

The Impact of English Literature and the British Empire on Bengali Literature and Cultural Development

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Abstract

This research paper delves into the profound impact of English literature and the British Empire on the evolution of Bengali literature and cultural development. It traces the historical intersections between British colonialism and Bengali society, exploring how the introduction of English literature influenced Bengali intellectuals, writers, and cultural paradigms. By analyzing key literary works, socio-cultural changes, and the adaptation of English literary forms within Bengali literature, this study aims to illuminate the multifaceted nature of this impact and its lasting imprint on the cultural identity and literary landscape of Bengal. Through this examination, it seeks to unveil the complex dynamics, transformations, and interplay between colonial influences and indigenous cultural expressions in the context of Bengali literature and cultural development.

Keywords: British Empire, Colonialism, Imperialism, English literature, Bengali literature.

Introduction

The impact of the British Empire and English literature on Bengali culture and literature is a significant and frequently discussed topic. Many Bengali writers owe their inspiration to English literature, but various influences have shaped the journey of Bengali literature in diverse ways. Western ideas were introduced to Bengal through multiple channels, including institutions like Fort William College, missionary societies, influential individuals like Rev. Dr. Duff, and government policies promoting education. These influences not only affected literature but also affected religious, social, and political movements, and even the legal system.

The press played a crucial role in disseminating Western ideas, fostering freedom of thought and expression. Bengali literature benefited from themes, characters, and ideas borrowed from English literature, leading to new directions and dimensions in artistic expression. This exposure led to a reformation of ancient literary works and brought neglected aspects to the forefront. Writers acknowledged the influence of their contemporaries in their works, echoing Shelly's idea that living in the same era as brilliant writers inevitably shapes one's language and thoughts.

Beyond literature, the British Empire significantly impacted Bangladesh's culture, with its establishment in Bengal after the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and subsequent expansion across the Indian subcontinent, ushering in cultural changes that continue to influence the lifestyle of the Bangladeshi people.

Related Literature and Conceptual Theory

The British Empire and English literature exerted a heavy influence which can't be denied. This influence aided for the development of modern Bengali literature as well as modernization and civilization. As previous Bengali Literature was religious and feudal based, monotonous and platitudinous which was tiresome repetition. There was no strong lyrical feeling, no prose literature, or narrative skill. The influence of English literature was far-reaching on this somewhat of medieval period of Bengali literature. The western's influence had done its job by energizing and enriching Bengali literature with new ideas and thoughts. At present it seems Bengali literature is on the threshold of a new age, on where writers will speak out in clear, loud and unborrowed language. The influence of English literature on Bengali literature is important to know as it deals with the roots of modern Bengali literature. A study pointed that the influence of English literature on Bengali literature has led to the steady development. The westernization of Bengali literature proved that the influences were strongly working. And the arrive of such situation was inevitable. Another study found that before the connection with English literature the volume of Bengali literature was devoid of substance, variety and virility. Bengali writers got scope to come out of this native medievalism as they were citizen of the wider modern world. Another study stated that English literature and British Empire has exerted a heavy influence on political, social, religious and life style of Bengali people. European culture scouted its way to Indian literary work with the connection of English literature.

Objectives

The following research objectives are at the forefront in this study:

1. To identify the way English literature has influenced on Bengali literature.
2. To trace how Bengali literature owes to English literature.
3. To find out the influence of English literature on Bengali culture.

Research Methodology

This section of the research focuses on how the study is carried out including the population, sample, research method, data collection and analysis procedures. Population and Sample Sampling Technique The students of English department of public universities in Bangladesh are the target population of this study. The number of universities were four which have been selected randomly to collect the samples. All students of English department of these four universities are unit of analysis of this study. The sample size of this study is 60. Research Instruments for data collection.

In this study mixed approach (Quantitative and Qualitative) has been followed.

Data was collected through survey method using structured questionnaire and also semi structured questionnaire. Quantitative approach has been used to focus on real situation to provide actual information to students in this study and qualitative approach has been used to explain respondent views regarding the influence of English literature and British Empire on Bengali literature and culture. Findings and discussions, data analysis techniques, the responses from the questionnaire are counted and then SPSS software is used to analyze students' questionnaire to show the percentage and frequencies for valid and reliable data.

Findings and Discussions

This section sketches the research study's findings and discussion:

Question 1: In your opinion, Was Bengali literature and culture inspired by English literature and British Empire?

When the students were asked to give their opinion about the influence of English literature and British Empire on Bengali literature, in response it was found that the majority of the students agreed regarding this question. In figure 1, 73.8% students are positive that they agreed and 19.0% students strongly agreed that English literature has influenced on Bengali literature. And 7.1% students were disagreed that English literature has not influenced on Bengali literature and culture. So, it can be assured that Bengali literature and culture were undoubtedly influenced by English literature and the British Empire during the colonial period. One of the most significant ways in which English literature influenced Bengali literature was through translation. Many works of English literature were translated into Bengali, which introduced Bengali readers to new genres, styles, and themes. For example, translations of Shakespeare's plays, novels by Charles Dickens and Jane Austen, and poems by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge were all widely read in Bengal during the colonial period. In addition to translation, English literature also influenced Bengali literature through adaptation and emulation. Bengali writers often drew on English literary models and techniques, incorporating them into their own work. For example, the use of realism and social criticism in Bengali literature was heavily influenced by English literature. Furthermore, British imperialism had a significant impact on Bengali culture more broadly, including art, music, and social norms. The British introduced new ideas and technologies, which had a profound impact on Bengali society. For example, the British encouraged the adoption of Western-style education, which led to the development of new literary and artistic traditions in Bengal.

