



Contaminating the Binaries: The Rhetoric of Resistance in Women's Autobiographical Narratives in the *Bamabodhini Patrika* (1863-1922)

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Received: 12 Sep 2022; Received in revised form: 30 Sep 2022; Accepted: 05 Oct 2022; Available online: 10 Oct 2022

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Abstract— *The nineteenth century Bhadrakal attempted to recast women and model them into the Bhadramahila ("respectable woman"). This was done as an attempt to establish themselves as a class and propagate the ideologies of liberal nationalism. I look at this recasting project through the reading of the Bamabodhini Patrika, a periodical for the upper-middle-class Bengali women started by Umesh Chandra Gupta in 1863. The Bhadrakal introduced the antahpur education, which featured extensively in the Bamabodhini, as a mean to emancipate the women from the clutches of Hindu patriarchy. This project, however, was circumscribed by its own limitations. In analysing the serialized publications in the Bamabodhini Patrika ('Gayanada, Sarala and Abala' and 'Strir Prati Swamir Upadesh, 'Kanyar Prati Matar Upadesh', and 'Swami Strir Paraspar Sambandha') I bring out how the Bhadrakal tried to curb curiosity and tame female self-subjectivity. Therefore, in construction of the Bhadramahila, the Bhadrakal reorganised some of the tenets of the older order of patriarchy and placed her in a newer and reformed patriarchy dictated by a distorted concept of 'emancipation'. However, viewing the patrika solely in terms of hegemony is, reductionist and one-dimensional; it provided one of the first platforms for the self-expression of the women. Although the patrika's strict editorial policies did not align with radical self-expression, towards the end of the nineteenth century and the twilight years of the Patrika the editorial policies were relaxed. The task I have undertaken in this dissertation is to collect the scattered voices of resistance and unpack them as challenges to the new formed patriarchal discourse. Periodicals like the Bamabodhini Patrika contaminated the public sphere with personal narratives of the Bhadramahila, and problematised the nineteenth century nationalists' attempt to resolve the woman's question. My reading further complicates the conclusions drawn by critics such as Partha Chatterjee regarding the dichotomies of the inner and the outer domain of nationalist discourse. His contention that women's autonomous struggles were tucked away in the private tracts of autobiographies shall also be disproved by my thesis. Finally, I propose that the Bamabodhini Patrika offered a space for women's writings to leak into the public sphere, and stands as a mean of obfuscation of lines that tried to neatly compartmentalize women's resistance in the private.*

Keywords— *women's periodicals, print, print culture, colonial Bengal, private sphere, public sphere, autonomous struggle, Bhadrakal, Bhadramahila, women's education, women's rights, women's writing, Bengali women's writing, 19th century Bengal, early 20th century Bengal, Brahma Samaj, Umesh Chandra Dutta.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The second half of the nineteenth witnessed a debate over the education of women amongst the nationalists of the century. The "liberal nationalists" that comprised liberal Hindus and the younger faction of the Brahma Samaj negotiated the education and position of women in the *Bhadralok* society.¹ The term *Bhadralok* was used to refer a category of Western-educated Bengali men, who were receptive to the European ideas of social reform and held chakris or jobs as government officials in the British administration. They consisted of upper-class Hindus and Brahmos. David Kopf describes this category of men as:

A distinctively new social grouping in India ... composed of an elite and an intelligentsia. The class was urban, not rural; it was literate and sophisticated; its status was founded more on wealth than on caste; it was a professional, not a literati group; it was receptive to new knowledge, ideas, and values; it absorbed new attitudes and its intellectuals created a syncretic cultural tradition; and perhaps most important, it mentally transcended kin and caste and thought in broader social terms.²

Their position became complex during the second half of the century. They were supposed to be the colonial compradors in their being the intermediaries between the Western and their own countrymen. The *Bhadralak* incorporated Western ideals in order to reform society, and in doing so, lost the popular support and grew conscious of being reduced to mere caricatures of their colonisers. Hence, there was a gradual awakening of the *Bhadralak* to the knowledge of imperialistic tyrannies upon their countrymen, and an urge to establish themselves as a class, firmly, in the society. Neither were these men given equal rights and opportunities by their British superiors, nor could they fit into the conservative Hindu model for men. There's was a position that Partha Chatterjee terms as "subalternity" of the elite. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid in the introduction to *Recasting Women* (1989), state that reorganisation of gender is a dominant part of class and ideology formation: "The relation between classes and patriarchies is complex and variable. Not only are patriarchal systems class differentiated, open to constant and consistent reformulation, but defining gender seems to be crucial to the formation of classes and dominant ideologies."

¹ David Kopf, *Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015. 129.

² Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, 'Introduction' to *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989. 1-26. 5.

