

Rózsa G. Hajnóczy's *Bengáli tűz* ['Fire of Bengal']

Savita Gaur

Abstract: A Hungarian travel journal written by Rózsa G. Hajnóczy (1892-1944) in either the late 1930s or early 1940s, *Bengáli tűz* is a work that has gained acclaim among readers in both India and Bangladesh. In 1928, the author travelled to India while accompanying her husband, the famous Orientalist, Gyula Germanus (1884-1979), and she stayed there for three years while recording her personal experiences in journal entries which eventually provided the raw material for *Bengáli tűz*. In spite of having a very wide fan base of mainly female readers, *Bengáli tűz* is still not mentioned in the *History of Hungarian Literature Lexicon*, which raises the issue of why this work has not been included in the canon of Hungarian literature. Since some questions surround whether Hajnóczy actually wrote *Bengáli tűz*, I aim to explore the issues connected to the authorship of this work while examining it from a comparative cultural perspective via textual analysis. My examination of the text will discuss the author's own metamorphosis from holding biased opinions regarding Indian culture to becoming an individual who embraces Eastern culture. Since this work is a rich source of the attitudes expressed by women of different nationalities, these opinions will also provide the baseline for my study. Hajnóczy's journal has an abundance of instances of interculturalism which make it relevant to current readers as well.

Keywords: *Bengáli tűz*, Rózsa G. Hajnóczy, Gyula Germanus, genuine authorship, comparative cultural studies

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Based on its cover, *Bengáli tűz* may look like just a simple travel journal, but when it is actually read, this work emerges as a balanced blend of drama, psychology and politics, making Hajnóczy's journal a book filled with rich depictions of many cultures. (See below for a picture of the journal's third edition in Hungarian.) Often described as a travel journal or novelistic voyage, *Bengáli tűz* depicts a period in the early twentieth century between the years 1928 and 1931, as portrayed by Rózsa G. Hajnóczy, before India gained Independence from Great Britain. Hajnóczy's book can be categorized as a mixed genre, in which she narrates the stories which she personally witnessed among her acquaintances of Shantiniketan, a small town, in West Bengal, approximately one hundred and sixty kilometres north of Kolkata (Calcutta). Shantiniketa is famous because Devendrath Tagore founded an ashram there in 1863, which was

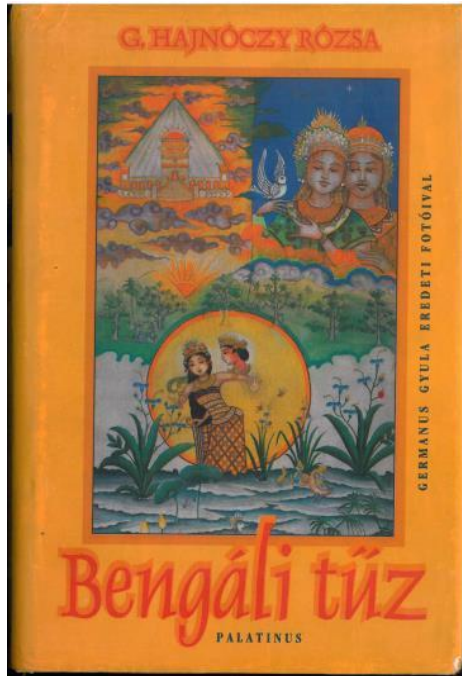


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expanded into a school, Patha Bhavana, in 1901 and later into a university named Visva Bharati, by his son, the Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore.



To summarize the journal's background, Hajnóczy initially traveled to India with her husband, a well-known Orientalist and famous explorer, Gyula Germanus (1884-1979). Germanus, one of the best known Islamic scholars in Hungary, received an invitation from Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) to teach at Visva, Bharati, the university he founded, whose meaning is “the communion of the world with India.” Not only a famous Bengal polymath and poet, Rabindranath Tagore was also the first non-European author to win the Nobel Prize in Literature (Shamsud 2016:03-10). Since the university was also the very first centre of Comparative Literature, many different nationalities came together at Tagore's university to teach aspiring students while performing unorthodox research for the betterment of the field of literature. In his state of Bengal, Rabindranath Tagore also worked as an educator in Shantiniketan, in his effort to further develop Shantiniketan; Rabindranath Tagore founded Visva Bharati, later on. It was reputed as one of the premier universities of India in that era. The Ashram is one of the

