Women , Leisure and a Room of Their Own : a Brief Appraisal

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Serious study on leisure can be said to have begun in the west with historians like Ruby Koshar and Peter Borsey who explored the profound inter-relationship between leisure and culture. P. Bailey who studied history and leisure and recreation has made a significant intervention on the subject in his "Leisure, Culture and the Historian: Reviewing the First generation of Leisure Historiography" (1989).

Some solicitous scholarship has been done in western academia with women's leisure as a serious theme of feminist analysis. Some serious feminist scholarships on leisure include: *Women's Leisure, What Leisure? A Feminist Analysis* by Eileen Green, Sandra Hebron and Diana Woodward (1990); "Gender, Work and Leisure in the Eighties - Looking Backwards, Looking Forwards" by Rosemary Deem (Sage Journal 4:5,1990); "The Politics of Women's Leisure" by Rosemary Deem (Sage Journal 33;1, 1985); "All work and no play? The Sociology of Women and Leisure" by Karla A. Henderson (Annals of Leisure Research, Routledge , 19:1, 2016) ; *Gender and Leisure : Social and Cultural Perspectives* by Cara Charmichael Aitchison (Routledge, 2003); "The Promise and Problems of Women's Leisure and Sport" by Jennifer Hargreaves in *Leisure for Leisure* ed. Chris Rojek (Palgrave Macmillan 1989).

In modern studies on leisure, Charlotte Brundson has explored the history of female involvement with soap opera, from program ads to interviews with leading soap opera scholars. She has shown how a feminist soap opera scholarship was a significant reading into the persona of a woman in conversation with her imaginary other. Her book acknowledged the soap opera as a legitimate object of research and incorporated intimate autobiographical accounts into a wider narrative that traced the transition from women's early thoughts of emancipation to feminism (Brunsdon 2000). In "The Housewife Mass Communication Research in the 1940s" Arnheim, Kaufman, and Herzog explored classic radio soap opera research in the U.S. during the late 1930s and early 1970s. They analyzed how this genre, its heroines and listeners are represented in literature and addressed some of the most interesting papers that have been published in this genre during the time.

Feminist leisure analysis has made women's lives visible, documented power imbalances within social institutions and cultural spheres and addressed the need for equality and freedom of choice in all spheres of women's lives which includes the choice of leisure. (Henderson et al. 1996)

Women's leisure studies have engaged with the ways in which women have compromised spaces and also carved out spaces for themselves in the face of the power and censorship of patriarchy. The studies have stressed the changing connotations of the concept for women, over time and space, and also on the shifting lines of demarcation between work and leisure. In India, critical research on the area of leisure is comparatively new.

The present paper focuses on the development of the concept of leisure in the upper middle-class and middle-class women in the nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal. The paper attempts to study, in its brief ambit, the patriarchal strategies that endeavored to structure and control women's everyday lives, their time and their activities, prescribed and proscribed pleasures and the women's contentions with these strategies and their struggle and search for freedom in the realm of creative imagination.

The ideas of 'work' and 'leisure' have undergone many shifts in meaning in any given society. The concept of 'quality time' is a twentieth century concept with earliest records of the phrase found in print in *The Capital* in January 1973, in an article titled "How to be Liberated".

My readings into the everyday lives of Bengali Hindu middle and upper middle-class women in the nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal reveal their love for stories and poetry, from oral renderings of religious texts and hagiographies to gossips, perhaps as a respite from the unsatisfactory realities of their own domestic captivities.

The nineteenth century women working outside their homes in Bengal, in the few professions that were available to them, or involved in committees, public readings (or movements) were likely to be heavily engaged in housework and childcare back home and not have time for leisure. The little time they found after their dedication to housework might have meant for development and preparations for professional purposes, which was seldom taken seriously by others in the household. Affluent women, had time for music and sang them in elaborate rituals observed in their houses, and also did some embroidery.

Housewives involved in cooking or supervision of household staff, if married to affluent men, and serving in-laws and children, also found time sometimes for singing and embroidery. Separation of work and home were experiences of only the middle-class and rural men. Rich men more often had offices at home and managed their accounts from home-office with sporadic visits to estates or property they owned. Most of the upper and middle-class women were cut off from public life altogether. Women's leisure, therefore, was more privatized.

Like in all other aspects of life, masculine and feminine duality was evident in leisure. While kings and the rich men went hunting, fishing, travelled, or gambled, their wives stayed indoors with supervison of housework and rituals. Women did not participate in drinking parties or watch the performances of courtesans, which were parts of masculine entertainment. Girls had no organized sports. They were supposed to help in the household chores; help the mothers bring up other siblings before they barely grew up themselves. The middle class women stayed indoors with domestic work or were engaged in giving instructions to servants. During the colonial period, elite Bengali went to *paschim* for change of weather for health purposes. Sometimes they built or bought houses in the fashion of the British. Women accompanied them along with a retinue of maids and servants.

