indian dog. If you look after a dog well, even a *desi* dog looks so beautiful. Bagha does not know fear, and his

> body is very strong. A pedigreed dog like a hound chased him once, but he almost died of being bitten just once by Bagha.
>
> (16)

Nihar Ranjan Gupta's Kiriti Roy is another hero, though not a child, who is a happy blend of the Indian and European cultures. He combines the best of the East and the West. He is an English educated Bengali detective who dresses in serge suits or flannel trousers, and smokes cheroots and cigars, the Western counterpart of *nashyi* (snuff), which activates the brain of Hemendra Kumar Roy's Jayanta. Yet he loves to listen to Rabindrasangeet and is a Bengali to the core. Although Westernized and sophisticated, he is not an Anglophile. He is not pronouncedly patriotic or nationalistic either, but proud of his heritage as a Bengali. Premendra Mitra's Ghanada, another youthful hero, whose extraordinary gift of storytelling exposes him as a megalomaniac and a liar, claims that he can resolve any tangle in any part of the world which the most renowned and intelligent white sleuths cannot. It affirms his pride in his own race, pitted against the white man who has dominated over it for so long. His favourite food, in the tradition of the true Bengali, is fish and rice.

A patriotic subtext, understatedly extolling the many virtues of Indian dress, native food as also home-grown pet dogs, runs through much of pre-independence children's literature. To be overtly patriotic in a situation where the British were still the rulers would presumably involve unnecessary stakes for the writers. The celebration of the nation, therefore, sometimes necessitated a less explicit expression, eulogizing the valour and self-confidence of its heroes within a broader and more general framework – particularly those of them who were not directly involved in confrontational exploits.

There was, therefore, also an enormous proliferation of virtually hagiographic biographical literature at the beginning of the century. Publishers like Deb Sahitya Kutir circulated these narratives to familiarize children with national heroes like Khudiram. A parallel and alternate discourse of history to the one disseminated by the British, proclaiming Indians as heroes, was fashioned indirectly through writing for children since it could not be done in a more straightforward and candid manner within the parameters and the precincts of colonial rule. Hemendra Kumar Roy's story *Panchanader Shire* (*At the Helm of Punjab*) extols a historical character belonging to the remote past who exhibits the characteristics of a patriotic hero by contemporary standards and understanding; it underscores Chandragupta Maurya's brave resistance at the time of Alexander's conquest of India. Since this was one of the few ways in which *Swadeshi* could be propagated among children, the narrator subjects the child reader to a lengthy rhetoric on patriotism even before the actual story begins:

> We apes certainly love our own country because even gorillas and ordinary animals do not like being exiled from their native country. If you relocate African gorillas to other countries, they die. No matter how well they are looked after or fed, their grief at being separated from their place of birth is never allayed. This grief is their patriotism. If gorillas can have patriotism, should we not also be patriotic?
>
> (Hemendra Kumar Ray, *Rachanabali 5*: 138)

Chandragupta Maurya, or for that matter Jayanta, Manik, Bimal, Kumar and Kiriti Ray, however, are role models for children and not children themselves.

6

Among child protagonists who are younger, *the naughty boy* hero is lionized in patriotic stories as much as in school stories, for he is likely to serve the social and national cause in a more active and meaningful way than the classic good and compliant boy, as Tagore prognosticated.

Whether working for the country makes idealist heroes, adventure-seeking spirits or bloodthirsty villains of young boys, however, is not easy to resolve. In a cynical summing up of the cause of nationalism, Premankur Atarthi calls it the deviant boy's outlet from studies, school and college (*Mahasthabir Jatak* 5). In Hem Chandra Kanungo's real life autobiographical account of his encounter with Khudiram when the latter was about fourteen years old, one reads of an actual nationalist hero. As a boy, Khudiram had refused to abide by the norms that govern a boy of his age, but in a strong and determined way, he had demanded a revolver from the author because his ambition was to kill at least one *saheb*. Kanungo further elaborates on the oppression and cruelty perpetuated on Khudiram by his guardians who were compelled to give him shelter because he was an orphan. If Khudiram had passively accepted such humiliation, he would have been termed a *sushil subodh balak* (good, well-behaved boy), but since he was a rebel by nature, he defied them to the extent of being accused of restlessness, impoliteness, disobedience, mischief and evil (Kanungo 72–4). Kanungo's discussion of this aspect of Khudiram's life underlines the rebellious background of some children that contributed to their evolution as political activists in the national crisis of the time. Khudiram's example facilitated the creation of insubordinate child protagonists who were the pride of their parents, teachers, community and by extension the nation.

One kind of naughty boy who is acknowledged favourably in literature comes alive in Manoranjan Ghosh's *Paribartan*. He is neither reprimanded

nor given up as being beyond the pale of adult control, but tamed in a way that he acquires and cultivates some patriotic feelings, particularly after the nationalist-minded master Shishirbabu takes the boys on a tour of India in order to show them its richness and variety.

Another kind of *danpite chhele* (self-willed boy) is Nihar Ranjan Gupta's Shankar, whose example I have already elaborated. Shankar's act of transgression is an attempt to do away with the social evil of inequality and the oppressive practices of the higher castes. The conventional sentimental plot, however, necessitates Shankar's overnight transformation into a good boy who comes first in the examination and grows up to teach his less educated brethren. However, both in his head-on confrontation with the oppressor of the village, and in his conventionally good decision to teach poor people, Shankar serves his village, his society and by broadening the range within which he functions, also his nation.

A third kind of naughty boy is one whose literal act of transgression, although it does not help anybody, is, by the nature of the defiance it exhibits, hailed as a heroic act which can do the nation proud. In Sachindra Majumdar's *Harano Din*, Mrs Oliff, the wife of the school principal, applauds the subversively intrepid act of putting a garland of shoes around the summit of a hallowed place of worship by two of the boys in the school. She says that it will stand them in greater stead than coming first in examinations, because it is by such acts of courage that Englishmen have been able to establish colonies all over the world. Her use of a signifier of patriotism that commemorates the daring of the English and her resultant appreciation of the boys' dare-devil act stretches the argument about valour from the English to include brave Indian boys. But because the boys are assessed by a benchmark of English heroism, it does not fit in completely with the discourse on Indian nationalism like the other examples.

The naughty boy refuses to be passive and submissive, and questions every action that is forced upon him. Priyambada Devi's poem *Subodh Chhele Noi*, written in the context of Bengal in the aftermath of Curzon's partition, celebrates the spirit of the naughty boy, who refuses to take anything lying down:

> I didn't take passively what was doled out to me
> If I am slapped, I hit back simultaneously
> I can row a boat, throw stones or climb a tree
> In the dead of night, I can walk on a village road fearlessly
> Seeing dear ones in trouble, I rescue them immediately.
> (*Sandesh,* October–November 1917: 193–4)

It is not difficult to read into such a boy the makings of a freedom fighter who is a terrorist.

In a sizeable section of poetry, however, the poems exhorting young boys to rise and work for some great cause do not associate a deviation from the path trod by the so-called *good* boys with the ability to do something for the nation. The normative tone in Kusum Kumari Das's poems 'Adarsha Chhele (The Ideal Boy)' and 'Manushyatwa (Humanity)', for instance, does not consider naughtiness as an advantage in a boy's ability to work for an idealist cause; in fact, it seems to suggest the very opposite (*Kishore Kabita Sanchayan* (*Selected Poems for Youth*), ed. Biswanath Mukhopadhyay 173 and 174). 'Bangla Mayer Shonar Shishu' (*Those Lovable Children of Mother Bengal*) by Bande Ali Mian and 'Kishore' (*Young Men*) by Golam Mustafa similarly follow the more conventional trajectory, spelling out the regimen for an obedient, disciplined, well-mannered boy whose courage can rise to any untoward occasion in countering the British menace (*Kishore Kabita Sanchayan*, ed. Biswanath Mukhopadhyay 344 and 283). The didactic poetry of the times, therefore, largely required the patriotic hero to be constructed along the lines of the good boy conformist who would also be alert and sensitive to the exigencies of the nationalist context that he lived in.

A little satiated by this kind of patriotic hero in the making, Narayan Gangopadhyay's *Tenida* stories offered a counter narrative, in which the hero is not any of the extremes – he is neither good and patriotic nor mischievous but patriotic but an ordinary, average boy who bides his time in the provincial environs of Pataldanga. In his own leisurely and droll manner, Gangopadhay provides laughter and a breath of fresh air to his child readers, not demanding of them to emulate a patriotic role model during the period when the nationalist consciousness was at its peak.

7

To examine a serious strand in nationalist thought, however, one finds accommodated within the nationalist discourse the philosophy of those who believed that nationalism was not only synchronous but synonymous with the revival of Hinduism. The *Swadeshi* mood combined politics with religious revivalism, which continued to act as a morale booster for activists. Leaders like Sri Aurobindo and Lala Lajpat Rai worked for a *Hindu* nationalism which was not merely a political programme, but a creed. Scholars like the Indologist Max Mueller who developed a romantic cult of the exotic orient in the West were responsible for Hindu traditions acquiring a greater respectability in Bengal. Many in the younger generation were 'sustained by the new Hinduism that emerged in the last quarter of the nineteenth century' (Rajat K. Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal* 141). Ramakrishna Paramahansa, the saintly priest from Dakshineshwar, won over Kolkata's intelligentsia despite his rustic simplicity and illiteracy. His disciple Vivekananda founded

the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897, which carved a place for Hinduism in the map of the world as a this-worldly kind of religion with scant claim to social radicalism. One of the major literary manifestations of this new *Hindu* nationalism was Bankim Chandra's *Ananda Math*, which inspired the youth of Bengal to put up a heroic resistance to colonial oppression and virtually became the manifesto of Bengali revolutionaries.

In actual practice, Hem Chandra Kanungo describes the part played by Hinduism in the nationalist awakening of Bengali youth in his account of how the *Yugantar samiti* used the Bhabani mandirs as godowns for keeping arms and ammunition, and also fortresses against the English as and when necessary. The *Yugantar samiti* used a *shloka* from the Gita as its motto, followed by metaphors, quotations, allusions and essays from the Hindu *Dharmashastras* (Kanungo 166–70). Although this cult of Hindu nationalism naturally overlooked and excluded the participation of the Muslims, it also emerged as a philanthropic and socially inclusive creed. To take just one literary example of a nationalist protagonist who swears by Hinduism, although he is not a child but has just crossed the threshold of adolescence into youth, one can read in Tagore's *Gora* the fostering of a kind of nationalist creed sustained by orthodox Hinduism that is more complex and all-embracing than examples documented by historians. Gora grows up believing that the annual Hindu ritual of bathing at Tribeni is a submission to the great movement of nationalism and part of a greater cause (34). Longing to feel from within the upsurge that has moved the heart of the country, Gora's comprehensive Hindu vision takes into account all of *Bharat* (134). This vision is inclusive of the harassed third class passenger stranded in the rain (47), the low caste people of his neighbourhood who he visits every morning (99), *as well as* a poor Muslim who he enjoins not to tolerate the injustice of being cynically knocked down by a rich man's carriage (103). In the latter part of the novel, he travels all over Bengal outside the rich and affluent segments of Kolkata society, trying to help the oppressed and the exploited (170). All these acts are part of an all-encompassing Hindu nationalist perception, but its orthodoxy prevents Gora from coming to terms with himself when he learns that he was not born a Hindu. *Gora*, for the most part, chronicles a case study within the major trend of Hindu nationalism in the evolving nationalist movement at the turn of the century, recuperating, to some extent, the volatile trajectory of the nation in the making, and offers a discursive representation of the nation.

8

The corpus of Bengali literature constituted around patriotic themes went through a prolific growth and several mutations all the way up to independence. Within this, 'A constant preoccupation was with the figure of the

woman. She dominates Bengali works through the conceptualization of the country itself in her image' (Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* 250).

An oft-repeated literary motif was an allegorical representation of the nation specifically as a maternal fount of nourishment. The icon of the *Deshamata* (Motherland) was also a late and significant addition to the Hindu galaxy of divine beings. What is noteworthy about this development vis-à-vis juvenile literature is the variety of literary constructions around the nation–mother as a very significant presence and an important influence for a child in her/his formative years. The cultural construct, therefore, metaphorically perceived the people of the nation, including adults, middle aged and elderly people, as *children* of this all-pervasive deity. It progressively became more and more ingrained in the nationalist imaginary as a reality and not just an abstract trope.

That the cult of an all Hindu nationalism often equated the nation to a Mother Goddess was evident, for instance, in the emblem of the *Yugantar Samiti* which was the hand of *Kharagdharini Kali*. Based on the teachings of Vivekananda and texts like the *Gita* and the *Vedanta*, the youth who wanted to obey the call of a higher life in the service of the nation elevated the nation to the status of a Hindu Mother Goddess (see R. C. Majumdar, *History and Culture* 70). Majumdar and other Hindu historians whose accounts were carried away by their highly emotional Hindu revivalism, however, do not pause to consider what service nationalists from other communities contributed towards the cause.

The image of the nation as a Mother Goddess in Hindu nationalist literature is an attempt to impart an identity, clarity and yet a spiritual dimension to the term *nation*. That nationalist leaders invoked the spirit of the Mother Goddess in ventures to oust colonial rule is evident in songs like Bankim Chandra's 'Bande Mataram' and Dwijendralal Roy's 'Banga Amar Janani Amar' ('Bengal Oh My Mother'):

> My Bengal! My mother! My country! And 'Bharatvarsha', thou nation
> Art the mother of my knowledge and the mother of my vocation
> As also the mother of my religion and meditation.
> (Biswanath Mukhopadhyay, ed. *Kishore Kabita Sanchayan* 109)

In *Swadeshi Samaj* (*Swadeshi Community*), Tagore reminisces on what he had been taught to believe about the nation as a Mother Goddess: 'In our early life, words like *Bharat Mata* and *Bharat Lakshmi* came to occupy a large space in our imagination' (*Atmashakti*, *Rabindra Rachanabali XII*: 701).

