

The Masculinist Construction of the National Woman and Her Gendered Practice of Love in the Colonial Bengali Fairy Tale Tradition

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ABSTRACT

This article will concentrate on the discourses that circulated around the literary genre of the Bengali fairy tale as it developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century India, especially regarding its ownership and genesis, and the interaction of this with the political/social debates/discourses surrounding the position and role of women. The discourses generated through the various prefaces and commentaries that accompanied the story collections, constructed a certain idea of the national woman as the bearer of tradition. They posit a theory of the sustenance of indigenous cultural traditions (which included story telling traditions) in her tremendous capacity for all-consuming love. At the same time, the story texts presented and focused on self-sacrificing heroines who fit into the model of indigenous womanhood that was being constructed during this period. This article will argue that these discourses were built on a series of erasures of women's voices, life stages and emotional spectrums but were serving the purpose of proving the superiority of indigenous traditions over that of the British imperialists. This project of defending Indian tradition, a central aspect of the cultural resistance to British imperialism, was a masculinist project. It reduced women to being mere sites and objects of knowledge.

Keywords: gender and love, feminist standpoint, colonial literature, Bengali fairy tale, nineteenth century women's question in India

INTRODUCTION

This article will study the classic literary genre of the Bengali fairy tale as it developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century India. The fairy tale collections that appeared during this period in Bengal¹, while purporting to be written transcriptions of an oral tradition, were effectively creating a new literary tradition distinct from the oral storytelling traditions that pre-existed in the region. This article will concentrate on the popular discourses that circulated around this emerging literary tradition especially regarding its ownership and genesis, and the interaction of this with the political/social debates/discourses surrounding the position and role of women. The Bengali fairy tale tradition was linked to the unlettered Indian woman who was untouched and thereby untainted by the colonial encounter, by indigenous Bengali collectors and their fellow intellectuals who commented on the texts. The discourses generated through the various prefaces, commentaries and introductory prose pieces that accompanied the story collections, constructed a certain idea of the national woman as the bearer of tradition and posited a theory of the sustenance of indigenous cultural traditions (which included story telling traditions) in her tremendous capacity for all-consuming love. At the same time the story texts presented and focused on self-sacrificing heroines who fit into the model of indigenous womanhood that was being constructed during this period. This article will argue that these discourses were built on a series of erasures of women's voices, life stages and emotional spectrums but were serving the purpose of proving the superiority of indigenous traditions over that of the British imperialists. This project of defending Indian traditions, a central aspect of the cultural resistance

¹ Bengal, historically a region within Eastern India, became the centre of the colonial British administration and housed the capital of Colonial India, Calcutta. The region was divided twice during the course of the early twentieth century, in 1905, by Lord Curzon but the partition was revoked in 1911. However, it was carved up a second time during the partition of India in 1947 and divided into two separate regions, the state of West Bengal in India and the region of East Pakistan in Pakistan. East Pakistan later became an independent nation Bangladesh in 1971 after separating from West Pakistan, which remained as the nation of Pakistan.

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to British imperialism, was a masculinist project (Chatterjee, 1993; Sarkar, 2001). It reduced women to being mere sites and objects of knowledge on the one hand, and on the other, in a much more problematic situation, sought to defend the indefensible aspects of indigenous patriarchal social organisation that itself had colonised, often fatally, women's bodies.

The discourses generated around the Bengali fairy tale were created by men, both British and Indian. In the nationalist period, which is the focus of this article, it was male members of the indigenous intelligentsia belonging entirely to the *bhadrolok* (refined class), a hybrid class which was grounded in both indigenous Bengali culture as well as in Western thought induced by the colonial education system, who were generating much of the published texts as well as the discourses around them. These print productions marked the entry of a pre-colonial oral narrative tradition into postcolonial modern print circulation. The narrative tradition on which these texts were based, called *rupkatha*, was a Bengali folk tradition of fantasy and romance narratives that had roots in social reality. However, the idea of the *rupkatha* as the Bengali equivalent of the European fairy tale came into existence in the colonial period under the influence of British literary genres as native scholars searched indigenous storytelling traditions for forms that were equivalent to English literary genres. The nineteenth century print market of the city of Calcutta was filled with translations of English books especially those that were aimed at children. This hegemonic dominance of British/European books was sought to be countered during the nationalist awakening that followed the first partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon in 1905. The ensuing political movement produced a massive cultural resistance that sought a nationalist awakening through the revival of indigenous cultural forms. However, by purporting to transcribe and record cultural traditions belonging to women, these men were speaking *for women*. There were attempts at sanitising anything uncomfortable. The sexual, the bawdy and counter-cultural voices were all censored out of the texts by the collector-writers and the commentators who, being members of the *bhadrolok*, had hegemonic control over indigenous knowledge production (Banerjee, 1989). At the same time, in the public debates that raged about indigenous women, as the historian Tanika Sarkar extensively discusses, women were reduced to being mere sites of debate, where men from various camps, the indigenous reformist, the nationalist-conservationist and the British administrative all sought to represent their voices without ever taking women's voices directly into consideration (Sarkar, 2001). This erasure of women's voices from public policy and social discourses is of course the general trend of history as Sandra Harding comments:

