

Between Tradition and Transition: Gender and Domestic Space in the Byomkesh Bakshi Narratives

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Abstract

Colonial domesticity is a site for both discursive and material apparatus by colonial and nationalist imagination. Colonial historiography assumes the long absence of civilized domesticity in pre-colonial India. Some critics claim that the concept of domesticity is a colonial creation but it emerges as a global phenomenon in twentieth century as it is neither a creation of the nationalist nor the colonialist. Under the influence of modernity Bengali domesticity emerges as a cultural logic of late colonialism. This study attempts to understand the contradictory and heterodox transformations brought about by the influence of European modernity. It also explores how Bengali modernity negotiated and assimilated European ideals, as reflected in the Byomkesh Bakshi stories. It records how the stories expose the modern domesticity as new colonial logic become a contradiction on the rise of nationalism. This paper considers colonial domesticity not as a rupture with the past but as a reconstructive negotiation of cultural continuity.

Keywords: Colonial Modernity, Domesticity, Gender, Negotiating Tradition and Modernity and Byomkesh Bakshi Storie.

Introduction:

In colonial India, the concept of modern domesticity was introduced by European powers. Judith Walsh argues that “in the mid-century [nineteenth century], domestic discourse no longer had a part of national origin. It is a transnational creation” (*Colonial Domesticity* 15). She further asserts, “[modern] domesticity [is] European in origin, colonial in development, a world traveler cycling throughout the globe to complete the nationalization of ideology and practice” (18). The new ideas of domesticity under colonial rule transcended the private–public divide and often crossed national boundaries, creating an overlap wherein the most intimate details of private life were discussed in public and shaped by imperial and international concerns. This study attempts to understand the contradictory and heterodox transformations brought about by the influence of European modernity. It also explores how Bengali modernity negotiated and assimilated European ideals, as reflected in the Byomkesh Bakshi stories. This paper considers colonial domesticity not as a rupture with the past but as a reconstructive negotiation of cultural continuity.

Postcolonial critics argue that the concept of "home" serves as a site of resistance with a significant political dimension (Upstone 2). They emphasize that understanding colonial authority and its modernity project requires more than just examining public structures; it must also consider individual public and

private lives. In Bengali society, domesticity was shaped by both colonialism and nationalism, influenced by strong discursive and material frameworks. Many foundational myths of European imperialism overlooked the existence of the civilized domesticity in precolonial India. For nationalists, the experience of colonial modernity was seen as unoriginal, as they believed that modernity was already occurring elsewhere (Chakraborty, “Deferral of (A) Colonial Modernity,” 2). The discussion of domesticity highlights the emergence of modernity in colonial Bengal, illustrating the impact of colonial regulations through the historical process leading to independence. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, educated men and women in urban Bengal began to reshape their social, cultural, national, and moral lives, influenced by a synergistic relationship between their indigenous traditions and encounters with European modernity.

Domesticity, and Modernity in Colonial Bengal

One pressing issue concerning the influence of English education on the Bengali *bhadralok* (Bengali Upper class/ caste population) is a certain degree of waywardness that diverts them from fulfilling their domestic responsibilities towards their families and elders. This waywardness often leads to conflicts and domestic crises, as well as a resistance to the traditional norms upheld within the Bengali household. The traditional Bengali family emphasizes the importance of the youth’s obligation to perform *grihakarma* (household duties). This defiance of domesticity and household responsibilities is a defining characteristic of Bandyopadhyay’s male characters. For instance, in the story “Picture Imperfect,” Professor Adinath Som, despite being married, fails to fulfill his responsibilities toward his wife. Similarly, Bandyopadhyay’s 1933 narrative, “The Inquisitor,” highlights the waywardness of the modern English-educated *bhadralok*. This story features a resident of a mess who embodies this theme. In “Harrison Road,” the young male characters exhibit a distinct reluctance to engage in domestic duties. Ajit and Anukulbabu prefer to remain bachelors to maintain their freedom. In “The Rhythm of the Riddle,” Ramchandra Roy and Banamali Chandra, both employed in mercantile banks, similarly demonstrate neglect toward their families. Additionally, in some stories, Byomkesh Bakshi also shows a hesitance to participate in household responsibilities.

This new form of individualism is not limited to men. Among its early advocates is Brahma reformer Sibnath Sastri (1847–1919), who championed the concept of a new family structure that elevates the role of women within the domestic sphere. He posits that both home and human civilization are fundamentally shaped by women, who hold a position of superiority. Sastri asserts that families should not isolate themselves from the nation and that women must be informed about the country's current circumstances. The Bengali domestic sphere emerged as a substitute for the external world, one beyond the immediate influence and control of nationalists and social reformers. Nationalist reformers strategically positioned Bengali domestic life as a site of anti-colonial resistance, emphasizing new ideas of reformed domesticity (Banerjee, “Debates on Domesticity and the Position of Women in Late Colonial India” 461).