However, the abstract and remote notion of a goddess who is also a mother was not sufficiently real for him; much later, he realized the everyday character of such a goddess:

> It is mere intoxication to believe that *Bharat Mata* sits on a seat made of stone over an inaccessible peak of the Himalayas, playing a pathetic tune on her veena. She resides in our own colony on the bank of a dirty pond, holding a malaria patient in her lap, unable to provide food and medicine for him, staring in dismay at her empty coffer.
>
> ('Chhatrader Prati Sambhashan' (An Address to Students) (1905), *Atmashakti*, *Rabindra Rachanabali XII*: 731)

Bharat Mata, as Tagore tries to reason, is not an abstraction, but exists in the person of the poverty-ridden mother stretching herself by cooking in other people's houses in order to give her son an English education so that he can just about get a respectable and stable clerical job. The notion of the nation as Mother Goddess is here demystified and personified as Everywoman struggling against the basic socio-economic injustices which threaten the less privileged in society.[6]

In Tagore's *Ghare Baire* (*The Home and the World*), Nikhilesh, too, recoils from an ideational and blind worship of the nation: 'He had, however, not been able to accept the slogan of Bande Mataram – *Hail the Mother* – as the ultimate. He used to say that . . . by worshipping the nation, he would only be ruining it' (27).

Yet Bimala, who is inspired by Sandip to be fanatically involved with the cause of the nation, mouths slogans on behalf of the nation as mother: 'I want the nation to be manifest to me in a form which I can call mother, goddess or Durga. . . . I am a human being, not a goddess' (40).

Nikhilesh, however, has his own divergent and distinctive views on the matter and opposes Sandip's deployment of the Durga Puja as a clarion call to garner a tumultuous wave of Hindu nationalism among the youth.

The Mother Goddess's equation with the nation is borne out by examples in numerous other literary texts too. In Tarashankar Bandopadhyay's *Dhatri Debota*, the title celebrates the divine status of the mother, while the text expands on such an image of the mother, equating the same Mother Goddess with the nation. In his first encounter with Sushil, Shibnath is taught a few slogans in the name of *bhakti* for the nation, which is not 'outside', but 'resides in the heart of a people' (186). Shibnath, therefore, is not indoctrinated by an academic and abstract idea of *bhakti*. *Bhakti*, the *Birbani* of Vivekananda and his mother's magic touch in weaving a carpet with thought-provoking patriotic maxims merge to inspire him with a mother-image of the country.

Popular, didactic children's stories in the pre-independence era abound with the idea of the nation as Mother Goddess. The equation is often introduced by an ideal pedagogue, a hero of the children, who is a good teacher, philanthropist, social worker and patriot rolled in one. In such didactic stories and poems, the conceptualization of the nation in the role of the mother

is often lost on the child protagonist, although no authorial irony is directed at the child. In Samaresh Majumdar's *Ani*, for instance, the child hero who is consoled by his teacher that even if his actual mother is dead, he has a mother in the form of his country, hardly understands how the latter can be a substitute for the former (see Chapter 3). The teacher, therefore, is exposed as naïve in believing that a theoretical notion of the mother as nation can make the child's mother come alive for him and also appeal in a way that he is able to assimilate the patriotism inscribed within the idea. Children's literature often similarly interrogates the idea of the nation as mother even as it celebrates it.

9

Within narratives of nationalism, although it is important to review the discourse of the abstract nation–mother which is meaningless in the everyday context within which children operate, it is also necessary to recuperate the contributions of the fictional ones towards shaping their children's nationalist mindset or absence of it. In both real life and fiction, the actual challenges posed by the world outside were only taken up by men, and the more they accomplished on that front, the more masculine they were construed to be. Women, both in real life and literature, were relegated to playing a subsidiary role at home. In keeping with such stereotypical practices of both masculinity and femininity up to the early and middle part of the twentieth century, during the nationalist upsurge, some mothers and wives, or even sisters and daughters, are known to have contributed in various ways to sustain men who were involved in the national cause. These women were more secular, holistic and down-to-earth exemplars of femininity than the abstract images propagated by Hindu nationalists, blurring the interface between mother, nation and goddess. Textbook paradigms of motherhood provide us with concomitant literary representations of the patriotic child reared by such mothers in the context of the national movement.

The family was believed to be the site that predominantly structured and carved out the nation's future, and the onerous task, therefore, was delegated principally to the mother. The woman's indisputable position at the hub of the family gave her certain additional responsibilities within a space that is inviolate and autonomous. National regeneration remained an impossible goal without the awakening and participation of the mother as a species: 'Bangamata is summoning you, listen to her: Awake, all my daughters' and 'Arouse a *jati* of mothers, Build up a nation of mothers' (Jayadev Goswami, quoted in Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* 249). It was compatible with a pervasive belief that the nation could advance only if the family could be regulated to keeping a regime of proper home management, child

rearing, dietary habits and so on. Sivanath Sastri, writing on the family, remarked: 'The qualities for which a nation attains brilliance and remains well preserved have to be achieved within the family' (quoted in Pradip Kumar Bose, 'Sons of the Nation: Child Rearing in the New Family', Partha Chatterjee, *Texts of Power* 123).

The emphasis echoes Samuel Smiles, the great Victorian advocate of self-help and of experience in life as the true educator, who saw that the foundations for future success were laid in the early upbringing in the family: 'The nation comes from the nursery' (Self Help XII, John Murray, 1859, quoted in P.W. Musgrave, *The English School Story from Brown to Bunter* 157).

The family as an institution, and the mother as its central figure, therefore, produced, prepared and sustained the group of soldiers and workers who built the new nation.

Within the nationalist framework, the mother had some special tasks to perform. Pratap Chandra Majumdar sounded a warning note about mothers who might not be able to discharge this responsibility. He believed that 'Because of the flaws of the mother, the child is ruined; when the child is ruined, the family is ruined; when family life crumbles, society decays; and when society is polluted, no nation can advance' (quoted in Pradip Kumar Bose, 'Sons of the Nation: Child Rearing in the New Family' 123). Similarly, 'If a nation of true mothers can be built then true sons will abound in every household' (Mukunda Das, *Karmakshetra*. Barisal, quoted in Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* 5).

It was argued that women who were ignorant of the rules of physical development would not only harm themselves, but by producing weak and deficient children, destroy the nation. The mother's enhanced authority in the domestic sphere also entailed her accountability. Atul Chandra Datta, an early writer on domestic science, wrote: 'Well-trained children are the pride of the country; with bad training and bad morals, they only bring disgrace to the family and become the scum of the nation' (quoted in Pradip Kumar Bose, 'Sons of the Nation: Child Rearing in the New Family' 123).

The metaphor of the family, says Tanika Sarkar, 'was used repeatedly to define a new community of patriots; by implication women would have a larger scope of activities within it' (*Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* 263).

Those women who did not primarily play the role of mothers and wives but were actually involved in the national movement worked within a wider spectrum. In recent years, a lot of research has gone towards salvaging and enumerating the involvement of women in the national movement. Dagmar Engels, for instance, has tried 'to relate the progress of female education to the changing social composition and economic basis of middle class families and to the development of the nationalist movement' (158). Tirtha Mandal

also documents what women were entrusted to do behind the wings during the national movement. 'They conveyed secret coded messages, provided food and shelter to the absconding revolutionaries, smuggled and hid weapons, wrote and delivered proscribed literature, provided financial assistance, strengthened revolutionary organizations and recruited and trained young girls for revolutionary action' (3).

One of the most talked about Bengali women who worked for the nation although she was not proactively involved was Sarala Debi Choudhurani, who opened a new academy in Ballygunge in which she physically trained young men and women to take on the challenge of the British. She maintained this gymnasium with a specifically nationalist program, though somewhat covertly. Similarly, Kshiradaprabha Biswas was actually arrested for giving shelter to Surya Sen, one of the Chittagong revolutionaries.[7] Bengal is known to have trained more young girls for armed revolution than any other province. Some of the most prominent examples of younger women and girls who actually took part in the freedom struggle are Kalpana Dutta and Pritilata Waddedar, who were trained under Surya Sen and managed to escape many attempts to arrest and transport them. In the raid led by Pritilata at the Railway institute in Pahartali, Chittagong, she finally evaded arrest by consuming potassium cyanide. Similarly, Bina Das, who was hardly twenty at the time, made an attempt to kill Sir Stanley Jackson, Governor of Bengal, and was caught. Two schoolgirls, Santi Ghosh and Suniti Chaudhuri, with a training in armed revolutionary activity and an unwavering conviction about their role in the cause of the nation, which they were probably too young to understand at the age of sixteen and fourteen respectively, shot dead Stevens, the magistrate of Comilla.

Despite such examples of exceptional young girls actually participating in terrorist activities at times, in nationalist literature, as in other subgenres, the girl child is generally absent. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, in most real life cases, excluding those mentioned above, the childhood of girls would be abruptly cut short as they were usually married off before puberty. Even before that, they were constantly trained to cater to their husband and *shoshurbari* (in-laws' house). At an age when boys played *guli danda* (stick and ball) and *lathi*, a girl would suddenly find herself an adult, as in Bibhutibhushan Mukhopadhyay's *Ranur Pratham Bhag* and Tagore's *Samapti*. While boys would find themselves indoctrinated and inducted to fight for the nation, mothers, and even sisters, would merely cook for them and look after their welfare. Women and girls did not, by and large, therefore, take an active part in the world outside the home, let alone in important and serious activities like the freedom struggle. This explains their infrequent presence in children's literature up to the nineteen sixties or thereabouts, around which time a widespread awareness of gender bias

accounted for the conferring of a somewhat more prominent place to girls in literature.

10

For the purpose of comparative study, it is essential to recall how, apropos India's new-found awareness of nationhood, Western, liberal thought found its way through English education and came to be absorbed in literature depicting the child and the adolescent of the nationalist period. Although Hinduism was at the very centre of nationalist thought and action, to the point of being chauvinist, the idea of the nation and the inspiration for the nationalist struggle came from Western ideologies as well as their revolutionary movements, as is demonstrated in *Dhatri Debota* (see also Chapter 2). Despite the sudden revival of belief in the past glory of the Indian nation, Western history, philosophy and literature had a considerable impact on the nationalist consciousness. Indian Nationalism was paradoxically both an education imbibed from as well as a rebellion against the British in India.

Although India's only intimate contact with the West was only through the British, Tagore believed that it was one of the best ('Nationalism in India' 423). 'Taken together', he said, 'the East and the West are complementary, and the East should be able to assimilate the enduring thoughts in Western civilization in order to bring about a reconciliation of these two great worlds' (423). His deep love and respect for the British race that had produced great-hearted men, thinkers of great thoughts and doers of great deeds, and given rise to great literature (424), makes him admit that India learnt something from the West.

Yet the alienation caused by English education made Tagore write that 'our own country [is] indistinct to us although we are quite familiar with things belonging to a foreign country' ('Chhatrader Prati Sambhashan' 725). Simply emulating the Western model of excellence or the alien culture, therefore, would make the nation lose its distinctive identity. The larger effort, therefore, took into account what Partha Chatterjee calls, 'a regeneration of the national culture, adapted to the requirements of progress, but retaining at the same time its distinctiveness' (*Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* 2).

For home-grown Bengali children, their acquaintance with the West was a window to thought and action in the larger world outside India. It appealed to them in a way that they wanted to vicariously experience and enjoy it. The *English* or Macaulayan system of education familiarized them with the liberal and radical thought of European writers like Mazzini and Garibaldi, Milton and Shelley, Bentham, Mill, Spencer, Rousseau, Voltaire and others. The Indian intelligentsia, too, was stirred by ideals of liberty,

nationality and self-government, and wanted to implement these at home at a time when the Western world had already been energized by them. The ideas of rationalism and individualism, social justice and political rights, disseminated during the French revolution, figured significantly in the Western way of thinking.

The English language became a common medium through which Indians belonging to diverse states could communicate and come together on a common platform. The vernacular languages were also systematized by the British in a manner that Indians acquired the agency and ability to publicly articulate and document discontentment with British rule. The standardization and streamlining of these languages, in fact, made it feasible to chart out and visualize a revolutionary programme using the same vocabulary that could overthrow the ruling regime. In Bengal, English education opened out a whole new world of ideas to young educated Bengalis and acquainted them with happenings outside their own limited world. In Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Aparajito*, Apu, in the prime of his youth, understands the worth of this education and believes that he needs to go far away from home, even if the journey is tedious, in order to attain quality education that would liberate him. His education, however, has no overtly political dimension or nationalistic agenda. In *Dhatri Debota*, the news of the world war breaking out in Europe, at a time when Shibnath is studying in college in Kolkata, renders irrelevant to him his bonding with his mother, his aunt and his village. He yearns to overstep this microcosm for a life that partakes of the momentous happenings of the larger world. In Kolkata, at the behest of friends, he reads and mulls over Western literature written during the French revolution and afterwards, all of which inspire him with revolutionary and patriotic ideals.

11

Yet Elie Kedourie terms nationalism as 'one of Europe's most pernicious exports' (*Nationalism*, quoted in Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial* World 7). That the patriotism reflected in adult as well as children's literature is not complacent or unstinted, even during peak periods of nationalist awakening and activism, is evident from the many questionings of the ideology within the nationalist discourse and its literary articulations.

One of the earliest critiques of the nation as an esoteric abstraction replicated from Western thought is elucidated in Tagore's 'Nationalism in India'. As an ideology, he avers that nationalism proves to be fickle by changing its alliances very often, and yet it does so with righteous indignation, claiming loyalty to the altered groupings without the least embarrassment ('Nationalism in the West' 432).

Tagore had started off by idolizing the nation more than revering God and humanity, but later admitted:

> When this organization of politics and commerce, whose other name is the Nation, becomes all-powerful at the cost of the harmony of the higher social life, then it is an evil day for humanity.
>
> ('Nationalism in India' 422)

In his fiction as well as his non-fictional writings, Tagore indicts nationalism for overstepping the threshold of morality to encroach into the domain of amoral, and even immoral, politics. Why is it, he asks, that 'that machine must be pitted against machine, and nation against nation in an endless bullfight of politics'? ('Nationalism in India' 436). It creates a situation, he argues, where the political man is given far greater preference over the moral man. This nationalism is 'a cruel epidemic of evil that is sweeping over the human world of the present age, eating into its moral vitality' ('Nationalism in India' 424). He denounces an obsessive involvement with the cause of the nation, particularly the use of terrorist methods, mindlessly perpetuating cruelty and violence without pausing to consider its inhuman aspects, when he says that 'the idea of the Nation is one of the most powerful anesthetics that man invented', under which a whole people carry out 'its systematic programmes of the most virulent self-seeking without being in the least aware of its moral perversion' ('Nationalism in India' 434).

Ghare Baire denounces a nationalist leader like Sandip for harbouring a major streak of corruption, exemplified in his personally lavish lifestyle that is facilitated by money from the people, actually meant to be used for the nation. Sandip, for instance, greedily eyes Bimala's jewellery and gold coins, intending them for personal use. Nikhil's undocumented, virtually artless theorization of the nation takes into account and censures what Amartya Sen calls the 'corruptibility of nationalism'. ('Tagore and His India', *New York Times*, August 28, 2001).

