

Women and Their Everyday Objects: A Peep into the Urban Bengali Domestic Space

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Abstract: *Women have necessarily been located, studied and contested from the interiors of the household for a long time. It's either the bedroom, the living room or the kitchen that echoes her production and reproduction of/for labour. Domestic space over time has seen gendered interventions in terms of utility, ritual practices (both sacred and profane), relationships (conviviality and conjugality), kinship longings and heritage maintenance, accommodating the lingering memories associated with the urban Bengali 'Bhadrolok' and 'Bhadramohila'. This paper will be an attempt to locate the 'bhadramohila' or the Bengali woman through her everyday objects of use. In pursuing the same, the paper shall draw cues from fictions and films of Satyajit Ray of the early 20th century, cooking manuals and handbooks written by Bengali authors and advertisements hinting at the appropriate use of household objects. Besides, there shall be a quick reference to the colonial impression on material objects that have been used by women to decorate their houses and their varied implications on their lives and lifeworlds. Objects enmeshed in everydayness, 'boti' (wooden stand with a curved knife), 'kulo' (cane tray), 'shil-nora' (hand grinding stone), 'haath pankha' (hand fan) and other objects alike and a few utensils shall be referred to account for women's fast-transforming material lives and how it weaves out their identities. In an age of 'gated communities' with plush residential flat apartments, urban Bengali women have found new purpose in decorating their domestic space and along with it, many old and new objects of everyday use have come to redefine the women 'homemakers' and their multifarious activities in 'doing gender' and 'undoing gender'. Thus, the journey from buying, owning, using, exhibiting, selling and again buying back those objects (in the second-hand markets) speaks of 'her' negotiations and assertions in the interiors, at times transpiring beyond the household. Nevertheless, the paper will try to account for how everyday objects possibly determine women's*

embodied (emotional, intellectual and aesthetic) as well as disembodied (spiritual) existences with the changing socio-political meaning of domestic space, at times questioning the masculine oversight on the household and at times accommodating the same.

Keywords: Middle class, Neo liberalism, Domestic space, materiality, aestheticization.

Introduction

Houses, among many other things, are a symbolic representation of social status, territorialisation and predominant kinship patterns—much of which essentially qualifies and defines the man or men owning, dwelling in or abandoning the houses. But the women have traditionally been delegated and strictly appreciated for their wholesome presence in the interiors of the houses. This wholesomeness, at times, is rewarded with a slice of shared status with the man and often times shrouded like the nagging everyday essential chores without which, otherwise, living would be cumbersome. In a famous piece of work, ‘The Home of Woman: A View from the Interior,’ Alison Ravetz points out how “women and daughter, themselves part of a man’s establishment, doubtless concurred, for the status of the house conditioned their own access to society and to matrimony.” (Ravetz, 1984: 9) Karl Marx, too, conformed to this class-determined housing and gender motivations for upward movement through the housing stock. Thereby, the point of departure for a discussion on women and her domestic space has to be located in ‘housing’ per se, being one of the many areas of life to ascertain, accomplish and often reclaim class (economic and social). In this sense, motivations and opportunities for actualisation of the class position by women from the interiority of the houses could barely be ignored. However, women in the interiors of the house commanded some kind of domestic organisation of space and activities, correlating to a strange sub-dominant agency, which definitely compels us to rethink the act of ‘doing gender’.

