

## Conclusion

This thesis grew out of a conflict between my two selves— the romantic and the feminist. An avid reader of romance and addicted to romantic films since adolescence, my feminist self increasingly sensed a contradiction between the realities of gender inequality and discrimination and the romantic utopia engendered by fiction and films. My research stemmed from the desire to try to resolve this contradiction. I was particularly interested in Bengali women’s experiences of socially prohibited love in the late colonial period. This again was inspired by an array of fictional women— Rohini, Shaibalini, Rajlakshmi, Abhaya, Kiranmoyee, Sabitri, Binodini, Bimala and many others— all of whom had asserted their love, transgressing societal norms. They had failed to unite with their lovers and had faced death, insanity or exile in the end. I empathised with these women in love. I then became curious to know more about their counterparts in flesh and blood, the women who lived, loved and suffered for their love in late colonial Bengal. I sought to locate their experiences of love within a patriarchal order of things. Having concluded my research, I am able to reconcile the apparent contradictions between passionate heterosexual love and the fact of men’s domination over women. In the upper-caste middle class milieu of late colonial Bengal, a wife’s choiceless, obligatory love for her husband was emphasized only to buttress the unequal nature of conjugality. The assertion of love by women prior to or outside conjugality and even after widowhood was sought to be prohibited and punished. At the same time, my thesis reveals, love that asserted itself in prohibited spaces in defiance of mechanisms of control was equally embedded in the matrix of unequal gender relations. Women could not escape gender inequality even by their acts of transgression. While the marital family was undeniably the site of patriarchy, the cohabitation of non-marital lovers was equally premised on gender inequality and hierarchy. Love, whether conjugal, pre-conjugal or extra-conjugal, was thus an intrinsically gendered experience. The ‘revolutions of the heart’, to borrow a few phrases deployed by Wendy Langford in her ‘anatomy of love’, were in effect ‘misguided revolutions’.<sup>1</sup> Love was unable to transcend the realm of patriarchy.

My thesis also brings to light, in the context of late colonial Bengal, the unprecedented modalities and strategies deployed by patriarchy to control women’s

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<sup>1</sup> See Wendy Langford, *Revolutions of the Heart*. See Chapter Seven: ‘Misguided Revolutions’.

affect and sexuality, as well as the overwhelming patriarchal anxieties regarding female transgression. Existing studies of the affective lives of the Bengali upper-caste middle class people in late colonial Bengal have focused largely on the various ideological ingredients that permeated the affective domain of the Bengali *bhadralok* in this period. They have underscored how the Bengali middle class appropriated European ideas of companionate marriage, of conjugal love imbued with romantic love, of a puritan sexual morality as an outcome of their intellectual contact with the west. Historians have also highlighted how the Bengali intelligentsia fashioned the model of the good wife who was expected to be the companion to her husband like her European counterparts, combining this role harmoniously with her traditional roles of a *satilakshmi*, a *patibrata*.<sup>2</sup> A new ethos imbued with such new ideas of conjugal love and womanhood was contrasted with ‘long established patterns of behaviour’ characterized by the transgression of marital norms by both men and women.<sup>3</sup> This thesis seeks to highlight how the varied efforts at the ideological refashioning of womanhood and conjugal love were aimed towards a more stringent control on women’s affect and sexuality and how they buttressed the asymmetrical pattern of gender relations prevailing in Hindu society. The hegemony of the traditional ideology of a non-consensual, indissoluble conjugal love, based on the wife’s unconditional subjection to her husband, was actually reinforced by various ideological devices. The reinforcement of the patriarchal moral order, at the same time, was intricately intertwined with an overpowering anxiety that women would defy the control on their affect and sexuality on account of their supposedly innate tendencies towards promiscuity. My thesis reveals how apprehensions that women would deviate from the ideals of chastity and fidelity provoked, among other things, reactions against representations of women’s pre-marital and non-conjugal love as well as other manifestations of marital defiance in the newly burgeoned genre of the novel. The Bengali literati feared that the literary portrayals of women’s desire and defiance would adversely affect the weak, impressionable and corruptible minds of women readers, drawing them into romantic and sexual liaisons prior to or outside marriage and inciting them to subvert the prescribed ideals of womanhood. The equilibrium of domestic life and society at large would then be gravely jeopardized.