One of the ways the *Bhadralak* attempted at negotiating their own position in the society to establish themselves as a class was to re-model their women- the wives, the daughters and the sisters. The *Bamabodhini Patrika* (1863-1922), edited by Umesh Chandra Dutta, an esteemed member of the Sadharan Brahma Samaj, was a periodical launched for the education of elite, upper-class women. The *Patrika* also provided a platform for these women to voice their opinions in writing. This opportunity was handed to these handful women to reiterate the new patriarchal codes set by the *Bhadralak*. The most obvious politics at play here was to oppose the Hindu conservatism towards women. The first schism of the Brahma Samaj happened over the issue of creating a separate universal religion of Brahmoism that didn't divide people based on caste, creed and gender - opposing the tenets that existed in Hinduism.³ Breaking the older pattern of Hindu patriarchy that barred women from pursuing an education had always been the aim of the *Bhadralak* reformer. Ridding women of superstitions, giving them an education that was tailored to keep them subservient, providing them with a platform to reiterate the benefits of their own women's education and emancipation project- shifted the women from one form of patriarchy to another.

Bamabodhini Patrika played a crucial role in popularising the '*antahpur*' education and in circulating the *antahpur* syllabus drawn for the same. The sanctity of the private could not be compromised by the educated Bengali men. There was a clear demarcation of the private and the public, the home and the world, the material and the spiritual. If the spiritual distinctiveness of the culture was preserved, no matter how many adjustments were made to adapt to the material modern world, the true identity of the nation would not be lost. Partha Chatterjee applied this dichotomy to the everyday life and social space to arrive at the conclusion that gender roles attributed women to the inner or spiritual domain and while the man remained a part of the outer or material domain.⁴ The *Bamabodhini Patrika* reaffirmed the position

³ Keshub Chandra Sen argued that "the Brahma Samaj was established to bring together the peoples of the world, irrespective of caste, creed, and country, at the feet of the One Eternal God" in his book *Conscience and Renunciation* (undated). Cited in David Kopf, *The Brahma Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind*, 177.

The 1886 schism of the Brahma Samaj was the result of the Adi Brahmos trying to cling to Hindu scriptures and remodelling them into forming Brahmoism, rather than having a separate religion. Keshub Chandra and his followers did not conform to this practice which they called "reformed Hinduism", and wanted a more liberal, rational religious ethics. The liberal Brahmos also believed in the liberation of women which was restricted by Hinduism.

⁴ Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question", Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds., *Recasting Women:*

of women within the household and their project of educating women was circumscribed by its own limitations. Women were encouraged to be taught in the house and about managing the household-being dutiful towards the husband, cleaning and cooking, religiosity, maintaining personal hygiene and managing the household accounts and expenditure. Sumit Sarkar states that most of the reforms made by the liberal nationalists were at the level of "inter-personal familial relationships" and "reformist husbands may have been occasionally imposing new norms of social conduct on not-too-enthusiastic wives."⁵ In the section "Taming Female Subjectivity", I argue, after Sumit Sarkar, that the *Bhadramahila* was as much a possession of the husband as she was before, and her education only tied her down to new forms of subjugation that entailed her to be a subservient wife as well as an ideal companion. Sumit Sarkar in the same essay claims that "Bengali women were not necessarily always mere passive recipients of reformist boons from their menfolk and much more research is needed on this point." In collecting and translating some of the radical voices from the *Bamabodhini Patrika's* section, "Bama Ganer Rachana", I drive home the very point that Bengali women did provide resistance in the form of writing to this new patriarchal discourse.

The self-interest of the *Bhadralak* and the politics of nationalism gave birth to gendered spaces. However, autobiographical narratives of the *antahpur* surpassed the threshold to reach the *bahir*. Partha Chatterjee states that women's autonomous struggle did not appear in public in the nineteenth century because their domestication was reified by nationalist ideologies. To find the same one needs to look away from public archives and turn to autobiographical modes of writing like letters, journals, family histories, religious tracts and so on. My reading of the *Bamabodhini Patrika* takes a departure from this very idea that Partha Chatterjee proposed- the presence of women's resistance only in the private sphere. Periodicals like *Bamabodhini Patrika* offered the *bhadramahila* a platform ('Bama Ganer Rachana') for self-expression and contained private narratives of struggle and resistance. The *Bhadramahila's* dissent over the male figure's encroachment on her space, her grappling with the added responsibility of pursuing an education, her penchant for 'swadhinata' and her demand for gender equality- I unpack several of these narratives of *Bhadramahila* as their

resistance to the dominant discourse in the last section of my dissertation. Krishna Sen's reading of the *Bamabodhini* renders it a "discursive space" that "allows for the gendered inflection of conventional male-authored nineteenth century "Advice to Women" texts."⁶ I draw upon this reading heavily in testifying how *Bamabodhini* is much more than a handbook for femininity- it represented dissent, dispute and debate over its own *antapur* rules of education and lifestyle. Although it was not a conscious effort, the *patrika* paved the way for its own criticism. Subsequently its design became redundant as women's writing that were far removed than what was permissible by the *patrika* started appearing in public circulation. The *antahpur*-educated women crafted their articles cleverly. At a glance they seemed to adhere to the editorial polices. Upon unravelling them at lengths, one can find a world of narratives that deal with struggle, critiques and even direct challenges to the imposition of this reconstruction projects. The women often contaminated the public sphere with the narratives of the private throwing the public/private dichotomy into disarray.