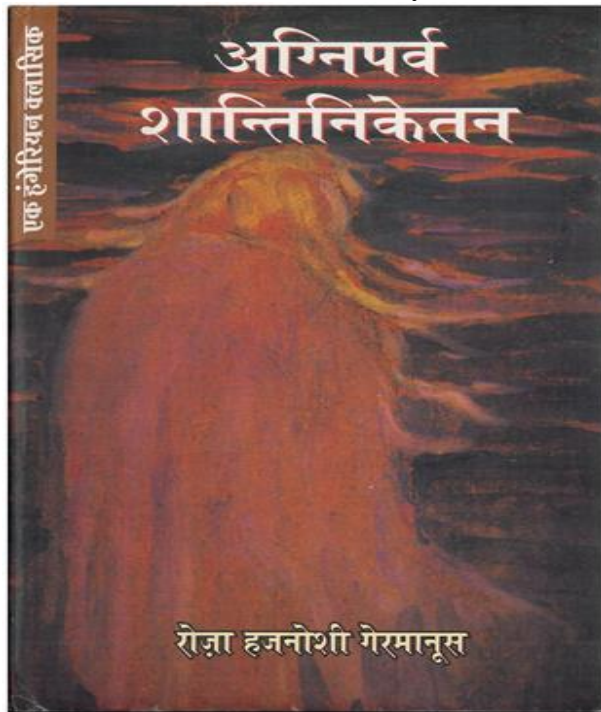
biggest buildings in Shantiniketan. Visva Bharati comprised the sole academic location in Shantiniketan that offered courses belonging to various disciplines such as the arts, history, science, and foreign languages. Shantiniketan was the pioneering center of Comparative Studies research in the 1920s and 1930s, and studies conducted here was primarily related to the study of various languages as well as the relationships between different religions and various forms of art were explored at Shantiniketan with the purpose of finding a common link among like-minded people and disciplines for the advancement of literature. Tagore's concept of World Literature could be said to have been way before his time, as he wrote against the backdrop of what is now commonly understood as the first wave of globalization, stressing the need to understand local problems in global perspective (Jelinakar 2010: 8; Dasgupta 2018).

While Hajnóczy stayed at this ashram for three years, she was exposed to Tagore's teachings and her journal is an important document of her time in India and of the experiences she garnered while living in this experimental, innovative environment. There were a great variety of people from different backgrounds present at the ashram during this period, and in her journal Hajnóczy was able to describe different aspects of the cultural, political, social and spiritual regions of contemporary Indian society. Hajnóczy's book also describes exotic worlds, the existing struggle and dialogues belonging to different cultures, and the rise of oppressed groups in the community.

Hajnóczy's book takes the form of entries which can be considered as more of a journal style rather than that of an intimate, personal diary because most of what is reported in it are the author's observations regarding other people. Although she also did write about her own difficulties in adjusting to India as a foreigner, she generally did not mention her personal relationship with her husband. As a form of expression, journal entries are generally a reflective

form of writing not conducted on a daily basis, but more or less regularly, depending on the writer's needs to express his or her thoughts or examine critically the social, political, and cultural norms of their lives, which is precisely what Hajnóczy did in her journal as she only recorded events in her journal when she felt that something significant had taken place. To offer one example of the frequency with which she wrote, the first entry in the journal was written in January 1929 while the second entry was written in the beginning of the next month (February); the third one followed at the end of February. The irregular pattern of entries depicts the fact that *Hajnóczy* did not write these entries down with the intent of writing a regular diary. She also sometimes attached pictures and maps to the text. In addition to being a journal, *Bengáli tűz* can also be viewed as a novelistic travelogue, as it was written in an epistolary manner.

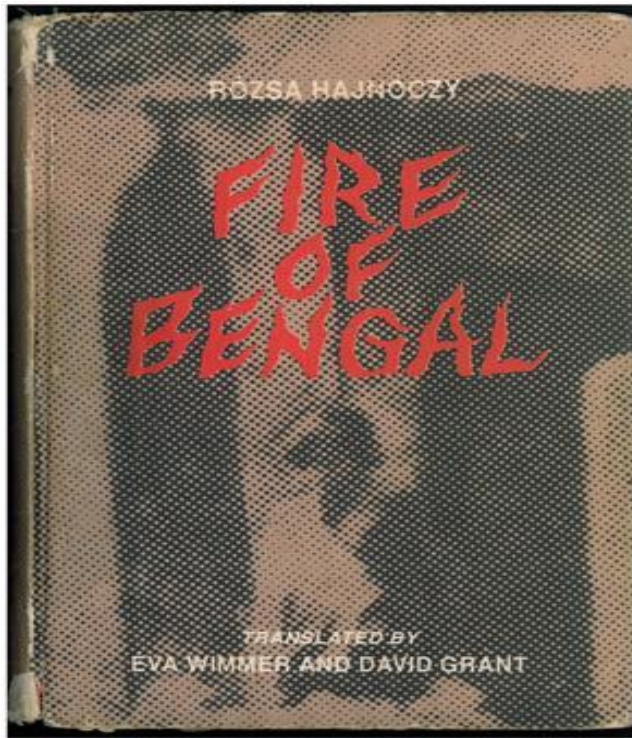
First published in 1944, *Bengáli tűz* gained a wide readership consisting primarily of Hungarian women, with roughly thirty-two thousand copies sold before the book was banned by the communist regime in the 1950s (Gábor 1964: 4). *Bengáli tűz* gained immediate popularity when it was published in Hungary and its mainly female readership found the content of the journal special, yet also relatable (*Népszava* 1944:6/02; *Orosházi Friss Hirek* 1944:06/22). For women it was extremely significant that another woman had had the chance to venture off to the distant, "oriental" country of India. Readers could therefore delve into the first-hand experiences of another woman living in an unfamiliar environment that was being relayed in their native language. Furthermore, while a different country was being described, the oppression that the women faced in the journal could be seen as being in certain terms similar to their own, which was one of the main reasons why female readers connected to the journal on a very deep and



