

# Domesticity In Colonial Bengal: Rereading The Complexities Of The Contested Terrain Of Women's Question

Dr. Sreyasi Ghosh

Assistant Professor and HOD of History Department of  
Hiralal Mazumdar Memorial College for Women,  
Dakshineswar, Kolkata

*Abstract: Anti- colonial Nationalism in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Bengal primarily established its hegemonic construct on separating the cultural sphere into two arenas- the material and the spiritual. In material domain the colonised male was completely subjugated under dominating British administration and bureaucracy. The colonisers labelled the colonised as degenerate and effeminate and according to their version the indigenous women used to lead life of a slave on which various types of punishments had been indiscriminately inflicted by their so- called protector male guardians at the slightest pretext. To counter all those allegations the colonised male had to invent the discourse of redefined domesticity and while searching for an ultimate solution of Women's Question, the nationalist leaders established image of New Woman, who would be educated but would use that knowledge only for grihakalyan to become perfect companion of their husbands like the ancient Aryan women as grihalakshmi. The debates related to Sati and the Age of Consent controversy were also merged with the Women's Question. The New Woman in the domain of companionate marriage and reformulated domesticity would worship her husband as God and through her chastity as well as steadfast devotion to him during his lifetime and even after her death either committing Sati by mounting his funeral pyre or living as an ascetic in home as a widow could save national glory and age-old prestige before the malicious colonisers. The cultural revivalist leaders made it clear from the very beginning that a woman would be appreciated only for her proficiency in housework which was her elementary responsibility and female education would be needed only for running of household and child-rearing in a more organized and scientific way. In this article I have tried my best for rereading the contentious terrain of domesticity and question of women's liberation.*

**Keywords:** Domesticity, British Bengal, New Woman, Patriarchy, Nationalism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The nationalist leadership structured its ideology on the essential cultural difference between the colonisers and the colonised. Partha Chatterjee in his illustrious book namely *The Nation and Its Fragments* had rightly opined that –“ *The more nationalism engaged in its contest with the colonial power in the outer domain of politics, the more it insisted on displaying the marks of ‘ essential’ cultural difference so as to keep out the colonizer from that inner domain of national life and to proclaim its sovereignty over it*”.

From 1870s, due to reformist zeal, various ups and downs occurred in the conjugal domain of the indigenous household

through the Brahma Marriage Act of 1873, several proposals to introduce divorce in the 1880s, and the Age of Consent Act of 1891. But in spite of colonial intervention the nationalist project continued to give thrust on so-called spiritual love-oriented traditional non- consensual, indissoluble, infant marriages which according to them gave women better security than westernized companionate marriage based on courtship. The heroic images of valiant sati voluntarily mounting the blazing pyre of her dead husband and scenario of ascetic widow willingly accepting path of various types of self- torturing for spiritual upgradation were held as necessary for national regeneration by the anti- colonial leadership. Partha Chatterjee in his article entitled *The Nationalist*

*Resolution of the Women's Question* clarified that while answering the Women's Question conservative anti- colonial leaders did not completely reject the Occident. In his language-

*"The nationalist paradigm in fact supplied an ideological principle of selection. It was not a dismissal of modernity; the attempt was rather to make modernity consistent with the nationalist project."*

Bhudev Mukhopadhyay in *Paribarik Prabandha* (1882) stated necessity of proper training in proficient housework for women of Bengali household because as a result of absence of such adequate training – *"... house and furniture get untidy, the meals poor, the health of every member of the family is ruined; children are born weak and rickety, constantly plagued by illness- they die early."* So indiscriminate imitation of western culture and civilizational pattern must be avoided while considering question of women's modernity and reformed domesticity. The New Woman of the household of Bengali middle- class intelligentsia, under close surveillance of new patriarchy, was completely different from the *memsahib* and also different from the lower- class women and women of earlier generation. The New Woman was educated and acquired cultural refinement but their *feminine* qualities such as chastity, self- sacrificing nature, dedication, kindness, patience etc. must not be eradicated because in Bengali household female education was not at all meant for competing with men in external world but for eternal well-being of each and every member within the domestic sphere. Sati- Savitri- Sita model ought to be followed by women so that they could enshoulder the political burden of chaste womanhood used as a competitive metaphor against the colonisers who accused the indigenous male as barbaric. Autobiographies, family histories, literature, songs, paintings and religious tracts had been important sources through which one could obtain sufficient idea of the concept of New Woman and refined domesticity where women of wealthy. Cultured middle- class family could enjoy freedom from brutal physical oppression of male guardians like women of previous generation. The new *bhadramahila* should acquire some of the skills of the *beshya*/ the fallen woman and use those in a refined as well as domesticated manner so that their husbands could be prevented from entering the places of the prostitutes and it was the responsibility of the ideal Bengali housewife to make the home adequately attractive for their male counterparts.