To reiterate the women’s presence from the interior and her sub-dominant position, I shall make some reference to Rabindra Nath Tagore’s writings. Prashantakumar Pal, who wrote ‘Rabijibani’ (1993: Vishva Bharati Press), cites a letter (chithipatra) where the poet is saying to his wife, Mrinalini, in 1901, about his yearning for household material renunciation. He writes:

Unless one can somehow make one's life very simple, one cannot make space in it for happiness – the place of happiness and contentment is entirely taken up by objects and things, bustle and strife, complications and excitement, accounts and records. The effort to find comfort destroys one's comfort. ... My innermost being continually craves emptiness [phnaka: also, translatable as 'vacancy'] – not just the emptiness of sky, air, light, but an emptiness within the household, an emptiness in arrangements and furnishings, an emptiness in effort, thought, fuss – all one's daily needs of food, clothes, customs, behaviour should be simple, restrained, moderate, clean – all around there should be an easy, calm frugality. (as translated by Supriya Chaudhuri, 2010: 188)

Tagore, in this excerpt, is conveying to his wife, the woman co-dweller of his house, his desire to physically, thus mentally, declutter the household. Tagore's dwelling always came up as an experimentation of simple and fluid ways of living. Not that he was a renouncer of material objects, and the museum at Viswa Bharati surely stands as a corroboration of the fact. In this letter his is actually motivating his wife to adopt a new style of interiors, with non-ornamental and not-so-elaborate furniture and furnishings. Possibly, we could see this desire for an alternate model of simple interiors as an influence of his visit to Japan. What is relevant for us in relation to this paper is his willingness to convey it to his wife. His gesture hints at the recognisable presence of the woman in the interior, if not overwhelmingly decisive. One must not forget that Furniture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a kind of material object embossed with multiple socio-cultural significations, thus becoming a signifier of cross-cutting political interests, and women lived through them too. Beyond domestic utility, furniture also played a very important role in maintaining utilitarian aesthetics. And women were no less wrapped up in this observance of aesthetics within the household, with the introduction of mahogany dressing tables, ornamental bed rests, large wooden frame mirrors, marble-top tea tables, glass chandeliers, etc. Adorning these furniture items of partly Persian-Mughal style and later of British fashion, the nineteenth and early twentieth-century Bengali middle class and their women developed a very deep association with the material objects of the then household. Nevertheless, I shall later discuss how women played a remarkably enterprising role in the selling and buying back of these material objects with the tag of 'heritage' in the second-hand market in the 21st century. However, as I am not trying to solely make an account for furniture in the Bengali household and locate women's voices through them, I would transit into the other by lanes of the

material world and locate other objects of utility that women interacted with in an everyday capacity and cast varied meanings upon them as much as to the domestic folds that 'she' often designed, if not defined; decorated, if not demarcated, maneuvered, if not resisted.

To walk through these domestic folds and contours of everydayness and its material objects, I would like to discuss two scenes from two different films of Satyajit Ray. Firstly, I would narrate a scene from the film 'Seemabaddho' (Company Limited, 1971). The film is an adaptation of the novel written by Mani Shankar Mukherjee. The protagonist of the film, Shyamalendu Chatterjee, is the sales and marketing manager in Hindustan Peters, a British-run electric fans and lights manufacturing company. Shyamal is an ambitious young man and is quite admired by his boss for his dedication to work. The company pays him a handsome salary and has offered a sprawling apartment in a posh neighbourhood in Kolkata. He resides there with his wife, and one fine day, his sister-in-law Tutul comes from Patna to visit them. The interiors of the flat leave her in awe, and a spectrum of emotions spreads out at the display of the domestic space. As Shyamal's wife takes her sister from one room to the other and eagerly confesses how she had long awaited showing her the new flat, Shyamal asserts how the light fittings and ceiling fans are all made at his factory. Tutul is taken to the guest room and is suggested to use the air-conditioner, though a ceiling fan is also at her disposal. The moment of surprise comes for Tutul upon seeing the geyser in the bathroom, and her unease around the safety of the gadget leaves her elder sister intrigued. Upon looking at the well-kept room, Tutul enquires if the room remains empty most of the time, and the answer was much to her expectation. Shyamal's wife disclosed how the British employers do not encourage long visits of the employee's parents to the same household. The room has a calendar neatly placed on the wall that is covered by the door, and the picture on the calendar is of a knotted woman's blouse. It appears as though the blouse peeps from the charade which the door unknowingly plays up to. There's a fine wooden mask on another wall and tall lamp shades on the corners of the sitting space. There's a book rack too, and a bouquet of dry flowers. Being a spectator to all of this, Tutul exclaims how mesmerised she is to have explored the interiors of the flat. In no time, Shyamal politely dismisses Tutul's attire for a visit to the race course, as if he is looking at her like other objects of his household and voices his 'tasteful' discretion. Tutul too echoes her location by asserting that her outfit is good enough for the 3rd class train travel that she has just made. Thus, we see how the interiors of the house are adorned and upheld by the woman of the house, who actively

