Patriarchy And Forbidden Love

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DESIRE AND DEFIANCE: A STUDY OF BENGALI WOMEN IN LOVE, 1850–1930
By Aparna Bandopadhyay
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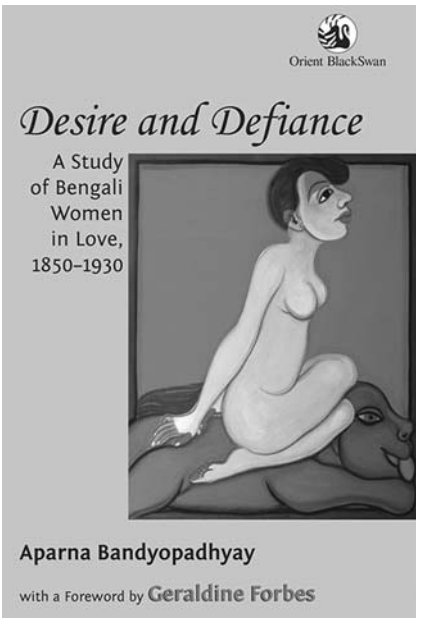
Aparna Bandopadhay's book creates a narrative out of the heartrending journey of desire and defiance that women in colonial Bengal went through for daring to assert the aspirations of their hearts. Caught between a patriarchal society and a patriarchal state, it shows in detail how classic patriarchy excludes and punishes women who challenge its control over their sexuality.

The chapter 'Quest for Legitimacy' recounts the instances when women from kulin Hindu and Brahmo families asserted their right to choose their life partners. The Hindu ideal of marriage was a non-consensual marriage at a pre-pubertal age. Although the Brahmos accepted the concept of mutual consent, they too imposed restrictions of caste endogamy, Brahmo endogamy, regional endogamy, and obtaining the approval of the families. Any choice that did not meet with these criteria was considered transgressive. Young kulin women, haunted by the spectre of lifelong spinsterhood or marriage to a polygamous older man and subsequent early widowhood, married men who were not vetted by their families. Such acts of daring by the kulin women obliterated all contact with their natal families. Brahmo couples, on the other hand, sought legitimacy for their relationship. However, marrying by declaring non-affiliation to any religion (Special Marriage Act of 1872), marrying across regions and even across religious lines were transgressions that met with resistance to granting legitimacy. Marriage became a public issue and the decision of legitimacy was made by the larger society and not just the family.



The chapter, 'Novels and the poison of Love' illustrates how the reformist intelligentsia sought to transform middle class wives into *bhadramahilas* through censoring their access to popular culture and creating a 'reading list' for the newly educated women that would teach them moral values and virtues desirable for nation building. However, women subverted this hegemonic agenda by reading novels, an imported genre of literature from the West based on individual's emotions and romantic love. Although the novels written by the male authors consciously de-eroticized the literary style and always ended on a note of conformism, the genre itself was built around the romantic heroine. Some of these novels also explored ideas of love by widows, unmarried young girls and wives, thus heightening the fear among the intelligentsia that western [lack of] morality was entering their *andarmahal*. While they were successful in banishing indigenous popular culture and artistes from the urban space, the dominant culture collaboration between the colonial state and the indigenous patriarchy could not stop the insidious permeation of the impact of the novel on the hearts of the middle class educated Bengali women. The revivalist Hindu nationalist attributed the transgressive aspirations and behaviour of women to this imported cultural influence.

Under *byabichar* (a pejorative term used to denote adultery or other forms of sexual transgression), the author investigates instances of non-marital sexual relationships clandestinely indulged in by kulin women and widows who did not experience a conjugal relationship. While many kulin girls remained unmarried till late age due to the strict hypergamous norms, wives of kulin polygamous men never saw their husbands after the marriage day. Widow-remarriage was anathema to society and, hence, these groups of sexually deprived young women took the risk of forbidden liaisons that often led to pregnancy and abortion. Kulin families either incarcerated their daughters within homes or killed them. Widows were under stricter social surveillance and forced to kill the unborn child to retain a foothold within respectable society. If the knowledge of the transgression became public, the women would be driven out of their homes, forced

to enter ostracized communities or brothels or even take their own lives. The burden of guilt and ostracism was only borne by women. Their male partners could deny any involvement or deny any liability. In fact, most lovers forced the women to undergo abortion, revealing the patriarchal face of the lover.