personal level. Still another reason why readers in Hungary appreciated this volume's exotic locale can be due to the fact that in 1944 in Hungary, a nation in the grip of World War II and the Holocaust at this time, travelling was not possible.

The book was reissued in 1978, with a further 110,000 copies printed (Gerő 1978:05). In 1993 an English translation, *Fire of Bengal*, was done by a Hungarian, Éva Wimmer, and her husband, David Grant (Hajnóczy 1993). In 2011, still another translation was done, this time into Hindi, by Kartik Chandra Dutt. This volume was published under the title of *Agniparva-Santiniketan: Ek Hungarian Grihavadhuki Diary* ['अग्निपर्व – शान्तिनिकेतन (एक हंगेरियन गृहवधूकी डायरी)'] (Hajnóczy 2011). (A picture of the cover of the journal's Hindi translation can be seen on the left.) Although the journal has only been translated into Hindi

and English once, the English translation has gained enough popularity in Bangladesh and West Bengal, a state in Eastern India, that filmmakers have expressed an interest in making a film based on the journal. There is not a concrete timeline present for that claim but the movie was in talks when some filmmakers visited Shantiniketan approximately ten to twelve years ago. This



interest stems from the fact that Hajnóczy's journal is a rare example of a work written by a foreigner who came to live in India and ended up respecting India's culture and religion at a time when a colonialist viewpoint was the norm. *Bengáli tűz* contradicts the popular notion in India that all foreigners only looked down on India as a country during this period in its history. *Bengáli tűz* also gained a following in Bangladesh because although many books had already been written about Shantiniketan, most were penned by native authors; readers therefore enjoy being exposed to a description of Rabindranath Tagore's Shantiniketan from the point of view of a foreigner. The popularity of the English translation also led to the creation of the Hindi translation in 2011, making it accessible to an even broader audience in India, including those who only read and

understand the Hindi language. (A picture of the cover of the journal's English translation can be seen on above.)

The Dilemma Surrounding the Authorship of *Bengáli Tűz*

Before examining the issue of authorship that lingers around this work, some information must first be provided concerning the personal life of Rózsa Hajnóczy and her husband, Gyula Germanus, whom she married in 1918. Germanus met Rabindranath Tagore in Budapest in 1926, at which time Tagore offered Germanus an opportunity to teach Islamic Studies in Visva Bharti. After receiving Tagore's invitation, Germanus moved to India to stay in Shantiniketan with his wife from 1929 to 1932. The couple left for India in January 1929 and returned March 28, 1932. Rózsa Hajnóczy published *Bengáli tűz* in 1944 and committed suicide within the same year of publishing her book. Gyula Germanus later married his second wife, Katalin Kajári, who was already his assistant when his wife was alive, in 1949. In 1972, Germanus claimed authorship for *Bengáli tűz*, making the claim that he had been the real author all along.