and at times passively lives up to the choices of the man of the house. She often appreciates, takes pride, and at times succumbs to unvoiced orders of the man, but hardly reprimands. One could see her domestic presence and control of the material objects therein as a way to reciprocate the tastes and testimonies of the economic life that her husband brings along with him into the interiors of the house. On similar lines: in a famous essay, 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century', Walter Benjamin mentions the domestic interior as a site of fantasy—a reflection of the mind of the private man. The 'phantasmagorias' of the interior are related to the equally fanciful commodities of capitalist culture. He writes:

The interior is not just the universe but also the *entirety* of the private individual. To dwell means to leave traces. In the interior, these are accentuated. Coverlets and antimacassars, cases and containers are devised in abundance; in these, the traces of the most ordinary objects of use are imprinted. In just the same way, the traces of the inhabitant are imprinted in the interior (2002: 39).

Interiors of the house are, therefore, projections of our consumption and consumable objects, either ingested, possessed, displayed or relinquished over time. The 'traces' that Benjamin is referring to are pieces of impression built through the journey of varied objects into the household, as they interact with the people inhabiting those households over a long time. People also inscribe their lives upon those objects and build upon their identity in acquiescence and at times in defiance of the demands of material culture. Gendering of domestic space is therefore possible only by gendering objects inhabiting that space, and that in turn produces and reproduces the gendered identities. However, this cycle of identification is also contested by the use of the same objects in the domestic space over time. To throw light upon the same, I shall discuss a few objects that have essentially defined the Bengali women's lives. But before that, I shall briefly hint at how the discourse on domesticity and women in Bengal has been influenced and partly indoctrinated by the colonists' ideals.

Coloniality and the Domestic Inroads

Nineteenth-century British home decoration manuals had vivid mentions of the segregation of gendered spaces. The mention of the parlour, morning room with decorations in lighter shades of pink and mauve, and bedrooms were adorned with bows and satins, keeping in with the feminine

conventions. On the other hand, descriptions of the dining room, billiard room and smoking-room exhibiting objects like guns, large reclining chairs, hunting trophies, large vaults made of oak, and crocodile leather upholstery speak of the masculine preoccupation with display of power and intimidating social position. (Hamlett, 2009) In general, the home decoration manuals suggested ways and idealised techniques that cater to the performance of gender and reproduce gender asymmetries in the domestic space. However, in colonial India, the native woman and her domestic identity were modelled around this British ideal of interiority. Stevenson (2013), through his study of Colonial Indian Postcards, tried to read aloud the representation of Indian women and their domestic space through the eyes of the colonisers. He points out how imperial domesticity was reproduced in the Indian households in the days following the 1857 rebellion.

Postcards depicting Indian domesticity epitomise this relationship between the Othering of space and the Othering of people, using depictions of inhospitable living conditions to reinforce perceptions of the oppressed, backward and ignorant Indian woman. Such postcards can be understood within the context of the “mission of domesticity” and its “compassionate gaze” (Ghose, 1998: 60), which allowed for justifications of colonialism based on the liberation of Indian women whilst concurrently demonstrating “compensatory pity” on the part of British women, so allowing them to place their own subordinate position within British society above that of Indian women. Postcards that depicted female missionaries with Indian girls have been discussed in terms of a sequential relationship with postcards of Indian domesticity and are shown to present colonially inspired notions of saving, liberating, educating and enlightening Indian women, ultimately continuing the thread of hierarchy that runs through all colonial postcards.