Women, like members of other oppressed groups, had long been the object of the inquiries of their actual or would-be rulers. Yet the research disciplines and the public policy institutions that depended upon them permitted no conceptual frameworks in which women as a group—or, rather, as groups located in different class, racial, ethnic, and sexual locations in local, national, and global social relations—became the subjects—the authors—of knowledge. Could women (in various diverse collectivities) become subjects of knowledge? (Harding, 2004: 4)

Bengali women in the late nineteenth and twentieth century thus occupied an intersectional social position where their lives were circumscribed both through indigenous patriarchy as well as the racially discriminatory social structures of British colonialism. This article will locate its standpoint in the perspective of their lived material lives, which I propose allows for a better view of the social picture of the time and provides ground for a necessary critique of the problematic aspects of gender myths that were generated by the early nationalist discourses and which have pervaded the life of the post-colonial nation since. In the words of Nancy Hartsock, the standpoint 'carries with it the contention that there are some perspectives on society from which, however well-intentioned one may be, the real relations of humans with each other and with the natural world are not visible' (Hartsock, 2004: 37). The native Bengali intelligentsia were male members of the *bhadrolok* classes who in terms of social structures occupied privileged positions, being male, upper-middle class and upper caste. They had benefitted from the colonial education system which had allowed them to rise to positions of privilege under the class structures created by the colonial administration. Under the circumstances that their perspectives excluded the material conditions of the oppressed groups both in terms of gender, caste and class was a very real possibility. The following political and epistemological claims made by Nancy Hartsock forms the basis of my argument:

(1) Material life (...) not only structures but sets limits on the understanding of social relations. (2) If material life is structured in fundamentally opposing ways for two different groups, one can expect that the vision of each will represent an inversion of the other, and in systems of domination the vision available to the rulers will be both partial and perverse. (3) The vision of the ruling class (or gender) structures the material relations in which all parties are forced to participate, and therefore cannot be dismissed as simply false. (4) In consequence, the vision available to the oppressed group must be struggled for and represents an achievement which requires both science to see beneath the surface of the social relations in which all are forced to participate, and the education which can only grow from struggle to change those relations. (5) As an engaged vision, the understanding of the oppressed, the

adoption of a standpoint exposes the real relations among human beings as inhuman, points beyond the present, and carries a historically liberatory role. (Hartssock, 2004: 37)

Since the discourses generated around the Bengali fairy tale was exclusively of *bhadrolok* origin, they necessarily represented a partial view, a view from above which could not and did not take into account the material life conditions of those below and yet at the same time purported to present a totality and an objective view of things as they were. To take a standpoint then, in the sense of a vision that seeks to engage with the material reality of the lives of women, as an oppressed group, is to take a political position that is not a given but requires struggle and engaged striving. This article will do so through critical readings of *bhadrolok* texts, both the fairy tale texts as well as the commentaries, for gaps and ruptures which allow glimpses into the erasures of material lives. The attempt will be to read the texts with deliberate suspicion and detailed attention to reading in between the lines. I will also take into consideration late nineteenth and early twentieth political and social commentaries to present a clearer picture of the continuity of *bhadrolok* discourses across the social order and the gaps and problems in them.

The various prefaces, commentaries, introductions as Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's author's introduction to *Thakurmar Jhuli* (1907) and *Thakurdadar Jhuli* (1909), Dinesh Chandra Sen's influential discussion in *The Folk Literature of Bengal* (1920), Rabindranath Tagore's invited preface to *Thakurmar Jhuli* (1907) and Rev. Lal Behari Day's Preface to his *Folktales of Bengal* (1883) that served as paratexts, imposed certain meanings on the story collections, enforced a layer of rich symbolism on the loose collection of stories, and enmeshed works of folkloric/literary scholarship into the bouquet of nationalist productions and discursive practises. Jack Zipes, drawing from Gérard Genette (1997), who theorised paratexts as being gateway to texts, suggested that paratexts 'create texts, they manage them (these texts) and they fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them...a paratext constructs, lives in, and can affect the running of the text' (Zipes, 2014: 209). The paratexts to Bengali fairy tale texts, integrally connected the stories to women's love by claiming that not only were these stories drawn from popular women's tradition but that they were particularly the product of maternal love. In the Preface that accompanied Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Thakurmar Jhuli* (1907), the landmark text of the nationalist phase of fairy tale collection, Tagore, the Nobel laureate poet, claimed that the stories collected in the volume belonged to the loving Bengali mother and compared the stories to mother's milk. He placed this body of stories in opposition to the colonial English education which he claimed came from the industrialised Manchester cotton mills and was just as mechanical. However, just as British heavy industry had destroyed Indian cottage industries, the British education system and its culture emphasising English literacy and the written word was also destroying indigenous oral story traditions. The substitution of mother for women ensured the subsuming of the entire spectrum of womanhood with its diversity under the category of mother. The biggest victim of this was the figure of the girl child who was in general a marginalised figure among the dominant cultural and political discourses of the period. The girl child who should have been the primary reader/listener of such tales, considering the fact that the purported progenitors of the storytelling tradition that was under serious threat were women, which in turn made her the future bearer of the storytelling tradition and thereby the key figure within the material practise of storytelling, was glaringly left out from the discussion forwarded by these paratexts. This discourse instead appeared to be centrally focused on the mother and the male child.

Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, the most well-known among the contemporary writers, often colloquially referred to as the 'Grimm of Bengal', opened his introduction to *Thakurmar Jhuli* with a statement that the work of telling stories really belonged to Bengali mothers, a work that he had been forced to take up because Bengali mothers had allegedly forgotten this task. His purpose in publishing this volume was to become of use to these mothers and revive the forgotten tradition among them. In a poem which followed this piece and served as a verse introduction to the volume, Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar called out to the *bou*, the daughters-in-law/wives, and dedicated the work to them. The poem additionally marked out children as the recipients of the stories, suggesting that these were that were told by mothers to their children during bedtime. However, this poem remains significant as the only instance where the girl child (*kehukei*) was mentioned by category along with the boy child. With the exception proving the rule, in all other poems that followed (which were included before the main stories in an attempt to preserve folkloric elements) all of them referred to the boy child (*kehokon*) exclusively. Lines like 'My little boy giggles', 'my little boy is in the lord's image' and 'my little boy's smile is precious, who has blest the grandmother's lap?' remain prominent. Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel laureate poet and one of the finest of early twentieth century cultural critics, in the celebrated Preface that he wrote for the same volume himself, marks out the Martin and Burke reading of boy child or *chele* as the intended reader for the volume. Lal Behari Day, the first native collector/author to publish a volume of fairy stories, who was writing on the request of the British collector R. C. Temple and was addressing the Anglophone world under the British Empire, simply mentioned his own boyhood and the fact of his hearing these stories from a woman called Shambhu's mother. In each of these texts the girl child seems lost between the twin figures of the mother and the boy child and remains conspicuous through her absence.

When one looks at the various nineteenth century debates and discourses that surrounded the issues affecting girl children, such as the passing of the Act banning *sati* in 1829², and the initiatives taken by Vidyasagar for women's education and for widow remarriage, leading to the passing of the widow remarriage act of 1853³, the arguments never feature the idea of these social practises being harmful for the girl as a *child*. Although the official British discourse against the practice of *sati* described the widow as a 'tender child', both the Hindu orthodoxy and the reformers deployed the *Shastras*⁴ to their benefits in their arguments and debated over the wellbeing of the social order in the context of these practices. Jasodhara Bagchi points out that 'Vidyasagar shared with the Hindu orthodoxy the conviction that the purity of the social order is closely tied up with the right channelling of female sexuality through marriage' (Bagchi, 1993: 2215). This elision of the girl child becomes all the more shocking when one looks at the contemporary public debates on child marriage, a practice which directly affected girl children in equal measure if not in larger numbers than boys. The focus of the arguments however remained on boys and on the health of the society in general. Monmayee Basu in her monograph *Hindu Women and Marriage Law: From Sacrament to Contract* (2004) discusses how Vidyasagar in his treatise against child marriage, talked about conjugal immaturity that resulted from immature spouses entering into a marriage and the detrimental effect of that on the subsequent health of children that resulted from such a union. Articles published in contemporary regional periodicals and newspapers, *Samvad Pravakar*, *Bamabodhini Patrika*, *Somprakash* during the middle of the nineteenth century denounced child marriage as detrimental to the education of young boys and instrumental in the creation of the horrors of poverty and ill health and the cause of decay of the human race (Basu, 2004: 40). The girl child is never directly addressed in these arguments; instead, she is conceptualised only as a future wife or mother of the community and the country. She could not be imagined outside of her sexual function even at the stage where sexual awakening had not taken place.

In the process of the gender socialisation of the girl child, what she should be and should do was determined by the need for preparing her for her future domestic role as the good wife and the good mother. Jasodhara Bagchi in her seminal essay on Bengali women's lives in the nineteenth century states that 'her upbringing was that of a good, well protected, *proto-bhadramahila* (emphasis added), encouraged to play feminine games of doll's house, read books "suitable" for girls, discouraged from physical activity' (Bagchi, 1993: 2218). The doll's house games usually mimicked adult domestic life and hence as such served a purpose in initiating the girl child into her domestic roles. The existence of the precocious child, who had more knowledge of worldly affairs than she should, often endearingly referred to as '*ginni*' a word which was otherwise used for the wife or the homemaker appeared abundantly in Bengali literature. What emerges from here is the hyphenated figure of the child-woman. In most discussions of the period, she appeared as the child-bride, as the child-wife and as the child-widow but somehow never as only a child. The 'suitable' books that were popular reading material for girl children traced the ideal relationship between men and women, praised domestic efficiency and provided examples from the life of heroines such as Sita, Savitri and others (Bandopadhyay, 1991: 163). Among these, *Sushilar Upakhyan*, which documented the life of Sushila, the ideal child-woman, was one book that was widely popular. Shibaji Bandopadhyay observes that just as the children's primers, Madanmohan Tarkalankar's *Shishubshikhya* and Vidyasagar's *Barnaparichay* had constructed the idea of the good boy Gopal and the bad boy Rakhhal, *Shushilar Upakhyan* had constructed the idea of their wives and mothers (Bandopadhyay, 1991: 213). To say 'children's' primers is then misleading because it was only boys who found representation as children in these books. The dialectics was between the *Gopals* who were the obedient and social boys and *Rakhals* who were troublesome. The girl child stood outside this dialectic and was thus never seen in their pages. There was no need for a good girl who did her lessons on time and did not fight with her friends, even in educational primers where she would have been represented prior to her role as wife