Leisure was considered an evil, especially for the economically dependent, and therefore, to be controlled and shaped by the powerful. The nineteenth and early twentieth century women were involved in housework throughout the day till they went to bed, presumably after everybody else, engrossed in the roles of ideal mothers and ideal housewives, they cooked and served the husband, children and the in-laws dutifully. In the absence of kitchen appliances like mixer-grinders or microwaves, or refrigerators or even gas-burners cooking took up much of their time and left them with little time for leisure. Cooking was a detailed and exhausting exercise for the middle-class women, with little or no domestic help and with the varieties of dishes to be prepared at every meal. Regular *pujo* and *sandhayarati* for the Hindu women, and observing of different rituals like *sasthi*, *itupujo, punnipukur or pous parban* or other such observations kept the women within the framework of a constricted schedule while allowing them a carved space of entertainment only within the framed rituals.

The leisure of women has been cast in a variety of ways in male narratives. Sometimes we find them elaborately dressing draping beautiful saris. Makeup

and hairdo by upper-class women occupies their leisure-time. If women were allowed in *kirtaan* or *padavali* songs or *jatra*, they were seated behind curtains. Sometimes we see them portrayed as gossiping in their leisure -time, and yet sometimes, when the British culture was filtering in, we see women portrayed as playing cards, playing pianos and singing, sometimes also stealing their way to watch theatre performances. The leisure of Charulata portrayed by Satyajit Ray in the film *Charulata* will remain a classic example.

> Taking all matters into consideration, the poor woman of this country should be an object of compassion rather than of our contempt. The stimulus given to India by British example, and capital employed for the education of Indian females, is not among the least of her beneficial operations. The time will come when their worth shall be duly appreciated by the daughters of India; and then, should this work chance to be perused by them, they will sigh at the follies of their ancestors, smile at their own good fortune.
>
> (Capt. N. Auustus Williard 2)

Sumanta Banerjee begins his "Marginalization of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal" with a quotation from N. Augustus Willard's "A Treatise of the Music of India"(1834).The Englishmen who came to Bengal in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, carried two burdens (along with their political motives), the 'burden of white man' to educate the unenlightened indigenous people, and also the 'burden of man' to emancipate indigenous women from what they perceived as socio-cultural condition of gross ignorance and impurity. The educated Bengali *bhadralok* who associated with the British on professional and also on personal levels shared their concerns about educating women and moved towards framing a common behavioral and cultural norm.

The instituting of a model of female education in Bengal was primarily fashioned by contemporary English missionaries, educators, and administrators. The concept of the emancipation of women by the Bengali *bhadralok* was derived from the English but was significantly modified by the patriarchal norms of traditional Hindu society. It was a conceptual framework that women across families shared over time.

Bengali women of the nineteenth century, like their companions in other regions, were not a homogeneous group. Their lifestyles and daily occupation varied according to whether they belonged to the rich or middle-class or were poor. While the women married to affluent families and not-so affluent families stayed indoors in seclusion in the *andarmahal*, the women of the lower-class and caste, like that of the wife of a barber or a weaver, or the domestic help, or the rural women employed in pottery or basket making or other agricultural works were mobile. The rural women and the lower-class women participated in popular festivals and also sang in chorus in weddings and in other local rituals. With the fall of the rural economy there was a regular exodus of men and women into the city. The indigenous women brought with them a rich folk culture and their own dialects. For the vast number of women in the cities who stayed indoors secluded, it was the lower- class women who worked as cooks or domestic help or the barber's wife or the weaver's wife who helped in pedicure or decorated the feet of upper-caste women with *alta* during pujas were the only link to the outside world. They were the bearers of local news and gossip.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the education system created a new race of women in the educated Bengali homes who through their engagement with books and writings cultivated new behavioral habits that replaced the earlier popular women's leisure altogether.

Earlier, women were often clubbed together with the lower classes as participants in various popular genres. Sumanta Banerjee refers to issues of *Somprakash* (23 Nov. 1863. 10, and April 1864, *Chaitra*, 23, B.S. 1270) where there are references of 'vulgar masses' comprising of women, lower-class, and children as spectators of performances in pantomimes, lampooning and farces, and a reference to the decline in the popularity of *kathakatha* amongst the educated men. The women, however, continued as its admirers. The attitudes of educated Bengali *bhadrolok* reformists influenced the conceptual framework of women's emancipation and their tastes for leisure. Attempts were made to disassociate women and children from existing popular cultures. With the initiation of social reforms such as women's education, widow remarriage, ban on child marriage, ban on *Kulin* Brahmin polygamy, efforts were made to ensure greater participation of women in new socio-cultural milieu. The denunciation of popular culture was concurrent with the formation of a new educated culture.