Nationalism indoctrinates its followers into believing that the nation is greater than the people. In an age of nationalist activism against colonial rule, fictional characters who often get carried away by the addiction of nationalism either regret their obsessive preoccupation later, or are questioned by other characters. Tagore says:

> The spirit of national selfishness is that brain disease of a people which shows itself in red eyes and clenched fists, in violence of talk and movements, all the while shattering its natural restorative powers . . . its strength becomes like the strength of madness which ends in self-destruction.
>
> ('Nationalism in the West' 432)

Patriotism as an obsession also comes under attack in 'Swadeshi Samaj': 'Just as alcohol is dearer than food for an alcoholic, for us the addiction of working for the nation became greater than the nation itself' (*Atmashakti, Rabindra Rachanabali XII:* 702).

Ironically, the nation is also its own greatest enemy:

> the Nation is the greatest evil for the Nation . . . any new birth of its fellow in the world is always followed in its mind by the dread of a new peril. . . . And for all this the Nation has been claiming . . . to be the salt of the earth, the flower of humanity, the blessing of God.
>
> ('Nationalism in the West' 429)

Critiques of such blind nationalism that is absorbed from Western discourses are offered by the equivocations of characters in the novels *Ghare Baire*, *Shilalipi* and *Dhatri Debota*.

Within a broader and more philosophical perspective that is not about Indian nationalism per se, Mary Poovey writes: 'the process by which individuals or groups embrace the concept of the nation as the most meaningful context for self-definition necessarily involves temporarily marginalizing other categories that could also provide a sense of identity' (55).

Although Poovey's statement is only an attempt to understand the phrases *national character* and *national identity*, that too in the Western context, and is not necessarily disparaging of national causes and movements, she reminds her readers that 'other categories and interests persist even in periods of nationalistic fervor' and 'they often compete with or contradict national values' (55). Literary characters are sometimes portrayed as so fanatically aroused by nationalist feelings that they become not only oblivious to all else, but do so at great cost to other human values.

12

It is this very inhumanity against which some very ordinary, everyday characters have spoken out in Tagore's fiction for adults. One of Tagore's short stories, 'The Patriot' (*The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore 2*: 268–71) encapsulates this hypocritical and inhuman aspect of the nationalist wave, juxtaposed against a more humane approach to life, in the depiction of a husband and wife pair. Girindra's wife is a staunch nationalist, to the extent that she reprimands her husband for not wearing *khaddar.* Yet she cannot rise above considerations of caste and class when Girindra wants to take into their carriage a sweeper who has been beaten up by pedestrians on the road because he has encroached on their sanitized path. Girindra, who does not wear the nationalist badge on his sleeve, ironically turns out to be the

person whose egalitarian treatment of a fellow human being transcends not only narrow considerations of caste and class, but whose love for the nation is also bigger and more inclusive than the limited notions of the nation that his wife upholds.

Child protagonists, too, are at times unselfconsciously aware that nationalism does not address itself to the more basic and critical problems of human beings, particularly pertinent in the Indian context. Although some protagonists get enthralled by the cult of violence that does not hesitate to kill or get killed in the name of the country, they mostly want to shun violence in the end, and adopt the more non-violent, liberal humanist vision of Tagore and Gandhi. In juvenile literature, the child protagonist's scepticism, after all that she/he sees and hears about the freedom struggle and what it might achieve, arises from the anxiety that this big, wide movement, which has been given the status of a revolution, is not really eradicating the greatest of social evils from their roots. In Sibram Chakrabarty's children's story *Bari Theke Paliye* (*Dodging Home*), the child protagonist Kanchan, in the course of his wanderings after running away from home, becomes aware of an incipient nationalism that is uncaring of the more pertinent problems of ordinary people. His sensitivity expresses itself in his innocuous question about what the slogan of *Swaraj* will ultimately achieve:

> What will happen when we have self-government . . . will poor people also have it? When the country is independent, will they be able to eat well and dress well? Will poor people not have to rummage through garbage and eat what other people have thrown away? Will they be able to live comfortably in three-storeyed houses?
>
> (47)

When confirmed by the adult to whom his questions are addressed that *Swaraj* will not solve the problems of food, clothing and shelter for the poor, Kanchan's concern turns to despair, and he prognosticates: 'I am only apprehensive that the Swaraj that Gandhiji will attain with so much effort will only be a Swaraj for the well-to-do. The poor people's lot will never change' (48).

It requires a child's mind, not carried away by the hype around the ideology of the time and place he lives in, to express despondency about *Swaraj* being purely notional for a great majority of the people, and ask, in a way, the fundamental question: 'Whose nation is it anyway?' Over and over again in Bengali literature for adults as well as children, a serious misgiving is expressed about what the national cause will ultimately achieve and at whose cost, resulting in a persistent scepticism about the nationalist struggle. Having got swept away by an obsession that is blind to its own internal

inadequacies, the young nationalists, whether they are of the extremist or the Gandhian variety, are made to pause and reconsider the limitations of their infatuation with the national cause.

To begin with, nationalism did not have the potential to solve the grassroots problems of the country – that of hunger and poverty. This perception exists along with a simultaneous critique of militant nationalism. To elaborate the question of nationalism vis-à-vis the survival of the underprivileged majority, Nikhilesh, in *Ghare Baire*, articulates the apprehension that because Indian goods sold in the name of *Swadeshi* are much inferior in quality, the boycott of foreign goods would merely threaten poor traders with loss of business. This becomes a cause of anxiety for other characters as well – for example Haranidhi, the owner of a liquor shop in Narayan Gangopadhyay's *Shilalipi*. Haranidhi's is a much less self-consciously held opinion, recapitulated through a childhood account in which the child hardly knows or understands what all the furore over boycott of foreign goods is all about. In an autobiography written by Mansoor Ali Ahmed, there is an illustration of a child's response to the *Swadeshi* cult. The master's injunction to the boys to wear *Swadeshi dhoti*s had merely physically compelled them to do so, as it was unthinkable during his childhood to disobey one's parent or master. The author unabashedly confides in the reader his reservations about the Indian cloth:

> Firstly, Swadeshi clothes were much more thick, coarse and crudely spun. Secondly, the colours of the borders of Swadeshi dhoties were not permanent. When you washed them for the first time, the colour would run and form blotches all over the rest of the dhoti.
>
> (*Atmajibani* 72)

In adult literature, it is not only the child's ignorance and lack of comprehension about fighting for the abstract ideal of *Swadeshi*, but a compelling critique of nationalism that often informs the narrative and problematizes some issues that manifest themselves by blindly following it. Nationalism, a movement associated with the rising middle classes, fails to deal with the problems of the poor because it is an ideology borrowed from the West, where it had proved to be a dynamically inclusive concept absorbing all the diversities. In India, such a homogenization cannot be accomplished as there are too many disparities of caste and class. It is precisely when a Western idea, decontextualized from where it took shape, is imposed on the Indian people that the undesirable disjunction between the theory and its practice gets highlighted, as pointed out by Nikhilesh in his reluctance to impose *Swadeshi* on his poor subjects. In the same novel, when Ponchu is ill and dying, the nationalist programme takes a back seat. Instead, the

resonance is that of a larger world whose problems are not answered by the nationalist ideology or activism of Sandip. Nikhilesh, whose world has not narrowed down to sustain a stereotypical, one-dimensional idea about the nation, berates Sandip for his self-indulgent addiction to nationalism and deification of the nation. There is impeccable logic in his question about why Sandip's concept of God or *nation* does not include all of humanity. The novel is a counter-discourse to the chauvinistic forms of nationalism. It engages with the idea of freedom – personal as well as political. It elaborates and interrogates nationalism as an ideology that militates on behalf of the nation's freedom and autonomy and yet causes the common man to lose his means of livelihood or erupts into mindless violence, falling short of its pompously flaunted programme. Ultimately, Tagore's ideology, voiced through his protagonist Nikhilesh, goes beyond nationalism to propagate a more humanistic, cosmopolitan, global notion of the world around us. It not only challenges the idea of nations and nationalism but also underscores and tries to salvage crucial issues that lie beyond the nation. The more local and ephemeral cult of nationalism, therefore, is subsumed within a broad, integrative, although perhaps quixotic vision.

The child protagonist, whose various encounters make her/him cynical about the national movement, often prioritizes social conscience over the national cause, linking up with what I stated at the beginning of this chapter, and what is expressed so clearly in Sibram Chakrabarty's *Bari Theke Paliye*. In Narayan Gangopadhyay's *Shilalipi*, Ranju, the child protagonist, having lived in the context of the Civil Disobedience and Non-cooperation movements between 1920 and1930, learns from his mentor Abinashbabu that his service to his country will be well worth it if he can just save one or two lives during the floods. For him, *Swadeshi* must actually relate to the people.[8]

An unstudied critique of both the moderate and the extremist variety of nationalism prevents the child or adolescent protagonist from getting swept away by an impetuous and unconsidered patriotism. Ultimately, it is neither an abstract, philosophical *bhakti* apropos Hindu nationalism nor an intellectual absorption of Western nationalist thought that draws characters like Shibnath in *Dhatri Debota* to dedicate his body, heart and soul to the less privileged people around him. Shibnath gives up militant nationalism and gets involved in Gandhian non-violent non-cooperation instead. The down-to-earth philosophy he imbibes from his mother, who does not want him to grow up to be a proud, stubborn, hardened, spendthrift and luxury-loving zamindar's son, makes him decide to work for his fellow human beings instead. Shibnath starts off with serving the poor people of his district in times of crisis, takes to militant nationalism in the following years, but

admonished by his mother, reverts to devote his energy for the cause of the poor and the downtrodden when he is disillusioned with terrorism in the name of the nation.

The mother's instinct is that Shibu will serve a greater cause and find greater fulfilment in working among poor people, looking after them during crises like the cholera epidemic. This is at a time when the youth of the country are being awakened by people like Shibu's *mastermoshai* Ramratanbabu to boycott foreign goods and write patriotic verses. It is a reminder that the minimal welfare of one's community cannot be given lower priority than the nation, a point reiterated many times by writers who have tried to foreground the shortcomings of a nationalism which is not worth working towards if it is at the cost of the suffering of poor people. Shibnath, who becomes fanatically and militantly involved with the national cause during his college days, receives a setback and is compelled to become more introspective when confronted with the equivocation of *Dada*, their guru in all their terrorist activism. In a country where most people are still uncivilized and uneducated, says *Dada*, it is madness to stretch one's hand out in search of freedom (230). Shibnath, who, despite his leisured *zamindari* background, has a social conviction that prompts him to nurse the cholera epidemic patients in his village while he is still a boy, develops a national conscience which makes him initially join the terrorists in attempts to wipe out British colonial rule. However, being disillusioned with the terrorist method of nationalist rebellion, he later renounces wife, child, home and estate to retire to an ashram in a remote village. There, he practises Gandhian principles of philanthropic work, although he ultimately finds his fulfilment and his vocation in going to jail for participating in the civil disobedience movement for the freedom of the country. Through a gut level perception, Shibnath learns a kind of humanitarianism from his mother that becomes an underlying ideal in much of the literature of the period (230). It recalls Tagore's much more considered prognosis that 'my countrymen will truly gain their India by fighting against the education which teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity' ('Nationalism in India' 456).

There is an implicit critique of the terrorist method of nationalism in Narayan Gangopadhyay's *Shilalipi* also, where most of the other boys, who are followers of Gandhian non-violence, indict Parimal, who hides weapons and is part of the militant faction, for having dropped out of the national movement altogether. While Ranju the protagonist is inclusive and democratic enough to accept the other faction functioning in a different manner from the followers of Gandhi, nothing except Gandhian non-violent non-cooperation is true nationalism for the others.

These two pre-independence adult novels with protagonists who have just stepped into their youth take stock of the loss in human terms caused by jumping the bandwagon of the nation and practising violent methods appropriated from the West. Seminal characters in the text at the interface of adolescence and youth have reservations about participating in a national movement that cannot subsume human, humane and humanitarian concerns within its fold. Both novels recommend philanthropic work, although with some qualification, as an alternative to the violence and menace of nationalism. These and other fictional works of the nationalist era, including those for children, rewrite the more traditional valorization of nationalism in a very significant way. They deconstruct the national movement as a progressive signpost in the history of India because the freedom and parity that it professed to foster would not enable the greater multitudes.

I began this chapter by examining the role of the child protagonist in social and national programmes beyond those that involve herself/himself and her/his home and school. Ironically, however, the cause of the nation, in both the adult and children's literature I have illustrated from, mostly rebounds on itself. As in her/his interaction with the family and the school, the child protagonist's involvement in nationalism that is a subversive movement during a protracted phase of colonial rule by and large terminates with an assimilation within the status quo. The child protagonist usually ends up being disillusioned about the national cause and reverts to a worldview that is more positively disposed to working towards something that is grounded in the reality of the social environment around her/him. The political agenda of young nationalists of both factions are exposed to be greatly inadequate when compared to some kind of social activism and inclusive humanist vision which can more immediately and palpably endeavour to improve the lot of the poor, the sick and the underprivileged. In a chapter that is ostensibly focused on childhood rebellion on behalf of the nation, I conclude that the child protagonist's dissidence in gearing up to work with national zeal in a context where it is construed as a major protest against the political establishment usually and paradoxically ends up expressing a dissenting perspective about that very nationalism. The child's rebellion, therefore, does not remain *for* and on behalf of the nation but culminates largely *against* all the counterproductive theories and practices it adopts and implements.

Notes

1 Two definitions of the nation, at the two extremities of the twentieth century, take into account these very characteristics. Tagore's idea of what constitutes a *nation* emphasizes the ancient cultural heritage of a people and their consensus to

live in one place, maintaining their legacy of art and culture (Tagore, 'Nation ki' (1901), 'Atmashakti', *Rabindra Rachanabali XII* 677). Ernest Gellner, in *What is a Nation*, also takes up these two constituents of what he calls the *spiritual principle* called the nation:

> One is in the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent; the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form.
>
> (Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (1983); rpt. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2006, quoted in Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* 19)

2 Minogue calls it 'a collective grievance against a foreign oppressor' (104) that breaks out into a struggle ranging from peaceful methods to terrorism and guerilla warfare. In 'Nationalism in India' (458), Tagore says that a nation 'is the aspect of a whole people as an organised power'. When India encountered the British, it came face to face with the problem of dealing not with kings like the Moghals or races like the Pathans, but with a nation. The awareness of nationhood in India was born because of the encroachment of the British nation, and in order to form a solidarity against and resist the British nation, India also had to form itself into nothing less than a nation (see Tagore, 'Nationalism in India' 429). Nationalist sentiment is also the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent (Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalisms* 1).