² The Sati Regulation of 1829 was the first major legislation passed by the British in India which introduced social reform by declaring the practise of *sati* or burning of widows alive on the funeral pyres of their husbands illegal and punishable by criminal courts. The legislation was passed by the Governor-General William Bentinck and marked the culmination of a sustained campaign to end the practise of *sati* by Bengali reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy and European Christian missionaries like William Carey. The act was unsuccessfully opposed by conservative sections of Hindu community lead by Dharma Sabha and scholars like Radhakanta Deb who had founded the organisation (Dharma Sabha) to counter the ongoing social reform movement.

³ The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act passed by Lord Canning in 1856 was the second major social reform legislation that legalised the remarriage of widows in all jurisdictions of India under East India Company rule. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagr, the main campaigner supported by other prominent men, petitioned the Legislative Council but was again opposed by Radhakanta Deb and the Dharma Sabha. Lord Dalhousie finalised the bill despite the opposition. However, a point to be noted is that both *sati* and the issue of young widows were Hindu upper caste problems. The issues gained attention of the British because it was this section of the population who formed the social elite and interacted with the British administrators. The majority of Hindu middle and lower castes, and Bengali muslims (also mainly descended from lower and middle castes) neither prohibited remarriage of widows nor practised *sati*.

⁴ The *Shastras* were religious treatises that had come down from ancient India and served as law books that regulated social conduct and especially governed practices surrounding birth, marriage and death.

and mother. She was rarely, if ever, seen detached from those roles. Thus, the books which specifically targeted the girl child were interested in presenting role models like *Shushila* who was the ideal, self-sacrificing, loving, righteous, and efficient wife to her (also idealised) husband. The girl child as a category was subsumed within the general conception of womanhood, as attached to her reproductive function. This, however, is not a cultural fact that was peculiar to Bengal. Mary Jane Kehily notes in her introductory discussion of childhood that 'the concept of childhood remains imbued with significance that encode what children mean to adults' (Kehily, 2009: 45). As the girl child in colonial Bengali households was burdened with the responsibility of 'keeping the patriarchal structure of the...family in place' she was from her infancy seen as a proto-woman (Bagchi, 1993: 2214). Boys, on the other hand were the 'first specialised children'. Kehily writes that from sixteenth century onwards, Western Europe saw an increasing differentiation in the way adults and children were represented. As childhood came to be seen as a new concept in the nineteenth century west, 'boys were singled out as a distinct and different category. The historical development of childhood in Western Europe was articulated through boyhood' and very importantly through white, middle class boyhood (Kehily, 2009: 44). The development of the concept of childhood was also marked by a simultaneous growth in specialised literature aimed exclusively at children. Nineteenth century colonial Bengal too had seen the growth of the publishing market under the category of children's literature. Some of the Bengali fairy tale collections were also part of that growing corpus of literature. This had developed under the influence of the cultural exchange that marked the heyday of British colonialist rule over the region. In Bengali children's literature too, the signifiers '*cbele*' and '*chelebela*' (boy and boyhood) came to be the universalised markers of child and childhood which seeped into and stayed in Bengali linguistic usage. The representation of this childhood was very much that of the class that had benefited from colonial education and business opportunities, and had grown under the colonial rule, that is, the *bhadrolok* classes.

It is only with the debates surrounding the Age of Consent Bill⁵ (which was passed in 1891) that the recognition of a time when the female body is not yet a sexual body or a maternal body entered into public discourse. In the aftermath of the much publicised death of the 11-year-old Phulmoni due to marital rape and the acquittal of her thirty year old husband Hari Maity⁶, the 'woman question' which had temporarily disappeared from public discourse, re-entered it. The emerging nationalist movement had 'resolved' the women's question, as Partha Chatterjee argues in his 1989 essay 'The nationalist resolution of the women's question', by placing it in the domain of home where interference on part of the colonial masters was not to be tolerated (Chatterjee, 1989). To quote from Tanika Sarkar's 'A prehistory of rights: the age of consent debate in colonial Bengal': 'cultural nationalists used a contrast between the loving heart of the Hindu home with the loveless, coercive nature of colonial rule. They saw all domestic arrangements (no matter how hurtful to the woman) as a matter of willed love and surrender on part of the woman, in contrast to the forced submission of the Indian man to the colonial order' (Sarkar, 2000: 613). However, this violent death and the ensuing figures revealed by investigations by colonial administrators over the large number of deaths of pubescent wives, forced both the reformist and the revivalist-nationalists to cast an anxious gaze onto the body of the child-woman. 'A new possibility also forced itself, adding to the discomfort', writes Sarkar, 'Were they talking of the woman or about a mere child yoked to untimely marriage? Was there a separate stage in the woman's life as childhood, and if so, was it compatible with marriage?' In the reformist discourse particularly, 'they read her wan face, her premature aging, and her fatigue and early death as something induced by premature sexual contact and childbearing' (Sarkar, 2000: 612). One can see that an idea of maturity was slowly being conceived which was trying to conceptualise a notion of girlhood that is to be seen as coming before and predating her existence as a sexual being, as a wife/mother/woman. The conservative position articulated through newspapers opposing the bill argued 'that the Hindu girl's biological development should be differently assessed: "According to the Hindu law the childhood of a girl is to be determined by reference to her first menses and not to her age."' (Sarkar, 2000: 613) It was this 'Hindu law' that was used to argue that if the Hindu girl did not come into sexual contact with her husband immediately after the onset of menarche, this would ensure the pollution of her womb and by extension that of the entire Hindu community. Reformers on the other