II. HISTORY AND BACKGROUND OF THE BAMABODHINI PATRIKA

Bamabodhini Patrika or 'the Magazine for the Enlightenment of the Women' was started by Umesh Chandra Dutta in 1863 and it ran successfully till 1922 becoming the "mouthpiece of the New Society".⁷ The Brahmandhu Sabha founded by Keshub Chandra Sen in 1862 in order to take up the cause of female emancipation along with other social reforms. However, its focus was shifted from the female emancipatory goal, and a new organisation had to be relegated with the responsibility. Umesh Chandra and Bijoy Krishna Goswami, the relatively younger faction of the Samaj, inaugurated the *Bamabodhini Sabha* with its singular focus, that of educating and uplifting women. The *Bamabodhini Patrika* was published by the efforts of this organisation. It was a monthly periodical, churning out hundred copies per month, priced at one anna (one sixteenth of a rupee) per copy. The primary focus of the periodical was to take education to the 'andarmahal' or the space of the woman, as Umesh Chandra wrote in the very first editorial published in August 1863 (B.S. Bhadra 1270):

By the grace of God many people in this country have turned their attention towards bettering the lot of our women. That they need to be educated

Essays in Colonial History. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989. 233-53. 238

⁵ Sumit Sarkar, "The Women's Question in Nineteenth Century Bengal", in eds., Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, *Women and Culture*. Bombay: SNDT Women's University, 1985.157-72.

⁶ Krishna Sen, "Lessons in Self-Fashioning: 'Bamabodhini Patrika' and the Education of Women in Colonial Bengal", *Victorian Periodicals Review*, Vol. 37, No.2 (2004): 176-91. 188.

⁷ *Ibid.*179

just as much as men, that without this there is no advancement either for women or for this country is now an accepted fact. We find public-spirited gentlemen setting up schools for girls here and there, an activity encouraged also by the benevolent government. But very few girls avail this opportunity and that too for a very limited period. Unless the school can enter the *antahpur* there is very little chance of benefitting the majority of our women... This journal will cover all topics which are relevant to its readers. We will attempt to eradicate error and superstition through the radiance of true learning... To make our articles easily accessible to women, we shall endeavour to keep our subject matter chaste and our language simple... If by the will of God this effort of ours is accepted by our cultured society and found to be of use to its women and then it will have served its purpose.⁸

This excerpt is of remarkable importance since it brings out the main objectives of the magazine and these are reflected and developed fully in other sections of the magazine in its due course. Firstly, the "accepted fact" was that the advancement of the woman had become synonymous to the advancement of the country. There was a need for western ideals of liberalism to encroach upon women's existence in a way that it did not conflict with the indigenous traditional values that guided them. This was the nationalist agenda. The conclusion that was arrived at was the introduction of the 'antahpur education' with its "subject matter chaste." Secondly, it attempted at overthrowing Hindu patriarchy by attempting to "eradicate error and superstition". This was one of the tougher goals-reorganising the contours of a form of patriarchy that had already firmly established itself was a challenge for these younger Brahmos. The lengthy dialogical series between 'Gyanada' and other Hindu women published in the *Patrika* gives a testimonial of the painstaking efforts of the editor to debunk Hindu superstitious beliefs against women's education. Lastly, the endeavour was directed at "our cultured society and its women"- the elite, upper-class Hindu and Brahmo women. The magazine in its outlook was already exclusive of women of the lower class or labourers. Not only did they create a separate class of women by giving them access to a moderated form of education, they tied them down more and blocked any other way of self-autonomy. In this sense, lower class women, labouring women were less oppressed by this new

form of patriarchy since they could venture outside the household to earn a living.

A similar project was undertaken two decades earlier by Debendranath Tagore when he established the Tattvabodhini Sabha in 1843.⁹ *Tattvabodhini Patrika* or 'The Magazine for the Enlightenment of the Soul' also started its publication in the same year. However, his efforts fell through for several reasons, one of them being, the lack of force. Although the women of the Tagore family were educated in the household, Debendranath was hesitant in advocating the same for most of the Hindu women. He had always been one with the popular support of the Hindus and so was his Brahmo Samaj, and debating over the issue of women seemed like a great risk that might damage the Brahmo popularity.¹⁰