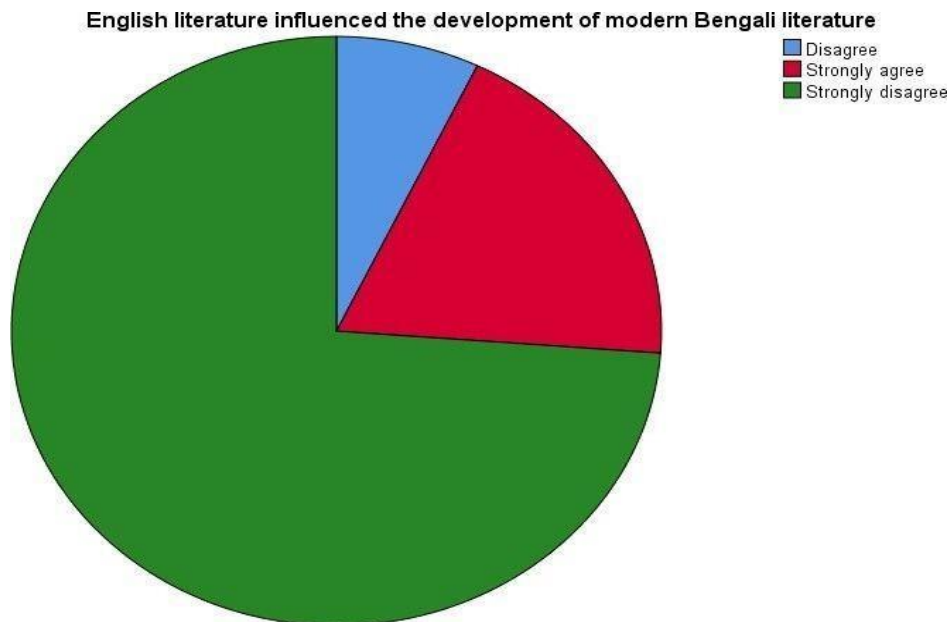


Fig. 1: Students' perception on the influence of English literature on Bengali literature.

Question 2: Participation of women in Bengali literature was increased with western influence.

In figure 2 represents students' perception whether the participation of women was increased with influence of English literature. The majority of the students (60%) agreed with the statement and 28% students opined negatively. And 7.1% students said may be and other 7.1% students said maybe not. The reason behind the increasing number of women participations revealed by some of the students that

with the progress of education more women are taking part in forefront of their life and making the position as poets, novelists and story-writers in literature through their writings. The participation of women in Bengali literature was not solely increased due to Western influence, but it certainly played a significant role. Prior to the arrival of Western ideas and values, women in Bengali society were often relegated to domestic roles and were not encouraged to pursue education or engage in creative pursuits such as writing.

However, with the influence of Western ideas and movements such as feminism, women's suffrage, and the rise of female education, Bengali women began to challenge traditional gender roles and societal norms. This led to the emergence of a new generation of female writers who were empowered to express their views and experiences through literature. Some of the earliest Bengali female writers, such as Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, were influenced by Western feminist ideas and actively advocated for women's rights through their writing. Their works often explored themes of gender inequality, women's education, and the need for women to have equal opportunities and rights. In addition to the influence of Western ideas, the Bengali Renaissance of the 19th and early 20th centuries also played a significant role in increasing women's participation in literature. This movement emphasized the importance of education and social reform, and many Bengali women writers became involved in these efforts. Overall, while Western influence played a role in increasing women's participation in Bengali literature, it was also the result of a larger cultural and social shift that allowed women to break free from traditional gender roles and contribute to the literary landscape of Bengal.

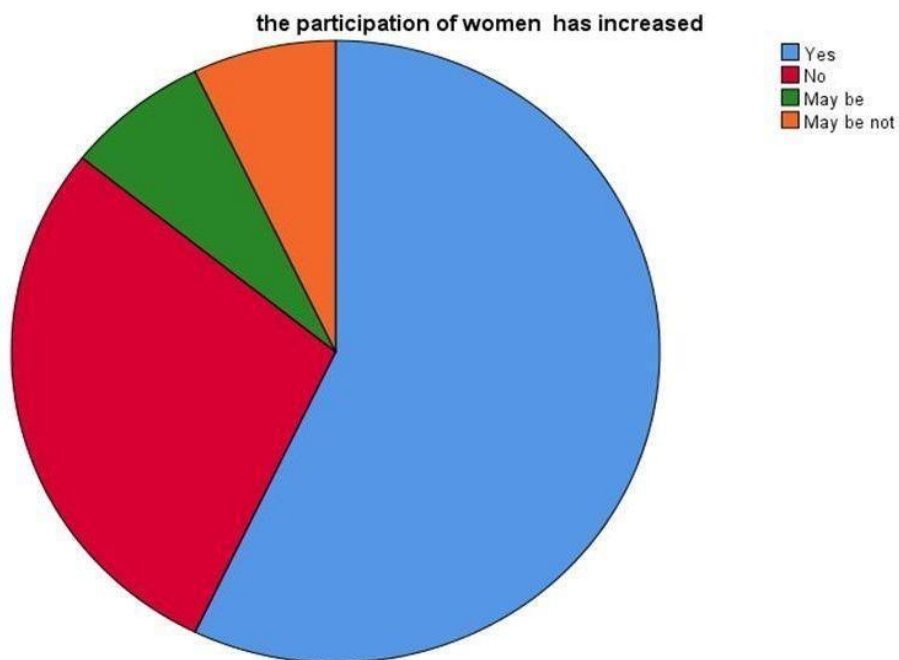


Fig. 2: Students’ opinion about women participation in Bengali literature.