Anuradha Roy in the book entitled *Dukkhini Sati Charit: Unish Shataker Banglay meyeder upanyas* explained that marriage stood as ultimate goal in life of womenfolk and women were given some education only for the satisfaction of their male counterparts so that the household works could be managed in a more organized manner. In her own language –

*"Jatiyabader tagide bideshi o deshiya adarsho miliye bhadralokra purushtantrer punarbinyas korte chailen. Korte giye bistar tarko- bitarko holo. Tabe narichintay deshi o bideshi upadan melanor khetre ekta subidha tara peyechilen. Seta holo Victoriya nari o deshiya grihalakshmir adarsho punkhanupunkho bichare alada holeo dutiyi chilo purushtantrik mulyabodher sange jarito. Unish shataker jatiyatabadider tai konobabei purushtantrer driro mushti alga korte hoy ni."*

## II. CONVENTIONAL DOMESTICITY

Representatives of British imperialism such as James Mill, Sir Herbert Hope Risley always criticised and condemned extremely degraded condition of Hindu women and the habitual contempt shown to them by their male guardians in domain of conventional domesticity and conjugality. Upgradation of women's condition was held as part and parcel of *white man's burden* theory strongly propagated by colonisers who always claimed moral and cultural superiority over the indigenous population. Thomas R. Metcalf in the book entitled *Ideologies of the Raj* rightly stated that the British colonisers showed themselves as only and ultimate protectors of indigenous women. Mahesh Chandra Deb in 1839 had spoken to the Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge about the miserable and downtrodden condition of young women caged in conventional domesticity-

*"Not withstanding all their kind attention, their pious and dutiful conduct, their submissive behavior towards their husbands, they frequently meet with severe scoldings and are even sometimes cruelly punished from ungrounded jealousy or a tyrannical whim."*

Here we can mention relevant statement from Partha Chatterjee's book entitled *The Nation and Its Fragments* where in chapter six namely *The Nation and Its Women* the renowned author had quoted from *Continental India* of J.W. Massie –

*"A woman, it is affirmed, is never fit for independence, or to be trusted with liberty.... Though her husband be devoted of all good qualities, yet, such is the estimate they form of her moral discrimination and sensibilities, that they bind the wife to revere him as a god, and to submit to his corporeal chastisements, whenever he chooses to inflict them, by a cane or a rope, on the back parts."*

Stalwarts of socio- cultural renaissance of our motherland namely Rammohan Roy, Vidyasagar, Swami Dayanand Saraswati always upheld the glorious image of Golden Age of Indian civilization and tried their level best to express that women had been treated with respect and adoration in ancient India and their rights in cases of education, marriage and free movement in socio- political life were not disregarded at all. Several leaders of middle class intelligentsia held the Muhammedan rule solely responsible for degenerated condition of our womenfolk. According to the opinion of those scholars, unwanted practices namely infant marriages, prevention on a widow's right to remarry, secluded condition of womenfolk and strict restrictions on female education as well as emancipation were nothing but responses to the Muhammedan threat to security of Hindu girls. In reality husbands were regarded as supreme Gods for married women and only the fortunate ones could enjoy some sort of respected life after becoming mothers of sons. After death of husbands women had to accept the blazing fire of the funeral pyre for committing sati which had been regarded as highest model of *sridharma* according to the *shastras*, or left in house with a life of ascetic widowhood when she was regarded as the most inauspicious creature. Eminent stalwarts such as Bankimchandra, Jyotirindranath Tagore and even Rabindranath in early Swadeshi period glorified self- immolation of widows and Chandranath Basu in 1892 tried to

justify cruel measures imposed on wives and widows in Hinduism as weapons of maintaining discipline to keep women's chastity and purity intact as jewel of entire society.

Anuradha Roy labelled the women in degraded condition as *Dukkhini sati* and explained that even women novelists of so-called liberal families like Swarnakumari Devi never crossed the barrier of patriarchy through their writings and always showed their endeavour to satisfy male ego by depicting women characters as victim in deplorable situation. Women novelists such as Sharatkumari Chowdhurani got appreciation and acknowledgement only for the quality that she entered the arena of literature after efficiently performing as a faithful wife with full dedication towards her domestic duties and responsibilities.