The vacuum produced by the repression of popular culture in women's regular lifestyle was quickly filled up by the novel. This genre of prose constructed as a long fictional story was a new introduction in Bengal in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The novel known by various names as *upannyash*, *akhayika* also *upakhan* became immensely popular in Bengal during the latter half of the nineteenth century (Chakraborty 1963). The emergence of the press made printed books easily available. The serialized novels became the chief attraction in monthly or bimonthly journals.

Like the novel, the women readers were a new emergence in Bengal. The missionaries, reformists, some educated families who arranged for women's education at home, and the newly established schools, increased the literacy rates among women. The English had opened a number of women's schools but several of them gathered a reputation of having a hidden agenda of conversion. The Hindu or Muslim families, therefore, refrained from sending their girls to such schools. It was John Drinkwater Bethune who established the first school for women's education in Calcutta in 1849 with a strong mandate for secularism. Other influential schools for women's education that enrolled a significant number of girls and young married women students are Mahakali Pathshala established by Mataji Maharani Tapaswini in Calcutta in 1893 and Sister Nivedita Girls School established by Sister Nivedita in 1898. But soon enough the advocators of women's education began to dictate the kinds of books women should read. They preferred that women should confine themselves to religious books and books with moral teachings. An overarching fear that women under the influence of novels were turning indolent, growing careless in household tasks, turning uncaring towards elders, hysteric, immoral, and also sexually deviant was recurrently voiced by Bengali intelligentsia during the time. This anxiety sometimes found its way into the pages of journals and periodicals. Once the leisure was structured and provided and approved as refined, attempts were made to control that leisure.

Apart from novels, women also turned to read plays, poems, and with the enlightenment filtering in, some families allowed women to watch play performances, giving rise to similar anxieties in general. However, recourse to pleasure outside the domain of household was a luxury shared only by a handful.

Reading remained the predominant leisure-time engagement for women in Bengal even after the introduction of the radio post World War I with the

popularity of programs like *Galpo Daur Ashor*, *Sangeet Sikhar Ashor*, and *Mahila Mahal* and the radio plays and even after the introduction of the TV with Saturday and Sunday movies and popularity of serials like *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi* , *Buniyaad* and *Ramayan*, and *Mahabharat* in DD National or *Tero Parban*, *Satyajit Ray Presents*, *Bomkyesh Bakshi* in DD Bangla in mid-1980s. The shift was slow. Gradually even the elderly women, who had hitherto ventured only a little into secular texts gradually succumbed to the charm of the TV and like the old-time radio, TV became a companion of the old. But reading habits persisted. By then *Desh* magazine (published since 1933) had already become a household name. *Rabibashoriyo*, the Sunday supplement of *AnandabazarPatrika* was equally popular. Women's magazine *Sananda*was introduced in 1986 with Aparna Sen as its first editor. *Anandalok*was first published in 1975. These magazines, along with some others, have made their permanent place in the Bengali household.

Some women during the colonial period had defied the societal proscriptions that threatened them with impending widowhood if they learned to read and write. They learned to read and write. We have the famous example of Rasusundari Devi (1809-1899) who taught herself to read and wrote the first autobiography in modern Bengali. The women writers used the little time they could save after their busy domestic schedule to try their hands at writing novels, stories, plays, and poetry.

Several of Tagore's short stories depict this endeavor with sympathy, and show how the women have received support or sometimes hindered by their families and husbands. In *Nastaneer* Charulata is encouraged to write by her husband Bhupati and brother-in-law Amal. In 'Khata'the young girl is ridiculed by her husband and in-laws when caught at writing.

Secretiveness marked the entrance of Bengali women into the realm of literary creativity. They wrote from their confinement like their English counterparts.

> That is what Jane Austen ,too, chose to do when she ironically defined her work-space as two inches of ivory, what Emily Bronte chose to do when she hid her poems in kitchen cabinets (and perhaps destroyed her Gondal stories),what Christina Rossetti chose when she elected an art that glorified the religious constrictions of the "convent threshold". Rich's crucial pun on the word *premises* returns us, therefore, to the confinement of these

> women, a confinement that was inescapable for them even at their moments of greatest triumph, a confinement that was implicit in their secretness.
>
> (Gilbert and Guber 2000, 83)

Many women did not have the confidence to engage publicly in literary practices. Some have used pseudonyms to conceal their true identity.