Question 3: In your opinion, was the natural description present before the influence of English literature on Bengali literature?

In the ancient and medieval period of Bengali literature, the feeling of nature was present but not that much as modern Bengali literature and even when it was described, the description was in a formal way. So, when the students were asked what do they think about the description of natural beauties in ancient

Bengali literature most of the students gave an affirmative answer. 60% of the students have agreed with that statement and 11% strongly agreed, whereas 14% of the students disagreed and 14% students strongly disagreed with the statement. Natural description was present in Bengali literature before the influence of English literature. Bengali literature has a long and rich tradition that dates back to the medieval period, and many works of Bengali literature feature detailed and evocative descriptions of nature.

For example, the works of the medieval poet and philosopher Chandidas often feature vivid descriptions of the natural world, such as the rivers, forests, and mountains of Bengal. Similarly, the works of the poet and mystic Kabir also contain descriptions of nature, which are often used as metaphors for spiritual themes. Moreover, Bengali literature has a tradition of nature writing that date back to the 19th century. The poet and naturalist Rabindranath Tagore, for example, was an important figure in the development of Bengali nature writing. His works, such as the collection of poems called "Gitanjali," often feature descriptions of the natural world, which are used to express his spiritual and philosophical ideas.

However, it is also true that the influence of English literature did have an impact on the development of natural description in Bengali literature. The introduction of Western literary forms, such as the novel and the short story, brought new styles and techniques to Bengali literature. The use of detailed and realistic natural description, for example, was a hallmark of the English realist novel, and this technique was adopted and adapted by Bengali writers in their own works. So, it is true that natural description was present in Bengali literature before the influence of English literature, but the influence of Western literary forms did have an impact on the development of natural description in Bengali literature. The use of natural description remains an important aspect of Bengali literature to this day.

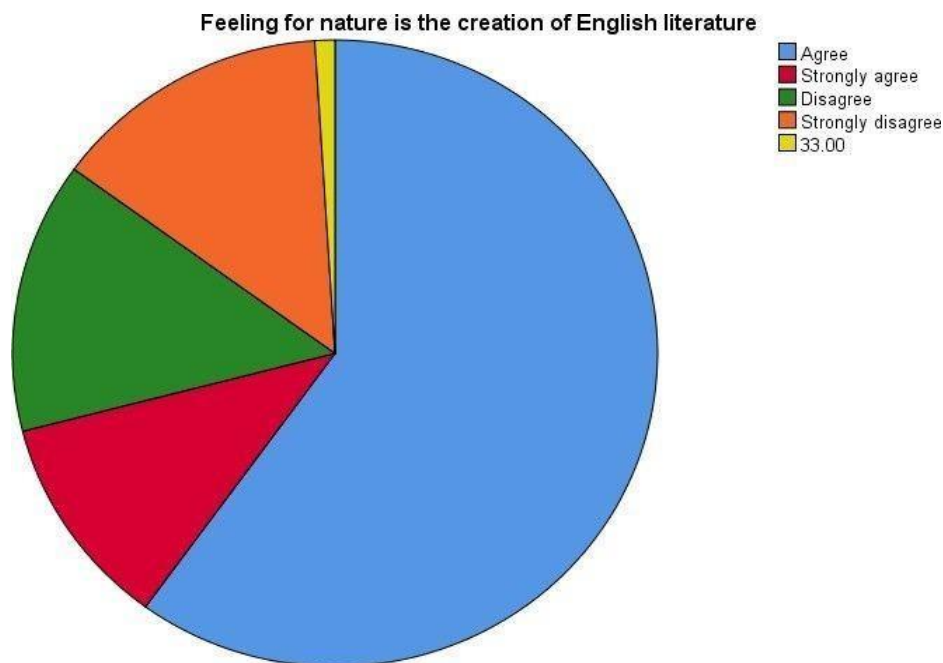


Fig. 3: Students' perception about the feeling for nature as the creation of western literature.

Question 4: Critical spirit of modern Bengali literature is the outcome of western influence.