In spite of Germanus's 1972 claim of authorship of *Bengáli tűz*, it is Hajnóczy's name that is featured as the author of the book in both the Hindi and English translations of the book. This, however, was not the case when it came to the Hungarian edition of the journal, which has been published a total of three times in Hungary. When published in 1944, both volumes one and two of the first edition list Hajnóczy as the author; initially the journal was published in two parts as it was a lengthy work (Singer and Wolfner, 1944). The second edition was then published in 1964 by the publishing house, Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó. Finally, Palatinus published the third edition in 2002 (Kubassek 2009: 44). As I mentioned, while the first edition did in fact list Hajnóczy as the author, the third edition published in 2002 also credited her husband, Gyula

Germanus, as author. While this inclusion did not affect the English or Hindi versions at all, in Hungary Germanus's claim that he had been the real author of the journal caused quite a stir. According to Germanus, he had used Hajnóczy's personal diary and notebooks to create the journal and he no longer wanted to keep this fact a secret. Germanus submitted his formal claim of authorship in connection to the copyrights of this book, a circumstance that Dr. Kubassek referred to in the 2002 edition (Hajnóczy 2002: 695), although I was not able to find this particular document in the Hungarian copyright office. In fact, Dr. János Kubassek, the director of the Hungarian Geography Museum, personally inserted a note in the book claiming that it is not a secret anymore that Germanus was the real author of *Bengáli tűz* (Hajnóczy 2002: 695). On August 6, 2018, I conducted an interview with Dr. János Kubassek in both Érd and Budapest. During the interview, the director adamantly maintained that Germanus had been the original author of the journal and wrote it using his first wife's diary.

When I asked Dr. Kubassek why Germanus had not claimed authorship when the book was first published, he stated that Germanus had filed a document in either 1975 or 1976 that listed him as the author of *Bengáli tűz* to the office of Artisjus, the *Szerzői Jogvédő Hivatal* ['Copyright Protection Office'] in Budapest. I obtained the document in question, which declares Hajnóczy and Germanus as co-authors of *Bengáli tűz* (see Figure 1). While the office did not have any concrete proof of Germanus being the only author, they mentioned that both Hajnóczy and Germanus are listed as authors somewhere in the Hungarian edition.

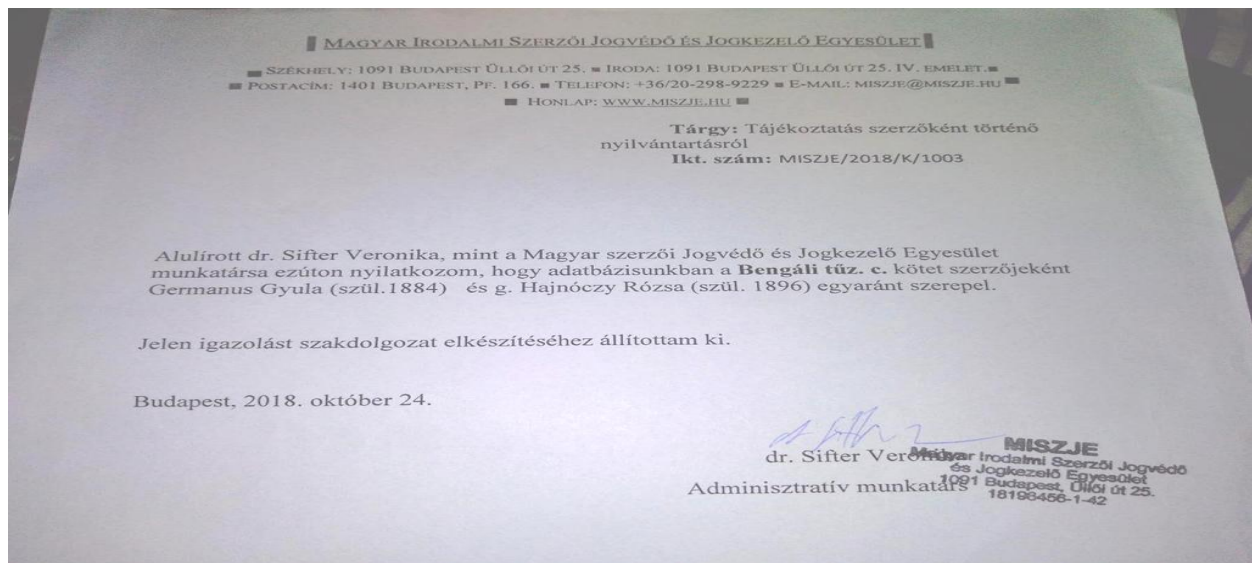


Figure 1: Document Recording Authorship of *Bengáli tűz*

Dr. Kubassek provided several underlying reasons that may explain the issue of Germanus's hidden identity in the original edition. Due to World War II and the period of Holocaust—Germanus had converted from Judaism to Christianity during World War II in Hungary in 1944, but regardless of his conversion, he still would have been considered as a Jew by the law which wouldn't have made it possible for him to publish anything under his name. Germanus later converted to Islam and became a Muslim, after which he went to Mecca in 1965 (Kubassek 2009: 07). Germanus taught Arab history and literature at Budapest University and led a successful academic career from 1920 until 1965. As was mentioned above, Hajnóczy committed suicide by overdose in 1944 as she was suffering from severe depression that has