III. TAMING FEMALE SELF-SUBJECTIVITY: THE POLITICS OF PERMISSIONS AND PROHIBITIONS OF BAMABODHINI PATRIKA

Before we see the rise of a militant form of nationalism at the turn of the century, the *bhadralak* reformer created a more liberal form of nationalism borrowing and tailoring Western ideas. The battle against imperialism was started in the *antahpur* in re-defining female identity which was analogous to the spiritual or true identity of the nation. The *Bhadralak* reformer were selective in their borrowing of European ideals for women. They wanted the *Bhadramahila* to be educated but not become a 'bibi' who, according to Bengali men, refused to do household work and spent their time leisurely reading cheap novels.¹¹

In this section I attempt at spelling out the objectives of the magazine- the laying down of foundation of women's education, the prohibitions and permissions which were to guide both the woman's life and their writings. As Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid's "epigraph" to the collection of essays goes, "She [the new woman] must be refined, reorganized, recast, regenerated"¹²- I unpack some of the serialized articles

⁹ For a succinct account of the Tattvabodhini Sabha, see, Dilip Kumar Biswas, "Maharshi Devendranath Tagore and the Tattvabodhini Sabha," A C Gupta, ed., *Studies on the Bengal Renaissance*, Calcutta: National Council of Education, 1958.

¹⁰ Debendranath Tagore, *Amar Valya Katha O Amar Bombai Prabash* (undated). Cited in David Kopf, *Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind*. 130

¹¹ 'Bibi' is a pejorative term commonly used in Bengal to refer to European women.

¹² The epigraph was taken from Koylashchander Bose's book *On the Education of Hindu Females* (1846). Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid eds., *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989.

⁸ Translated from Bengali to English by Krishna Sen, Umesh Chandra Gupta's article of commencement published in the first editorial of *Bamabodhini Patrika*. Krishna Sen, "Lessons in Self-Fashioning". 177.

published in the magazine that focus on reconstructing women's position, duties, and even "mon" ("soul").

Gyanada, Sarala and Abala

Bamabodhini had the hefty task of correcting a traditional Hindu patriarchy that was built on the selective reading and interpretation of the Shastras or Smritis to keep the women under control. The project of reconstructing femininity in the creation of the Bhadramahila entailed clearly spelling out the permissions and prohibitions of the project. Before witnessing a largely female authorship *Bamabodhini* did the job of clearly defining the terms of women's education through the creation of fictional narratives by the male editors. One particular serialisation that is interesting and notable was a dialogical exchange between Gyanada and Sarala, two fictional characters dwelling upon the subject of women's education, appearing on the pages of the magazine for almost two years. Gyanada (the name literally translates to 'the wise woman') was created as an ideal woman, who possessed traditional womanly virtues but was also modern in her outlook in discarding stigma and superstition around women's education. Gyanada was intelligently crafted to discuss subjects that were typically the concern of the women, that of domesticity and conjugality. The formation of fiction with a woman at the centre of the narrative was instrumental in speaking to women at large and advocating the benefits of antahpur education. Sarala ('the simple woman') was representative of Bengali women who had their share of fears and misgivings about 'antahpur' education. The purpose and design of the 'antahpur' education is clarified within the first few issues of the periodical when Sarala asks, "What is the point of getting an education? Women are not likely to get a job or sit at meetings like men do."¹³ Gyanada, the mouthpiece of the Bhadrakal, marks out the limits of this education:

Why will women have to go to meetings like men? They can meet amongst themselves and discuss a variety of subjects that they have learned. There are some good men in the country who are trying to educate the women, but if women themselves are not enthusiastic about this, their own perils will never go away and they will never be enlightened.¹⁴

The purpose and design of this education was to carve out another responsibility for women who were perceived as spending too much time in leisure, indulging in argument over petty matters, and breeding discontent in the family. The *antahpur* education was tailor-made to domesticate

women so that they could serve their families better, apply their knowledge to rearing children, and be a suitable companion to their husbands. Thus, the syllabus was drawn accordingly:

The April 1866 issue outlined a five-year syllabus for home study, covering a variety of subjects, with recommended textbooks and topics for examination for every year. Moral Science, embroidery, and handicrafts would be taught, and the academic curriculum would be graded: reading and writing Bengali the first year; Bengali grammar, geography, and arithmetic the second year; advanced Bengali grammar and literature, geography, history, and algebra the third year; the same subjects and hygiene the fourth year; the same subjects and botany and biology the fifth year (Ray 34-36). This syllabus, reprinted with minor alterations and the addition of an optional sixth year course covering more advanced topics in the earlier disciplines together with geometry and basic physics, was given in September 1870.

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The syllabus was limited and there being no question of going outside, it did not require any practical knowledge that could be applied to making a living. Therefore, the figures of Sarala and Gyanada expounded this education and the syllabus. Gyanada breaks down to Sarala the importance of education and then Sarala in turn educated other women like *Abala* (the silent other) and other women of her milieu about the same. Through the conversation amongst these women there was a formation of a discourse around the benefits of *antahpur* education in the pages of *Bamabodhini*. An ideal that was sought to be actualized in the real life.

