



Daughters of the Nation: Revisiting Women's Speculative Writings in Bengal

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Abstract

This paper will look at speculative writings by women in Bengal, both in the colonial and post-independence years, in an attempt to locate the emergence of certain counter-tropes against the dominant trope of the masculinist hero. Taking select writings from *Rokeya Racanabali* (Complete Works of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain) and *Kheror Khata* by Leela Mazumdar, it argues that the preconceived gendered discourses on socio-cultural roles and asymmetrical bifurcation of agency that were propagated through Bengali juvenile literature since the mid nineteenth century also contained certain disruptions. These women writers question the very notion of assertive native masculinity that was emblematic of the nationalist body politic, and promote an alternate model of female agency and power in an almost utopian manner. This paper also proposes arguments on the crucial accommodation of the Muslim woman's voice within the larger question of women's emancipation in Bengal that had appeared to concern itself with the Hindu *bhadramahila* class predominantly, through the speculative visions of Hossain. While Hossain adopts an emphatic feminist stance in her reformist motives, Mazumdar depicts a more humorous, ironical and self-reflexive strategy in her deconstructing mission. Both writers disrupt and gradually subvert the narrative of patriarchy by attributing to their female characters crucial roles and often even sole authority in various walks of life, thus paving the path for their visible presence in the project of social reform and emancipation of the motherland. These consciously wrought counter-tropes of feminist agency and authority within the diegetic space of Bengali speculative writing will be examined from a critical, historiographical perspective to understand the problematic dynamics of gender operative in the nationalist discourses. The de-mystifying agenda of these writers in their speculations against the *myth* of male superiority balanced with the celebrative notions of female efficiency, and their ideological plea for the case of gender equality will also be examined.

Keywords

speculative writings, female agency, social reform, counter-tropes, nationalist discourses

Introduction

Speculative writings in Bengali juvenile literature have garnered considerable critical interest since the past few decades. The advent of speculative literature within the Bengali cultural front is evidentially rooted within the tensions of colonial rule. The nineteenth century witnessed Bengal caught up in the whirlpool of massive changes in all spheres and the race towards colonial modernity implicated a native negotiation with a much-needed scientific and technological knowledge. While science-based writings were extremely popular among the wide readership of juvenile periodicals in colonial Bengal, speculative writing as an independent genre in itself evolved into actualization only towards the closing decades of the nineteenth century. This, of course, implicated a complex intercession between traditional roots in indigenous knowledge systems (folktales, mythologies, legends, etc.) and a newly developed alliance with Western scientifically inclined thought and rationality. Notwithstanding the etymological or generic ambivalences of Bengali speculative fiction, this is an arena which has been understood as incorporating “the need for a subversive, if not always openly resistant, response to political domination” (“Bengal” n.p.). Speculative writings went on to become a staple part of Bengali periodicals from the 1920s onwards with essays, fictional accounts, poems, novels in serialized forms, etc. proliferating through the efforts of the literary stalwarts of the Bengal Renaissance.

Speculative writings in colonial Bengal were predominantly the forte of the male, *bhadralok* intelligentsia for whom the consolidation of scientific and technological progress with native epistemological systems was a necessary requisite within the larger nationalist project. From the time of its culmination, Bengali juvenile literature has remained a highly gendered domain with differential notions of identity and socio-cultural agency being propagated for the shaping of native childhood. The nineteenth century marks a watershed moment in Bengal with the focus upon the women’s question and educational reforms for women’s emancipation gaining momentum. Historiographies of colonial Bengal have also documented quite a number of women writers, artists and professionals contributing to the cultural progress of their times. Despite this, critics have pointed out to the innate difference maintained in the approaches and techniques of writers from different sexes— while female writers turned to more a mythologically-oriented or light-hearted take on scientific topics owing to their *feminine* disposition, male writers enjoyed a sort of exclusive privilege within this perceived *masculine* territory of science. The highly gendered nature of such pedagogical practices in Bengal inevitably

manifested discrepant notions of intellectual and nationalist aspirations within the minds of the target readership which comprised of children, adolescents and often even young adults from both sexes.