⁵ The issue of child marriage was heavily debated within Bengali intellectual circles for much of the second half of the nineteenth century. It was a sensitive issue as it was tied to religion and notions of tradition. The Age of Consent Act was finally passed 1891 that raised the age of consent for sexual intercourse for girls both within and outside of marriage to twelve from the earlier age of ten. The Governor-General and Viceroy, Lord Landsdowne supported the passing of the act in the Legislative Council and this amended the Indian Penal Code as any violation of the provisions of the act would lead to charges of rape.

⁶ The case of *Empress v. Hari Mohan Maity* colloquially referred to the Phulmoni Dasi rape case, triggered the outpouring of public sentiment as it resulted in the death of Phulmoni from marital rape. However, as she was over the legal age her husband was acquitted on charges of rape despite the witness account provided by Phulmoni's mother and aunt. Hari Mohan Maity was however charged under the Indian Penal Code for causing grievous hurt and endangering a person's safety and sentenced to twelve months of hard labour. The trial and the evidence produced during the trial, helped consolidate the cause of the social reformists like Keshab Chandra Sen and others who were arguing for raising the age of consent.

hand, 'linked childhood to a stage anterior to the full maturation of all the sexual, procreative organs. A minimum age, they said, would be a safer index' (Sarkar, 2000: 613). The gravity of the issue is evident from the fact that the two sections were warring over raising the minimum age for sexual intercourse in marriage by only two years, from the statutory age of ten to twelve. The Hindu orthodoxy's claiming of the right to continue with the tradition of '*garvadan*' (or giving of the womb immediately after the onset of menarche) was supported by the revivalist-nationalists because they were resisting the colonial legislative intervention into what they claimed was a private religious issue. However, the passing of the bill did mark a moment of recognition for the physical state of girlhood, when the female body was neither a sexual body nor a maternal body. Still, the idea of 'consent' that was being debated was only restricted to her body and the physical readiness of her body for sexual relations. Consent was defined as the capability of the physical body to bear sexual penetration without serious harm or injury. Phulmoni Dasi, the child-wife, whose death had started the debate was aged eleven and therefore above the age of ten at the time. Her death after thirteen hours of pain and profuse bleeding, however, proved that her battered body was not ready for a sexual relationship. It was the unpreparedness of the body that would gain the woman the right to a semblance of a childhood and a certain amount of legal immunity. There was still no discussion of the emotional and mental immaturity or ideas of innocence associated with girlhood. On the whole, although the number of issues that were classified under the 'women's question' were debates that also affected girl children (for example: education, marriage and widowhood), they were nonetheless regarded as *women's* questions that affected Indian womanhood in general. Ruby Lal notes this when she says, 'Most of the literary and reformist discourses of the nineteenth century deluge us with a liminal figure, which I shall call girl-child/woman' (Lal, 2013: 33). The universalised notion of *chelebela* (boyhood) as childhood held ground, and Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar and Rabindranath Tagore, writing in the decade immediately following the passage of the 1891 Age of Consent bill continued to use such signifiers. The emphasis still remained on the girl-woman as mother and as wife. She appeared variably as '*snehomoyee*' (the affectionate one), '*deshlakshmi*' (the blessed women of the nation), as '*boro bou*' (elder wife) and '*choto bou*' (younger wife) but only once as '*kbuki*' (girl child). Tagore and Mitra Majumdar by specifically placing the tradition of storytelling on the mother's shoulders and in the grandmother's repertoire, and by identifying the colonial educated male child as the receiver (as Tagore and Mitra Majumdar themselves had been) erased the girl child as either listener or teller. This omission highlighted the other female presence in the discourse: that of the mother. Furthermore, conflating the figure of the tradition-bearing, care-giving, loving, storytelling mother with the figure of the tradition-preserving, loving self-sacrificing Hindu/indigenous/national⁷ woman was inevitable.