The advisories

The *Bamabodhini Patrika* consisted of articles in the form of advices ('upodesh') for the young women from older male figures like *swami* ('husband'), *bhrata* ('brother') and the mother. These advices were published in order to fine tune the way the women perceived their education. This was done to manipulate the feelings and the 'mon' ('soul' or 'heart') of newly educated women. Written in the form of advices towards a woman who is already following a curriculum and is bound to have curiosity, these were meant to curb them. Therefore, not only were the women not given access to the outside world, but even temporally there was a clear threshold that they couldn't transgress. Some of the articles were titled 'pity and affection' or 'respect and devotion.' These cast women in

¹³ "Sarala O Gyanadar Kathopokathan", *Bamabodhini Patrika*, June 1863.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Krishna Sen, 'Lessons in Self-Fashioning', 179.

a subservient role whereof, even when if their education enabled them to have the power to distinguish right from wrong, they must not be too eager as to correct someone who isn't an equal in age or gender. For instance, one of the advices from a husband towards his wife goes like this:

You must not under any circumstances behave rudely with anyone, nor should you insult any person. Never talk back to your elders, that is, speak respectfully to and softly with them. If you find any faults with your elders do not feel the need to correct them. Behave properly in front of them; do not make inappropriate remarks or laugh loudly in their company. If you are in the presence of any virtuous man or woman you must feel respect towards them just as easily as you feel sympathy for someone who is unfortunate. It is usual to feel the sense of respect for a virtuous person. If you cannot find it in yourself to respect a particular person at all, the least you should do is never to disobey them. Your father, your mother, your brother, people who are highly educated, your teachers, religious leaders, saints, devotees of God and your father-in-law, mother-in-law, etc- these people should always be respected. At times you might not able to tolerate their remarks but you must not disrespect them at any cost.¹⁶

This passage shows a desperate attempt on part of the Bhadrak patriarchy to preserve the feminine qualities of the woman. By teaching them how to feel, whom to respect and obey, is an effort to tweak their self-subjectivity even more. Education does not give the *bhadramahila* the right to refute or talk back to her elders or male figures. Her education should not be a cause of altering her thought process so as to behave in a manner superior to others- after all she was a woman, although more learned, a subservient figure nonetheless.

The question of conjugal life becomes crucial when the woman is educated. Prior to this emancipation project, wives were silently devoted to their husbands and the members of his family. Now she had a new role of inculcating virtues such as "courage, expertise in work, strength, discipline" and "model" her soul upon these values. These are the qualities that the husband possesses and the wife needs to understand them in order to become the ideal soulmate to their husbands. In addition, wives are also advised to be affectionate, devoted to God and perform all the household duties that are required of her by her husband: "she must act as her husband's shadow and

pray for his well-being, and devote her body and soul to take care of her husband. The husband and wife shall be companions and spend their conjugal life according to the oath of marriage taken in front of God."¹⁷

This new liberation discourse of the woman demanded more of the woman than ever before. This was a legitimate subordination towards the husband and male members of the family garbed under the vocabulary of emancipation. She was as much a property of her husband as she was before, the terms of ownership were reorganized to suit the new needs of the Bhadrak. Sumit Sarkar is of the opinion that the social reforms that were made at this point was to solely make the women adapt to these new units of the family and cater to the educated husband which was then preferred over catering to the needs of the elderly in the joint families. They wanted fit companions who would alter themselves to this new way of life:

Efforts at education and a controlled emancipation became a dire necessity to survive in the hostile social world... Reform attempts in fact were survival in a hostile social world...and were very often concentrated on near-relatives.¹⁸

IV. 'BAMA GANER RACHANA': THE 'ANDARMAHAL' COMING TO THE 'BAHIR'

In this section I have collected fragmented voices published in the section 'Bama Ganer Rachana' ('the writings of women') of women's struggle with the new conditions imposed upon her for the purpose of self-fashioning. There wasn't a complete collusion on part of these women with this new policy of education and new roles imposed on them. There are individual voices that report autobiographically the hardships of achieving the ideal that was expected of her. There were disputes, debates and dissent over the high expectations of the men and at times even strong penchant for independence. The Patrika therefore, showcased personal experiences of women as they strived to grapple with this new form of patriarchy. In doing this, it was bringing the 'andarmahal' to the public eye, therefore problematizing the nationalist attempt of resolving the "woman's question" and formulations of dichotomies like public and private, inner and outer, or spiritual and material.

Bamabodhini was one of the first magazines for women that encouraged women to send their writings for

¹⁶ "A husband's advice to his wife", *Bamabodhini Patrika*, October 1865.

¹⁷ "The Companionship of Husband and Wife", *Bamabodhini Patrika*, March 1888.