In this way, the role played by women missionaries, imposing Victorian domestic manners and practices were principally to suit colonial interests. The colonial femininity felt the urge for a “domesticated” native femininity to fill the household space, with whom they would be able to easily configure and continue the power relations, that of a master and a servant.

With the imagination of colonists’ ‘domestication’ of Bengali women, the changes in the Bengali domestic space, and especially that of the kitchen and cooking objects. Hygiene and not mere cleanliness became the buzzword for organising cooking space and cooking mode/medium. Bengali cookbooks like *Grihasree* (1915), written by educationist Dinesh Chandra Sen, discussed how a clean kitchen was essential for making healthy food. Instructions for using ladles and spoons for serving food were mentioned in the book.

Thus, new kinds of utensils (saucepan, frying pans, strainers, netted lids, jugs, forks, and spoons) found a thriving presence in the Bengali household. Awareness of the germ theory of the nineteenth and late twentieth century necessitated the need for making arrangements in the cooking space so as to mitigate concerns of pollution, dirt and disease. Its influence percolated to varied spheres of social life, and the Bengali middle-class domestic space became the zone of concern with regard to managing the apprehensions regarding hygiene. The kitchen and its 'purity' became a deep concern for women, with 'domestic' help and maid-servants gradually being assigned to tasks not so offensive for the maintenance of domestic purity. Dinesh Chandra Sen, in his book, also reprimands women for wiping their hands on their clothes while carrying out household chores. The use of 'duster' and 'apron' gained fast popularity. Similarly, metal used for making utensils also saw a remarkable transition—from clay to kansa (bell metal) to finally aluminium and steel. Utensils made of the latter were preferred for their durability, and women were both encouraged and disapproved for their use. It was not only health concerns but also the Victorian ideals of representation of the right kind of cutlery that were at play for cutting out the most appropriate image of the Bengali middle-class 'Bhadramohila'. Keeping in tune, Pragyasundari Devi in her book 'Amish o Niramish Ahar' denounces Aluminium utensils. Nevertheless, in the guise of health and hygiene, many objects and arrangements within the Bengali kitchen were being adopted that had deeper implications for the women and their role in the household. From adopting the imperial ways to upholding the middle-class patriarchal tradition, Bengali women were continuously juggling between material objects that could define 'her' space.

Bengali women have long been negotiating with varied kinds of material objects to define their domestic space in accordance with the social, cultural and political temper of the times, in turn trying to define their gendered (if one likes to say feminine) identity. To throw light on this aspect of 'doing gender' (West & Zimmerman 1987) I would take up four material objects—'boti' (cleaver-like blade with a wooden base), 'kulo' (cane tray), 'shil-nora' (grinding stone with a pestle) 'haath pankha' (hand fan) used essentially by Bengali women in her domestic space to potentially reproduce masculine hegemony and often produce change and cast her feminine prowess and reclaim a new position and identity.

Women and her Negotiation with Everyday Objects of Use

(1) 'Boti' (cleaver-like blade with a wooden base)