Every subsequent chapter describes a step further down the path of transgression. *Kulatyaga* (outcaste) describes chronicles of elopement, betrayal and ostracism. Many women eloped with their lovers in the hope of a new life, thus risking complete schism from family and society. Most were doomed to desertion by their lovers, who returned to family and society unscathed—their romantic escapade being viewed as an assertion of masculinity. However, women who stepped out of the boundaries of social propriety were never given a chance to return. They joined communities of socially marginalized individuals, became inmates of reform homes, joined domestic service or became labour force of factories and plantations. Brought up within the moral and spatial world of the family and home, they were pushed out of these familiar spaces into the public space and left to fend for themselves for the basic needs of food, clothing and shelter. They were exiled from the private space that defined respectability to the public space that was synonymous with being an outcaste.

Finally, the author describes how thwarted desires led to hysteria and suicide among upper class Bengali women. While Hindu revivalist intelligentsia lay the blame at the door of western influence, the author interprets it as the last desperate attempt by women to retain control over their lives, even if it was through death.

The book under review thus records the acts of defiance and the reaction to the acts by society. However, the voices of the women themselves are missing. Undoubtedly, the reaction of society has been read closely with a feminist lens for identifying patriarchal oppression, but this is still a one sided view. Although based on extensive and very comprehensive research on mainstream historical sources—newspapers, government reports, judicial records—the limitation of complete reliance on mainstream sources has got transmitted to it i.e., the muting of the female actors themselves. It is restricted to being a 'history about women' instead of 'history by women'.

The entire frame is that of victimology. The only group whose agency has been speculated about, though not explored, is that of women who ended up in prostitution. The author fleetingly mentions women who joined *akharas* (vaishnavite communities), women who entered domestic service and women who entered the labour force of factories and plantations, but does not explore the lives of these women in these spaces. Women who went away to distant lands as governesses are another fleetingly mentioned group who merit exploration. There are no 'survivor' narratives in the book.

It could be said that non-literate women had very little wherewithal to record their experiences, but popular culture could be a conduit to hear them. Songs of vaisnavite women, publications of writings of women in prostitution that were sought to be swept under the carpet, and even missionary and reform home reports could be tapped for these unexplored life histories. Moreover, we do not even hear the voices of educated, middle class women in this discourse. The discussion of these issues in the *andarmahal* is missing. Family archives of diaries and letters might give us access to this invisible discourse.

Another gap in exploring women's voices is the superficial exploration of novels written by women. The author has gone in depth for the analysis of works by Bankimchandra, Saratchandra and Rabindranath and the social reaction to their views, but very little space has been given to female authors. The reader is left with the desire to know more about how these novels contrasted with the writings of male authors and the social reaction to them. The author contends that the strategy of critics was to be silent about the transgressive parts of the female writers' works and highlight the instances conforming to social norms. If this was so, it is worth exploring the reason behind these divergent reactions. Could it be linked to the social positions of the female authors themselves (as wives and daughters of respectable men in society and leading conformist private lives)? Was patriarchy rewarding them for their actual conformism in real life?

However, the author has contributed significantly to our knowledge about the women question in colonial Bengal, explaining in depth how the men in colonial Bengali society tried to retain control over the 'ideal modern woman' and since the image of the Hindu nation predicated upon the image of the Hindu wife, their attempt to control evolved with the evolving nature of the socio-political context from self-reflective reformism to revivalist nationalism. It is a commendable contribution to the social history of colonial Bengal.

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