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<sup>2</sup> Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal 1849-1905*; Tapan Raychaudhuri, ‘Love in a Colonial Climate’; Partha Chatterjee, ‘The Nation and its Women’; Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Difference-Deferral of a Colonial Modernity’, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Raychaudhuri, ‘Love in a Colonial Climate’.

Hitherto, historians have drawn attention to the numerous polemical tracts and treatises that surfaced in the second half of the nineteenth century for an understanding of the redefined parameters of the ideologies of conjugality and womanhood. The anxieties about the disruptive impact of novels set the stage for more aggressive articulations of these ideas and values through a wide repertoire of writings that included plays, farces, satirical tracts as well as serious treatises on literary criticism. Moreover, while in an earlier phase of reaction directed against the medieval literary narratives, women's deviant love was condemned as an unsavoury aspect of indigenous tradition, critics of the novel considered such love a vice imported from the west by novelists, thus deploying love as an element in their critique of the western culture. The assertion of love prior to or beyond the conjugal space along with other acts of marital defiance were ultimately seen as the manifestations of the western spirit of individualism that was incompatible with the ethos of Hindu society. In this way, anxieties about the immoral impact of novels worked their way into the burgeoning project of a Hindu revivalist nationalism. A Hindu nationalist intelligentsia not only predicated the spiritual greatness of the Hindu nation on the chaste Hindu wife but also strove to forge in a unique manner a linkage between womanhood, literature and the nation. It expected literature to serve the Hindu nation by upholding its prescribed model of womanhood and condemned it if it did not.

My thesis brings to the fore an apparent paradox. While male novelists were chastised for portraying transgressive love, women authors were largely spared adverse criticism even though they dealt with similar themes of transgression. If reading a novel was bad for women, writing one should have been worse. Interestingly, while silence greeted most novels by women, a few, despite their subversive content, were acclaimed for their celebration of the ideals of *satitva* and *patibratya*. Such a critical exercise was propelled by the same anxieties about the immoral impact of novels and fears of female transgression, manifested in the tendency to downplay the subversive aspects of a woman's novel and foreground the conformist ones and thereby appropriate women's writing within the Hindu nationalist discourse on womanhood. The differential modes of critical evaluation are indicative of the diversity of strategic manoeuvres of a nationalist patriarchy seeking to contain the threat posed by portrayals of women's transgressive love in novels.

This thesis raises fresh doubts about the validity of Partha Chatterjee's notion of the nationalist resolution of the women's question.<sup>4</sup> The obsessive deliberations of the nationalist intelligentsia intended to reconceptualize gender roles and relations as well as the tremendous backlash against the literary portrayals of women's desire and defiance, processes that continued till as late as the third decade of the twentieth century, would have been redundant had nationalism resolved the women's question. This multilayered, and to a great extent, repetitive, ideological exercise indicated that the 'new patriarchy', despite its hegemonic aspirations, felt gravely challenged. While literary portrayals of gender relations were perceived as a threat to the ideological projects of this new patriarchy, my thesis brings to light the actual incidence of transgression by women of the Hindu upper castes, and, to a limited extent, by women of the Brahmo Samaj, their assertion of love outside the conjugal space—love that defied the hegemony of the ideology of choiceless, inviolate conjugality. While many women did indeed strive to conform to the norms of pre-marital chastity, of a marriage arranged by guardians, of an everlasting fidelity to husband, there were others who resented the denial of choice, agency and fulfilment in their quotidian existence and defied attempts to confine their affect and sexuality within a prescribed form of conjugality. The women's question was thus a daily contested terrain. While a notion of the resolution of the women's question thus becomes questionable, this research seeks to underscore the feminist significance of women's transgression. It finds in such transgressive love the assertion of choice and agency by some women and the urge to break the fetters on their desires. It sees the very intimate, personal experience called love as a political exercise, the expression of desire an act of defiance of patriarchy, while realizing, at the same time, that such defiance does not emancipate love from the stranglehold of patriarchy.