Traditionally, in a Bengali household, there was the practice of having two separate 'botis', one for chopping vegetables and another for removing fish scales and portioning fish or meat (Ansh boti). There has been a strict practice of not mixing up the two 'botis' with relation to the function each is supposed to fulfil. There's a ritual significance for the same, as 'niramish' cooking had to be ensured on significant days like 'ekadasi' or during other religious rites. Besides, the use of this chopping instrument aligns with the 'floor-oriented' culture of cooking and dining in India, until the cooking gas and stove revolutionised the kitchen space by introducing a raised platform for cooking. However, manoeuvring the 'boti' while standing wasn't quite ergonomically feasible; thus, the knife made its way into the kitchen. But the point to note here is the absence of 'ansh boti'. Women outsourced this task of removing fish scales and chopping meat to the fish vendors. Moreover, nuclear families no longer needed to buy an entire fish for household consumption. So, the women came in to economise and set the budget for everyday consumption. It was for her to organise the buying, cooking and setting up meals for the members of her family, and she wasn't interested in spending time descaling the fish and portioning it. Nevertheless, she retains the 'niramish boti' as the chopping of certain (saak) leafy vegetables, mocha (banana flower), and other such items makes the 'boti' indispensable. Women have chosen to do away with the ritual purity to some extent; at the same time, she has also chosen not to do away with some traditional elements of Bengali cuisine and therefore her retention of the 'boti'. The heritage of Bengali cuisine and, therefore, the cultural symbols associated with the same help her locate herself better in the lifeworld that surrounds her. Meah (2014) shows some contemporary gendered domestic practices whereby women are negotiating and negating ideas of oppression and asymmetry associated with the kitchen.

In the case of Bengali immigrants in the USA, cooking is signified by women as a gift and sacrifice for the family, almost a sacred activity that confers them symbolic power. These immigrant women are doing gender by performing an activity traditionally associated with women's oppression and are undoing gender by positively signifying and using this activity, which becomes an empowering instrument (Rezeanu, 2015: 22)

Thus, Bengali women dishing out exquisite recipes by using the appropriate techniques (which include the use of specific instruments as well) draw a significant Bengali iconography hinting at feminine abilities.

(2) Shil Nora (grinding stone with a pestle)

The Bengali kitchen and some exclusive food preparations cannot be imagined without the freshly ground spices like mustard seed and poppy seed, using the 'shil nora'. This grinding instrument has a long history in the lives of Bengali women. From 'holud bata' for the ritual 'gaye holud' before the marriage to 'sorshe bata' for Ilish maach on a ceremonious occasion, women of Bengali households have always found 'shil nora' indispensable. This grinding object too was well designed to suit the sitting arrangements for cooking. Chitrita Banerjee, in her *The Boti of Bengal* (2013), writes:

How big is the difference between sitting and standing? A cultural universe, when you examine posture in the context of food preparation. In the kitchens of the West, the cook stands at a table or counter and uses a knife. But mention a kitchen to a Bengali, or evoke a favourite dish, and more often than not an image will surface of a woman seated on the floor, cutting, chopping, or cooking. In the Indian subcontinent, especially in its eastern region of Bengal, this is the typical posture (*Gastronomica* 13.1)

However, with the introduction of cooking counters and cooking stoves being raised from the floor to a higher platform and modular kitchens organising kitchens into a new sort of covered décor, the mixer grinder has surely become the handiest instrument for everyday use. But the Bengali 'Bhadromahila', in keeping with her tradition, not undermining the 'Bhadralok' gastronomic excesses, often falls back on this mortar pestle. I shall quote from a personal blog of a Bengali woman to show how she asserts her position on the cooking front by deciding upon the ways that she shall adopt to make her food taste as she has had at her 'mother's' kitchen.

I dread my mother's phone calls after her favourite food show: Ajker Ranna on Doordarshan. Though many of us have ditched Doordarshan, my mother follows this show closely. I tease her that she should win the best audience award. During one of the stray mother-daughter conversations, she mentioned with pride that Sarmistha (one of the popular names in Bengali cooking shows) has advised using shil-nora to grind mustard paste, as mustard peels get separated in a mixer. The mustard paste tastes better when ground into a paste in shil-nora, concluded my mother, as the mustard is pressed with equal pressure, which crushes the

peels and the seed. Shil- Nora is one of my mother's favourite tool kits. She has resisted kitchen technology of mixers and grinders and no paste; crushed spice is incomplete for her without the touch of shil-nora. A very dear friend, a self-proclaimed shortcut cook but a great baker, swears by her shil-nora for her poppy seed paste (posto bata). My mother's fascination for her prized shil-nora has translated into my penchant for a stone mortar and pestle, which occupies a special position on the kitchen top, and it has been part of my culinary life for four years now. (Itiriti, Coding Food, 2014: 9)