### III. NEW WOMAN/ THE MODERN LAKSHMI CONCEPT EMERGED

By the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century the concept related to ideal wife was changed and the concept of so-called New Woman emerged when several women were educated, and to some extent participated freely in social as well as political gatherings outside their homes dominated by their male guardians. For increased urbanization and emergence of several new professions the strict barrier between *ghar* and *bahir* gradually started to erase with a slow pace. Liberal parents discarded the necessity of child marriages and comparatively older married young women played a more significant role as perfect mothers. Saraladevi Chaudhurani, daughter of novelist Swarnakumari Devi, was embodiment of the concept of New Woman. She gave her consent for marriage at the age of thirty two which was quite unusual and even after marriage with Rambhuj Dutt from Lahore, she steadfastly continued her role as an ardent nationalist educationist and also a feminist leader. New Woman was capable of building their own organizations and strongly propagated urgent necessity of social reforms as part of modernizing agenda for colonised females through public platforms. Kailasbasini Debi, happily married to Kishorichand Mitra, an eminent 19<sup>th</sup> century social reformer, was another bright example of that culturally refined and enlightened New Woman. She vehemently criticised the deplorable unhygienic condition where women had to become confined in traditional homes at childbirth but even that educated woman sometimes justified several conventional customs such as harsh restrictions imposed on widows by stating that austerities would diminish vigour of widows and as a result their chastity could be easily maintained before lustful eyes of men. Kailasbasini always followed Hindu rituals though she knew it quite well that her enlightened husband did not follow those orthodox and age-told rituals. Even after enjoying complete domestic bliss and companionate conjugal relationship, that New Woman was always scared that her relatives would not accept food from her hand and so she did not dare to confront orthodoxy. Prasannamayi Debi, was nothing less but an extraordinary example of New Woman who was given education by her liberal father who saved her daughter from mentally deranged husband and provided her the opportunity to spend rest of her life in parental house being actively

protected by her brothers also. She later earned name and fame as a writer who overcame her personal tragedy and flourished literary talent with exemplary fortitude. She without any hesitation criticised several orthodox Hindu religious beliefs, horrific rigidities of caste system and polygamy but never forgot to mention that the primary duty of an ideal woman was becoming an obedient wife and dutiful mother like her own mother Magnamayi Debi who worshipped her husband faithfully.

Deification of husbands remained the same in fate of conventional women and the so-called New Women, Anuradha Roy explained the situation in her book namely *Dukkhini Sati Charit* – ‘... *Jatiyatabadira bollen- bideshi adarsher ‘sahachari- stri’-r sange meyeder oitihyik ‘grihalakshmi’ r bhunikao palon korte hobe. Lekhapora shikhleo meyera swarthopor, alas, abadhya, sajgoj –kora, novel-pora, ul- bona ‘mamsaheb’ hobe na. .... Swamike tara debota jyan korbe. Ei grihalakshmi, satilakshmirai hobe jatir Shakti, jatir garbo.*’

Dipesh Chakrabarty in his article entitled *The Difference – Deferral of a Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British Bengal* (included in *Subaltern Studies VIII*) also declared that the age-old Lakshmi- Alakshmi debate ruled the basic logic of domesticity related discussions. Lakshmi, wife of Vishnu, was always regarded by Hindus as symbol of perfect wife who was epitome of the ideas such as chastity, fidelity, complete harmony with her husbands' commands as well as desires. The educated *modern lakshmis* could become indispensable for hegemonic nationalist project if they never tried to overpower authority of their husbands and never become negligent in domestic responsibilities by being lazy, immodest and devoid of devotion, dedication and fidelity. Allegedly self-indulgent educated women could become *alakshmis* by their disrespectful treatment towards their mother-in-law/ *grihini* of the extended household and always were devoted to personal luxury by neglecting guests, children etc. A woman could only become a successful wife by combining education with efficiency in housework and in such a way could be the best follower of *naridharma*. Female education would be cherished only if it brought with it *true modesty* in women/ *kulastree* with composed demeanour, downcast eyes, proper sense of dressing, devoid of loud, lustful, quarrelsome nature and speaking gently and softly.

This ideal model of indigenous womanhood like the Puranic mythical Sabitri only could be capable of withstanding repeated allegations raised by representatives of the British imperialists such as Thomas Macaulay, G.W. Stevens, Robert Orme, Bishop Heber, Charles Grant, James Mill and many others that the male population of Bengal were of weak, degenerate and effeminate, cowardly character and so should be governed by foreign administrators with a perfect civilizing mission and especially agenda to protect indigenous women from tyranny of their so-called protector male counterparts. Nationalist leaders tried to show fortitude of the dauntless sati, valiant widow and overall picture of self-sacrificing courageous women who were able to accept death any time for sake of their motherland and socio-cultural welfare. Those images of heroic women had been relevant enough also during the revolutionary activities of the Anti-Partition/ Swadeshi Movement (1905-1911). Indira



Chowdhury in her famous article namely *Constructing Chastity: The Sati and the Widow in Nineteenth- Century Bengal* announced rightly that-

‘Sati as a signifier of Hindu womanhood .... became a competitive metaphor of self- description- a figure that could resist the colonial notions of ‘barbaric’ Hindu tradition.’