Through the discursive formation and legitimization of Western domesticity, the colonial government adopted the Western conception of domesticity, which posited that husbands and wives should be friends and companions in marriage. This notion reflected the well-known Victorian ideals of companionate marriage that the British introduced to India in the nineteenth century. Many Bengali male and female reformers eagerly embraced these ideals (“Deferral of (A) Colonial Modernity” 2). This mutual relationship facilitated the exchange of knowledge between men and women. Those who engaged

successfully in public activities often enjoyed a degree of companionship in their marriages. For example, the partnership between Sunanyana, also known as Bonolaxmi, and Dr. Bhugandhar resulted in a prominent presence in Bengali cinema, particularly in "The Menagerie." Similarly, the discussions between Byomkesh and his educated wife Satyabati enabled them to collaboratively solve many intricate mysteries.

The transformation of Bengali domesticity unfolded gradually alongside the emergence of the Bengali *bhadralok*, influenced by both colonial rule and nationalist sentiments. The new value system instigated by Western education posed a critical challenge to traditional Bengali patriarchal norms. Concepts such as discipline, routine, and order became integral to Bengali domestic life, facilitating a reconstruction of the home environment. This evolution ultimately contributed to the liberation of individuals within the modern Bengali domestic landscape.

Post-Independence Bakshi stories illustrate how "European punctiliousness" manifests in the diligent adherence to domestic duties, as well as in the growing emphasis on the health consciousness of family members. The character Satyabati exemplifies this punctiliousness, balancing her responsibilities with a modern concern for her ailing husband's healthcare. As Ajit Bandyopadhyay, Byomkesh's friend and the chronicler of his cases, notes, "I glanced at the clock; it was exactly four o'clock. The clock could be set by Satyabati and her ministrations." In this context, time is portrayed as a key to success and prosperity when managed wisely, aligning domestic schedules with civil, political, and public life. The introduction of Western healthcare practices within the urban domestic sphere is evident: Satyabati's offering of pomegranate juice to her ailing detective husband contributed to the "increase[ing] [of his] blood count," and she is often depicted as determining the dinner menu, typically favoring "chicken broth and toast."

Negotiating Tradition and Modernity

In the discourse of the new Bengali domestic sphere, the conflict of the Bengali housewife (*grihalakshmi*) and the *memsahib* is on the basis of the freedom and the autonomy of the individual. The debate was about the autonomy of individual and bourgeoisie domesticity against the idea of subordinating the individual to the will of the clan or the extended family in the traditional system. Freedom, undoubtedly, is the main concept that shaped the modern Bengali domesticity. The contradictory experience of the traditional and the modern both called into being the exigencies of colonial modernity. However, the traditional value of the society was not completely eradicated from the Bengali society. The twin pressure of colonialism and nationalism put forth a particular ideological drive to prescribe a code of behavior for the good house wife (*sugrihini*) which served not only to define the cultural identity of the middle class, but also to cope with the ideological struggle. It consists of the notion of the contrast between tradition, modernity and the nation.

The emerging Bengali domesticity emphasized women's education, hygiene, and household management, reflecting a global conception of domesticity shaped through the reciprocal interactions between the colony and the metropole ("Debates on Domesticity and the Position of Women in Late Colonial India" 460). The transitional and hybrid origin and the impact of modernity by tracing the genealogy of domesticity of Bengal from postcolonial to the post-independent India will problematize the relationship of the male and the female in the new domesticity in the postcolonial India. Bengali domesticity emerged as a cultural construct not at a single moment due to colonial encounters but has deep roots in pre-colonial history. Bengal's domesticity, as a new cultural logic, became a driving force of change for both the British and colonial subjects, particularly empowering women by offering them a sense of

agency in the late colonial period. (“Debates on Domesticity and the Position of Women in Late Colonial India” 455).