The Gendered Space of Bengali Speculative Writings

Following the legacy of its generic predecessors, Bengali speculative writing that gained maturity as an independent form in the twentieth century, also came across (initially at least) as a highly gendered domain. The seeds of subverting racial and cultural stereotypes that were sown in the experimentation with pedagogic discourses at the beginning of the nineteenth century itself, now came to be actualized in a more emphatic form. The early practitioners of speculative writing not only criticized certain aspects of Western scientific knowledge and notions of modernity but also desperately sought to subvert the stereotypes of the colonizer and the colonized, civilized and uncivilized, manly and effeminate, rational and irrational, etc. However, within this entire gamut of contentions, there is a palpably visible lack of female agency. While the figures of the native male traveler, scientist or sleuth were ideologically modelled to champion a masculinist Hindu body politic, there was hardly any active female participation within the speculative visions of nationalism or cosmopolitanism. Stalwarts in this field in the pre-independence years like Jagadananda Roy, J.C. Bose, Hemendrakumar Roy, Upendrakishore Roychowdhury, Sukumar Ray, Premendra Mitra and Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay, were actively involved with the assertion of these dominant gendered tropes of subversion, parody and rectification of racial anxieties as well as negotiating with cultural aspirations. Only a handful of female writers like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Leela Mazumdar and Sukhalata Rao managed to carve a niche for themselves in the realm of Bengali speculative writings. Even then, their contributions appear to be sparse in comparison to the wealth of writings produced by their male counterparts. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to look at their subjective approach towards a domain that relegated women and girls to a conspicuous absence or a very marginal appearance. While Hossain herself was actively involved with the cause of Muslim women in Bengal and their reform, Mazumdar and Rao appear to be more involved in the cultural project heralded by the Brahmo intelligentsia, albeit in their individual ways. What bring these women together; however, are their similar speculative concerns and writings upon the gender disparity within the socio-cultural and nationalist fronts. Hossain directly questions the basic ideological assumptions of nationalism and progress,

whereas Mazumdar and Rao adopt a more critically humorous and self-reflexive stance while addressing the gendered visions of emancipation and modernity.

Women's Speculative Writings in Colonial Bengal

This paper will focus specifically upon select speculative works by two notable women writers of colonial Bengal, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Leela Mazumdar. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain is a celebrated name in the history of women's writing in colonial Bengal, especially owing to her contributions for accommodating the crucial, contentious question of Muslim women within the project of emancipatory reform. Unabashedly critical about the regressive traditions of fundamentalist Islam, Hossain crusaded all throughout her active years against the practices of *purdah*, women's enslavement within the asphyxiating, dehumanizing interiors of the *zenana*, dearth of financial, educational and professional opportunities for women, etc. Apart from the numerous articles, essays and other fictional pieces through which she had championed the cause of gender equality in the nationalist vision, some of her speculative writings stand out significantly in this context on account of their potential for dissent. She was perennially and actively involved with the education of Muslim girls in order to provide them various means of training for gaining employment and economic independence, founding the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' High School in 1911 for that purpose. In 1916, she also went on to found the *Anjuaman-e-Khawateen-e-Islam* (Association of Muslim Women) that held various debates, meetings and conferences on the issues of Muslim women's emancipation, education and reform. Her visions of emancipated Muslim womanhood found expression in some of her speculative writings that are a part of her rich oeuvre.

The two fictive pieces, 'Gyan Phal' (The Fruit of Knowledge) and 'Mukti Phal' (The Fruit of Emancipation) that were composed as a part of the second volume of *Motichur* (1922), though not strictly set within the paradigms of science-fantasy writings, still have speculative potential. Hossain exploits the generic possibilities offered by the fairy-tale form and extends it to unearth her speculative ponderings on unprecedented forms of feminist agency within the nationalist project that would question the ideological moorings of masculinist superiority. 'Gyan Phal' utilizes the theological story of the creation of man and woman, expanding further into a different, imaginary narrative which culminates in underlining the absolute necessity of female intervention and participation for the sustenance of meaningful existence. The allegorical narrative surrounding 'the tree