Here it again reiterates how feminine identity and therefore 'doing gender' is surely a way to reiterate one's bonds of kinship; reclaim one's location of sustenance, recognition and pride; and once again a source of contesting the idea of 'liberation' that comes with technological intervention of the capitalist culture into our personal space. Thus, the act of personalisation of some objects and almost making them symbols of sentimental value is no less empowering for a gender to sustain its rights and perform the correlated duties. Women's positive interpretation of home and household objects could hint at ways of accommodating multiple femininities in both 'doing-' and 'undoing gender'. Nevertheless, there's no denying that power relations are becoming even more subtle in such gendered spaces, but the acts of 'doing gender' surely hint at even more subtle ways to reconfigure the power relations.

(3) 'kulo' (cane tray) and 'haath pankha' (hand fan)

Interestingly, domestic interiors have always been a source of self-substantiation, and we have been discussing the same throughout. This self-substantiation, too, can be gendered, with women possessing some objects in their domestic space and associating cultural meanings with them. And these objects help her define her social relationships (both by consanguinity and affinity). 'Kulo' and 'haath pankha' are both objects that have made a journey, being essential items of utility to acquiring ritual significance and finally 'becoming' a source of aesthetic fulfilment. Women in Bengal used the 'kulo', a separate shaft from rice grains, to dust off pebbles and other micro dust from rice, pulses and other types of grains. Bengali women, often in isolation or in a group (often of kin ties or other women of the extended family), sat down to perform this cleaning task. However, with the mechanisation of the cleaning process and packaged grains with labels of branded sellers reaching the market, the need for

‘kulo’ in the middle-class urban household has almost diminished. But what about the ritual significance of ‘kulo’? Kulo still happens to define a Bengali marriage. Women in the collective decorate the ‘kulo’ and place all essential ingredients on it, to be used for observing the marriage ritual. It’s also used to hold a lamp while welcoming the newlywed bride and bridegroom into her in-laws’ household. Thus, the ‘kulo’ becomes an important signifier of power as well as promise between two generations of women in a common household. The patriarchal orders within the family are surely signified through these ritual gestures concerning the ‘kulo’, but the feminine intervention is equally important to uphold the womanly camaraderie that often transposes the masculine preponderance.

Similarly, the ‘haat pankha’ can be visualised as the finest prop in the hands of the women to comfort the family members while they sit for their meals. It’s almost an archetypal image of the Bengali woman fanning her husband or her children using a ‘haat pankha’ after a hard day at work. Echoing the role of a ‘caregiver’ that women are naturally, thus unapologetically, thought to be triumphing at. Thus, her ‘doing gender’ as a comforter and an unpaid caregiver could be critically examined through the lens of subjugation and denial. Nevertheless, her ‘practice of caregiving’ definitely suggests some agency that she very subtly gets to display while sitting next to her family members and comforting them using a ‘haat pankha’. Though this archetypal image is rarely replicated today, the use of ‘haat pankha’ to bless the daughter and son-in-law during ‘jamai shosti’ is not very rare. The Bengali mother offers blessings to her son-in-law by sprinkling water on him, and the water is made to run through the ‘haat pankha’. Thus, the mother signifies her presence in the lives of her children and their families, begotten through marriage. The ‘haath pankha’ as an object reverses the power equation between the genders, often allowing the woman to make her ritual performances speak for her emotional commitment and control.