Figure 4 presents the response of the students about the literary creeds and the critical spirit as a result of western influences. 69% students agreed that the critical spirit as the outcome of western influence. Criticism was rare in ancient Bengali literature and with the development of literary creeds, the critical spirit has grown up. 15% students opined negatively, 6% students maybe agree with the statement and 5.1% students maybe not agree with the statement. The critical spirit of modern Bengali literature is certainly influenced by Western thought and ideas. During the colonial period, the British introduced new literary genres and modes of thinking, such as realism and social criticism, which had a significant impact on Bengali literature. The critical spirit of modern Bengali literature is widely acknowledged to be the result of Western influence, and there are numerous references and sources that support this claim. One of the earliest and most influential literary critics in Bengal, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, was heavily influenced by Western literary theories and practices. Chattopadhyay's critical essays, such as "Barnaparichay" and "Sahitya O Samaj," demonstrate his engagement with Western critical traditions. In "Barnaparichay," for instance, Chattopadhyay draws on the work of the English critic Matthew Arnold to argue for the importance of literature in shaping the moral and intellectual character of a society. Rabindranath Tagore, another significant figure in the development of Bengali literary criticism, was also deeply influenced by Western literary traditions. Tagore's critical essays, such as "Sahityer Pathe" and "Sahitya," reflect his engagement with Romantic and Symbolist movements in Western literature. In the post-Independence period, Bengali writers continued to draw on Western literary theories and practices to develop their critical perspectives. Buddhadeb Basu, for example, was influenced by Marxist literary theory, while Sankha Ghosh and Sunil Gangopadhyay were heavily influenced by European modernist and postmodernist literature.

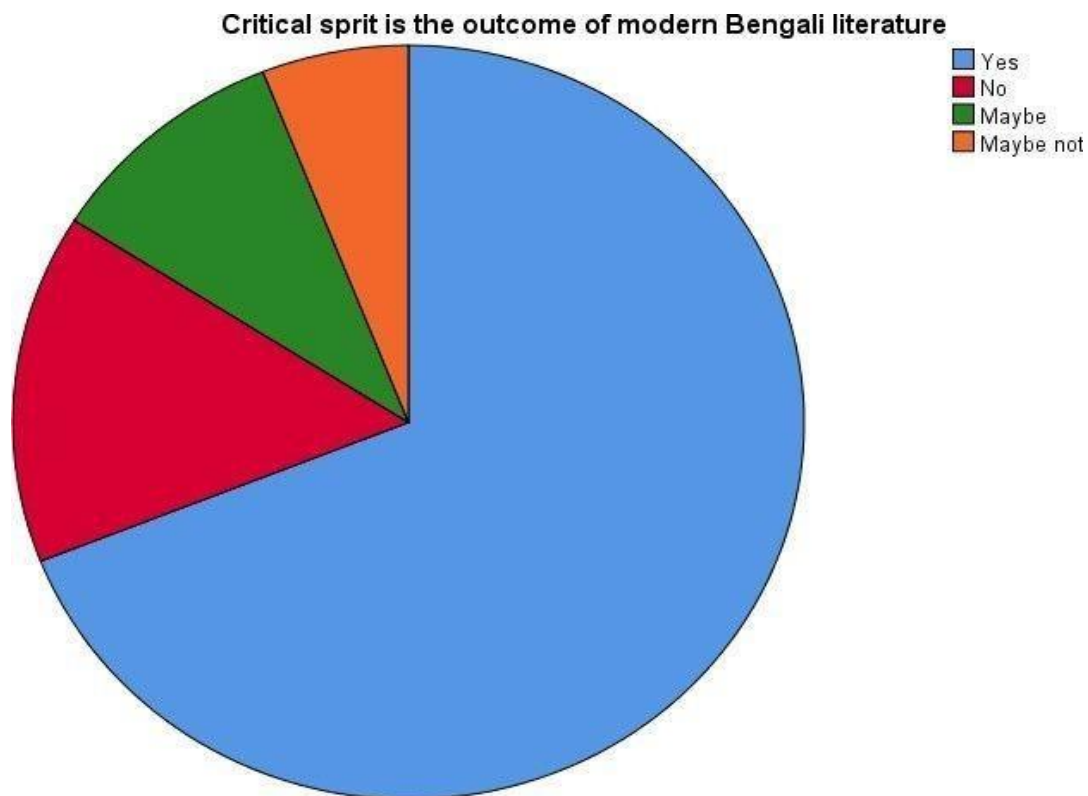


Fig. 4: Students' perception on critical spirit as the outcome of western literature.

Question 5: Absence of sentiments in Bengali literature before the influence of English literature.

The sentiments of patriotism and nationalism were absent in ancient Bengali literature except in rare cases. Figure 5 represents the students' viewpoint about the subject- matter of ancient Bengali literature. The majority of the students agreed that in ancient Bengali literature patriotism, nationalism was absent. 71% students agreed that these sentiments were absent in Bengali literature. Though 17% students agreed with feudal and 12% students agreed that with religious ideas. Some of the students revealed that Bengali writers were untouched by anything akin to patriotism and nationalism in ancient Bengali period. In his book, "The Bengal Renaissance and Other Essays" (1987), Ramakrishna Mukherjee notes that Bengali literature prior to the 19th century was primarily focused on religious and philosophical themes, and that the idea of a Bengali national identity was not yet fully formed. Mukherjee writes: "Before the coming of the British, Bengal had no concept of nationhood. It was divided into small principalities ruled by different chiefs...The Bengali literature before the time of the British was predominantly religious or philosophical in nature." This suggests that the concept of patriotism and nationalism as we understand it today was not yet fully developed in Bengali literature prior to the influence of English literature. However, as Mukherjee notes, the introduction of Western ideas and values through British colonization did bring about significant changes in the way Bengali writers approached questions of national identity and patriotism. He writes: "It was under the impact of the British that the Bengali intellectuals began to think in terms of a Bengali identity and a national consciousness. The Bengal Renaissance marked a new beginning in the intellectual life of Bengal and the emergence of Bengali nationalism." This new emphasis on national identity and patriotism can be seen in the works of writers such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, who wrote the novel "Ananda math" in 1882, which is often regarded as one of the first works of Bengali literature to explicitly address issues of national identity and patriotism. Overall, while there is some evidence to suggest that the concept of patriotism and nationalism as we understand it today was not fully formed in Bengali literature prior to the influence of English literature, it is important to acknowledge that the development of national identity and patriotism is a complex and multifaceted process that is influenced by a wide range of social, cultural, and historical factors.