3 Ernest Gellner, for instance, says that 'Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist' (*Thought and Change* 147–78). Benedict Anderson calls the nation 'an imagined community . . . because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (5). That the nation is a mental construct is also reiterated by Homi Bhabha, who says that nations 'lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realise their horizons in the mind's eye' (1).

4 See esp. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, *Ananda Math* in *Bankim Rachanabali: Upanyas Samagra*, which depicts a group of patriotic *sannyasins* who left their hearth and home, knew no other God than their motherland, and were prepared to sacrifice everything at her altar. On the other hand, in Tagore's *Char Adhyay*, the love of the beloved and the love of the nation coalesce into one in a united effort dedicated to the liberation of the nation from foreign rule.

5 See Hem Chandra Kanungo, *Banglae Biplab Pracheshta* (*Revolutionary Endeavour in Bengal*), Mansoor Ali Ahmed, *Atmajibani*, Pulin Behari Das, *Amar Jiban Kahini*, Bipin Chandra Pal, *Memories of My Life and Times* and Bipin Chandra Pal, *Shatwar Batsar:Atmajibani*.

6 See also Tanika Sarkar's account of *Bharatmata* painted by Abanindranath Tahkur – pale, tearful, frail, the *archetypal female victim* – or Sarkar's footnote on 'a mournful Mother India [weeping] day and night, tears streaming down her face, a shaft of sorrow piercing her breasts' (Anon.) and 'Look at our Mother, disease-ridden, skeletal, a withered body. . .' Jyotirindranath Tagore, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* 255.

7 A literary equivalent of Kshiradaprabha is Bimala in Tagore's *Ghare Baire* (1916). who, although a mere housewife and the mistress of an aristocratic family, not only agrees to keep Sandip's weapons but also offers to give him her jewellery to be sold and used for his revolutionary activities.

8 In history, a failed attempt to demystify nationalism was made by those left-wing thinkers and activists who actually joined the movement. Although the leftist view is that the bourgeois variety of nationalism creates artificial borders within geo-political spaces, 'Indian communism sprang . . . from roots within the national movement itself' (Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India*, p. 247). That the national movement was not different from a people's revolution is quite clear from the historical fact that communists like M. N. Roy joined it with the backing of Lenin, who urged the necessity of broad support to bourgeois-led national movements in the colonies. Of course, they were later disillusioned with bourgeois-nationalist leaders like Gandhi, and founded the Communist party of India in 1920.

7 The rebel child and the conformist resolution

> Man has to strike a balance between two equally strong forces, two opposing impulses – his own independence, and the necessity to conform.
>
> Tagore, Rabindranath. 'Swatantrer Parinam', *Dharma, Rabindra Rachanabali XII*. p. 72

> How can the tendency towards individuality, which is the necessary fruit of a culture of self-determination, be made to co-exist with the opposing tendency to normality, the offspring, equally inevitable, of the mechanism of socialization?
>
> Moretti, Franco. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. London: Verso, 1987, p. 16

1

In this concluding chapter, I will discuss the implications of childhood defiance and where it leads to as represented within some of the texts that I have studied. I will restrict myself to discussing children's literature written in the narrative mode because this genre offers a representation of the child's discontent with the world around her/him, taking into consideration the vicissitudes she/he goes through and the alterations her/his outlook undergoes over a period of time. Poetry, except for the narrative kind, is neither configured around developing plots, nor is concluded in a way that is linked to the beginning and the middle in a logical and chronological sequence. It is only the endings of novels, stories and plays for and about children, therefore, that lend themselves to such an analysis centred around their conclusions. Fiction and drama generally attempt to offer a 'resolution' because such narratives usually try to settle, in however incomplete or unsatisfactory a manner, some of the issues that are raised. Through the denouement of the plots of some stories and novels, I will focus on and examine the Bengali child protagonist's potential to carry out her/his rebellion to the point of

taking a decisive step, breaking away from or doing away with the institutions of home and school altogether. What and how much control does the child protagonist have over her/his own situation and the way her/his life unfolds within the stringent parameters of the establishment of which she/he is a part?

As in some earlier chapters, in order to understand an aspect of narrative structure like the endings of works for children, here too I begin by enlisting the assistance of western ideas and theoretical formulations. I will later deploy those very ideas to analyze the rationale of the resolution of the Bengali stories that I have intensively documented in the course of the previous chapters, albeit with some caution and qualification.

What Sarah Gilead describes as the endings of children's fantasy fiction, 'the most problematic of the narrative transitions . . . the point at which we are invited to relax our attentiveness and interpretive energy and at which, for that very reason, the greatest demands are placed on our understanding' (101), is equally true of stories in the realistic mode. Justifiably enough, child readers would not feel satisfied with open-ended stories that leave much unsaid or not worked out, testing the reader's ability to respond to some stimuli for additional reflections. Most of children's fiction, therefore, does not make use of the narrative innovation of open-endedness that has come into vogue in postmodern writing for adults. Even child readers who are older than the age group which likes to read fairy tales and stories with the positive certainty of 'happy endings' would want to know what happened eventually to the characters whose lives and predicaments they get involved with while reading about them. Yet, they would also not be willing to fully suspend their disbelief to the extent that an inevitably happy ending requires. The closure of the novels and short stories they read, however, usually entails some kind of viable working out or coming of a full circle. In fiction with childhood rebellion at its centre, the trajectory that is generally followed does not allow the child protagonist to make so radical a break that it might pose a challenge to the realistic mode in which the stories are cast. The homecoming and conciliation with the domestic enclosure and all other signifiers of the establishment like the school within which she/he functions presumably satisfies the prerequisite of a plausible plot. But it also does not challenge the sense of security that is an existential precondition for the well-being of children. Such reunions with parents and family, therefore, go down well not only with parents but ironically also with child readers who are otherwise carried away by narratives delineating children's questioning of school and family norms or even turning their backs upon these institutions altogether during the course of the story.

According to Bakhtin, the novel as a genre is able to subsume other genres while still maintaining its originality as a genre. Other genres, on the

other hand, cannot incorporate the novel without impairing their own distinct identity. The conclusion of a novel takes into account and intrinsically incorporates the shaping of its protagonists in relation to the time period that it covers. The protagonists of the novel form, says Bakhtin, are 'heroes of free improvisation . . . heroes of a life process that is imperishable and renewing itself forever' ('Epic and Novel', *The Dialogic Imagination* 39).[1] The 'epic wholeness of an individual' (39) seems to have disintegrated in the novel form. Since the individual hero of the novel cannot be forcibly embedded in already tried and tested categories, her/his 'unfleshed-out humanness' (31) accounts for 'unrealized potential and unrealized demands' (31) that have a lot of scope for inventiveness and experimentation. In a children's story or novel, particularly the Bengali children's novel I am concerned with, however, what Bakhtin calls the 'external and formal completedness' (31) of plot is usually at odds, not only with this fluidity and uncertainty in the protagonist's nature, propensities and movements but also what the author seems to empathize with, underscore and celebrate all along.

2

Unlike autonomous short stories or novels, a certain subgenre of fiction is open-ended by its very definition. Here, I do not refer to those stories and novels that have shaped the contours of postmodern fiction or been wrought, in turn, by the exigencies of postmodern critical discourse, but the category of serialized stories like *Pagla Dashu*, whose child protagonist I have perceived as the forerunner of all twentieth-century Bengali child rebels. In these stories, Dashu is compelled into positions of repeated confrontation with his school authorities, his teachers who are pillars of the establishment, as also his schoolmates who have never questioned the fairness of the system that runs the school or/and have gone along with discriminatory practices and conspiratorial pacts among themselves. Whether Dashu is punished or ignored, provides laughter or is laughed at, hailed as a hero or reprimanded at the end of each story is not very relevant, except that it suggests the extent of authorial sympathy, which is largely on Dashu's side. Whatever the ending of each story, Dashu must, in keeping with the requirements of the serial format, be ready in the next one with yet another of the antics that identify him as the odd one out among a group of schoolboys, repeatedly demonstrating his *pagla* (somewhat eccentric) nature.

It is important to remember, therefore, that the layout of serialized stories – whether it is *Bhimer Kapal* (serialized in 1883, which I have discussed in Chapter 2), *Pagla Dashu* (1916), or a later twentieth-century popular

children's text in English like R.K. Narayan's *Swami and His Friends* (1935) that even the non-Bengali reader is greatly familiar with – is such that the narration is not an extended account of the protagonist's life like some of Dickens's novels that were also serialized in the nineteenth century. These narratives follow an anecdotal format in which the anecdotes or episodes do not lead us on to see how far the child protagonist could stretch to take on the challenge of her/his discord vis-à-vis the establishment. Unlike the open-ended serial form in which these stories are cast, the autonomous short story or novel has a closed structure that often necessitates a compromise on the part of the main characters, since they might get into serious trouble and jeopardize their own lives if they do not eventually acquiesce in the views of their parents and teachers. The protagonists of short stories and novels, therefore, suffer by comparison to *Pagla Dashu* regarding how far they are prepared to go in order to confront and defy the system. Each of Dashu's pranks, as narrated separately in each story, is an intuitive expression of a deep-seated conviction about not giving in to the ways of the established system. The episodes, of course, neither eventually lead to his complete breaking away nor do they necessitate for him a decisive reabsorption in the system.

3

Another kind of 'open-ended' closure within children's fiction is in the prolific genre of children's detective or crime series which paradoxically entail that the child protagonist should be securely reinstated in her/his home environment once the case is solved. As most detective stories or novels do not stop at one, some allowances for flouting conventional rules and taking a break from everyday routine have to be made for the children in the next story or episode. Although this kind of fiction must have a respectable location from which the child detectives could start to solve their next mystery, in the course of the mystery or 'case', they cross accepted adult parameters of safety and propriety once again. After overstepping norms set for them over and over again in achieving heroic feats of detecting criminals and solving mysteries, however, the children must reconcile to living within the constraints of the system, but only in the interim between two stories.

The escapades of child detectives, as already discussed in Chapter 5, lets them travel through Bakhtinian adventure-time, wherein the adventures they undergo are beyond calculation by real time – they are always poised between two consecutive moments of real and chronological time. The adventure chronotope in Bengali adventure stories for children lets the child temporarily appropriate exciting adult spaces which normally lie outside her/his domain. It opens up these closed spaces, lets the child protagonist

experience the freedom of unshackled time, at times desensitizes her/him to bloodshed and violence like adults, but is reconstituted as a 'loop', which brings the action back to where it had started from.

The format of the detective story for children, therefore, is such that it provides no challenge to the perseverance and doggedness of the child protagonist in her/his propensity to deviate from accepted patterns of child behaviour. Within it, the child does not have to exercise any final choice between rebellion and conformity. The detective story follows the Bakhtinan adventure chronotope, in which

> the world and the individual are finished items, absolutely immobile. In it there is no potential for evolution, growth, or change. As a result of the action described in the novel, nothing in its world is remade, changed or created anew. What we get is a mere affirmation of the identity between what had been at the beginning and what is at the end. Adventure-time leaves no trace.
>
> (Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel', *The Dialogic Imagination* 110)

Having a definite closure that must bring the child protagonist back to status quo, it cannot chart how far the child protagonist is willing to diverge from the norms and conventions of her/his home and school. At the end of the stories, the child detectives must return to the establishment of their respective households and be good and obedient children to their parents, and also intelligent and hardworking students in their schools, which can stand them in good stead when the need to display their prowess as detectives arises again. They remain the same in story after story because 'The hammer of events shatters nothing and forges nothing – it merely tries the durability of an already finished product. And the product passes the test' ('Forms of Time and of the Chronotope', *The Dialogic Imagination* 100).

4

Nineteenth-century English classics do not deal with the middle-class child's adventures or playing sleuth in the way that twentieth-century popular crime thrillers for children do. The older fictional works like those of Dickens, however, sometimes describe the orphan or the destitute child's grotesque experiences in the underworld of criminals or brush with those who live at the fringes of middle-class life. The serialized novels of Dickens had a large middle-class readership that was possibly, strangely enough, as anxious about a happy ending as curious to read about sordid surroundings and

dubious encounters outside the peripheries of the genteel world, and therefore catered to their demands.

Rehabilitation within a middle-class world order after the child protagonist's experiences in the nightmarish world of crime, therefore, is quite common in these novels. In *Oliver Twist* (1838), for instance, despite the traumatic mental and physical hardships he undergoes, Oliver enjoys playing thieves and pick-purses with the Artful Dodger and others in Fagin's den. After his adventures in such squalid locales in London are over, Oliver is, however, reinstated within the orderly, stable and respectable home of Mr Brownlow. Although a protagonist like Oliver whose ancestry is dubious or questionable could occasionally get adopted by a wealthy person, most of Dickens's works end by celebrating the status quo and perpetuating the hierarchies within it. Oliver's incorporation within the secure Brownlow household, therefore, is far from a promise that most children who hail from similarly deprived conditions are likely to receive comparable patronage for themselves.

Oliver's case, however, is very different from that of the middle-class child protagonist of Bengali children's fiction, for whom an exposure to the world of crime is far removed from the insulated shell of her/his existence. It, therefore, comes as a welcome break and a whiff of fresh air beyond the ambit within which she/he generally operates. But getting excessively embroiled in the lives and environs of characters from a background that is either criminal or at least not genteel obviously causes unwarranted upheavals in her/his life that must be rectified by getting back to the familiar familial fold.

5

Child protagonists who try to find a way out of their constrictive circumstances inevitably try to implement escapist solutions that fail. One of the realities that the English child protagonist wants to get out of is the stifling urban, industrial set-up that is usually very cruel to socially and economically disadvantaged children. The encroachment of the city into the country left the nineteenth-century English child protagonist with hardly any choice about espousing nature, the countryside and all the relatively relaxed ways of life they stand for. Assimilation within the new urban, industrial order, on the whole, appeared to be more symptomatic of progress and prosperity. This assimilation would at times even ensure the child's placement within the stability of the middle class without infringing on her/his human rights or freedom. Despite themes of urban oppression, the canonical nineteenth-century English works, as in Bengali children's fiction, do not prescribe a retreat to nature as an easy remedy for the evils of the city. In fiction

that evokes a romantic sensitivity to nature and the countryside which were increasingly threatened by the time-discipline and routinized structure brought about by the Industrial revolution, these nostalgic sensibilities have often to be sacrificed, sometimes with insinuations of being invalid or irrelevant. In Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), for example, despite the anxieties of urban living for Mr Trent, whose shop has become an anachronism in a fast-moving industrial town, and his resultant recourse to gambling and becoming almost bankrupt in the process, a regression to preindustrial life in the country offers no way out of the problem at all, but in fact leads to Little Nell's death. In Rabindranath's 'Chhuti', written about half a century later (1891), on the other hand, Phatik dies an untimely death because of being dislocated from his country roots. To give a more philosophical interpretation to the conclusion of the story, he wills his death in a more proactive manner in order to free himself of being oppressed within the confines of a claustrophobic city home. Repeatedly in the literature spanning the entire century across geographical, linguistic and cultural divides, therefore, there is not much of an absolute option between the country and the city as the child protagonist could be exposed to the menacing aspects of both. In the numerous examples of the child protagonists' affinity with nature that I have enumerated earlier (see Chapters 2 and 5), none of them really offer bonding with nature as a viable alternative to the child's having to function within stifling urban spaces, particularly the city home and the formal schooling system.