In order to achieve male recognition of their academic seriousness, Mary Ann Evans most famously used a male-impersonation. The three Bronte sisters, too, hid their femininity under the masks of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell, names that Charlotte Bronte disingenuously claimed they had selected for androgynous neutrality.

Anurupa Devi (1882-1958) who wrote some bestsellers of her time did not reveal

her initial literary endeavours to anyone except her elder sister, Surupa Devi (1879-1922), who was a novelist herself and wrote under the pseudonym Indira Devi.

Anurupa Devi once had to show the manuscript of her novel to her husband on his insistence. A well-placed man, he was not known to be hostile to his wife's literary pursuits, yet he is known to have thrown her manuscript into river Ganga. Later she published her works under pseudonym, Anupama Devi. Interestingly, it was Swarnakumari Devi, who persuaded her to discard her pseudonym and expose her true identity. Nirupama Devi (1883-1951) who initially published as Srimati Devi, also adopted the pseudonym Anupama Devi later, and even won the Kuntalin award consecutively in 1904 and 1905 under the pseudonym. It is worth noting that Anurupa Devi was Nirupama Devi's friend (*gangajalsoi*) and she also used the same pseudonym 'Anupama' in her literary ventures. Masuda Khatun (1885-1926) was a pioneering Bengali feminist and secularist. She used the pseudonym Mrs. M Rahman. Ashapurna Devi (1909-1995) wrote with her own name but nobody knew who Ashapurna Devi actually was for a long time, because she remained confined within the *andarmahal* till the age of thirty-eight and chose to send her manuscripts to the editor by post or through trustworthy hands of her husband or brother-in-law (Bandopadhay 2016-17).Like Helen Graham of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), they used their art both to express and camouflage themselves.

The handful who could leave their marks in the literary world was not always the luckily placed ones, but, sometimes the ones who had struggled more. These acts of subversion of women could only be compensated by perfect and flawless domestic roles. Some women who created names for themselves like Nirupama Devi (1883 – 1951) who was educated at home and has nine novels to her credit, Sarasibala Basu (1886–1929) the novelist,story teller,and poet writing during the Bengal Renaissance who produced more than twenty novels numerous short stories and plays which made a great impact on Bengali literature, or Ashapurna Devi (1909-1995) who began writing in the 1940s served her family and performed every ritual to please her sisters–in-law and wrote during the night (Ghosh 2008, 11-12), did not necessarily have a smooth river to sail on.

Leela Majumder (1908-2007) whose literary oeuvre includes immensely popular novels and short stories wrote in her autobiography *Pakdandi*

> Writing much at a time was not possible. Women like me remain perpetually submerged in all kinds of domestic responsibilities. My conscience would start hurting if I neglected those, and people at home would be displeased. It is difficult for a woman to engage in creative pursuits unless she is less encumbered. The creative potential of many a woman has thus suffered a miscarriage. Women who have worshipped goddess Saraswati in face of criticism are rare...
>
> (Majumdar 2008, 295)

Indeed, only a few women writers had a room of their own to sit with a pen and paper in hand and ponder. They had to constantly struggle with themselves to engage in their literary pursuits and remain focused. For all their work and sacrifices for keeping a smooth home, ironically even the most devoted of the housewives never had a home. A woman's premarital and post-marital status in both the father's and the husband's homes was uncertain and tenuous, completely at the mercy of those who controlled her life. (Rokeya Hossain 2006,46-54)

For instance, Ashalata Singh's literary career began with her debut novel *Amritar Prem (*1938) written at the age of sixteen. It was appreciated by critics and even by Rabindranth Tagore. She wrote till little after twenty- six because while her own parents had encouraged her, the in-laws relentlessly opposed her literary efforts. Sashibala Ghosejaya similarly had to grapple with insensitive in-laws and

a mentally ill husband. Jyotirmoyee Devi (1894-1988), a widow confined indoors was denied outside contact. (Bandopadhay 2014)

> Spatial images of boundary and enclosure seem to proliferate whenever we find writers coming to terms with Jane Austen, as if they were displaying their own anxieties about what she represents.
>
> (Gilbert and Guber 2000,109)

> In a book not unfittingly pronounced North /Anger [Northanger Abbey], Austen rewrites the gothic not because she disagrees with her sister novelists about the confinement of women, but because she believes women have been imprisoned more effectively by miseducation than by walls and more by financial dependency, which is authentic ancestral curse, than by any verbal oath or warning. (Gilbert and Guber 2000, 135)

Women were confined within spaces and also within texts by representations and language. That calls for a detailed discussion in a separate paper.

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