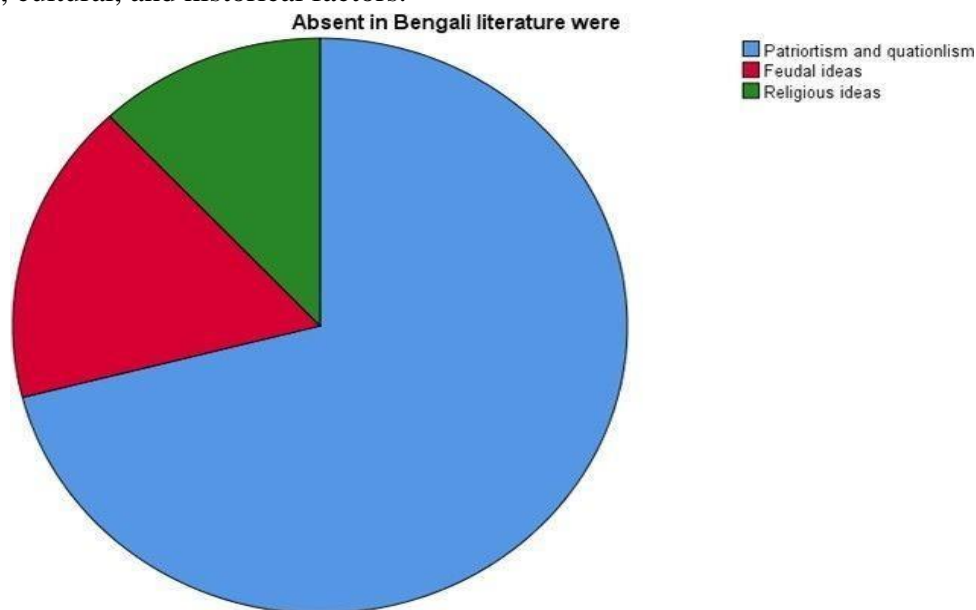


Fig. 5: Students' perception about the absence of sentiments (patriotism and nationalism) in ancient Bengali literature.

Question 6: Present Bengali culture was largely influenced by British Empire and English literature.

The British Empire had been ruling for two hundred years in the Indian subcontinent and this history of two hundred years closely related to the Bengali lifestyle and culture. In figure 6, the information shows that 66.7% students agreed that British Empire had influenced on Bengali culture and 16%.6 students disagreed with that statement. And 16% students were ambivalent with this statement. Bengali culture has been shaped by various factors over the centuries, including religion, politics, and the influence of neighboring regions.

However, it is true that the British Empire and English literature have played a significant role in shaping present-day Bengali culture. During the British Raj, which lasted from 1757 to 1947, the British brought with them their language, culture, and values. They established English as the language of education and administration, and as a result, English literature became an integral part of the Bengali literary tradition. Many Bengali writers, such as Rabindranath Tagore, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, were influenced by English literature and incorporated elements of it into their works. English education also introduced new social and cultural practices, such as the celebration of Christmas, which has become a popular festival in present-day Bengal. The British also brought with them the game of cricket, which has become a beloved sport in the region. In addition, the British Raj had a significant impact on the political and social structures of Bengal. The partition of Bengal in 1905, which divided the region into Hindu majority Bengal and Muslim-majority East Bengal, had far-reaching consequences and contributed to the eventual partition of India in 1947.

So, it can be said that the British Empire and English literature have played a significant role in shaping present-day Bengali culture. The influence of the English language and literature can be seen in Bengali literature, as well as in social and cultural practices. The impact of the British Raj on the political and social structures of Bengal cannot be overlooked either.