Saradindu Bandyopadhyay’s attitude towards domesticity is ambivalent, and his stories contain detailed references to the Bengali modern domesticity. The male and female characters he portrays embody new values that according to Partha Chatterjee, is the bourgeoisie virtue characterized by the new social norms-- “disciplining of orderliness, thrift cleanliness, and a personal sense of responsibility, the practical skill of literacy, accounting, hygiene, and the ability to run the household according to the new physical and the economic condition set by the outside world.” (*The Nation and Its Fragment: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* 129-130) Satyabati, Shakuntala Singh, Hena Mallick are Bandyopadhyay’s new women. Satyabati, Shakuntala Singh, and Hena Mallick represent Bandyopadhyay’s “new women.” While Shakuntala Singh, despite her feudal background, is not confined to domesticity, her education and deep interest in Indian art and culture provide her with opportunities to engage publicly through gatherings and other social events, as seen in the story “The Firefly.” In “The Porcupine Spikes” Deepa Chakraborty’s educational involvement raises the issue of the restriction on women, rooted deep in the patriarchal society and emphasizes the sense of crisis they felt from many quarters. Bandyopadhyay’s female characters excel in both education and household responsibilities. Rajani Chaudhury, in “Picture Imperfect,” becomes the center of attention among male characters. Her charm captivates Prof. Adinath Som, Dr. Ashwani Ghatak, and even Byomkesh. In a reformist manner, the author critiques the exclusion of widows from domestic rituals and practices, a traditional Bengali norm.

The stories highlight the evolving roles of men, women, and the family, reflecting changing ideas about marriage, partnership, rights, duties, and responsibilities that together form a new domestic ideal. The conjugal relationship between Byomkesh and Satyabati exemplifies companionate marriage, emphasizing compromise and responsibility. Within the educated middle class, the new role for women emerged as the modern figure known as *bhadramahila*, the female counterpart of *bhadralok*. These women represented a blend of the traditional Hindu ideal of *grehalakshmi* and the Victorian image of the “perfect lady.” They envisioned contributing to public life through their husbands’ careers while skillfully managing household tasks and educating their children in progressive ways. The role of *grehalakshmi* was thus adapted to align with contemporary notions of domesticity.

Tanika Sarkar points out that in the last decade of nineteenth century the notion of conjugal relationship shifted from the apparently love-less husband-wife relationship to the loving relationship of husband and the wife (“Debates on Domesticity and the Position of Women in Late Colonial India” 460). Most of Bandyopadhyay’s couples are love-ridden figures and have a strong loving relationship. The disheartened husband, Prof. Adinath Som wishes to give up his marriage where there is no love and affection (Picture Imperfect). Shukuntala Singh in the story “The Firefly” tries to engage in an extramarital affair with Ratikanta Chaudhury who is more lively and vital than remaining stuck in her loveless marital life with landlord Deep Narayan Singh. Reba Sarkar and Deepa Chakraborty engaged in the extra-marital affairs with more “loveable” persons in the stories “The Invisible Triangle” and “The Porcupine Spike”. Historical literature on domesticity witnesses the emergence of a new domesticity which is the cultural logic of late colonial India embedded with the notions of modernity, progress and the emerging new nation. The Bengali middleclass intelligentsia utilizes the new cultural logic of domesticity and the newly envisaged role of the modern women to carve out a modern, autonomous and hegemonic subjecthood. The nationalist imagination tried “transposing the intimate and the personal in the private realm by the process of cultural construction...which subjected a new kind of patriarchy”

(“Debates on Domesticity and the Position of Women in Late Colonial India” 462). Nevertheless, the role of men and women underwent considerable change during this engagement with colonial institutions.

The popular text tried to understand this new vision of the domestic and prescribe a specific code and conduct for the Bengali couple. The earlier Hindu patriarchy demanded that women remain illiterate and uneducated and confined her in the *antahpur* (inner recess of the home), but the colonial modern Indian imagined a new order.

Their advice was intended to fit women with the skill necessary for the family life of the British ruled India and to create conditions and structures in the private sphere that would compensate men for their loss of power and position in public life. To this end, proto-nationalist reformers of the period offered women participation in a new patriarchy (*The Nation and Its Fragment: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* 186).

Bandyopadhyay’s new women like Dayamanti Debi and Nityakali alias Sunanya surpassed the code and conduct of traditional social norms. The former wanted to acquire some English culture by enlisting in a Convent, a girl’s school in Calcutta; while the latter one crossed the stereotypical barrier and entered the cinema world, and obtained a reputation as an actress. At the sometime they did not forget their social responsibilities to their families (*The Menagerie and Other Byomkesh Bakshi Mysteries* 36). The colonial penetration of the indigenous urban life occurred mainly through the Media and printing of both indigenous and western books. The easily available pulp magazine begins to shape the domestic sensibility of young Bengali couples

Print Culture, Colonial Modernity, and the Reconstitution of Bengali Domesticity

The printing culture of Bengal did not only bring “displacement” and the “marginalization” of performative tradition of indigenous culture but also shaped the transformation and mobilization of urban domestic life. The affirmative response of colonial print culture is validated by the distinct study of Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar who opine that the colonial Bengali printing culture formulated Bengali cultural identity. Benedict Anderson’s assertion is worth mentioning here that standard printing culture was a powerful force in forging national identities among colonial intelligentsia. Print played a prominent role as a medium for circulating Victorian domestic ideology in colonial Bengal.