been supposed to have been caused by her fear for her husband's life as a Jew (Unfortunately, no concrete story can be found to explain her suicide and all the information I have included here is based on my interview with Kubassek, who claimed to be an acquaintance of Germanus's, which was how he came to know some facts about Germanus and Hajnóczy's personal life). The fact also remains that, as a Jew, Germanus could not in any way have published the book under his own name during the Holocaust, not to mention the possibility that the book's audience would have reacted differently at the time if it had been published by someone of Jewish origins. Due to the historical and social circumstances of the time, if he had indeed written it, Germanus obviously would have been forced to publish the book in his wife's name. While it will never be possible to know with any certainty how much of a role Germanus played in the publication of *Bengáli tűz*, the detailed portrayal of the many female characters found in the journal, the writing style and timeline strongly suggest that Hajnóczy created the basis of the book, which leads me to conclude that the majority of its authorship rightly belongs to her alone.

Whatever circumstances surrounded the writing of *Bengáli tűz*, the fact remains that no concrete evidence (such as manuscripts, letters, etc.) exists that would support the fact that Germanus had written the book. The only somewhat known element is that he filed a declaration stating his status as the journal's author in Budapest thirty-one to thirty-two years after its initial publication, in either 1975 or 1976. It cannot be ignored that Germanus's claim of authorship could have been financial in nature as by then the book had sold a remarkable number of copies. Unfortunately, no exact date could be found for when he made the original claim as the copyright office does not have any archives on the said subject.

As I continued my search for more concrete proof regarding the authorship of *Bengáli tűz*, on February 28, 2018 I conducted an additional interview with a renowned Hungarian Indologist, Imre Bagha, a professor of Hindi at Oxford University. Professor Bagha claimed that even if Germanus had used Hajnóczy's diary to write the book, the text still felt like Hajnóczy had been the only original author. Bagha backed this belief by stating that the writing style of *Bengáli tűz* did not match that used in works Germanus had written in the field of Orientalist Studies. This opinion is shared by Ádám Mestyán, a historian of modern Arab culture who works at Duke University. Mestyán also states that Germanus's claim of being the original author cannot be a reliable statement as there are significant differences between the writing style of *Bengáli tűz* and the other volumes which Germanus has written, such as *Allah o Akbar: Poets of Arabia* which was published in 1960 or his volume, *Arab Literature* (1962) or his book, *Thoughts About Gül Baba's Grave* which appeared in 1984 (Kubassek 2009: 44). To summarize the opinion found in a more recent review found in a blogpost written about *Bengáli tűz*, the book is narrated in an old fashioned writing style which is not professional at all (Smoking Barrels 2017). The author of the blog claims that even though the facts written about India are interesting, the writing still feels like the scribbles of a bored housewife with a penchant for writing, which is what made it different than a professional author's writing. He also claims that the book is too lengthy and repetitive as Hajnóczy starts repeating herself after a while. While some aspects of this criticism can be agreed with, it should be noted that the style does seem to be that of a stressed woman jotting down entries in her personal diary instead of a professional author creating a book. Finally, the blog author concludes that, "The book has its own flaws, but it certainly burns the reader's heart" [*A könyvnek megvannak a maga hibái, de biztosan megperzseli az olvasó szívét*] (Smoking Barrels 2017).

As I mentioned previously, one fact that cannot be ignored is the presence of various incidents in the book that make it impossible for Germanus to have been the sole author. The entries recorded in the month of December, 1930 (Hajnóczy1993: 433) could have only been written by Hajnóczy (shown in the picture below) as they comprise a month of several activities which Hajnóczy participated in alone, at Shantiniketan, while Germanus was teaching as Jama Masjid, a famous mosque located in Delhi. Given Germanus's absence at this time, there is no



possible way that this part of the book had been written by Germanus as he was not physically present in Shantiniketan during this time period. To my mind, the journal also could not have been complete without the depictions it includes of the women who lived in the "harem" in Hyderabad, a location that would have been closed off to Germanus as a man. The marital issues that took place between one of the main characters, Himjhuri, and her husband, the portrayals of the girls at Shantiniketan or the many characterizations of other, foreign women who surrounded Hajnóczy also indicate that Hajnóczy's ability to gain access to this type of material was necessary since men would not have been admitted to the places where many of these events occurred, nor made privy to this type of private information. This, however, does not preclude that Germanus could also have provided Hajnóczy with some information. To mention a few ways in which Germanus could have also contributed to *Bengáli tűz*, a few of the explanations in the book are related to Islam, including the ninety-nine names of Allah (Hajnóczy

1993:483), narratives from the *Quran* (Hajnóczy 1993:501), verses from the *Quran* (Hajnóczy 1993:518), and an explanation of *Jannat* ['Heaven']. Yet, after examining the narration, these details all concern information that could have easily passed been on in the course of any normal conversation between Germanus and Hajnóczy, since none of this information reflects any sort of academic knowledge that only Germanus would have known. I stand in favor of considering the journal as the contribution of a very strong Hungarian female author, Rózsa G. Hajnóczy, whose views and voice expressed many aspects of womanhood and the status of women living in India around the 1900's.