Aesthetics, Women and her Identity

Beyond the ritual significance of both the objects (‘kulo’ and ‘haath pankha’), the modern urban Bengali middle-class homes have negotiated with the utility quotient of the former and turned them into objects of aesthetic value. Consumption of ‘commodities of display’ that the neoliberal forces promote is carefully designed to introduce a new wave of aesthetics. A kind of everyday aesthetics that plays through the fine folds of tradition, heritage, memory and sentimental values and ideas to influence the aesthetic

preference of a large group of people. Such aestheticisation of everyday and everyday objects becomes quite functional to commodification, since it is easily compatible with the promotion of consumerism pursued by advertisements that target women and their everyday needs and desires. Here too, we shall locate how the ‘kulo’ and ‘haath pankha’ are decorated with motives and other art-like inscriptions to strike the most appropriate cord in the minds of the women, so that she picks them up as items of most valued display in their house. Art done on ‘kulo’ before selling them is mostly designs and motifs that represent the Bengali women, various aspects of women’s lives or women in general, as the sellers are also aware of their potential customers. We can see that the reproduction of gender roles becomes the most plausible technique to sell decorative items of the household. Hence, ‘doing gender’ surely feeds into the home decoration and interior design industry for sustaining profits. Here, I would like to refer to an ethnographic inference drawn from a study on the ‘Marina’ community in Southern California. Carol Warren (2010) documents how domestic space can be a source of shame or pride for the residents, which influences the decision of having guests (when they are proud, they often invite many people into the entire house; when they are ashamed, they select a small group of people, inviting them only in specific rooms). One of the biggest sources of shame is a house that is not clean or ordered, according to which women are judged (425-442).

As this sense of shame overwhelms the feminine identity, the sense of pride does not exude from the women alone. Pride about the domestic space and its representational dynamics run far to take class and associated status (achieved and ascribed), comfort, hygiene, religiosity into its ambit. Women, by appropriating material objects more familiar to their lives and making those good symbols of home décor, necessarily reproduce social and cultural capital, while legitimising traditional gender roles. Even the most popular Bengali magazine, Sanada, which started in 1986, in its issue named ‘Andarer Upakhyān’ (December, 2024), suggests ways to adopt the minimalist tradition of art within Bengali homes. And themes could be chosen to make one’s home look ‘classy’ while reflecting ‘aithijhyo’ (heritage) at the same time.

‘Doing’ Gender and Reimagining Gender

In contrast to the kind of ‘doing gender’ discussed above, I would also draw attention to home decoration practices that could actually be ‘undoing

gender' whereby they rediscover domesticity as a place of fulfilment, productivity and a source of regenerating relationships. I again quote from an online blog named 'A Homemaker's Diary'. Sayantani Mahapatra introduces herself as "Mom of two beautiful kids, one 7-year-old boy and a 2-year-old girl. A true-blue Bengali at heart, a self-employed Designer who strives to strike a balance between her personal and professional life. Holds her family and memories close to her heart. Finds solace in cooking and feeding with love." Sayantani, in her writings, briefly mentions (along with pictures of her household) how her deep engagement with home decoration unravelled her sense of 'aesthetics' seated in her Bengali roots and Indian philosophy. Without fail, Rabindra Nath Tagore's idea of being surrounded by nature and beauty has been the most basic inspiration for her. In one of the pictures that displays the 'haat pakha', she writes: 'haat pakha' (hand-held palm leaf fan), Kansa'r Bason (bell metal utensils) or Dhama (cane baskets) are not only used as props in my food styling, but they possess their own space throughout the house. We can, nevertheless, rationalise from references like these that even though domestic space and the objects within turn out to be institutionalised instruments of displaying, doing and celebrating heteronormativity, they can also become sites for seeking pleasure, empowerment and negotiating with gendered asymmetries.