In English literature, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), which is not a novel for children, explores a similarly unresolved dialectic in a more serious and complex manner. In *Wuthering Heights*, the quest for freedom and a whole-hearted participation in the untamed aspects of nature is challenged and countered by the realistic need for security and respectability. The novel does not unequivocally affirm the values of Wuthering Heights, a house situated on a rough terrain high on the moors and exposed to the inclemency of nature. There is an obvious authorial empathy for the ways inherent to Wuthering Heights, embodied in the passion and intensity of the adolescent Catherine, for whom the moors are her native habitat and whose temperament is shaped by her environment. But the affirmative message of this empathy cannot unambiguously override the pragmatic considerations and worldly values of the more urbane and comfortable, though joyless, Thrushcross Grange.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a recognition of the pressures of insulation within a lifestyle that insists on formal education and discipline, together with a simultaneous though irreconcilable and lingering yearning for the 'romantic' in the Bengali character, insinuated their way into literature for adults as well as children. This dissonance at the heart of modern,

middle-class, urban living was explored particularly by those writers who, because of their exposure to western education, were nurtured on the seminal works of English literature of the Romantic and Victorian age. Like that of the Victorian 'gentleman', respectability and stability were also some of the primary concerns of the Bengali *bhadralok* of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and that respectability could hardly be attained within a natural environment that is rural and therefore also regressive. In the Bengali/Indian literary imaginary, nature and rusticity seem to be seamlessly merged with poverty and lack of education/opportunities to the point of being almost synonymous. Writers who wrote for and about the *bhadralok* class, therefore, transmitted and propagated commensurate perspectives to readers of an impressionable age. Their texts endorsed stability within the context of urban, middle-class, educated households, with education as the signifier of respectability, rather than an adventurous but unsettled life full of uncertainties that could lead to disastrous consequences, far away from the structured life of the city. The damaging potential of the alternate life, therefore, is not just one of the primary anxieties of the Bengali *bhadralok* writers of the late nineteenth century but also continues to impinge on twentieth-century writing for children to a great extent. Alongside, child protagonists in literature are made to avoid vital and definitive confrontation with parental disapprobation and social censure. Reconciling personal with prudential considerations, despite being the greatest critics of society, they also prove to be its most unexpected conformists.

6

In many of the stories and novels that I have studied, within settings and events that are realistic, the child protagonist's breathers from a life that is structured around home and school are a kind of wish-fulfilling fantasy, as I have already elaborated in chapter 5. The closure of such stories, therefore, is also a kind of return-to-reality of the kind that Sarah Gilead discusses:

> In a particular work, the differing perspectives may be manifest in a dramatic clash between characters, in the protagonist's internal conflict, in patterns of imagery or symbol, or in narrative structure. A return-to-reality closure tends to concentrate these dramatic, psychological or figurative expressions of the work's opposing purposes and themes . . . The adventurers return home, the dreamer awakens, or the magical beings depart. Often the ending completes a frame around the fantasy, reestablishing the fictional reality of the opening
>
> (81)

Does the return, she goes on to ask, 'neutralize the social criticism implicit in the fantasy'? Or does it 'challenge the norms of reality'? (81). These are two crucial questions, not only apropos the genre of fantasy but concerning the subgenre that I have earlier elaborated as domestic fantasy (see Chapter 5). In most cases, the child protagonist, by and large, voluntarily reconciles and adjusts to the surroundings she/he has been used to and the 'reality' of her/his situation. The return, therefore, does not alter the real-life conditions of the child protagonist. In Sukumar Roy's *Ha Ja Ba Ra La*, a pure fantasy and a work written in imitation of the style and concerns of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, the first person protagonist wakes up at the end, acknowledging that all the weird things that happened to him were only part of a dream sequence, which explains why they have hardly any resemblance to life. Yet they parody the preoccupations, whimsicalities, hypocrisies and incongruities of human life. Like *Alice* but in keeping within its own time, place and context, Sukumar Roy subverts and critiques several human predicaments, categories and institutions when he examines the validity of time, language, science, mathematics or law. In Lila Majumdar's 'Ghoton Kothae', which is a domestic fantasy with a realistic backdrop and describing what could be read as a real-life encounter, Ghoton's wish of wanting to run away from home and school is about to be fulfilled but at the cost of his enlistment as a petty criminal. Around this time, he realizes that he is still sitting in the tram in which he was going to school, suggesting that his brush with adventure was only a flight of his fancy. In this instance, the closure suggests a dream self, giving in to subversive desires, and a waking self, which does not totally 'abjure the crutch of escapist fantasy' (Gilead 81) but virtually acknowledges the episode to have occurred during sleep.

Gilead classifies children's literature into three types according to their closure frame (82–7). The return may first complete a history of psychic growth and interpret the fantasy narrative or the intervening period as a salutary exposure of forbidden wishes and emotions. Second, it might reject or deny the fantasy of the intervening period, ignoring its subversive forms. Lastly, it might act in a tragic mode that reveals both the seductive force and the dangerous potentiality of fantasy. This kind of supposedly 'happy' ending with its convivial return to reality, however, amounts to what Peter Hollindale calls a 'contract of reaffirmation' (38) of questionable values – more specifically, values of the respectable, adult world – which have earlier seemed to be on trial. The return sometimes seems to offer the reassuring concept of reality as that which is familiar and ordinary and that which loyally awaits our return even though we turn from it.

7

In a certain sense, children's literature is inescapably didactic, 'a repository . . . of the values that parents and others hope to teach the next generation' (Musgrave, *The English School Story* 22). Twentieth-century children's fiction, as I have elaborated, sometimes makes allowances for the child protagonist to be at variance with adult views and break away, at least temporarily, from adult control. It also does not usually end with moral homilies that are unabashedly adult-friendly and insensitive to children. Instead, it tries to do away with the overt didacticism of an earlier period. Preaching to children by citing or referring to an unqualified and incontrovertible moral code has not only become archaic and unfashionable but been challenged in more recent children's literature for justifiable reasons. Life, in all its comprehensive aspects, both idealistic as well as practical, after all, is not as reductive and black-and-white as such simplistic narratives of an earlier era made it out to be. Despite fairly serious attempts to celebrate the child's point of view and do away with conscious moralizing by the adult author, a very obvious power relationship is discernible between the writer and the reader in children's literature. The politics of this relationship is demonstrated in the adult writer's manipulation of the child reader's views by letting the story develop and wrapping it up according to the way the author wants it to. However unobtrusive a writer may try to be, she/he is inescapably guided by her/his own more seasoned and experienced observations and opinions, which are, by the author's judgment, also usually the more evolved or politically correct ones. Whether consciously or unconsciously, openly or indirectly, she/he usually steers the course of the narrative with an ideological thrust and the advocacy of a power balance that the reader may not immediately be able to recognize.

The Concise Oxford English Dictionary defines 'ideology' as 'a system of ideas and ideals forming the basis of an economic or political theory' or 'the set of beliefs characteristic of a group or individuals'. Related to politics or society but forming the basis of a personal worldview, it justifies actions, and is held implicitly or adopted as a whole and maintained regardless of the course of events. 'Morality', on the other hand, is defined as 'principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behaviour'. Whereas morality could pertain to the *individual* human being's choice between the two universal absolutes of good or bad, right and wrong, an ideology usually defines the views of a *collectivity* of people apropos issues that generate conflicting views but cannot just be reduced to good vs bad, right vs wrong. Ideology can usually be traced to a particular spatial and temporal frame within which it was formulated and began to operate, but morality is generally assumed to be universal, invariable and

unrelated to time or place. The ideological intent of the author, particularly in the twentieth century, insinuates its way into the stories in a suggestive, less blatant manner than the overt black-and-white morality of stories in the nineteenth or even the early decades of the twentieth century. According to Charles Sarland, who discusses at length ideology and its relationship with the power balances that exist in children's literature, however, the moral/didactic role of children's fiction has now been recoded as its ideological role (45).

Critical thinking and teaching in recent years acknowledges that ideology is not necessarily a discrete component of texts but that all texts are inevitably infused by underlying ideologies. Umberto Eco suggests that all texts carry ideological assumptions, whether overt or covert, but readers have various options about how to respond to them. They can absorb those assumptions, miss them altogether and import different readings instead or openly question these assumptions (22).

Writers for children are transmitters not of themselves uniquely, but of the worlds they share, and a large part of any text is coloured greatly by what its author believes are the politically correct principles within that world. The author's individual opinions are a product of the context in which the text is produced, either subscribing to its pervasive worldview or conflicting with it. Her/his values and principles within the socio-cultural matrix in which the stories are set find their way into the text in an attempt to make the child reader reflect about herself/himself and the world in a particular way and accept this subtly or overtly conveyed set of beliefs through repeated fictional examples.

Till recently, children's literature was assumed to be 'innocent' of the concerns of power based on gender, class and race. Hollindale elaborates on how, in contemporary society, a concern with the child reader entails a prioritization of the three politically correct missions which are seen as most urgent: anti-racism, anti-sexism and anti-classism (21). Children's writing in America, where the predominant worldview 'othered' blacks and other minority ethnic groups till very recently, offers alternate perspectives that demonstrate a more sensitive attitude to these 'others'. Some critics tend to believe, however, that this overriding preoccupation with being inclusive about these 'others' could sometimes show an indifference to maintaining a benchmark of literary achievement.

The more recent trend, however, has quite perceptibly been to shy away from a trite and simplistic moral indoctrination but promote a cultivated ideological programme vis-à-vis the child and her/his society instead. Moreover, children's literature now has also sensitized itself to endorse an ideological position emblematic of greater parity than earlier between *adults and children*. The ideological agenda of the author could simply be the affirmation

of values like liberty, equality and social justice and a greater freedom and voice for the child in a world where she/he has now begun to be heard and taken more seriously than before. But although the adult author/narrator sometimes seems to empathize with the child protagonist's effort to gain independence from adult control and questions inequalities between the old and the young, she/he also ironically enjoys a stronger position in the hierarchy of age. In a replication of real-life situations, therefore, the adult author guides the child reader's judgment and exercises her/his unquestioned right to ideological training of the child reader.

Most writers in the twentieth century whose works I examine are not conventionally didactic and do not dole out pious platitudes like deference to authority and compliance to established values from an adult point of view. They, in fact, subscribe to a political and ideological mission, supposedly representing the converse of such didacticism, which is a justifiable valorization of the right to childhood rebellion. In a somewhat parodic emulation of what Hollindale terms as 'anti-sexism, anti-racism and anti-classism', such an agenda can be termed as 'anti-ageism' – the tirade against persecution, discrimination, marginalization and exploitation of children from a supposedly superior, adult position. Anti-didacticism and a politically correct stance in which the adult author/parent/teacher has little pedagogic privilege vis-a-vis the child protagonist/reader itself becomes an ideological template that the author inflicts on the child reader. The endings of children's texts, as I have said before, are important to examine to what extent the author's fundamental ideology impinges on the world of children.

8

Prior to Hollindale's stance on the three predominant political missions of anti-classism, anti-sexism and anti-racism that are present in contemporary children's literature, Bob Dixon, a literary critic of the seventies and eighties, observed a widespread conservative position on all these three fronts among children's writers in English up to fairly recent times: 'Most children's literature . . . has the overall effect, whether conscious or not, either on the part of the writer or on that of the reader, of indoctrinating children with a capitalist [as also a sexist and racist] ideology' (*Catching Them Young 1*: 70).

Before the contemporary period in children's literature, he maintains, English children's literature brainwashed children with feudal ideas, reconciling serfs, peasants and labourers to their specific ranks in society. Dixon argues that classic writers like Daniel Defoe endorse British racism and colonialism in an unqualified way. In Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), he explains, the archetypal master–servant relationship of the protagonist

with his loyal Man Friday is proposed as a paradigm for the hierarchies of colonial exploitation and its ideological justification. In recent times, too, a sizeable corpus of children's literature has advocated the reconciliation of blacks, servants, women and children to their respective, static positions in the social hierarchy, the essential idea being not to disturb the status quo of existing relationships and structures.

In popular English children's literature, a case that exemplifies this trend is the snobbery through which Enid Blyton gains the approval of the upper-middle-class child readers and their parents for her stories. Her child characters in the Famous Five series belong to well-to-do families, who not only have full-time cooks and housekeepers, but sometimes also resident tutors for the children during their holidays. Their mothers, and even cooks, pamper them with culinary delicacies at home and provide them with no dearth of pocket money when the children are on their own. When they are supposedly roughing it out away from home or in the middle of dangerous adventures, they still lead a totally sanitized existence and all their comforts are taken care of. In fact, it is commonly acknowledged that 'Until at least the 1960s, a middle class viewpoint was taken for granted in the English family story. To the authors, it represented normal life. Working class characters occasionally stray in, but they are a different species' (Avery 341).

In the course of their adventures, Enid Blyton's child protagonists sometimes meet working class characters, particularly children, like Jo in *Five Have a Wonderful Time* and *Five Have a Mystery to Solve*, Yam the ragamuffin boy in *Five Go Down to the Sea* and Jock in *Five Go Off to Camp*. They also encounter many adults like Wooden-Leg Sam and Mr Luffy in *Five Go Off to Camp*, Mr Penruthlan in *Five Go Down to the Sea* and Mr and Mrs Sanders in *Five Go Adventuring Again* who are lower down than them in the social scale. They just about tolerate characters belonging to the middle classes like Mr Penruthlan the farmer and Mr Luffy the schoolmaster because they look after their comforts and provide the little guardianship they need when they are on holiday. In the stories of the Five-Find Outers, working class characters, like the police constable Mr Goon, are made a laughing stock of, while Inspector Jenks, who comes from an educated background and is much higher up in the police hierarchy, is respected. The children temporarily put up with gypsies, circus performers, Welsh people and foreigners with German and Russian names, that too because they indirectly help in furthering some mission they have taken up during their adventure. Predictably, those of the outsiders who are not overwhelmingly kindly, maternal or extremely helpful to the children turn out to be criminals, and are dispensed with easily. The children are extremely class-conscious, and they behave condescendingly with children of less privileged parents, never quite conceding them to be part of their group. Yet, some of these

poor, ragged parents and children help them out of many tangles and also contribute in major ways to solving their mysteries. At most, the children who are 'othered' by the protagonists are rewarded with a little bit of patronage. For instance, when Jo's father is taken away to prison and she is left all alone, she is given a little bit of charity as a reward, dressed in George's old but clean clothes, and sent away to be adopted by Joanna, the cook's sister. But these underprivileged children are not allowed any semblance of equality in terms of social class or status, or any parity in terms of participation in discussion and decision-making during the course of the adventure or mystery.