For an additional perspective upon one type of collaboration that may occur between married couples who possess literary aspirations, see Dávid Szolláth's examination in this issue of how the author, Miklós Mészöly, used his wife's experiences as raw material for some of his own works. Mészöly based his novel, *Pontos történetek, útközbn* ['Accurate Stories on the Road'] (1970) on Alaine Polcz's narration of her journeys to her native region of Transylvania or the Hungarian countryside, which she recorded on tape. Polcz then gifted these recordings to her husband. The questions surrounding authorship that are raised by the case of *Pontos történetek, útközben* can be compared to the questions regarding who wrote *Bengáli tűz*. In my opinion, just

as it should not have been possible for Mészöly to publish his novel exclusively under his own name as the work had been based on his wife's "raw material," Germanus should not have claimed authorship for a book for which the raw material at least was almost definitely provided by his wife.

The case of another, earlier Hungarian work whose origins have been debated is Éva Heyman's Holocaust diary, which was edited by her mother Ágnes Zsolt and published as a memoir. The likelihood is great that the grieving mother included her own memories as a means of supplementing the events that her daughter had depicted in the diary; as also occurred in Rózsa Hajnóczy's case, Ágnes Zsolt committed suicide soon after her daughter's diary was published and the original manuscript has never been located. The Heyman diary therefore represents an example of a work that raises questions regarding authorship and points to the fate of personal narratives that are published after the original diarist no longer has control over her writings (see Kunt 2016 for a detailed analysis of the circumstances surrounding the authorship of Heyman's diary). I argue that one thing that the person who lays the foundation for a later book should always receive credit, no matter whether he or she was actually responsible for the final, published work. While in my opinion it would have been more fortunate if Germanus had not interfered with the authorship rights for *Bengáli tűz* at all, the fact that he did provide another interesting example of how family members may influence literary output while also raising a complex set of moral questions in connection to the very nature of authorship.

Interpreting *Bengáli tűz* Through Comparative Cultural Studies

As the term already suggests, the field of Comparative Cultural Studies provides an examination of culture via the examination of cultural domains, such as art, cinema, theatre, from the perspective(s) of different nationalities and peoples. The fundamental zone of Comparative Cultural Studies consists of the process of studying the society and the culture present in it from a comparative and cross-cultural angle (Saussy 2006: 175-185). I will compare Hajnóczy's work utilizing a comparative cultural perspective, analyzing in particular the metamorphosis that she underwent from the time she arrived in India until she returned to Hungary. My hypothesis is that Hajnóczy's mentality changed in a way that enabled her to improve and grow as an individual who was then not only able adapt to new cultural situations but also appreciate them and this change can be traced via the textual interpretation of *Bengáli tűz*.

The most dramatic demonstration of the cultural change in Hajnóczy's outlook is offered



at the beginning and the end of the narration of *Bengáli tűz*. Upon arriving in India, Hajnóczy wrote that, "It was a bleak place, where wisdom is piled so high, yet where all is so comfortless" (Hajnóczy 1993: 56). (See the picture on the left recording Hajnóczy's trip by ox cart to Shantiniketan, a photo that was included in the published version of her journal, as was the previous image.) During the same period,

she also initially stated that "I was excited, at last, the company of a white woman, to make life in India bearable!" (Hajnóczy 1993:57). After the span of three years, her opinion found at the end of the journal changed to one of, "All of us are born with the same eyes, yet we see things differently (Hajnóczy 1993: 04). Finally, after returning from India, she exclaimed, "Now, I realized that Himjhuri was right to seek solace in the wisdom of India" (Hajnóczy 1993:123). One important factor accounting for the change in Hajnóczy's attitude can also be explained by the fact that when she arrived in India she was not fluent in English, but by the end of her sojourn she had learned both English and Hindi (Hajnóczy 1993: 33). Due to the cultural and linguistic barriers between herself and native Indians, when she first arrived she possessed a low regard for India, and she was always in the search of the company of white people, but with time she gradually adapted to her environment and surrounding society, a process that strengthened her personality and allowed her to undergo a cultural transformation. Within the literature of the time, Hajnóczy's is a very rare instance of a foreign author who changed her perspective about India; in other words, her journal demonstrates that she did not remain the typical "memsahib" enjoying a ride in a rickshaw pulled by an underfed and impoverished Indian laborer, as is depicted in the photo below. By way of comparison, although he wrote at an earlier time, Rudyard Kipling never truly came to respect India and its natives in spite of possessing an immense knowledge of this nation's customs, peoples and language.