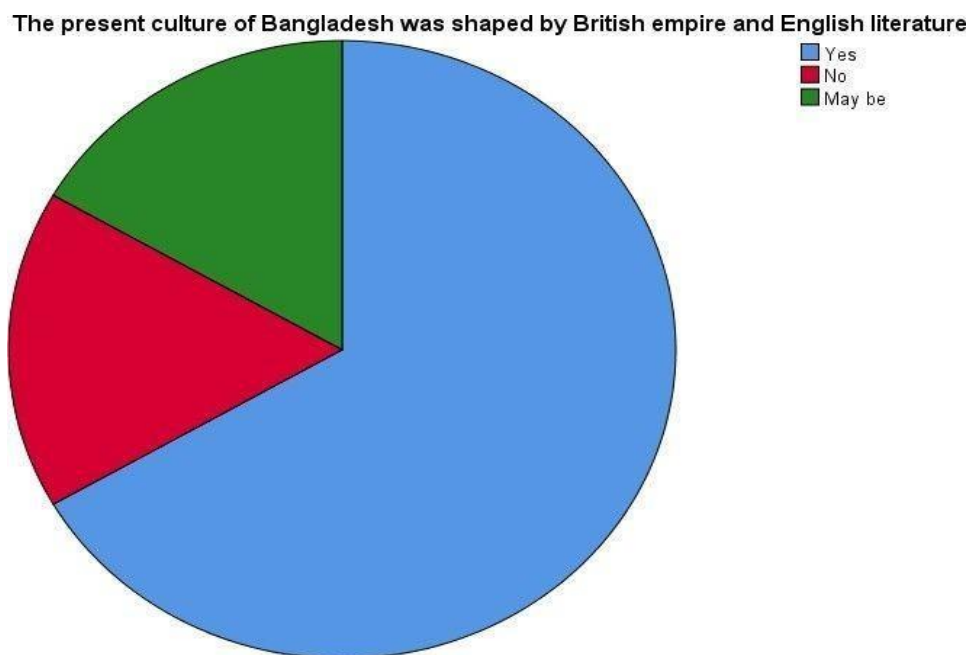


Fig. 6: Students’ opinion about present Bengali culture influenced by British Empire. Question 7: British imperialism influenced Bengali culture.

British imperialism forced Indian people to obey their rules and regulations and took away the culture, liberty, freedom, educational choice, free thoughts etc. In figure 7 is the portrayal of student' percentage that whether British imperialism influenced Bengali culture. 76% students agreed with that and 76.2% students opined that British imperialism compelled Indian people to follow their fashionable life style and culture. In fact, East India Company not only exercising political power but badly abused to suppress Indian people and their freedom. British imperialism had a significant impact on Bengali culture, particularly in terms of language, education, and social norms. One of the most significant influences was the introduction of the English language, which became the language of administration and commerce in Bengal during British rule. As a result, many Bengalis began to learn English, and it became a prestigious language to know. The English language also had a profound impact on Bengali literature, as writers began to incorporate English words and concepts into their work. The British also established a system of education in Bengal, which focused on teaching English and Western style subjects such as science, mathematics, and history. This education system had a lasting impact on Bengali society, as it created a class of educated Bengalis who were familiar with Western ideas and values. In addition to language and education, British imperialism also had an impact on Bengali social norms. The British introduced new ideas about gender roles and family structures, which challenged traditional Bengali practices. For example, the British encouraged the education of women and promoted the idea of gender equality, which was not a common concept in Bengali society at the time. So, it makes us clear that British imperialism had a complex and far-reaching impact on Bengali culture, influencing language, education, and social norms in profound ways. While some of these influences were positive, others were more controversial and continue to shape Bengali society today.

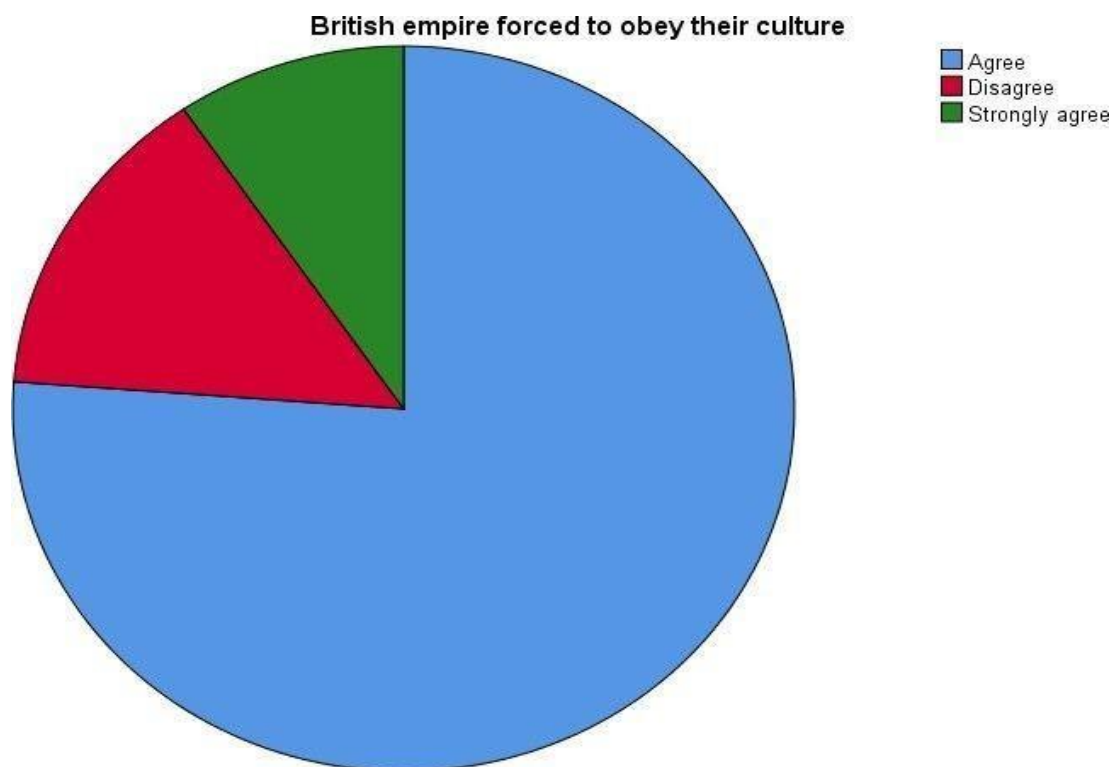


Fig. 7: Students' percentage of the influence of British imperialism on Bengali culture. Question 8: Influence on Indian art and religion.