of knowledge’, its origins and its significance in human life achieves a speculative dimension through Hossain’s careful maneuvering of traditional systems of thought to serve feminist ends of highlighting female agency within a discursively masculinist domain. She completely subverts the conventional linkages between enlightenment, epistemological systems and male monopoly by speculatively positing femininity as the source and nurturing essence of knowledge in its constructive, sustainable forms. The fantastic world of djinns, fairies, humans, demons, magic gardens, islands and dream-prophecies that construct the novum of this speculative fable remain not merely a cognitively estranged narrative setting but extend to meaningfully negotiate with the nuances and complexes of the factual reality from which the writer presents her subjectivity. The allegory of the beguiling trading company, scheming and selfish in their preoccupation for materialistic advances, ruining the prosperity of a foreign land and its inhabitants, is an explicit satiric attack upon the incapacitating effects of colonial domination. However, the crux of her argument lies in the strong advocacy of female education that she makes in fictively proposing a dystopic outcome for the future of mankind stemming from regressive restrictions upon female education. In the fantasy world of Hossain’s speculative fiction, empowered, truly emancipated and educated women are envisioned as the only resort to free the nation from the shackles of colonial tyranny. The re-telling of the traditional creation-story within the novel narrative paradigms offered by speculative fiction enables Hossain to imaginatively bridge the gap between knowledge acquisition and native womanhood.

‘Mukti Phal’ goes a step further to challenge the trope of the enslaved motherland awaiting the competent participation of her ‘sons’ in the struggle for her emancipation. Written as an allegorical take on the divisive ideologies of the Indian Congress party, this fable satirically interrogates the ideological foundations of one of the major political groups in India coming into prominence within an era of active, militant nationalism. The speculative trajectory of her narrative disrupts the discursive underpinnings of native masculinity and pragmatism, questioning the flawed perceptions of nationalism as an exclusively male prerogative. Her satirical take upon the innate corruption and discrepancies embedded with such normatively celebrated ideologies of a masculinist body politic paves the path for a feminist speculation on reconfiguring the prevailing socio-cultural notions on womanhood. Again, using the speculative mechanisms of djinns, fantastic jungles, castles and an equally allegorical demographic, Hossain conjectures upon the inherently biased nature of nationalistic endeavours that inevitably

harboured an inclination towards failure. However, the optimistic ending of the story pivots upon a futuristic envisioning of emancipated and assertive womanhood as the vehicle for propagating actual liberation and civilizational progress beyond the clutches of colonial enslavement. This is a cause that Hossain actively pursued and untiringly sought to bring about in the traditional mores of society– the need to “create an environment of sympathy and solidarity to address injustices against women” (Hakeem 52). The emancipation of enslaved womanhood from the rigidities of patriarchal structures is reflected through the defamiliarizing lens of a speculative narrative. The emphatic political and satirical overtones in both these fables, of the debilitating effects of colonial rule upon native cultures extends to achieve greater feminist significance through their poignant dealing with crucial issues of women’s deliverance from underdevelopment and gender equality.

Apart from these two works, ‘Sultana’s Dream’ (first published in 1905 in *The Indian Ladies’ Journal*) perhaps stands out as the most celebrated of her speculative writings in which she completely subverts the gendered assumptions of socio-political and economic independence, agency and efficiency. Critics tend to regard this work as much ahead of its time, having been published even before another similarly acclaimed novel by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, namely *Herland* (1915). Overturning the traditional understanding of the public-private divide, her speculative visions of a feminist utopian space where women are the rulers and men are the subordinate subjects emphatically dismantles the asymmetries of the colonial reforms that championed gender-disparate discourses. Within the framework of this dream narrative, the plotline hinges upon the speculative vision of Ladyland, an alternative space where women are at the helm of political governance through the sustainability of their ‘feminine’ pragmatism. Hossain completely subverts the colonial, patriarchal understanding of science, knowledge and power for questioning and critiquing its cultural ramifications. What Hossain sardonically labelled as “a sentimental nightmare” (Hossain 12) and her husband as “a terrible revenge” (Hakeem 34) can be understood as a utopian, dream-vision rendition of an alternate reality. Ladyland, unlike the setting in *Herland*, does not completely efface men from the face of society but rather satirically inverts the conventional social order to portray “a vision of female-led cooperative social progress” (Bagchi, “Speculating...” 71). Juxtaposing the narrator, Sultana who appears to be the woman-equivalent of an armchair revolutionary, “thinking lazily of the condition of Indian womanhood” (Hossain 1), with the figures of Sister Sara, the Queen of Ladyland, the Lady Principal and other

inhabitants of this utopia who actively participate in the public sphere, Hossain scathingly critiques contemporary social reforms and tenets of nationalism.