Bob Dixon sums up the common factor underlying Enid Blyton's writings:

> What overwhelmingly pervades every aspect of Blyton's work . . . is the insistence on conformity . . . to the most narrow, establishment type beliefs, practices and values. She never seems to have been troubled by any doubt and would not have appreciated that creative doubt is the necessary precursor to change, but then, she was not interested in any kind of change.
>
> (*Catching Them Young 1*: 68)

English children's writers who are contemporaries of Enid Blyton, he contends, have by and large tried to preserve the social and economic inequalities as they are, and it is only in the 1970s and thereafter that some children's writers in England have become aware of the need to question or reverse this trend.

9

The closure frames of the Bengali stories under my purview, too, are guarded about portraying any change that might question or destabilize prevalent assumptions apropos class, caste and gender. Even in Tagore's primer for children, *Sahaj Paath* (*Lessons Made Easy*), which merely describes a few rhythms of family, domestic and work life, from its third part onwards, the class and caste hierarchies in labour practices are described as if no alternative could ever exist to such a way of life. According to Tanika Sarkar, 'The beauty of the sentences is so delicate that they can naturalize the conjunction between caste and /labour forms, mask and aestheticize the hierarchies of production relations' (*Rebels, Wives, Saints* 296–7). In the words of Himani Bandyopadhyay, 'In *Sahaj Paath*, in lesson after lesson, the boy has been made conversant with his "specified" social role; the sense and belief that the arrangement is permanent, as unchangeable and infallible as the laws of nature, has been embedded within the description of nature' (1047).

But one needs to go over what happens in the middle of some of the *stories* under consideration – the rhymes of *Sahaj Paath* have no 'middle' – in order to interpret how and why they lead up to a kind of return-to-reality closure. Many of the child protagonists are tempted to cross the permitted bounds of their home, class and society with the help of some external human agency who I have discussed in Chapter 5; even those of them who cannot or do not do so articulate their longing to cross the line when they are in collusion with these 'heroes'. The intermediaries, in most cases, are uncles and cousins who do not think like conventional parents and teachers, reliable servants who live with the family and yet belong to a very different background, and outsiders like roadside magicians and jugglers. All these people are looked upon suspiciously by the adult characters in the stories. The child befriends them because of her/ his natural penchant for transgressive activities that are not permissible within the parameters of her/his 'decent' upbringing. Yet, none of these human props succeed in enabling the child protagonists to radically overstep the social boundaries defined by their family and school.

Since I have already referred to the unfolding of the stories in the other chapters, I will try to illustrate with some of their closing details. To take the case of the external agency of *Chotomama* in the Gupi and Panu series of Lila Majumdar, he is a typical college dropout who is a hero for his nephew Gupi and his friend Panu because of the exciting schemes he launches, using the two child protagonists as accomplices (see Chapter 5). At the end of the concluding story of the series, 'Nepor Boi' *(Nepo's Book)* (*Lila Majumdar Rachanabali* 3), *Chotomama*'s inevitable absorption back into the system by being sent to complete his studies for the BSc examination is accompanied by Gupi and Panu's understandable disillusionment with him. Boro Master, the other role model of the children in the story, turns out to be a fraud; the two boys cannot remain enamoured of him because his enchanting tales about his visits to strange lands turn out to be concocted, as he has never stepped out of 24 Parganas. Fortunately for Panu, who had been disabled in an accident, he is able to walk again and resume his normal activities at the end of the story; it is, therefore, no longer necessary for him to derive vicarious pleasure from the fabricated tales about incredible feats accomplished by his two mentors.

In many of Sanjib Cattopadhyay's stories for children, a ubiquitous and larger-than-life *Boromama* co-opts his nephew in all his unconventional ventures, although the narrator-nephew is so reluctant to participate that he is mostly only an amazed observer (see Chapter 3). *Boromama*'s capers are all doomed to failure, but because of the serialized nature of the stories, he begins undaunted with a weird, new enterprise every time.

The *Kakababu* in the Santu stories of Sunil Gangopadhyay is a daredevil who is not in the least deterred by his physical disability – he is crippled

with an amputated leg and has to use a crutch. He gets Santu involved in all his expeditions and they solve criminal cases together (see Chapter 3). Living in the same house as Santu and being the father's younger brother in a patriarchal set-up, his spirit of adventure is tolerated, even appreciated by family members. This is particularly so because he used to hold a high position in government service and could have fitted his role as a meticulous and authoritative though uninteresting bureaucrat. His inclusion of Santu in his deviantly adventurous schemes, however, becomes a matter of apprehension for Santu's mother. Being the narrator-protagonist of a detective series, Santu, of course, comes out unscathed after dangerous interludes, and is ready to join hands with *Kakababu* to travel through rough and hazardous terrain and confront formidable criminals in the next story.

The above were examples of serialized stories, of which only the Gupi and Panu stories end with a definite closure that precludes any further complicity with Chotomama's ventures. Single stories usually end with a similar kind of homecoming. In Kabita Sinha's *Char Palataker Kahini*, there is an uncle with a difference. David Saheb is the avuncular figure who shows the children a lot of the world outside their home while they are on the run, but is a constant word of caution and ultimately urges the truant children to go back home.

In Satyajit Ray's 'Atithi' (*Aaro Baro*) which was later filmed as *Agantuk*, Mantu is attracted, even held spellbound by his mother's self-declared *Chotomama*, who is suspected by his parents to be a fraud and no *mama* at all. For Mantu, it is a meeting with a great-uncle (*Dadu*) who is a rebel that is more exciting than any that he could imagine with run-of-the-mill uncles. His childlike temperament can readily identify with the free spirit of the gypsy *Mama*; on the other hand, his father conforms to the values of the establishment and cannot wholeheartedly accept anybody who does not regularly earn money, take on the responsibility of his own family and rear children. Although the *Dadu* tells Mantu many interesting tales about his Bohemian past and his travels through the world, he does not try to inspire or lure Mantu to lead a similar life. Instead, when he makes a choice of going away to Bali, leaving behind *kupamandaks* (frogs in the well) like his niece and her husband, *Dadu* generously gifts to Mantu's mother the only signifier of worldly success he has – the substantial money that he won as a prize. By choosing to disappear like this and leaving his substantial monetary assets to Mantu's mother, he also ensures that Mantu's thrilling holiday in the unconventional mode is over.

Servants, as representatives of a different world from that of parents and teachers (as I have elaborated in Chapter 5), often tempt child protagonists with an alternate way of life which appeals to them more, but inevitably fail to provide them with viable and long-term substitutes that can help them

to escape the drudgery of their own life. In upper class families, according to sociologist A. K. Srivastava, living in spacious houses where the parents remain engaged in outdoor and extrafamilial activities, the vacuity of interaction between parents and children is usually filled by servants who act as a medium of communication (82–3). But because they are not family members, they can never lead the children on to anything more than a short expedition through areas other than home or school. The child protagonists in stories that include servants as important characters have to ultimately concede the higher authority of the parents fully and unquestioningly. The endings of some of Lila Majumdar's stories are testimony to this. Jhagru and Phagu are two examples of servants living with the family who attract the children towards them with the help of their knowledge of tribal superstitions and black magic. In 'Gun Kora' (*Lila Majumdar Rachanabali 3*: 391–8), Phagu, the servant, claims to be from the land of fairies and promises to teach the children how to become invisible. But when the time comes for him to exhibit his skill, he disappoints them and the gullible children are left with their faith shattered in the promised magical act that would put all their education to shame. Although Jhagru, in *Holde Pakhir Palak* (*Lila Majumdar Rachanabali 3*: 263–321), is not guilty of a similar fraud, his theory about dogs that swallow yellow feathers getting changed to human babies is not conclusively proved, and the children are left with only a dubious belief in the authenticity of his claim. The irreconcilable difference in status, or even caste, in a society that is incorrigibly class-based is the only sociological explanation for servants never to be taken seriously enough to become the mentors of their children in lieu of their parents and teachers.

But there are other characters apart from retainers and servants who cross the paths of the children, particularly magicians and performers with no access to middle-class living, who display improvised skills in order to make a living because they lack the education required for more respectable jobs (see Chapter 5). They, therefore, never unconditionally entice the children to opt for their way of life, although the child protagonists are only too eager to use magic as a means of release from the tedium of home and school. In Lila Majumdar's short stories 'Borolok Howar Niyam' and 'Jadukar', for instance, I have already discussed how the magicians present their credentials with a word of caution to the child protagonist not to be taken in by magic completely.

Sometimes, encounters with magicians lead the child protagonist dangerously close to the world of crime. The child protagonists retract from such a world, though not easily and naturally. At the end of Satyajit Ray's *Phatikchand*, Phatik alias Nikhil has to return home after his exciting adventures with the juggler Harunda, who had himself run away from home. Having suffered poverty and insecurity, Harunda would never advise Phatik to follow

his footsteps. Harunda, who hails from a middle-class background, actually prevents Phatik from being kidnapped by criminals who would probably train him to become a criminal as well. Phatik, at the end of the story, has to pick up his studies and his routine life, albeit reluctantly, from where he left them. In Lila Majumdar's 'Diner Sheshe' (*Lila Majumdar Rachanabali 3*: 376–83) the brother and sister child protagonists suffer a rude shock when the *Sheengwala* (the man with horns) who had won them over with his magic and to whom they had given shelter in their shed is discovered to be no more than a petty thief who has run away with many people's belongings. He, too, does not set a positive example that has anything more attractive to offer to the children.

Any discussion on the dissident behaviour of child protagonists who have the potential to get lured by criminals with a seemingly attractive lifestyle would be incomplete without taking into account the protagonist of Lila Majumdar's 'Ghoton Kothae' (*Chelebelar Galpa, Lila Majumdar Rachanabali 1*: 217–24). Ghoton's encounter with the two magician-like strangers he meets on a tram is either real or part of a dream in which he expresses his latent and sub-conscious desire to run away from home and school. He is unwittingly led into hazardous spaces by these new acquaintances who are no better than petty streetside criminals. Following them blindly into a dark alley, Ghoton learns that the visits to exotic locales that they have promised him will have to wait; for the present, he must be content to kill people in dark street corners. Frightened by this threatened initiation into the world of crime, Ghoton, the story seems to suggest, would rather go back to his school and studies. The adventure makes him aware of the security and comforts of his own middle-class family life, despite its insistence on studies and discipline.

The alternatives that strangers with some claim to the knowledge of magic offer are not real outlets at all, but indicate in one way or the other that compliance with the system would be more worthwhile in the long run. In most cases, therefore, encounters with alluring relatives, servants and strangers are eventually a let-down.

Most child protagonists who belong to the middle or upper middle class romanticize being away from home and parents probably because they subconsciously know that it is not for ever that they have to rough it out. Shanu, the son of well-to-do parents holidaying in Puri in Asha Purna Devi's *Ek Samuddur Anek Dheu*, gets lost and does not have a constant companion or mentor in the new environs of roadside teashops in which he suddenly finds himself. He initially befriends a tribal boy called Dinglai for some time, and later an older boy called Batuda who is an unwanted child at his own home; neither of them, in the long run, however, succeeds in beguiling him into espousing forever a fascinatingly forbidden world to which he had always been denied

access. Instead, they expose the sordid aspects of a life of privation and poverty. Amid other novelties, Shanu enjoys working in roadside teashops, but he eventually comes back home, even though with some reservations. He can afford to articulate a reluctance to return home, however, because he is secure in his comfortable and unquestionable position as the only child of an affluent family, not abandoned by his parents like the unwanted Batuda.

In Premankur Atarthi's serialized 'Dushtu Cheler Diary' ('The Diary of the Naughty Boy') (*Mouchak* April–May 1920: 19–29), Debidas and Pramatha make many attempts to run away from home and school, actually escape to the Sundarbans to do *tapasya* and become *sanyasi*s, but Debidas betrays them at the last moment and they have to go back to school, where the other boys compel them to wear dunce caps. In numerous other instances, strong and well-meaning adults thwart any such attempts of the child protagonist to escape.

There are rare instances in children's literature of children who are the inverse of the middle-class child who enjoys a merely temporary retreat away from home. Such an exceptional case is Shailen Ghosh's 'Khude Jajabar Istasi' ('Little Magician Istasi') (*Sharadiya Anandamela* 1982: 259–87). Istasi does not belong to the middle class and wants to continue to live like a gypsy. Unlike the other children mentioned so far, he is not rooted in the middle class or anchored to a stable home. Being poor and orphaned, he does not have the advantage of protection or pampering, but on the other hand, he also has all the freedom in the world with no parental restriction whatsoever. Although he has to live a life of extreme penury and struggle, he is an unusual example of a child protagonist who does not long for the comfort of a home. He does not have the middle-class child's ingrained understanding of and instinctive attachment to parents and the security of home, but he is not tempted by it either because it would entail a curtailment of his freedom. Being closer to the Huckleberry Finn prototype who would rather perpetually be on the run, he represents one category of children who do not really fall within the scope of my discussion.

10

Despite questioning their domestic regimes and taking up issue with the institution of their school, why do the child protagonists in most of the stories and novels ultimately compromise with the system? Childhood rebellion among growing children could be interpreted psychologically as a part of the process of growing up or a rite of passage – an initial maladjustment followed by a natural and eventual absorption within the system. To perceive any kind of rebellion as unnecessary, reckless, ineffectual and therefore undesirable, however, is to take not only a politically conservative but a

despondent stand. It also goes against the kind of ideological stance that Peter Hollindale observes vis-à-vis the content of contemporary children's literature. Two feasible courses for the child protagonist to follow – that of a short-lived rebellion, usually of the protagonist, and that of passive conformity, mostly that of the other characters in the narrative who pale by contrast – cover the entire range in children's literature barring a few exceptions. Basically, the protagonist and the other more conventional characters conform to the Rakhal and Gopal prototypes, respectively, but are rendered more complex through more involved interactions and exchanges in the stories. The radical course, however, is not encouraged or furthered in most children's texts in Bengali.