¹⁸ Sumit Sarkar, "The Women's Question in Nineteenth Century Bengal", in *Women and Culture*, eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid. Bombay: SNDT Women's University, 1985.157-72.

publication. From the earliest volumes of the magazine, editors have urged in the columns of magazine for women to participate in this project so that other women can come forward and the magazine represents more voices of women:

It is our deepest desire to publish articles that are written by the women. The beautiful writings of women will adorn the *Bamabodhini Patrika*, hence, we request our readers that from this new year onwards to send their writings to the *Bamabodhini Sabha*.¹⁹

To encourage more readers into contributing to the magazine they even proposed a reward, “for the sake of encouraging the writer, we will be sending her a free copy of the *Bamabodhini* for the month in which her writing is published.” *Bamabodhini*, thus, was more than just a handbook the rules to which this new woman had to follow. It became an interactive platform and although the editorial policies were not in line with radical self-expression, there were scattered voices of resistance to be found in the magazine. With the call for writings there was a major influx of entries sent to the editor's office. Such massive was the response that the editor had to ask the writers to provide proofs of identification. It was astonishing that women could compose such wonderful, radical and well-written prose and poetry. A few editorials later the editor shared his doubts in the paper:

We have received a lot of writings from women in the past few months and all of them are more than eligible to be printed in the *patrika*. But we are doubtful whether these compositions are of women, and thereby, we cannot print them. If you are eager to have your composition printed in our periodical then send any kind of proof of identity along with your writing at the *Bamabodhini Sabha* office at the earliest.²⁰

It is evident that the editorial policy questioned the credibility of the power of women's writing and most of the published women's writing dealt with the common subject of education of women. The benefits of education, devotion towards God, performing wifely duties meticulously, raising children with utmost care-contributed to the subjects of most of the '*Bama Ganer Rachana*' ('the writings of women'). The sensibility, however, changed with the turn of the century- the first prose or poetry pieces almost always attributed education to a divine inspiration. At the end of the century and beginning of the twentieth century the women's composition showcased how they were inspired by the heroines of Tagore's novels and made

them modular forms of the woman. For instance, one Srimati Madhumati Bandopadhyay from Barishal (now in Bangladesh) writes that women bear the hatred of God because they do not put their mental and physical faculties to proper use. By not educating themselves they go against God's design which is to see both men and women flourishing: “By not educating ourselves we are defying God's orders and in doing so, not only our existence in this life becomes futile but also, we shall be punished in afterlife.”²¹ The subject matter did not change much in the later years of the *patrika*, they developed on their aims to their fullest potential. However, with an increase in literacy amongst the *bhadramahila* she could easily perceive her reflection in the contemporary novels and also provide comments on the roles of her opposite gender. One Kumodini Ray writes, in 1894, about the heroines of Tagore's play *Raja O Rani* (1889). The romanticizing of the woman's subservience towards her husband and partner is highly praised by Kumodini and she feels every woman should strive to achieve this bond with her husband:

Two of the female characters in Babu Rabindranath Tagore's *Raja O Rani* has been portrayed beautifully. These two female characters should be models for the Hindu woman. Ila says to her husband Kumar, “I shall love you day and night, you can love me whenever it suits you. I shall sit right here for you all night, you come to me whenever it pleases you.” What Ila means by this is that she shall always keep her husband in her heart. This is the kind of admiration towards the husband that is ideal. The men have to face a lot of difficulties in life and they must perform their duties diligently- therein, lies his masculinity. The woman shall wait for her husband to come to her after he has completed his duties.²²

New women, who were educated now and had somewhat acquiesced to the idea of the gendered spaces, demanded the husband to venture to the outside world. She will perform her wifely duties devoutly inside the house and wait for her husband so long as he takes up his “manly” tasks in the outside world. This passage defines masculinity as perceived by the modern woman, if spaces are to be gendered, men should conform to their duties on the other side of the threshold. She follows up this passage with her disappointment at the repugnant idea of the “effeminate man”, stating: “If the man always seeks for comfort in woman's ‘anchal’ and not spread his ideas and

¹⁹ *Bamabodhini Patrika*, April 1864.

²⁰ *Bamabodhini Patrika*, July 1864.

²¹ Translated from Madhumita Bandopadhyay, *Bamabodhini Patrika*, October 1865.

²² Kumodini Ray, *Bamabodhini Patrika*, August 1894.

efforts in the world...he will be referred to as an effeminate man." Thus, the new form of patriarchy expected men to play a certain role as well, and these women did not shy away from demanding what was expected of him.