The idea of mobility, technological progress and effective administration is coupled with a sense of order, feminine aesthetics and a celebration of women's freedom for "cooperative social progress" (Bagchi, "Speculating..." 74). The emancipated women in Ladyland are not only technologically advanced but are well-equipped with innovative means of spatial mobility that allies technophilia with a feminist sense of freedom. Hossain herself is said have had a particular fondness for travelling during her lifetime, a leisure activity that meant to her much more than temporary vacations (Bagchi, "Speculating..." 73). This liberating notion of unhindered female mobility assumes supreme importance within the narrative paradigms of this speculative work harping upon the stark contrast between the contemporary scenario of restrained womanhood and the futuristic ideals of uninhibited female activity. The witty substitution of the *zenana* with the *mardana* along with its implications have a telling impact by rupturing the illogical assumptions of women's seclusion and men's unhindered hegemony in all walks of life. By deconstructing the patriarchal logic of keeping women grounded, shut away within the interiors and shorn of any scope for mobility, Hossain attempts to not only raise "unsettling questions" (Bagchi, "Speculating..." 74) about these regressive traditions but more importantly, utilize the speculative possibilities of competitive womanhood. In fact, men are mercilessly branded as "predatory purveyors of rape culture" (Bagchi, "Speculating..." 74) by characters like Sister Sara who offers a very radical explanation for the deliberate sequestering of the male sex to the inner quarters. Hossain's heroines in this story, have a sustainable, eco-centric vision of governance as well as maintenance of order and steady socio-economic progress, reflected in the abundance of lush gardens, usage of ecofriendly fuel, etc. Very interestingly and deliberately, she juxtaposes the natures of man and woman, obviously appreciating the latter for their farsightedness, command and calm-headedness in crucial situations. The former, however, are condemned not only for their proneness to warfare and destructive, militancy but also for their innate incapability to steadily contribute to the peace and prosperity of a growing nation. Therefore, in this imaginative, utopian land, the emasculation of the menfolk is proposed as a corrective measure to the otherwise dystopic manifestations of regressive patriarchy in the forms of colonialist or imperialistic practices. This "feminist utopian vision...allied to the technophilia, futurism, and love of the sciences" (Bagchi,

“Speculating...” 73) effusively foregrounds models of female leadership, education and activism within the ambit of nationalism.

Leela Mazumdar, another illustrious name in the history of Bengali juvenile literature also speculatively dealt with gender disparities within the cultural subjectivity of colonized Bengali men and women, albeit in a different light. Mazumdar, inevitably caught up in the onus of carrying forth the legacy of the Bengali Renaissance, nevertheless left an indelibly individual mark upon the discursive configurations of Bengali juvenile literature, both in the colonial and the post-independence years. Hailing from a Brahmo family background, Mazumdar herself was a zealous reformist and had a peculiar penchant for debunking stereotypical assumptions about traditional womanhood through her witty foray into the realm of speculative fiction. She was associated with a number of organizations from 1939 onwards, which promoted female empowerment such as Anandamela (Assembly of Joy) and Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti (Association for Self-Defense for Women). Throughout her life, she held an enduring interest for a wide range of socio-cultural activities, contributing regularly to journals like *Sandesh*, *Meyeder Katha*, etc. that influenced her personal and literary career significantly. Largely popular for her remarkable contribution to Bengali juvenile literature, especially fantasy, horror and nonsense writings, Mazumdar gave scope for “the marginal and the liminal” (Bagchi, “Ār...” 226) to accommodate themselves within the rich cultural heritage of Bengal. Traversing across the late colonial as well as post-independence years in Bengal, her works construct absurdly familiar worlds where apparently ordinary people and places are laden with a distinctive flavour of utopian fantasy. In these imagined utopias, the shifting implications of modernity, tradition, socio-cultural ethics, science, etc. are cast in an innovative light with women being especially celebrated for their “strength, intelligence, imagination, independence, down-to-earthness, eccentricity, stubbornness, and mischievousness” (Bagchi, “Ār...” 227).

Kheror Khata (Scrapbook, 1982) is arguably one of her characteristically humorous attempts to experiment with speculative writing through a collaboration of autobiographical elements and fantasy. What emerges out of this interesting combination is, as Barnita Bagchi argues in her article titled “‘Ār konakhāne’/‘Somewhere Else’: Utopian Resonances in Lila Majumdar’s Autobiographical Writing’, “a sense of female-centred heterotopia...of zany women who carve their own liminal spaces (between sanity and madness, tradition and modernity, science and spirituality) in the everyday world” (227). *Kheror Khata* comprises of snippets from Mazumdar’s own life experiences and