My thesis brings into sharper focus the divergence and contradictions between the legitimacy accorded to marriages by law and the legitimacy granted by society. While the refusal of Hindu society to grant legitimacy to the remarriage of a widow, despite its legalization in 1856, has already been revealed in previous research,<sup>5</sup> my

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<sup>4</sup> Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question' and 'The Nation and Its Women'. The notion of the nationalist resolution of the women's question has been critiqued by Himani Banerjee in 'Projects of Hegemony: Towards a Critique of Subaltern Studies' Resolution of the Women's Question', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 11 March 2000. Chatterjee's position has also been questioned by Malini Bhattacharya in the Introduction to *Talking of Power* (already discussed in the Introduction of this thesis) and by Jasodhara Bagchi in 'Nari Lekhani' in *Nari o Nari Samasya*.

<sup>5</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'Caste, Widow Remarriage and the Reform of Popular Culture'.

thesis shows how the legality conferred on a civil, irreligious marriage by the Act of 1872 did not ipso facto grant it social acceptance even within the Brahmo Samaj, the sect which had initiated the Act. Within the Brahmo Samaj, divergent perceptions of what constituted a valid and legitimate form of marriage were a perpetual cause of tension among factions and individual members of the Samaj. In Hindu society, departures from the prescribed rituals of a Hindu marriage by lovers keen to formalize their relationship rendered social and even legal sanction of their marriage largely elusive. Often, the very fact of a self-executed marriage rendered it socially illegitimate, despite manoeuvres by lovers to seek religious sanction. At the same time, the diverse initiatives taken by lovers for legitimacy not only enhanced the fluid and protean character of marriage within the Brahmo Samaj but also assailed the hegemony of the brahmanical institution of marriage by creating an alternative space marked by a plurality of matrimonial practices.

A diversity of strategies was adopted by public institutions like the bureaucracy as well as the judicial apparatus of the colonial state in reinforcing the hostile societal attitudes towards women's transgressive love. In the process, the limits of the dichotomies of private and public were exposed. The workings of a patriarchy that pervaded family, society and the state, transcending the apparent contradiction of interests between the colonizer and colonized were also brought to light. My research reveals how a deviant woman's reproductive sexuality became an object of diverse and often contradictory forms of control. For instance, while a pregnant widow's lover as well as her family members exerted pressure on her to abort, the bureaucracy at times exercised surveillance on pregnant widows with a view to preventing their abortion, uncaring about the implications of illegitimate motherhood. My thesis also enhances the understanding of the gendered workings of the colonial judiciary. The colonial state professed an emancipatory agenda, with its self-imposed burden of liberating Indian women from the snare of ignorance and barbarism. The judicial organ of the colonial state pronounced its judgment in favour of the property rights of a few widows who had become 'unchaste' after their succession to their husband's property, thus testifying to an 'emancipatory zeal'. While the absolute nature of property rights was also upheld in the process, the verdicts in these cases provoked one of the earliest expressions of a revivalist Hindu nationalism. However, a few other verdicts against widows who had become 'unchaste' prior to succession largely eluded the attention of the Hindu intelligentsia.

What remained unnoticed was the uncritical appropriation of the Hindu notion of chastity by the colonial judiciary and also its overall tendency to scrupulously adhere to the asymmetrical prescriptions of the Hindu shastras. Further, while the colonial judiciary placed women beyond the purview of punishment in case of ‘offences’ like adultery or elopement, unlike the ancient Indian state, it simultaneously sought to deny her agency and see her as a victim of male design rather than as a desirous female subject. The tendency to deny a woman’s affective agency and transform her into a victim was also shared by the print media. The politics of communalism reinforced the discourses of victimization upheld both by the judiciary and the print media.

This thesis foregrounds the role of deviant women as intelligent and vociferous interlocutors, taking into account, at the same time, the surrenders and compromises as well the predicament of deviant women faced with abject denial of agency. Availing the print media for their indignant self-articulation, several women drew attention to the circumstances that propelled their transgression and proceeded to interrogate prevailing social norms. A few women legally contested familial intimidation and acts of desertion and betrayal by their lovers. Widows in love initiated law suits contesting conspiracies of relatives to disinherit them, abandoned women sued their lovers demanding maintenance of their illegitimate children with varying degrees of success. Thus women availed the very instruments of the public sphere that were at times deployed against them, to seek redressal of the injustice they were subjected to. At the same time, some women succumbed to familial and societal pressure and disavowed their transgressive actions. For instance, a few women, who had eloped but were captured, surrendered to pressure in the courtroom, conformed to the victim image so fervently upheld by their families and the judiciary, and cooperated with them in incriminating their lovers, even though they hardly stood a chance of regaining their old location within family and society.