Thinkers like Bourdieu (2003) have seen the opposition between the masculine and feminine and the corresponding public and private spaces as mental categories, which are produced and reproduced through mental categories and sustained through myths for fulfilling socio-political orders of the time. To focus on this 'myth' and locate the reality that sustains it, the paper has traversed through the letters written by Rabindra Nath Tagore to his wife in apprehension of the colonial excesses in their home furniture; then engaged with the role Shyamalendu's wife plays in the movie 'Seemabadhha' for asserting her sense of shared pride about her domestic corner; lastly and most importantly, locate objects quintessentially representing a women's world. The effort has been to delineate how feminine domesticity has been a source of identity for the women, either reproducing the masculine hegemony and confining herself to spaces, memories and instruments of oppression or, even though obliquely, redefining her power, position and individuality. This paper also tries to revisit theoretical standpoints of 'doing gender' by highlighting the multi-dimensional and dynamic gender practices in the domestic space. Since the paper talks of Bengali domestic space and 'Bhadramohila', it has taken the liberty of not cognising how 'doing gender' could become 'undoing gender' in a different class and ethnic category. Besides, many of the objects and household

practices pondered upon have had close association with men and their livelihood too, as none of them could exist as ‘quasi objects’ (Latur, 1991) in isolation from either gender. Every day journey of /with these objects unmistakably keeps afloat the aesthetics of using, arranging, decorating and refurbishing, as gendered existences and corresponding multiplicity of identities sway between material, ideal and existential philosophies.

Images

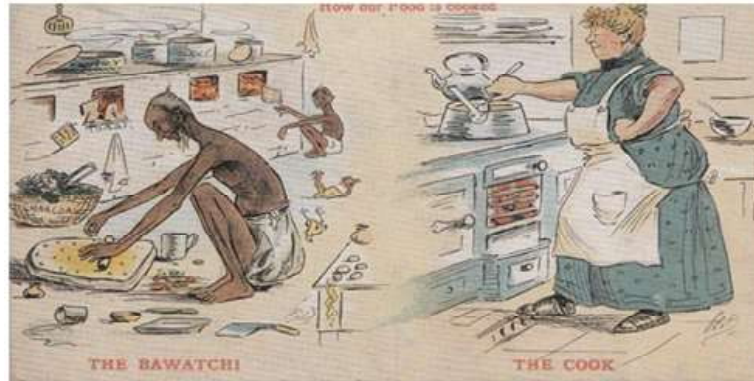
Image1 & 2: Scene from the Movie ‘Seemabaddha’ (1971)

Women, household, adornment and her objects



Image 3

Postcard



In this postcard, hierarchical comparisons are made between domestic settings, household items and practices. The Indian kitchen is represented based on stereotypical imaginations. The space is unorganised, traditional, thus backward and deprived. Moreover, what is of greater interest is the juxtaposition of gender and race. The British domestic space is the abode of the woman, whereas the Indian kitchen is managed by lean and half-clad men

Source: East and West Series: How our Food is Cooked. Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., printed in Great Britain, date unknown

Image 4



The adoption of Apron

Source: travelingspoon.com 2025

Image 5



Women and her maid servant by the side, keeping distance while waiting diligently

Source: from the blog, [An old Calcutta home—Sita Raychaudhuri's](#)

Image 6

A satire on a Bengali middle-class household, depicting a woman portioning a fish caught by her husband. She gets startled upon hearing the news of a man being arrested for fishing.



Source: 'Horryfying News' cartoon by Gaganendranath Tagore published in the book 'Realm of the Absurd'

Image 7

‘Cookme’ – the local brand of Bengal selling spices introduces ground spices to a Bengali woman, suggesting to her its benefits.



Source: Pinterest, Vintage Bengali Ads. uploaded by

Image 8

Woman Fanning the Man while he Devours his Food



Source: Pinterest, uploaded by Joydeep Chowdhury

Image



India Stamp 2017, Indian Hand Fans decorated with Zardozi Embroidery and Phad Paintings

Image 10

Mother separating rice shafts from grains while caressing her child.



Source: Pratham Books, 2018

Image11



Objects, Women and Aestheticisation

Source: Necessitystore. in; Items: Hand Painted Decorative 'Mothers Love' Kulo (as advertised for sale) and 'pankha' as a piece of decoration

Reference

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