The emphasis on woman as mother within the prose and verse pieces that accompanied the *rupkatha* stories can thus be located within the discourses of the early nationalist period when motherhood was constructed as a metaphor for the nation. The icon of the mother and the mother goddess became the rallying point around which nationalist ideology sought to construct itself. The nation, an abstract idea, simultaneously went through the process of being visually represented as a cartographic space and at the same time began to find emotional expression in the idea of the motherland where the nation was embodied as the body of a woman, the mother. The brand of nationalism that became dominant in India at this time was distinctly Hindu in character. This iconography found its most complete expression in the idea of Bharat Mata, painted in 1922 by Abanindranath Thakur, as a four-armed goddess in ascetic robes. The transformation from woman to nation to goddess was completed within the public psyche. Temples dedicated to Bharat Mata opened in Benaras and elsewhere. The deities worshipped in some of these temples were represented by the map of undivided India (Davis, 2007). It was the prevalence of goddess worship, Jashodhara Bagchi points out in her essay 'Representing nationalism' that facilitated the empowering of the mother image paving way for nationalist uses of the image (Bagchi, 1990: 69). Additionally, in Bengal, the mother and child relationship was central to worship in both the dominant religious traditions: the *Shakta* and the *Vaishnavite*. Bengali culture was permeated by the psychology of '*vatshalya sneha*', that is, the affection for one's offspring, that was also at the heart of the framing of both the *Shakta* and the *Vaishnavite* tradition (Bagchi, 1993: 2215). Representations of Yashoda's loving indulgence, of Krishna's escapades and the devotee's (be it Ramaprasad, *Bamakhyapa* or Ramakrishna) loving appeals to Mother Kali, were an intrinsic part of these devotional cults. It is to be noted that it was once again a relationship between that mother and her male child which is highlighted in these devotional cults. Since religious imagination has been central to Indian culture, religious iconography was extensively used by the nationalists for raising support for their political causes. The mother-child relationship found within devotional cults was framed within the emerging nationalist discourses as the relationship between the nation as mother and the citizen as child. The claim for sovereignty was framed as the child's quest to win honour for the battered mother. The *Shakta* tradition in particular, became a rallying point for the nationalist imagination. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, the celebrated novelist and political thinker,

⁷ The nationalist discourses of the late nineteenth century were predominantly Hindu as there was a disproportionate representation of Hindus among the *bhadrolok* classes. Historically this was the result of greater willingness of Hindus in participating in the colonial institutions and structures as opposed to Muslims.

presented the country as a mother when he published his song ‘*Vande Mataram*’ as part of the novel *Anandamath* in the *Bangadarshan Patrika* in 1882. This song became widely influential within the nationalist cause and ‘*Vande Mataram*’ became the expression of devotion to the nation as the ‘worshipped motherland’. In this novel *Anandamath* that was published serially between 1880 and 1882, he also took the next step of placing the figure of the mother as the mother goddess in the distinctly political context of the nation. He used a series of mother images in the novel to present the condition of India throughout the succeeding ages and thereby referring to the past, the present and the future states of the Indian society: Annapurna, the goddess of fertility and plenitude, Kali, the dark and angry goddess wandering in graveyards, and Durga, the ten-armed goddess of power presented at the moment when she has vanquished the enemy. Bagchi points out how nationalists read deep political messages in Bankim’s crisis-ridden images of Durga and Kali. The distinction that he made between the symbolism of the two deities, however, was not found in later nationalist uses of the goddesses, where both Kali and Durga were of synonymous usage, both representing power as it were along with a certain kind of maternal tenderness. This was evident in the ascetic-philosopher-social worker Vivekananda’s 1898 work ‘Kali the Mother’ where he combined both the conceptions of the nurturing and the avenging mother in the image of Kali and vocalized through it a call for nationalism. He linked goddess with the motherland, where the need of the hour was for the son (citizen) to bear the destructive force represented by the mother goddess (Bagchi, 1990: 69).

When placed in this context, the *snehomoyee* or affectionate woman and the *deshlakshmi* or the blessed national woman who Rabindranath Tagore referred to in his 1907 preface to *Thakurmar Jhuli* attain special significance. The affectionate mother, that is, the *snehomoyee*, was the nurturer of the nation as she was also the *deshlakshmi*, the blessed woman of the nation. Lakshmi originally the goddess of wealth and prosperity was also an ideal for women to emulate in everyday life and *lakshmi* in popular parlance was widely used as an adjective for the good wife/woman/girl. The *deshlakshmi*, then, was the woman who like the goddess protected the wealth and prosperity of the land. The wealth being the repertoire of indigenous culture and traditions. Woman, nation and goddess were inextricably linked within the Indian imagination of the time. Both nationalist as well as religious cultural markers were thus being referred to in the Bengali fairy tale discourse as it traced the genesis of the tradition in the love of the affectionate mother, and identified the national child, being male and middle class, as the recipient.