Hajnóczy Rózsa egy riksában – Kalkutta

Hajnóczy's descriptions of Indian cooking and eating habits and concepts of purity are another illustration of her gaining of understanding of the culture. For example, rather than simply be shocked by this difference, Hajnóczy describes why Indians both cook and eat on the floor, a religious tradition and custom related to Hindu culture. This habit was a foreign concept for all the other nationalities present at Shantiniketan: "In the kitchen, there is no sight of a table" (Hajnóczy 1993: 46). Hajnóczy also discusses how Indians eat only with their hands and how

difficult it was for the Hungarian palate to adjust to the strong flavours of the very different Indian spices found in every dish. In relation to symbolic and food purity, she additionally describes how some of the servants would not allow her in the kitchen as they viewed her as a contaminated Westerner; nor was she allowed to accompany the chef to the native markets (47).

Hajnóczy also draws a comparison between greetings and early morning rising in the two cultures. Indians greet each other by the mudra or 'gesture' of *Namaskar* instead of shaking hands or kissing one another on the cheeks, and they regularly rise earlier than people in the West; in India, someone who rises later than six o'clock in the morning is frequently thought to be ill. Rather than simply commenting on this "oddity" or discussing it in a negative way, Hajnóczy explains that Indians get up earlier due to both spiritual and geographic reasons, such as the fact that the sun rises earlier in India. She also provides the information that the Holy Books of Indian Mythology recommend getting up at four and chanting mantras to praise the Hindu gods and goddesses (72). Unsurprisingly, Hajnóczy was shocked by India's caste system, yet also particularly intrigued by the fact that an individual's name indicates his or her caste. While all these facts may be common knowledge today, in 1940s Hungary they were less well known and proved to be of great interest to a broad public.

During her personal metamorphosis, the author also made comments which underscore the difference between not only East and West, but also show the difference between Eastern and Western Europe as well, in particular of women of various nationalities whom she met with whom she cohabited in Tagore's ashram. In other words, Hajnóczy compared their attitudes and how they dealt with the issues they faced either while in Shantiniketan or in general. It must be mentioned that the participation of females in this ashram (whether they were Indian or from any other nationality) was an aspect of the fight for Indian independence that had been sparked by Mahatma Gandhi. Very few narrations represent this era in India's history from a female perspective, yet another reason why Hajnóczy's journal has garnered great appreciation in India. Accordingly, many of the events which took place in Shantiniketan during this pivotal moment in Indian history were keenly observed by the author, who related the condition of every female there in a clear manner.

Throughout the journal various subplots are described concerning several minor, European, female characters. One such character is Gertrud, a German girl who always depreciated Indian rituals and voiced her opinions regarding the inequality women had to face in Indian society and expressed a dislike for the double standards of Indian females and the negative customs society had in store for women in general (246). Yet another character was the American Lady Doctor, who despised the fact that her husband was not allowed to treat a difficult pregnancy even though he was a gynecologist (377); at this time in India, male gynecologists were not allowed to operate on or treat pregnant women due to the harsh and narrow-minded custom that forbid men from examining women to whom they were not married. As was detailed in Hajnóczy's narrative, the American Lady Doctor later became a fine example of a working woman in India, an unknown concept to the Indian nation, and eventually came to terms with her husband not being able to treat patients because of the rigid Indian norms. Two other women living in the ashram were fellow Hungarians, to whom Hajnóczy refers to as Böske 1 and, her daughter, Böske 2; Hajnóczy describes Böske 1 as a dotty Hungarian painter (381). The two Böskes had left their husbands to come to India and fulfil their dreams of becoming artists, examples that also illustrated how women could live independent lives.