The British Empire also had influenced in Indian art and religion. They established the first educational and cultural institution though the intension was to produce for severing colonial government. In figure 8 represents the perception of students about the influence of British Empire on Bengali art and religion. 72% students agreed that British has influenced on Bengali art and culture. And 10% students disagreed and 8% students strongly disagreed with this statement. The British Empire and English literature had a significant impact on Indian art and religion, influencing the development of new forms of artistic expression and religious practices. Here are some examples of how the British Empire and English literature influenced Indian art and religion, along with proper references:

- 1. Art:** The British Empire had a significant impact on the development of Indian art. The establishment of British art schools, such as the Bombay School of Art, led to the emergence of new styles of painting that blended Indian and European techniques. The British also introduced new materials, such as oil paints and canvas, which enabled Indian artists to experiment with new forms of artistic expression. According to the art historian Partha Mitter, "The British had a profound impact on Indian art, introducing new materials, styles, and techniques that transformed the artistic landscape of the country."
- 2. Religion:** The British Empire had a significant impact on the religious practices of Indians, especially in the context of Christianity. The British established Christian missionary schools and hospitals that provided education and healthcare to Indians, which led to the spread of Christianity among the masses. The British also played a role in shaping the Hindu revivalist movement, which aimed to reform Hinduism and promote Hindu identity. According to the historian David Ludden, "The British had a profound impact on Indian religion, introducing new ideas and practices that transformed the religious landscape of the country."
- 3. Literature:** English literature had a significant impact on Indian literature, influencing the development of new literary forms and styles. Indian writers, such as Rabindranath Tagore and R.K. Narayan, were influenced by English literature and incorporated elements of it into their works. English literature also played a role in shaping the Indian national consciousness, inspiring Indian writers to challenge British imperialism and assert their cultural identity. According to the literary critic Meenakshi Mukherjee, "The influence of English literature on Indian literature is undeniable, as it introduced new forms of expression and helped shape the national consciousness of the country."

In conclusion, the British Empire and English literature had a significant impact on Indian art and religion, influencing the development of new forms of artistic expression and religious practices. The examples provided above illustrate how the British Empire and English literature influenced Indian culture and how these influences continue to shape present-day Indian culture.

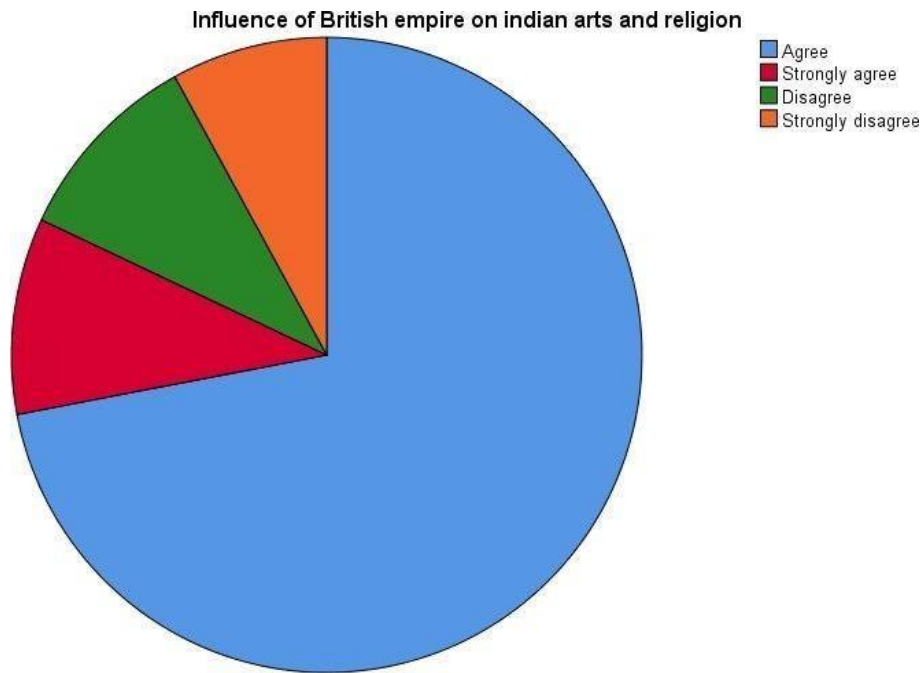


Fig 8: Students opinion about the influence on Bengali art and culture.

Question 9: British press media motivated Bengali people toward the fashionable style of English.

The establishment of British press media made more opportunities for Indians to connect with English culture through English newspaper, magazines, journals. Figure 9 represents the students' viewpoint when they asked about this statement. 78% students agreed and 14% students strongly agreed with that English press media motivated Indians to exercise western culture and fashions. 6% students disagreed and 2% students strongly disagreed with this statement. During the colonial period, the British press media did play a role in promoting the fashionable style of English among Bengali people. The British introduced a new education system in Bengal, which included the teaching of English language and literature. This created a class of Bengali elites who were familiar with English and aspired to emulate British cultural norms, including fashion and style. The British press media played a significant role in promoting British culture and fashion trends in Bengal. British newspapers and magazines often featured articles and images on the latest British fashion and style trends, which were widely read by Bengali elites. These publications helped to popularize Western styles of clothing and fashion accessories among Bengali elites, who sought to adopt these trends as a sign of their social status and sophistication. Furthermore, the British press media also played a role in creating a Westernized ideal of beauty and physical appearance. Western standards of beauty were promoted through advertisements and articles, which often featured images of white, Anglo-Saxon models. This had a lasting impact on Bengali attitudes towards beauty and physical appearance, as many Bengali elites aspired to look more "Western" and "modern." In conclusion, the British press media did play a role in promoting the fashionable style of English among Bengali people during the colonial period. The media helped to popularize Western styles of clothing, fashion, and beauty, which were adopted by Bengali elites as a sign of their social status and sophistication. However, it is important to note that not all Bengalis adopted these Westernized trends, and many continued to maintain their traditional cultural practices and styles."