The texts of the fairy tale stories also engage with the nationalist construction of the ideal woman. The specific conception of the Indian woman within the nationalist discourses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was built upon the idea of the Indian woman’s willed surrender to the harsh demands of indigenous patriarchy. Such an idea was central to the nationalist distinction between the nature of Indian tradition and nature of British colonialism. The Indian woman, ‘the other’ within the self, the nation, became the central site for emphasis of this distinction. She, nationalists were forced to admit during the very public debates surrounding the raising of the age of consent, was subject to social laws and cultural dictums that were detrimental towards her. The conservative sections of the nationalists (most notably Bal Gangadhar Tilak) however argued that no matter how ruthless the socio-religious laws, the Indian woman followed them voluntarily, unlike the relationship between the Indian man and the British colonial master where humiliating laws were forcefully imposed by the colonial master upon the Indian man. However, it was colonialist discourse itself early in the nineteenth century that established woman as the site and object of debate, when it identified the condition of Indian women as the marker of the inferiority of Indian tradition. By contrast, Indian nationalist discourse in the last decades of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, projected the Indian woman, who embodied Indian tradition and culture, as a marker of the superiority of Indian tradition because of her ability to sacrifice her own interests, her body and even her life for the well-being of her people. In the nationalist discourse, East was identified with spiritualism as opposed to western materialism and women were burdened with representing the spiritual core of the nation. This discourse also stressed the essential difference in the social space occupied by women between the East and the West. The wife in the West was the companion whereas in the East within Indian tradition the wife was goddess. The spiritual superiority of the East was established by the Eastern woman’s moral triumph through her ability for self-sacrifice. Such linkages ultimately lead to women embodying qualities of self-renunciation or *tyag*. The concept of *tyag* as renunciation was also central to both Hindu and Buddhist religious traditions. Woman, tradition and religion were linked to form a co-ordinated concept of nationhood. Self-abnegation became the hallmark of the national woman. This general perception of Indian womanhood led to the valorisation of the goddess like self-sacrificing heroic women in the literature produced during this time. The character of the ideal child-wife Sushila in girls’ primers like *Sushilar Upakhyayn* (published in multiple volumes through the 1880s) fitted this model of Indian womanhood, and the same figure can be found among the women characters of Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar’s books *Thakurmar Jhuli* (1907) and *Thakurdadar Jhuli* (1909).

Both of these Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar’s books, written during the phase of the Bengali nationalist cultural awakening, focus on conflicts which have the self-sacrificing good women on the moral side, and the desiring self-serving evil woman on the other side. His *Thakurdadar Jhuli* also paraded a series of heroic good women who displayed remarkable agency but nonetheless submitted to the hierarchies of the indigenous

patriarchal social structure unquestioningly. These narrative characters remained loyal to their husbands even when they were treated outrageously by them, as in the case of Kanchanmala (Mitra Majumdar, 1909: 113-238). They obeyed social laws despite the fact that these laws caused them suffering as in the case of Pushpamala (Mitra Majumdar, 1909: 89-138), and remained deferential to villainous elders as in the case of Malanchamala (Mitra Majumdar, 1909: 135-192). Malanchamala was the epitome of the *tyagi*, the self-sacrificing woman, who willingly married a babe who had only twelve days to live, and then even after being assaulted and abandoned by her in-laws, she remained in the cremation ground with her dead baby husband protecting his corpse from the spirits who came to feed on him. The story traces her struggles as she raised him and finally married him off to another princess. After enduring tremendous hardships when she was finally accepted by her father-in-law, she delayed her return to court, choosing to remain in the forest. Dinesh Chandra Sen, one of the foremost literary critics in the early twentieth century, praised her as symbolising 'all the virtues of Indian womanhood, whose ideals were still alive in India' in his 1920 book *The Folk Literature of Bengal* (Flora, 2002: 44). Furthermore, since all of the stories were centred on romantic love, self-sacrifice was also presented as central to the ideal woman's practice of love. *Tyag* was at the very foundation of femininity and female love. The story of 'Pushpamala', which was a retelling of an earlier romance *Sakhi Sona*, (written by the 16th century poets Fakir Ram Kabibhushan and Mohammad Korban Ali)⁸ clearly shows instances where Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar intervened into an older story to tweak the character of his heroine. The heroine, Pushpamala, in Dakshinaranjan's story eloped with the hero, not because they were in love but out of a sense of duty, because she felt that she must honour the promise her father made to the hero's father that he would give her in marriage to him, especially as her father had previously gone back on his word. This episode was presented in a manner which suggested that Pushpamala was actually sacrificing herself at the altar of truth. Moreover, just before the elopement, Dakshinaranjan's heroine prepared a meal to serve to her parents and relatives thinking that this would be the last time that she would be able to serve them, whereas in both Kabibhushan and Korban Ali's versions the heroine kept regretting having to leave her luxurious life as a princess as she was used to the comforts of the palace. As expected, the difficulty she faced in adjusting to the new life with her young husband also made its way into the story. In contrast, Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's heroine was the idealised portrait of the woman as dutiful daughter and wife. Her childhood was essentially erased.