Bertrand Russell, while acknowledging that in order to prosper, a community needs a certain number of individuals who do not conform to the general type, also warns against the potential danger of letting them have it all their way: 'if the community exercises no control, the same kind of individual initiative which may produce a valuable innovator may also produce a criminal' (37).

A major reason for manipulating the narrative in a way that the child protagonist is reined in and compelled to make peace with the establishment is perhaps the adult writers' perspective of caution and common sense regarding the child reader's impressionable age. The writer, as a representative of the larger society to which the child reader belongs, has a responsibility towards the child reader not to let her/his imagination run wild and become anarchic, inspired by the feats of nonconformist children in the literature that she/he reads. In an old school reading of Lila Majumdar's 'Ghoton Kothae', Nabendu Sen upholds the responsibility of the children's writer in preventing her/his child protagonist from becoming a complete deviant from the mainstream. According to Sen, by introducing street criminals into Ghoton's life, the writer is merely making him attentive to and warning him about the darker and seamier situations he could get into and the criminal way of life he could be inducted into at the outskirts of middle-class life:

> One can see the pure responsibility of the children's writer being fulfilled here. The children's writer does not have the ability to make the child a radical. Her/his *responsibility* is to further her/ him in the maintaining of *a pure life* in a society that is full of happiness, beauty and flavour. It is better for her/him to make the child aware of the darker sides of life. In literature for children, the effort will be to free the child of these darker sides of life and *establish her/him in life*. Lila Majumdar has perceived this truth in her profound experience of life. Ghoton is the result of that perception. (emphasis added)
>
> (171)

In the phrases *a pure life* and *establish her/him in life*, Sen overlooks the adult writer's justifiably sympathetic treatment of the child protagonist's dissidence. Adult writers of child-friendly stories perceive the child's innately romantic or mutinous temperament favourably as resisting the ways of the establishment at every step in order to discover the world for herself/himself. The tussle is between the deviant child protagonist's legitimate questioning of the set of do's and don'ts that are imposed on her/him, and the forces both within and without that pressurize her/him to conciliation within the accepted restrictions of a secure life devoid of unknown perils. Sen elides altogether the problematic entrenched within what he asserts as the moral concern of the children's writer. He reductively irons out the ambivalence of the author's position, encapsulating it as the *responsibility* of the adult writer for children.

However, it is true that by and large children's fiction is dominated by a pervasive middle-class *and adult* worldview that does not allow the child protagonist to stray too far from the beaten track. In the examples I have discussed through the course of this study, the stories associate any escape from middle-class society and family life with the school at its centre, whether by accident or intention, as illusory, fraudulent or hazardous. The plots of these stories take into account the frustrations and the futility of a life without education, discipline and stability. Although the protagonists of these stories experiment with all possible outlets from the rigours of their home and school, their authors ultimately manoeuver the narratives in a way that these temporary digressions are absorbed within their schema.

The larger formula around which the stories are fashioned fulfils narrative expectations within a deal that is unwittingly struck between the writer and reader. Whether the child protagonist gets into a scrape inadvertently or opts out voluntarily, whether she/he merely talks back to adults to assert her/his own perspective or proactively decides to subvert or escape from systems imposed by adults, whether she/he learns to value these adult structures designed for children during the course of sundry interactions/adventures or is compelled to get tamed because the alternative is risky, she/he is usually back to square one towards the end. These minor variations of formulae seem to corroborate Frederic Jameson's view that genres, 'like all other institutions of social life [are] based on tacit agreements or contracts' ('Magical Narrative: Romance as Genre' 135). The formula ultimately acknowledges education to be the most essential component of good breeding and worldly success, two supports on which the wholeness and solidity of middle-class family life depends. All the youngsters in the stories finally get reintegrated within the middle-class ethos, a life that reinforces, although with some reservations, the truth of the proverbial Vidyasagarian link between studying

seriously and being able to travel in carriages/horses, both unmistakable signifiers of respectability in mid-nineteenth-century Bengal.

This kind of rebellion, by its very nature, is self-limiting; the child protagonist does not radically break away from what she/he rebels against. It amounts to a temporary and short-lived indulgence during a difficult period of adjustment to her/his environment in her/his adolescent years.

11

The functionalist tradition emphasized the importance of the nuclear family in maintaining the stability and continuity of society and upheld traditional family values. Instead of seeing cooperation and consensus within such a system, Marxist and feminist theories of the family see it as a site for class conflict, gender conflict and exploitation. The conjugal family, according to the exponents of these theories, preserves the oppressive, capitalist, patriarchal system both within and without (Robertson Elliot 119). The role of the family in perpetuating social inequalities outside its own domain has been a rising concern with Marxist thinkers and writers ever since Engels. According to Andre Beteille, the institution of the Indian family endorses and facilitates lack of change more than any other institution. ('The Family and the Reproduction of Inequality', Patricia Uberoi, ed. *Family, Kinship and Marriage in India* 435–51)

Irrespective of the functionalist theories and those that countered them, however, a reading of Bengali children's literature, on the whole, would affirm the pattern of integration, breaking away and reintegration within the family for the child protagonist, though for varying reasons. The family as an institution continues to be so dominant and pervasive in not only the Bengali but the Indian cultural domain and imaginary that the children's writer is compelled not to question but maintain the hierarchies within and without it as they are. Stories for children, therefore, ultimately concede not only the power relations within the family and the subservient position of the child but also the importance of the family vis-à-vis the world outside it.

While power and status, demarcating the positions of its members, are preserved within the family, the middle-class characters of Bengali fiction comply with the same hierarchical code outside, ensuring the marginalization or exclusion of those belonging to a different social class. In Bengali writing for and about children in the twentieth century, this is manifested in the adult anxiety about not letting middle-class children become too familiar with people, places and activities beyond the threshold defined by their class, caste or status (see Chapter 5). The nuclear family actually ensures the transmission of social status from one generation to the next. And for

the child protagonist, it is this very monotony of having to live within the restrictions of the same class and social slot with no variety provided by the world outside that class that begins to sow many noticeable seeds of rebellion. Although she/he may not understand the socioeconomic and political implications of these restraints, her/his instinct often leads her/him to take to the streets, run away or enjoy some out-of-the-way adventure that unexpectedly come her/his way, at least as long as the illusion of having escaped lasts, as in the case of Asha Purna Devi's Shanu in *Ek Samuddur Anek Dheu*, Satyajit Ray's Nikhil in *Phatikchand*, Sibram Chakrabarty's Kanchan in *Bari Theke Paliye* and Lila Majumdar's Ghoton in 'Ghoton Kothae'. But even the others who cannot actually manage to find an outlet do not want to be bound by the strictures imposed by their middle-class or upper-middle-class upbringing, and often instinctively fantasize getting away from the clutches of the family (see Chapter 5).

12

The most real obstacle in the way of a social change that might make things more equal and thereby make possible more interaction between classes, making life more colourful and interesting for the child protagonist, as I have tried to elucidate above, is the institution of the family. But by implication, it is also the institution of the school that also accommodates the same ideas of inequality. The parental and educational system that resists a social change towards equality also opposes the kind of childhood freedom that might pave the way towards that uncomfortable, almost unacceptable equality.

It is, therefore, true to say that the adult writer has not found any viable substitute for the existing system of bringing up and teaching children. In a country like India, no positive and unquestionable replacement for the family can be offered. Children in realistic fiction for adolescents who consciously opt out of home and school are highly unlikely to come across job opportunities that will provide them a decent livelihood, and the result is likely to be that the child will not only be exposed to poverty and hardship, but also some of the more sordid aspects of the underworld like cruelty, exploitation, alcoholism, drug addiction, prostitution and crime. Any escape from middle-class family life with the school at its centre, therefore, necessitates reabsorption within the family. Even Western sociologists like Laing who have denounced the family as an institution, in fact, have not found any feasible alternatives for it. Robertson Elliot says that they have offered no assurance that 'alternative ways of . . . parenting could lead to a more satisfactory state of affairs' (124).

With all the attractions of alternative modes of life offered by their heroes and mentors, the child protagonist's rebellion is never carried out to its logical conclusion. One of the serious shortcomings of the tempters who inspire the children to an alternative way of life is that they usually live at the periphery of the society inhabited by the child protagonists. The alternatives that they offer, therefore, are not really serious or viable, particularly in a context where the authors, in accordance with the kind of texts that their readers and their parents demand, cannot allow their protagonists to finally reject the comforts of their social class in favour of treading on more hazardous territory. The tempters also cannot lead the child characters to evolve a concrete and viable equivalent for the school and family system they are used to because the modes of escape they offer contain within them something unreal, dangerous and at times verging close to the criminal, which makes inevitable the return of the child protagonists after all the adventures are over.

The root of this kind of compromise is subsumed within the child's essential and unvarying bond with her/his family. The beginnings of rebellion in the child and her/his first assertion of independence is sometimes psychologically interpreted not as a rebellion against her/ his parents but as experimental moves denying her/his own attachment to them. The process can be summed up in the words of the sociologists Gerald Handel and Robert Hess, who wrote in the sixties that

> the family's life together is an endless process of movement in and around consensual understanding, from attachment to conflict, to withdrawal and over again. Separateness and connectedness are the underlying conditions of a family's life, and its common task is to give form to both.
>
> ('The Family as a Psychosocial Organisation', *Psychosocial Interior of the Family,* Ed. Gerald Handel 10)

Bengali child protagonists who cannot or *do not* finally break out of the constraints of parents would also fit Levy and Munroe's much older formulation of the child rebel's self-perceived need to be taken care of by her/his family along with a simultaneous inclination to cross the barriers created by it:

> He gets into plenty of scrapes, and he does have a good deal to put up with from parents . . . But his main problem is that half of him likes to be protected and loved, while the other half is trying to be independent. (12)

13

One could also attempt to explain the endings of the children's stories under consideration in terms of a variation of the Bakhtinian 'novel of human emergence' that shows 'man in the process of becoming' (Bakhtin, 'The Bildungsroman and its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)', *Speech Genres and Other Essays* 23) Bakhtin reads the bildungroman or 'novel of emergence' as 'tracing a typically repeating path of man's emergence from youthful idealism and fantasies to mature sobriety and practicality' (23). Within a smaller temporal frame and taking 'youthful' fantasy to mean the fantasies of schoolgoing protagonists, does fiction for children transpose and incorporate aspects of the bildungsroman of Western derivation? In Franco Moretti's reading of the bildungsroman in European culture, he underlines literary depictions of the growth of the Napoleonic individual protagonist pitted against a repressive society.[2] For the last two centuries, says Moretti:

> Western societies have recognized the individual's right to choose one's own ethics and idea of 'happiness,' to imagine freely and construct one's personal destiny - rights declared on proclamations and set down in constitutions but that are not, as a result, universally realizable, since they obviously give rise to contrasting aspirations.
>
> (16)

Moretti's explanation of such dual phenomena is in terms of the process of the individual's 'internalization' of social norms and the fusion of 'external compulsion and internal impulses into a new unity until the former is no longer distinguishable from the latter' (16). Its implications are usually positive and are not only labelled as 'legitimation' and 'consent' but attributed to a 'force of conviction' and 'optimistic clarity', leading to a denouement in which one's 'formation as an individual . . . coincides *without rift* with one's social integration as a simple part of a whole' (emphasis added) (16). The two opposing tensions are not just co-existent but complementary and a give-and-take takes place between them in which something is gained and something is lost.

The trajectory of a bildungsroman could encompass an entire spectrum of actions and mental processes from striving towards a target to a 'problematic formation' to a 'failed inception' (15). In the standard endings of children's stories, the protagonist's experiences lead to a mellowed and a chastened understanding of the world around her/him, according to which she/he realizes that it is not prudent or safe to try and fashion her/his own life in a manner that is significantly different from the way the adults who

are responsible for her/him have conceived of it. Most of the Bengali texts under my consideration are not long and therefore do not really illustrate some of the more positive interpretations of the 'development' of the protagonist that can be gleaned from the bildungsroman. A bildungsroman, which has also been defined as a 'novel of education', 'novel of initiation', 'novel of formation' or a 'coming-of-age novel', presents the psychological, moral and social shaping of the personality of a character, usually the protagonist. The texts for children that I have studied, however, are usually not extensive or dense enough to qualify as bildungsroman. As I have illustrated earlier, some child protagonists merely express opinions and state the reasons for their lack of adjustment with things around them and do not undertake any serious action or prolonged journey. Others seem to have lost their case even before they embark on any expedition. Those who set off or take flight are hardly in quest of what could be termed as a goal. In fact, most of the texts I have dealt with are short stories, not novels; one of the preconditions for being a bildungsroman is for the text to be a longish fictional piece. Of course, there are exceptions like *Bhimer Kapal*, *Bari Theke Paliye* and *Bhombol Sardar* in which the child protagonists proceed on an escape route from their homes and are in quest of freedom from the shackles of home and school. They follow a bidungsroman-like trajectory that engages them in a prolonged encounter with life itself.

Most child protagonists who go away or opt out, as I have elaborated, get somewhat disillusioned by the alternate course, get back to where they started from and search for meaningful existence within their homes, schools and society all over again. The predicament of having to 'apprentice' themselves to life once again is something that the protagonists of traditional bildungsroman sometimes have to reconcile themselves to.[3] Some children's stories, especially children's novels, therefore, include components that seem to correspond to a kind of bildungsroman paradigm.

14

There are exceptions to the pattern of rebellion and conformity in the nineteenth century, much before the period under study, that qualify them for representing a kind of constructive 'growth' that the bildungsroman sometimes encompasses. As I have observed already, they offer more serious and complex readings of the rebel child. In American literature of the nineteenth century, *Huckleberry Finn* (1886), which is by common scholarly consensus classified as a traditional bildungsroman, is a serious statement of the child protagonist going away to carve his own destiny, although with unknown consequences, at the end of the novel. Huckleberry's is a radical indictment of those institutions with which he has never felt at

home – namely, a stuffy middle-class home and school. Huck actually bonds and decisively goes away with Nigger Jim, an older character, on his raft on the river Missisippi. One characteristic that Nigger Jim shares with the mentors and role models of Bengali child protagonists like servants and streetside performers is that he belongs not only to an underprivileged class, but an 'othered' race. The Bengali child protagonists I deal with, however, must be differentiated from Huck. They belong to mainstream society and a class that is complacent about its own security; they, therefore, are more advantageously placed than Huck. Huck is able to go away with Nigger Jim as he has nothing much to lose. Despite the attempts of Widow Douglas to 'sivilise' (*sic*) him, he never really belongs to the respectable middle class, and there is consequently no pressure on him to be drawn back into its fold. It is thus easier for him to run away, although he does not know what lies before him.