Some of the writings exposed the extra burden that the 'antahpur' education imposed on the middle-class women. To make fit companions out of their wives might have been an intended consequence of the reforms if not the whole purpose of it. Experiences of women who showed remarkable perseverance in pursuing the 'antahpur' education under the tutelage of their husbands were showcased in these periodicals. An excerpt from Kailashbashini Debi's *Hindu Mahilaganer Hinabastha* was published in *Bamabodhini's* pages to inspire young women to take up studies. However, it also brought forth the grim picture of the Hindu household which was not conducive to pursuing an education, it demanded doubling of her responsibilities:

It was exasperating to me even when the matter of women's education was brought up in my presence. My husband Babu Durga Charan Gupta took it upon himself to educate me. I was persistent in not following his advices, but that did not deter him. Contrarily, he was more determined to have me educated. Eventually, I paid heed to his suggestions. Therefore, to be loyal to both my duties [that of a wife and of a daughter-in-law], I used to finish my household chores at day time and by the time I used to get time to rest at night I used to study.²³

The plight of the younger woman in fighting the older matriarchs to pursue their education is a recurrent topic that had been taken up by women writing in the *Bamabodhini*. Susamasundari Dasi from Ghoshpara, Krishnanagar, writes of the many obstacles faced by the younger women from the illiterate older women of the household. She says that they "burn with jealousy" and burden them with extra housework so as to divert their focus from studying. Susamasundari exposes the implausibility of women's education in joint families. Husbands do not want to engage in a conflict with the other family members and therefore, are not enthusiastic about tutoring them. She states that this form of education is feasible only for women who can go away to distant places with their husbands for the purpose of his job.

Another major topic of discussion featuring extensively through the periodical was regarding the

tutelage in *antahpur* education. Several women forthrightly advocated their dissent to the aggressive teaching methods of male tutors. They demanded to be taught by female tutors who took a particularly feminine approach to teaching and would teach them "softly and gently". The traditional masculine form of imparting knowledge with its continual rebukes and punishment was not settling well with women. A lot of women did not partake in the exercise just because they felt uncomfortable or overwhelmed by the male figure's teaching methods. An anonymous writer in the April 1864 edition of the periodical writes that the 'antahpur' education project might fail if women are not taught by women themselves.

If educated women come to the fore to take up the job of teaching younger women, only then can the success of the project not be doubtful...There are a lot of women in Bengal who are widows or do not have children, if they come forward then some of their troubles will also be eased and the problems of the project shall also be solved. Moreover, they will be able to sustain their own lives via this vocation.²⁴

This again reaffirms the position of *antahpur* as an exclusively female space where the encroachment of male figures was not welcome. The *Bhadralok* did not want the women to come to the bahir, likewise the *Bhadramahila* conveyed their own disagreement with the masculine methods of teaching and the subsequent interference of the men in their space. Articles like this were published to encourage women to take up the role of *antahpur* tutors. It paved the way for providing the widows and older women a chance in pursuing a career within the space of the household. The historical implication of these please culminated into, even if to a miniscule degree, the resolution of the cause widows who were neglected by Vidyasagar's widow remarriage policy. These widowed women would teach embroidery, cooking, cleaning, and moral science classes. A minority of these older widows or childless women took part in the teaching-learning process for the sake of sustenance. Even though they were ostracized by the society, they acquired some amount of agency and self-autonomy by being financially dependent.

Some women recognised the imbalance of power within marriages that was persistent even after the women were being educated in numbers. They voiced their opinions strongly in their essays. These radical voices are found in the twilight years of the magazine when the *Patrika* was laden with mostly women's writings. The editorial policies were lax is evident from the fact that articles where women openly reprimand men for not

²³ Excerpt from Kailashbashini Debi's *Hindu Mahilaganer Hinabastha* printed in a section for book review, *Notun Granther Samalochana* in *Bamabodhini Patrika*, 1863.

²⁴ *Bamabodhini Patrika*, April 1864.

allowing them to pursue a job or own private property began to appear. Kamini Kumari Gupta writes in her article 'Stri Siksha O Stri Swadhinata' ('Women's Education and Women's Liberation'): "The society comprises both men and women, therefore, the responsibilities in every sphere of social life must be delegated equally to men and women."²⁵ Women now wanted more than just being the ideal companion to their husbands, they wanted equality and would not be fettered by dominating husbands. Kamini Kumari Gupta throws caution to the wind in not only asking for equal rights but also, in the same article, reprimands men for not being satisfied with their wives even after all the trouble women had to go through in order to educate themselves:

Had women not shown any interest in educating themselves despite having the access to a proper education, they would have deserved to be dominated and reprimanded. But now if their husbands or fathers still try to dominate them and belittle them without any concrete reason, then women are undeserving of such treatment. Judging from an unbiased standpoint, in such cases, it is the men of the country who are to be blamed.²⁶

This passage resonates the collective frustration of the *bhadramahila* with her own position in the household and in the society at large. Voices like these were present throughout the course of the *Bamabodhini Patrika's* running period. They were either fragmented or were censored by the editorial policies. This article was very carefully crafted. 'Stri Siksha O Swadhinata' begins in the same strain as any other article about the importance of women's education, but then it develops into a cathartic valve leaking the oppressed desire for "swadhinata" ('independence')- going outside, pursuing a career, owning property, being spoken to as an equal, and equality in "every sphere" of the social life. She blames the Indian man for not treating his partner with respect and still looking down on her despite her going through a rigorous process of reconsolidation of her position for more than half a century.²⁷ "It is the men of the country who are to be blamed", throws a ringing challenge to the multi-foliated patriarchy that constantly tries to recast women.