The antithesis of the qualities that constituted this rigidly constructed ideal of the Indian woman, was found embodied in the figure of the evil woman. All the *rakshasis* (monsters) who appeared in the section 'Rup Taras?' of *Thakurmar Jhuli* were desirous instead of self-effacing and had a voracious appetite (both real and metaphorical). This section derived its name from the terrifying visage of the *rakshasi*. The other evil women, the various *shotins* (co-wives) and the evil sisters are represented as always jealous of the good women. Their jealousy resulted from their inability to sacrifice self-interest and thus marked the absence of qualities which constituted the ideal Indian woman. This also marked them as unnatural women and as monstrous. The valorisation of self-abnegation led to the vilification of desire in women. When self-abnegation was constructed as central to womanhood itself, it rendered female desire itself as monstrous. Hence, every woman who acted from motives of self-aggrandisement in Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's stories were represented as villains and metaphorical monsters. This distinction between the good women and the bad women is maintained neatly across the entire body of Mitra Majumdar's works. However, through deft craftsmanship their actions were also rendered problematic within the logic of the fairy tale as these were presented as going against the moral order. All of their acts of self-aggrandisement came at the cost of the innocents. These evil women usurped power at an early point in the story either through villainy or through cunning manipulation/displacement of male authority figures, however, the story could end only with the re-establishment of the patriarch and their deaths, a cliché of fate for many subversive women in literature.

CONCLUSION

Since 'the position of women is structurally different from that of men, and that the lived realities of women's lives are profoundly different from those of men' (Hartsock, 2004: 36), this should have epistemological and discursive consequences. However, the social and literary discourses of colonial Bengal, while focused on women, refused to take into account women's lives. They originated from the privileged sections of Indian society, the intelligentsia who contributed to and sustained the discourses were predominantly male, upper class and upper caste. These discourses claimed objective knowledge of whole of society but as view from above left invisible the most vulnerable lives. Feminist historians' recovery of female voices from the time shows that they directly

⁸ Both of these stories are described in detail in Dinesh Chandra Sen's *Folktales of Bengal* (1920). See Dinesh Chandra Sen, *The Folk Literature of Bengal* (Kolkata: Aparna Book Distributors, 2007), 116-124.

contested such an argument. For example, Monmayee Basu notes letters written by ‘a few Bengali women from Chinsurah’ in 1835 (well before the nationalist-reformist debates emerged) to the newspaper *Samachar Darpan* that decried child marriage and the lack of educational opportunities for women. They accused men of treating women poorly and stated that Indian men deserved the rough treatment they were receiving from the British because of the way they had treated their women (Basu, 2004: 39). Such letters were merely instances where individual women managed to ‘speak’ in public, with little or no effect on larger public discourses. Counter-voices can also be read within the fairy tale texts written by women collectors in the following decades of the twentieth century, such as in Sovana Sundari Devi’s *The Orient Pearls* (1915) and Suniti Devi’s *Indian Fairy Tales* (1923) which presented more rounded female perspectives and ascribe greater agency to women characters. Instances of counter-cultural voices can also be found in the stories published in volumes like Mitra Majumdar’s *Thakurmar Jhuli* and *Thakurdadar Jhuli*, which throw up moments that rupture the dominant discursive organisation of the texts. However, such moments exist because the texts themselves were a complex product of interactions between the oral stories as collected from rural women, and the classic literary narration as written by members of the male intelligentsia.

In the discourses that have been studied in this article, men speak for women, and men discursively organise women’s lives. The neat reduction of women’s lives to their bodies, which included an overt focus on the reproductive function of women, women as mothers, and defining consent around the physical readiness of the female body for sexual intercourse, is symptomatic of the work of abstract masculinity (as Hartsock conceptualises it) that adopts dualisms of mind/body, abstract/concrete, culture/nature, and stasis/change, and aligns men with the former and women with the later. These dualisms, the product of European Enlightenment, can also be traced within the Bengali fairy tale discourse of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as well as in the larger nationalist, revivalist-nationalist discourses of the period from which the Bengali fairy tale discourse was drawing from. The idealisation of an unchanging social order marked by continuity of tradition, with woman as the body that bore the yoke of tradition with loving sacrifice, and the body that birthed and preserved the community as the mother, was the result of an abstract masculinist discourse that had escaped ‘from contact with the female world of the household into the masculine world of public life’ (Hartsock, 2004: 45). This discourse also showed the same problematic tendency towards social synthesis identified by Hartsock, where it resolved these dualisms through metaphorically killing the other, that is through silencing and erasing women’s voices. This was true both for the fairy tale discourse which erased the girl child and life stages of women, fossilising them as mothers and the nationalist discourse which glorified female sacrifice and death.

A standpoint rooted in material realities of women’s lives exposes both the realities of power hierarchy at work, as well as the perversity of the ‘objective’ masculinist social and literary discourses. As dominant discourses have the power to shape social realities, such an intervention is necessary to critique and redefine the terms of existence ascribed to the community. However, a standpoint, to quote Hartsock, ‘is an achieved rather than obvious, a mediated rather than immediate understanding’ (Hartsock, 2004: 39), and it has been the aim of this article to identify and mediate these problems and ruptures in the discourses created around the literary fairy tale and the nationalist discourses from which it drew. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengali fairy tale and fairy tale discourses’ monolithic construction of the indigenous woman, their concentrated focus on woman as attached solely to her reproductive function, their marginalisation of the life stages of women that existed beyond that function, and their construction of the gendered practises of love, and their overwhelming emphasis laid on women’s self-abnegation as the basis of romantic love, was a damaging masculinist fantasy serving political ends.

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