The predicament of women in situations of illegitimate pregnancy has also been brought under scrutiny. Widows and wives, pregnant from relationships outside marriage, generally proceeded to abort their foetuses. Such a step was dictated by familial and societal pressure and the deviant woman’s own realization that her pregnancy had driven her into a cul-de-sac. For the sake of her continued existence within respectable society, she had no option but to terminate her pregnancy. If she opted for motherhood, she had to move beyond the portals of respectable society. My

thesis, instead of highlighting a transgressive woman's active agency and exercise of choice in her act of abortion, draws attention to the abject denial of choice in her situation.

Prostitution in colonial Bengal is already a theme of extensive research.<sup>6</sup> This research seeks to further the understanding of prostitution in colonial Bengal by highlighting the linkage between women's transgressive love, their experiences of social ostracism, coupled with deception and desertion by their lovers, and the swelling ranks of prostitutes. A survey of archival records as well as interview-based reports in newspapers serve to prove that prostitution was the ultimate fate of many women who dared to assert their desire in defiance of prevailing norms.

The debates and deliberations around the issues of hysteria and suicide, hitherto unrecorded, reveal how this western category of mental affliction with its attendant gender stereotypes entered the intellectual vocabulary of the Bengali *bhadralok* and was in turn deployed by them to launch a cultural critique of the west. Reconfigured as the manifestation of unfulfilled transgressive desires induced by western culture and transmitted by artefacts like the novel, hysteria was also linked in an unprecedented manner in the discourses of a revivalist Hindu intelligentsia to a perceived suicide spree among Bengali women. The traditional patriarchal anxieties regarding an untrammelled female sexuality were thus reworked in nationalist discourse and transformed into a vexed issue of mental health. This thesis thus seeks to not only explore the various layers in Hindu upper-caste Bengali women's experiences of socially prohibited heterosexual love but also links these to the patriarchal discourses on women's transgression in late colonial Bengal.

I end by drawing attention to an apparent paradox. If the denial of choice and agency in marriage had driven women in late colonial Bengal to extra-marital relations, the relatively greater freedom of choice in marriage enjoyed by women in the present milieu should have reduced the incidence of such relationships. Undeniably, in the post-independence decades, the institution of Hindu marriage affords a greater degree of freedom of choice and agency to women. While love marriages have become a more acceptable proposition among the Bengali middle class, women and also men are able to exercise their choice and assert their preferences to a much greater degree even within the framework of an arranged

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<sup>6</sup> Sumanta Banerjee, *The Dangerous Outcast*; Sumanta Banerjee (Bandyopadhyay), *Asruta Kanthaswar*, Ratnabali Chatterjee, 'Constructing the Beshya in Nineteenth Century Bengal' etc.

marriage. The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 has provided men and women marrying according to Hindu rituals the right to divorce their spouses. However, there is an ostensible trend towards extra-marital involvements among married women of the Bengali urban middle class, a trend indicated, for instance, by a recent survey on marriage<sup>7</sup> and also reaffirmed by contemporary Bengali films and literature. These women are legally equipped to exit from their present marriages and remarry. Some of them are also financially empowered to lead a single existence if desired. Yet, most of them pursue extra-marital relations without choosing to dissolve their marriages. This trend is also noticed among women in other parts of the country as well. The situation no longer seems paradoxical, however, if one takes into account the social and material constraints that prevent many women from availing the legal option of divorce. Marriage continues to be regarded as largely indissoluble despite the legal freedom of exit. My study of the pre-marital and extra-marital relations of high caste/middle class women in late colonial Bengal, by offering a historical perspective on marriage and its transgressions thus brings to light the continuities and the long-drawn trends in this regard and also enables a more informed understanding of contemporary societal issues.

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<sup>7</sup> Samita Sen, Nandita Dhawan, Madhurima Mukhopadhyay et al, *Renegotiating Gender Relations in Marriage: Family, Class and Community in Kolkata in an Era of Globalisation: A Report*, School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, 2009, pp.50-51.