The main female character Hajnóczy chose for the comparison of the two cultures was Helga, a Danish lady who was married to an Indian husband. Although Helga struggled to adapt to Indian rituals, she maintained the religious customs of dressed in the saree, the traditional garb of an Indian women, and displayed a commitment toward her husband and his culture. Helga eventually adopted the Hindi name of Himjhuri as a signal of her intent to become Indian. While she initially altered her entire identity for the benefit of her Hindu husband, in the end Helga/Himjhuri came to appreciate Hindu culture on the basis of its own merit and later joined Gandhi's movement to fight for freedom. Although at that time India was struggling for freedom against the British rule under the guidance of Mahatma Gandhi, Tagore did not want any of his students in Shantiniketan to take any part in the freedom fight. Helga defied Tagore as well when she chose to participate in the fight. From her point of view, she was married to an Indian professor, considered herself to be Indian and this gave her the right to take part in the freedom fight movement against British rule. Hajnóczy's depiction of Helga is also important because no other author has written about the role other nationalities played when it came to fighting for freedom with Mahatma Gandhi. Helga and other females like her played important roles in this historical event. Helga/Himjhuri's participation in the fight for the country's freedom as the Western wife of an Indian professor surpassed all the expectations held for middle-class women by Indian society at the time. This inspired many of the Indian women at the Shantiniketan to take the initiative and fight for their native country.

Hajnóczy also described some Indian women, such as Parvati, a sixteen-year-old widow, who had fallen in love with Santilal and tried to marry him in spite of the Indian customs forbidding the remarriage of widows. After consulting with Gertrud, the character of Nandini also chose her own groom, Bhandarkar, in defiance of all the rules and laws of marriage. As was shown in the examples of Parvati and Santilal, in India at the time females were not allowed to choose their own partners, while widows were not allowed to remarry. Indian women also struggled to be allowed to gain an education in spite of factors such as marriage, discrimination or issues related to caste, all circumstances which shaped the distinct shades of existence typifying an Indian woman's life at the time. Because Indian society at the time strongly clung to customs such as child marriage, arranged marriages or the prohibition of widows remarrying, Indian women were not only exposed to education in Shantiniketan, but could also receive support and motivation from the Western women who were also living there. It must also be mentioned that the Indian women staying in Shantiniketan came from upper middle-class families, a factor that meant they still had more opportunities compared to others. Rabindranath Tagore had a stellar reputation and these families wanted their daughters to learn and grow into mature human beings. Nandini's father, for example, was an enlightened solicitor and had the drive to send his daughter to this reputable institution. This unique circumstance resulted in a rare opportunity that allowed both Indian and Western women to support and inspire one another as they faced their own problems and societal obstacles. The comparison made between all the major female characters, such as the Danish Helga/Himjhuri, the German Gertrud, the Hungarian painters Böske 1 and Böske 2 and the American lady doctor illustrates how these women were more open and therefore did not hide their emotions, their taste in clothing, or attitudes towards many different Indian customs and norms. While these Western women did not suffer under the old traditional and social customs of India, it cannot be forgotten that they had plenty of their own limitations to face and confront. In the end, the different attitudes of all the women of different nationalities toward the many different cultures mentioned in *Bengáli tűz* makes it

possible for us to study many aspects of comparative culture based on Hajnóczy's observations. Perhaps most importantly, *Bengáli tűz* tells the story of how an international community of women cooperated amongst themselves while contributing—to lesser or greater extents—to a political and historical movement that led to India's independence. A male perspective would have undoubtedly told this narrative from a very different stance or by focusing on other events and characters.

As a foreign woman, visiting another country without knowing anything about the customs or rituals found there was an enormous challenge for Rózsa G. Hajnóczy. After a lengthy struggle, Hajnóczy was finally able to adapt to her new environment and spent the rest of her stay in India appreciating her surroundings. As a remarkably sensitive woman, Hajnóczy was able to make keen observations regarding the other women who surrounded her during a significant time and at a rare site of Indian history. While Hajnóczy scrutinized the women from various nationalities, she still found a common ground for building an emotional and sensitive rapport with them. As an Indian woman, I myself found it fascinating to discover how a Hungarian woman was able to make such keen observations regarding the problems and life of Indian women at this time. While she showed enormous fortitude in overcoming cultural and linguistic barriers and boundaries, Hajnóczy was unfortunately not able to conquer the depression to which she eventually succumbed even though she experienced a cultural transformation that made her emotionally strong and stable in many ways.

For the readers of the English and Hindi versions of the book, Hajnóczy will always remain the author of the journal. For Hungarian readers, however, some doubt remains regarding the identity of the actual author of this unique journal. The few (uncorroborated) explanations that can be used to rationalize why Gyula Germanus came forward to claim the authorship of *Bengáli tűz* thirty-one years after the book's first edition had been published remain insufficient as Germanus would never have been able to call the book entirely his own work since Hajnóczy's personal observations and experiences provided the source of this narrative, a factor that will always make her the sole author of *Bengáli tűz*.

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