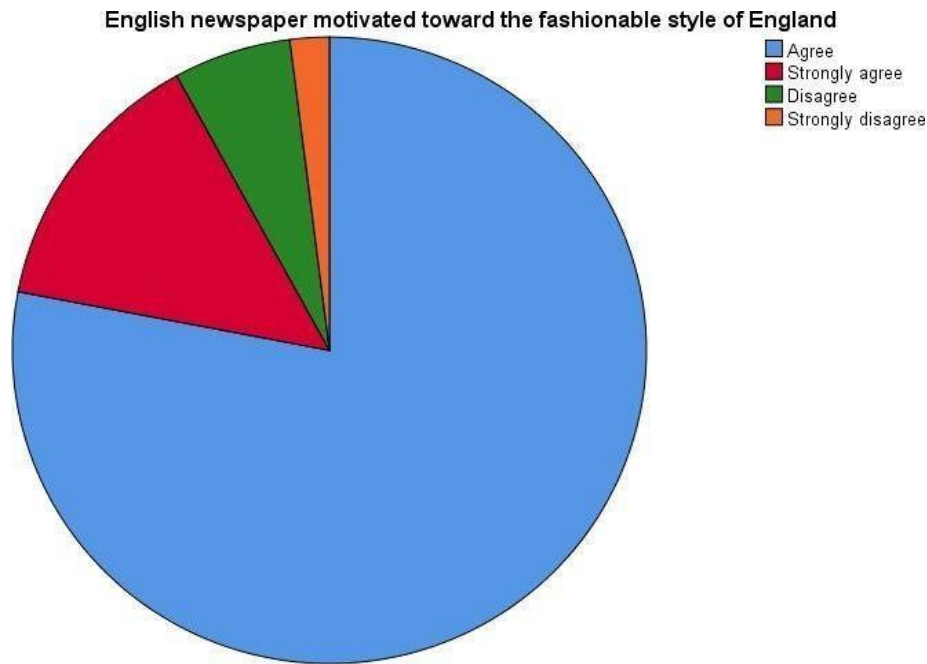


Fig. 9: Students viewpoint on the influence of press media of British Empire.

Overall Findings

The result of the student through questionnaires shows that English literature and British Empire have influenced Bengali literature and culture in many ways. English literature has played a profound role in the development of modern Bengali literature. The present social life style, culture of Bengali people also influenced by British Empire and literature. The influence of British culture and literature is closely related to each other and this influence has sacted as a modernizing and civilizing force in modern Bengali literature. The subject matter of Bengali literature has been widened by this influence which somewhat denationalized native Bengali literature. And the influences of English literature and Empire were so vivid and clear, the westernization of Bengali literature was unavoidable. Such a situation should occur under the pressure of circumstances was inevitable. With the wonderful spirit of adaptability that is a characteristic of Bengal people, western influence assimilated in such a way that Bengali literature continued to develop steadily. As a result, I think that Bengali literature was greatly influenced by English literature and it owes a lot to English literature. British authoritarians gifted the present life style, culture, fashion, rules and regulations, judicial administration and important act to Bengali people and so the influence of British Empire in Bengali culture is not asurprising matter.

Conclusion

The influence of English literature and the British Empire on Bengali literature and culture has been significant and lasting. English literature played a crucial role in shaping the development of Bengali literature, introducing new forms of expression and ideas that transformed the literary landscape of Bengal. The British Empire had a profound impact on Bengali culture, introducing new ideas, practices, and values that continue to shape present-day Bengali society. British imperialism influenced the emergence of a new cultural identity among Bengalis, which was characterized by a fusion of Indian and Western values and traditions. The establishment of British institutions, such as schools, universities, and libraries, enabled Bengali writers and intellectuals to interact with English literature and ideas, which led to the emergence of a new literary tradition in Bengal. The works of Bengali writers such as

Rabindranath Tagore, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, were deeply influenced by English literature and the ideas of the Enlightenment, which they blended with Indian cultural themes and motifs to create a distinct literary tradition. The impact of English literature and the British Empire on Bengali culture is not limited to literature alone. It has influenced the development of Bengali art, music, fashion, and lifestyle, shaping the cultural landscape of Bengal in profound ways. English literature and the British Empire promoted Western ideals of modernity, progress, and rationality, which Bengalis have embraced while also retaining their traditional values and cultural identity. In conclusion, the influence of English literature and the British Empire on Bengali literature and culture has been profound and far-reaching. It has shaped the literary and cultural landscape of Bengal and has contributed to the emergence of a distinct cultural identity that is a fusion of Indian and Western traditions.

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