deals with a diverse range of topics pertaining to Bengali socio-cultural subjectivity. Within the diegetic space of such literary preoccupations, Mazumdar effectively portrays speculative sketches of independent-minded Bengali women whose idiosyncratic pragmatism, reasoning capabilities, competence and intelligence outsmart their male counterparts, often even ridiculing them. Negotiating with the dialectics of modernity and tradition, colonizer and colonized, public and private spheres, etc. Majumdar adopts a humorous, genial, self-reflexive stance while delineating a different kind of feminist utopia through her speculative vision. The idiosyncratic women in these writings harbour the capacity to manage both household work and professional obligations with equal efficiency, obliquely critiquing the nationalist assumptions of masculinist hegemony in all spheres. At the same time, she also satirizes certain women from the middle classes for their hierarchical fanaticism against women from the working classes. Particular stories like ‘Meye Chakre’, ‘Dajjal Meye’, ‘Ginnider Prasange’ and ‘Meyeder Katha’ weave unique worlds of idiosyncratic women who straddle both the domestic and the professional spheres with equal ease and competence. Their earthy wit, crazy humour and inimitable strategies prove to be convenient in all adverse situations and aid them in delivering not just themselves but also their male counterparts out of various scrapes where traditional, masculinist logic fails. Not all of these women are well-indoctrinated into conventionally-understood fundamentalist knowledge systems, but rather function within the bounds of the home and the hearth. Also, interestingly enough, these zany women do not always conform to stereotypical notions of beauty, feminine delicacy and expected womanly grace in demeanour. The heterotopic world within which they function allow them the scope to express their potential as individuals harbouring the capacity to outwit their menfolk and assert a sense of unprecedented agency in apparently trivial but paradoxically significant episodes in their lives.

Perhaps the most memorable figure that emerges within such feminist heterotopic speculations is that of Pawto didi (Snehalata Moitra), a close relative of Majumdar who was the very first graduate in Mathematics from India. This woman is portrayed delightfully as eccentric, intelligent, confident, whimsical, careless and lovable in her own way, “straddling science and spirituality” (Bagchi, “‘Ār...” 236) in her everyday interactions and experiences. Extremely down-to-earth in her habits, clothing and lifestyle, this brilliantly intelligent woman had a love for science, especially mathematics, which she used for her own experiments in the course of solving routine issues, ranging from safely packing breakables while moving to house cooling on a hot day. She has her

own unique, bizarre antidotes for every crisis which often challenge empirical knowledge systems and even turn out to be successful in their outcomes. While possessing a scientifically-oriented mind on the one hand, she also tries to negotiate with a personal sense of spirituality on the other, clearly reflected in her devoted inclination towards the philosophy of Ramkrishna Paramhansa. Genuinely affectionate, unmaterialistic and generous in disposition, this woman remains above the stringencies of class and caste divides in traditional society, often blurring these otherwise palpably maintained boundaries. Likewise, the other innumerable memorable women who inhabit this speculative heterotopia and revel in their daily exploits, deconstruct the hegemonic notions of male authority that formed a staple discourse in Bengali juvenile literature since the colonial times. The male equivalents of these unique women prove to be lack-lustre, timid and incapable more than often, undermining the ideological expectations of competent masculinity that was routinely valorized through the majority of twentieth century speculative fiction.

Conclusion

The reconfigurations of native childhood in Bengal since the colonial times entailed the propagation of certain gendered notions of agency, identity and subjectivity through various pedagogic discourses. The Hindu masculinist body politic that was celebrated as the ideal within the larger nationalist project, left its implications upon juvenile literature and its target readership. Despite the heterogeneous demographic of the latter, girlhood was consciously differentiated from boyhood and so were the instructional ends envisioned for the two sexes. However, these dominant narratives were ruptured by the women attempting speculative writing, who maneuvered the generic paradigms of this newly emerged form to suit their own feminist visions. While Mazumdar's self-reflexive, heterotopic strategies create interesting fissures in the hegemonic masculinist ideologies, Hossain's attempts vehemently subvert the disparate notions of gender through speculative visions of female-centered utopias. Hossain's contributions further serve to accommodate the crucial Muslim women's question within the Bengal reforms that had a problematic exclusivist tendency, concerning predominantly the Hindu middle-class *bhadramahila*. The subtler nuances of reformation embedded with the alternative discourses proposed by these women writers of speculative fiction brings to the fore significant issues like socio-cultural and intellectual participation, critiquing their complexities and futuristically anticipating greater gender equality.

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