#### IV. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Eminent historian Rajat Kanta Ray in his famous book entitled *Exploring Emotional History: Gender, Mentality and Literature in the Indian Awakening* has very rightly opined that conventional patriarchal system was not at all altered even after the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 and the Age of Consent Act of 1891. Infant marriages, elderly dominance in match-making, position of marriage system as compulsory choice and ultimate goal in life of each and every girl, polygamy prevalent among males, denial of right of divorce to wife, Godlike stature of husbands, secluded life of women in extended joint family structure, widowhood based on endless self- torturing, custom of outcasting, denial of financial independence and property rights for wives and daughters continued as significant practices in the reign of Queen Victoria . (Chapter-4: *Man, Woman and the Novel: The Rise of a New Consciousness in Bengal*).

Sambuddha Chakraborti in his essay namely *Conjugal Relations in Early Nineteenth –Century Bengal: Conditions Before the Growth of a Private Relationship* included in the book entitled *Women in History* has also stated that child marriage, polygamy and deification of husbands were undoubtedly main hindrances in the path of development of conjugal affection/love in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengali household. Women were always held responsible for unhappiness in the family space and even contemporary periodicals such as *Bambodhini Patrika*, *Antahpur* and *Mahila* blamed wives for polygamy as well as extra- marital affairs of their husbands with public women/ famous stage- actresses. But in case of New Woman, one significant transformation occurred in arena of domesticity. Marriage was acknowledged as beginning of a very personal relationship between a man and a woman and it had been no longer only union of two different families to produce sons. But concept of conjugal reciprocity, privatization of relationship and mutual interdependence in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century did not decrease the Godlike position of husbands. Wife’s unfaltering devotion and endless endeavour for satisfaction of her male counterpart was always held as a priceless jewel which separated purity of our indigenous civilization from occidental culture.

Partha Chatterjee in his article namely *The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question* made it clear that the New Woman was not only different from western women but also deliberately separated from women of previous generation subjected to conventional indigenous patriarchy and cruel physical oppression in hands of male guardians. The New Woman was the symbol of cultural superiority and were not at all vulgar, quarrelsome, coarse like women of lower classes. In language of Partha Chatterjee the cultural distinctiveness of image of New Woman can be adequately expressed-

‘Education then was meant to inculcate in women the virtues- the typically ‘bourgeois’ virtues characteristic of the new social forms of ‘disciplining’ – of orderliness, thrift, cleanliness, and a personal sense of responsibility, the practical skills of literacy, accounting and hygiene, and the ability to run the household according to the new physical and economic conditions set by the outside world. For this, she would also need to have some idea of the world outside the home into which she could even venture as long as it did not threaten her ‘femininity’. ‘

#### V. CONCLUSION

The nationalist hegemonic construct of the New Woman was always utilized to inspire women of Bengali middle-class household to combine cultural refinement and age-old so-called feminine virtues as ultimate goals through obtaining formal learning so that cleanliness and discipline could be maintained in domestic sphere where husbands would be worshipped as Gods just like previous generations. The new patriarchy gave women a new social responsibility and so her dress, eating habits, religiosity and socio- cultural demeanour etc. everything had been monitored for the sake of nation-building process. Women’s ideal image had been desexualized and was empowered as epitome of motherliness and only this valiant imagery of mother- goddesses could confront the accusations brought forward by the colonisers and sovereign nationhood related cherished dream could be translated into reality. Well- educated indigenous leaders could not comprehend plight of commonplace women outside their own privileged family- space and definitely in 1890s, reformist agenda was conquered by extremist and cultural revivalist Hindu nationalism. Especially women of lower classes were not at all touched by the modernist project and it must be acknowledged that the concept of so-called reformulated conjugality did not decrease women’s subordination but only facilitated their home- management by giving weapon of ideological strength. History –writing had been cleverly utilized as a powerful vehicle to uphold glory of our chaste and heroic women by drawing examples from stories of valour of Rajputana as well as of the Maratha warriors. This article can be concluded by quoting from Indira Chowdhury’s essay entitled *Writing History, Making Manly: Politics and Gender in Nineteenth – Century Bengali Historiography-*

‘In the present context it is enough to mention that this historical discourse was gendered in very specific ways. While the construction of heroic womanhood was part of an attempt to write compensatory history, it was also part of an effort to refute colonial reformist assumptions. Nineteenth – century debates about child marriages, widow remarriage , restitution of conjugal rights into which the Bengali bhadralok found itself drawn , shaped the historical discourse by constructing Hindu womanhood as an icon which aided the group’s hegemonising activities’ [essay included in Sheila Lahiri Chowdhury- edited book entitled *Reading the Nineteenth Century*].

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