In nineteenth-century English fiction, which provides some of the prerequisites and co-ordinates for Bengali children's fiction, middle-class society is depicted as greatly under the pressures of industrialization and urbanization, and operates within its own restrictive morality. Within it, there is hardly any scope for the child protagonists to get away from the shackles of regimented homes and oppressive schools, and even less for child characters belonging to the working class, to escape from factories, workshops, orphanages, charity houses and slums. Middle-class children are sometimes portrayed as somewhat acceptably naughty or disobedient. Some show streaks of a romantic disposition that longs for nature and the freedom of the countryside; yet others raise a voice of protest against tyrannical parents, parent surrogates and schoolmasters. But they are torn by conflict even as they do so and no Victorian child protagonist ever eventually makes a complete break with the system.

Bengali romanticism of the last part of the nineteenth century appears to espouse the cause of the freedom-loving child who feels stifled within the confines of a new, urban way of life. She/he is in quest of an inner fulfilment, like Tagore's Phatik in 'Chhuti', Amal in 'Dakghar' and Tarapada in 'Atithi'. Phatik, forced to live in his *mamabari* in Kolkata, feels claustrophobic and yearns for the open countryside in his native village to the point when his only *chhuti* (release) from the suffocation he feels in the city can be the embracing of death. Amal expresses his distrust of the system by refusing to study and become a *Pandit*, and instead desires to traverse unknown lakes and mountains, in a Shelleyian pining 'for what is not'. The ailing Amal's romantic yearning, too, is predetermined at the beginning of the narrative to be resolved only by his death. The adolescent Tarapada in 'Atithi' is singularly successful in resisting the 'system' and breaking away from it altogether, spurning the comforts of his upper caste, well-to-do background.

Tarapada not only rejects the security of his home but also his foster home, which has magically opened up the world of English education before him. Since it wants to bind him in the institution of marriage, he rejects it and consequently and ultimately has to find his way out through rivers and jungles. The relationship of Indranath with nature in Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay's *Srikanta*, on the other hand, is not one of an eternal romantic but that of a reckless daredevil who always chooses a path through the jungle when there is a much easier path (see Chapter 5).

An exceptional twentieth-century child protagonist, Khagendranath Mitra's *Bhombol Sardar*, is not the pampered only child of affluent parents. His protest, like that of Huck Finn, therefore, is qualitatively different from most of the ones discussed already. Even so, the resolution of the originally serialized novel does not unambiguously celebrate his breaking away. Throughout, it is suggested that Bhombol deludes himself thinking that he has nothing to lose but his chains, both at home and at school, when he sets out, time and again, to work in the Tatanagar factory. The fact that he is an unwanted imposition, another mouth to feed in his aunt's household, is provocation enough for him to finally break free and enables him to reach his destination. But seeing the formidable factory gate at Tatanagar that requires entry and exit passes for workers to come and go, Bhombol has to come to terms with the possibility of a worse bondage that the future holds for him in this industrial town. The child protagonist's escape, although made feasible for once, therefore, does not promise unqualified freedom, but in fact, ironically poses a valid question about whether he was better off within the tyranny that his *mamabari* epitomizes. Bhombol, as Nabendu Sen says, finds the possibility of a greater, more heartless incarceration waiting for him at the end of the road:

> The roadside traveller who has severed all his ties will come to the end of the road one day and find the guard of the imposing lion-headed gate. He does not have a pass to enter. It is not as if there is no message in this. He has not prepared himself. He is not trained to enter these massive portals and work in these factories. On the other hand, the eternal truth about man's life is displayed here. On one side, in the primal desire to break one's bonds, he has spurned the love, advice and good wishes of friends and relatives, and crossed many streets and roads, colonies and villages, slums and cities. Keeping alive his dream of moving on, he arrives here in order to quench his desire to reach his destination. Yet at the end of that road, his path has been intercepted by the strongest restraint. This is the truth.
>
> (204)

Many other child protagonists, like him, cannot essentially find the freedom they are looking for, but unlike him, make their compromise with the system in some way or other. Any attempt to escape is thwarted or abandoned beyond a certain point as it is not only fantastic, perilous and irresponsible, but also not possible to sustain within the parameters of a decent, bhadralok life.

Notes

1 Bakhtin's essay 'Epic and Novel-Towards a Methodology for the Study of the Novel' was originally written in 1941 but was not published for long afterwards, till Russian scholars revived Bakhtin's work in the sixties. Bakhtin's essay has now come to be considered a signpost in the theory of the novel, demarcating it from the epic. Bakhtin argues that the novel is apposite in postindustrial civilization because it is predicated on the very diversity of this world in which we live that the epic attempts to elide.
2 See the discussion of the more affirmative features of the bildungsroman in Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987), especially the first chapter, 'The Comfort of Civilization.'
3 The birth of the bildungsroman is normally dated to the publication of Goethe's *The Apprenticeship of Wilhelm Meister* in 1795–6.

Glossary

Preface

pathshala – rural Indian school, not yet revamped by colonial reforms in education.

bhadralok – gentlefolk – a word coined during the colonial period in Bengal to describe the new class of respectable middle-class educated Bengalis who earned that appellation by virtue of their aping of English speech, manners and lifestyle.

Chapter 2

akhara – a place of training and practice with facilities for boarding, lodging and education for a particular sect or order.

chatushpaathi – school with a monastic structure that taught Sanskrit grammar, poetry, laws and philosophy. It was believed to teach all the four Vedas.

tole – Sanskrit school.

makhtab – Muslim primary school.

madrasa – a religious school/educational institution teaching Islamic theology and Muslim law.

Ayurveda – a system of Hindu traditional medicine native to the Indian subcontinent and a form of alternative medicine.

munshi – writer, teacher of Arabic languages.

Baidya – Hindu caste of medical practitioners, second only to the Brahmans.

Brahman – the priest class, highest in the hierarchy of the Hindu caste system.

chotolok – lowly or vulgar person, outside the respectable, educated middle class.

memsahib – appellation for the wife of a sahib or foreigner, usually used as a term of address for the white English mistress of a native retainer. The word has remained as a respectful term of address for any woman in a position of authority in a mistress–underling relationship.

Guru – teacher or master in the Hindu Guru–Shishya (master–student) tradition. The word carries within it the connotation of 'venerable'. Traditionally, a Guru would impart oral learning and experiential wisdom.

Shishya – pupil or student.

narugopal – a word borrowed from the typical posture of the Hindu god Krishna (whose child version is known as Gopal) feeding on sweetmeats (naru), which he is believed to have a weakness for. It also denotes a punishment for students which entailed, for the boy in disgrace, having to kneel down on one knee with his arms outstretched, with a large brick placed on each arm. The brick, ironically, would represent the so-called naru or sweetmeat. If he let one of them fall, the master would strike him hard with his bamboo cane.

bichhuti – stinging nettle. A method of punishment that was associated with it was stinging the naked body of a boy who had done some wrong with a very sharp, indigenous variant of nettle. This was a regular part of the old country-school tradition.

shanto chele – although the word 'shanto' means quiet *or peaceful* and 'chele' means boy, the two words taken together also has connotations of a well-behaved and compliant boy.

Purohit – Hindu priest, necessarily of the Brahman caste.

zamindar – an aristocrat, typically hereditary, who held enormous tracts of land and held control over his peasants, from whom he collected tax. Such a landlord usually enjoyed the loyalty and obeisance of all subjects in the fiefdom under him and was usually addressed by royal titles like 'Raja' and 'Maharaj'.

ginni – housewife and/or mistress of the house.

Chapter 3

jatra – an open air dramatic performance, with an improvised stage at the centre and the audience sitting on all four sides. The exaggeratedly theatrical plays, based on mythological or historical themes, have a lot of musical accompaniment and very elaborate and flashy costumes.

mamabari – maternal uncle's house, which can also be used for the maternal grandfather's residence, irrespective of whether a mama lives there.

puja – The word 'puja' means worship. But 'puja' is also used generally for Durga Puja, the most celebrated festival of Bengal. Bengali Hindus

believe that the Goddess Durga, who lives in the Kailash mountains with her husband Shiva, comes home once a year, during the month of September or October, to visit her parents. She is worshipped for a period of four days, after which she is ceremonially sent off to her shoshurbari (in-laws' house) via the river Ganga. The idols of Durga are immersed in the river, and people mourn her return to her shoshurbari as well as an end to the annual festivities.

boudi – elder brother's wife. She is a respected person, but sometimes also shares a playful, bantering relationship with her younger brothers- and sisters-in-law because of their proximity to her in age.

mejokaka – a kaka who is neither the eldest nor the youngest kaka but somewhere in between.

chotomama – youngest mama.

boromama – eldest mama.

mejomama – mama who is neither the eldest nor the youngest mama but somewhere in between.

mejomashi – mashi who is neither the eldest nor the youngest mashi but somewhere in between.

pishima – a more respectful term for a pishi.

mejojethi – a jethi who is neither the eldest nor the youngest jethi but somewhere in between.

dajjal – a shrewish woman.

Chapter 4

didimoni – a term by which young female teachers are addressed by their students. 'Didi' is a term of address for an elder sister and 'moni' is an endearing suffix to it.

Gurudev – an appellation for a teacher (Guru) who is like a god (dev), particularly used by the students of Shantiniketan for Rabindranath Tagore. Subsequently, he came to be known as Gurudev.

Sanskrit – the ancient and classical Indian language, revered as much as Latin or Greek is revered by speakers of English.

panditmashai – a reverential term of address for a Pandit by his students.

Dadu – mother's father. Sometimes, even the father's father, who is formally known as thakurdada, is informally addressed as dadu for the sake of brevity.

saadhu bhasha – in this context, pure and undefiled classical Bengali, very close to Sanskrit, untouched by colloquialisms and borrowed words from Urdu, English and other languages. Bhasha means language and saadhu means 'canonized', so the phrase can be used for any Indian

language with Sanskritic roots that does not violate the formality of the original Sanskrit.

dhoti – loin cloth, a loose piece of cloth, tied by hand. It was traditionally worn around the loins by Bengali men and boys, and is plain white or with a border. Even after the adoption of English sartorial items in toto by the more urbane, educated and affluent segment of Indian males, it is still considered as the lower part of the conventional male outfit, usually worn during Hindu weddings, rites of birth and death and other religious ceremonies and festivities.

surya pranam – one of the basic asanas (postures-cum-exercises) of yoga. It involves a ritual that invokes the rising sun and traditionally begins the yoga session for the morning.

chhuti – holiday, vacation or end of the school day. It is also used metaphorically as 'respite' or 'reprieve'.

panjika – yearly Hindu almanac of religious festivals (whose dates change from year to year in the Hindu calendar). It also marks auspicious and ill-omened dates when weddings, rice ceremonies, sacred thread ceremonies and other celebrations should or should not take place.

chowkidar – watchman, sentinel or guard.

mahua – a tropical tree grown in the Indian sub-continent. Its flowers are fermented to make an indigenous liquor known by the same name that is drunk on festive occasions and is believed to be quite inebriating.

tiki – tuft of hair, usually at the back of a bald pate, kept by Brahmans, particularly Pandits, to demarcate themselves from the others.

Chapter 5

chaat – savouries and fritters of wheat flour and lentils, boiled potatoes and chickpeas in a spicy and tangy concoction of curds and tamarind chutney. It is a favourite snack in North India.

jadhareba vivajetodhareba pravajet – Sanskrit aphorism meaning 'as soon as your gypsy instincts are aroused, disregard conventional bonds and set out.'

moawalla – seller of sweet confection made with puffed rice/flattened rice and jaggery.

Kabuliwala – a hawker from Afghanistan selling dry fruit, nuts and raisins, a common figure in Kolkata streets at the turn of the century.

Santhal – a tribal belonging to the Santhal Parganas in Bihar.

akhara – a kind of school or training hall for martial artists.

gharkuno – home-loving and reclusive, but usually used in the pejorative sense of a predilection that is stay-at-home and unadventurous.

Chapter 6

satyagrahi – literally, someone who insists on truth. Actually, the Satyagraha movement was one led by Mahatma Gandhi during the struggle for India's independence. In theory as well as practice, it was a part of the resistance during the civil disobedience and nonviolent non-cooperation movement of the independence struggle. A Satyagrahi (one who carries out satyagraha), therefore, is someone who fights for social justice and rights.

vanara sena – monkey brigade. According to Hindu belief, an army of vanaras who helped Lord Rama fight against the army of Ravan of Lanka in *Ramayana*. But during the independence movement in India, the vanara sena was a term coined for an army of children who could go about picketing or causing trouble for the British ruling class. As they were small in size, they could slip in and out easily unsuspected and undetected. They were also less liable to get caught despite surveillance by the colonial police.

Swadeshi – a slogan of self-sufficiency aimed at the revival of the Indian economy during British rule. It was used particularly for the pressure groups (who were known as Swadeshi groups) within the nationalist movement who boycotted British goods. They advocated an absolute refusal to buy or use any consumer goods that was not indigenously produced in India.

lathi – stick or cane used for beating the opponent or for punitive purposes. Lathi-play is the technique of using a lathi in one-to-one combats to fight the enemy (in this context, the British forces). Lathi play was taught to freedom fighters as part of their training in martial arts.

dacoity – an act of violent robbery committed by an armed gang, from the word *dakaiti* in Hindi or *dakati* in Bangla.

danpite – self-willed, headstrong and a kind of dare-devil.

shloka – a Sanskrit couplet from Hindu scripture – technically a distich of Sanskrit verse consisting of two sixteen-syllable lines of two eight-syllable padas (feet) each.

Kharagdharini Kali – iconic representation of Kali, one of the Hindu goddesses, who holds a kharag or scythe in her hand.

Bande Mataram – Hail, o mother, the first line of a song written by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, which is actually a salutation to the motherland. In 1950, in post-independence India, it was given the status of the 'national song' of India, as distinct from the 'national anthem'.

bhakti – the Hindu idea of love and devotion to one's God.

jati – class, caste or group.

shoshurbari – in-laws' house, in which a young wedded wife lived with her husband, as distinct from her natal home.

guli danda – a game played with improvised ball and stick, a kind of poor boys' cricket, popular in the rural areas before the advent of the Western cricket, football, basketball, hockey, etc.

Swaraj – self-governance or home rule.

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Index