V. CONCLUSION

The project of reconsolidation of the women's position and roles in 19th century Bengal did not operate smoothly and

²⁵ *Bamabodhini Patrika*, 'Stri Siksha O Swadhinata', Kamini Kumari Gupta, December 1882.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

didn't go unchallenged by the *Bhadramahila*. In addition, the platform for resistance was offered to her by the *Bhadralak* himself. Himani Banerjee speaks about the *Bamabodhini Patrika* only in terms of Gramscian hegemony and Althusserian interpellation.²⁸ However, such a reading of a 'Patrika' that ran for almost sixty years is somewhat reductionist and one dimensional. The *Bhadralok* never shied away from admitting that the *Patrika* was designed to educate women inside the house. They tried (with considerable success) to tame female subjectivity, but they also provided a platform for women's self-expression. Krishna Sen believes that the legacy of the *Bamabodhini* lies in creation of a discursive space: "However fraught with inherent epistemological contradictions, editors and contributors used *Bamabodhini* as a platform to think through the existing culture in the hopes of glimpsing a new horizon."²⁹ Krishna Sen's reading of the *patrika* in terms of hope and new horizon throws new light on the Bengali reformers efforts to reconsolidate women. Notwithstanding how artful the education curriculum was, women learned to voice their opinions within the existing paradigm and criticising the same in multiple levels in which it operated. Individuation and self-expression leaked out into the public in the form of women's writing. *Bamabodhini's* legacy lies in bringing the private lives of upper-middle-class women into the public eyes. The autobiographical nature of these writings renders them the quality of resistance against the dominant discourse that expected nothing but subservience and collusion. Partha Chatterjee states:

We would be mistaken to look for evidence of such (autonomous) struggle in the public archives of political affairs, for, unlike the women's movement in nineteenth-and-twentieth-century Europe, that is not where the battle was waged here in the era of nationalism. The domain where the new idea of womanhood was sought to be actualized was the home, and the real history of that change can be constructed out of evidence left behind in autobiographies, family histories, religious tracts, literature, theatre and such other cultural artefacts that depict life in the middle-class home.³⁰

²⁸ Himani Banerjee, *Inventing Subjects: Studies in Hegemony, Patriarchy and Colonialism*. New Delhi: Tulika, 2001.99-178.

²⁹ Krishna Sen, 'Lessons in Self-Fashioning: "Bamabodhini Patrika" and the Education of Women in Colonial Bengal', published in *Victorian Periodicals Review*, Vol. 37, No.2, 2004, 176-191. 189.

³⁰ Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question", in eds., Kulkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989.233-53, 250.

Women's resistances were found in autobiographies and private tracts, but women's periodicals like *Bamabodhini* made provisions for these struggles to leak into the public as well. However imperfect their endeavours, periodicals like *Bamabodhini Patrika* by offering a platform for self-expression contaminated the public sphere with personal narratives of women. My study of the *Bamabodhini Patrika* is not to frame it just as a medium for resolving the woman's question in late the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. By collecting the scattered voices of women that were in circulation in the public, I propose a new perspective on the woman's question and its so-called resolution. The home, where the new womanhood was sought to be actualized, could not contain the narratives of the new woman, they were brought forward by the *patrika*. It became a discursive space beyond the reified binaries of home/world, inner/outer or spiritual/material. My reading complicates the conclusions drawn by critics such as Partha Chatterjee regarding the dichotomies of the inner and the outer. *Bamabodhini Patrika* stands as a mean of obfuscation of lines that tried to neatly compartmentalize women's resistance only in the private sphere. My thesis opens up new avenues to study women's periodicals in colonial Bengal. Women's autonomous struggle in this period is also rendered a new colour as it can be redefined by reading women's writing in public tracts like magazines and periodicals.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to my supervisor professor Achyut Chetan, who has guided me throughout the reading and writing process of this paper. He gave me complete intellectual freedom to shape my work and made every argument sharper with his valuable remarks. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Department of English, St. Xavier's University, for the knowledge, support and encouragement that they have provided to me. I would also like to acknowledge Mr. Prodosh Bhattacharya's contribution to my research. He has been a mentor and has also aided my project by sharing his knowledge of archived documents and where to find them in Kolkata. I would like to thank my friends from the University with whom I have shared this experience of learning and writing. Finally, I thank my best friends and family for always believing in me and encouraging me in my academic pursuits.

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