Many of the stories witness the intergenerational crises of the reformation of the old patriarchal system. The crises are the problem of choosing between the husbands the mother-in-law. The story “The Blood Stain” shows the conflict of the doxical and the heterodoxical social value of indigenous and modern life. The influence of the European freewill in daily life and the public engagement of men and women in both the public and the private places entered into the upper-middle class family of Ushanath Das. The westernized men experienced in extended families saw women. The intergenerational crises were created by the European wave of modernism.

The negligence of *grihakarma* (household work) is an often-alleged complaint against the (overtly) educated women in Urban Bengal. It is interesting to note that the middle-class Bandyopadhyay women do not show waywardness in their domestic duties. Bonolakshmi (Sunanyana), Mukul in “The Menagerie”, Deepa Mukherjee and Nalini Chaudhury are the model for Bandyopadhyay’s new women who are “educated, companionable but modest and obedient at the same time” (“Deferral of (A) Colonial Modernity” 26). The Bengali social epithet *grehalakshmi* is applicable beside their names. The modern social structure transformed the women’s space in the domestic order. The nationalistic domestic

historiography used the *grehalaxmi* as a conception of nationalist-sublime which can create resistance to colonial domination. The concept intertwines the national interest and the mytho-religious traditional notions. Bandyopadhyay repeatedly asserts that the new woman of Bengali domesticity is a *grehalakshmi*, or the angel in the house in the Victorian paradigm.

The concept of individuality was associated with the Bengali *bhadralok* in the middle of the nineteenth century. The impact of the western education and modernity constituted an overwhelming factor of domestic life. Bengali domesticity was the place where the “hegemonic project” of colonialism as well as nationalism was launched (*The Nation and Its Fragment: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* 80). The Bengali middleclass domesticity was the site for the active agent’s nationalist and the colonial projects. “The Menagerie” (1953) is the reminiscent of the pre-colonial image of domesticity. The European model of bourgeoisie domesticity is provincialized in the far distance of Nishanath Sen’s Golap colony. Pinaki Roy’s opinion about Golap colony is that it replicates the micro transformation of the British colony. Nishanath *Babu’s* residence cum farm is the imitation of the colonial manor house. It is significantly described as a minor colony (Roy 195). Bandyopadhyay describes the colony thus:

Spread over fifteen to twenty bigha-s, and ... enclosed by the barbed wire with the cactus plants doubling the fences. Inside there is ... a huge garden, with a small tiled-house scattered all over. The colony [appear to be] ... an oasis amidst the bleak, dreary sun-blunt surroundings. (*The Menagerie and Other Byomkesh Bakshi Mysteries* 356)

The depiction of the characters shows the greatest hybridity and ambivalence, a result of straddling two cultures. Nishanath Sen, the former Mumbai High court, Bhujandharbabu, Nepal Gupta, all of them exhibit the ambivalence of both indigenous and western culture. Ajit Bandyopadhyay mentions, “Nishanath Sen was moderately built, clean shaved, sharp faced, with a pince-nez. He was clad in white trousers and sleeveless silk kameez. He wore no socks, but a pair of knotted Grishan Sandals” (344). Bhujandharbabu had a foreign education in the colonial centre but has a deep attachment towards classical Indian music and instruments. Prof. Nepal Gupta is also educated by the western education system and is a successful chemist yet he prefers to play chess as a leisure amusement.

Though, Damayanti Sen is married, yet “she has at her disposal all the financial reservoirs of colony and maintains the account” (376). She is another embodiment of the new woman in the colonial domesticity. She has taken admission in Calcutta’s St. Martha Girls’ School and acquainted with the “western etiquettes” and “societal norms” of the Bengali domesticity. Her English education serves to transform the *kulata* behaviour of Damayanti Sen (Singh) into a more responsible *grihalakshmi*ⁱ in domestic affairsⁱⁱ. ‘In spite of her westernized education and etiquettes, she has the quality of “the perfect [Bengali] housewife” (386)

Domestic Modernity and Cultural Hybridity in the Byomkesh Bakshi Stories

Not only the characters, but the architecture in the Byomkesh Bakshi stories reflect the onset of colonial modernity. The domestic architecture of Nishanath Babu’s golap colony is hybrid. It possesses a European style manor-house of the Victorian tradition. Sen’s house contains European furniture’s “roll-tap table, the book case, the electric fan and telephone”, but the menu comprises completely Indian “rice mixed with ghee, pulses, pawn-cutlet, curry made out of jackfruit, chutney, payesh, and char burfi”(358, 368). The 1936 narrative, “The Hidden Heirloom” shows another strand of the oscillation between traditional habits and modernity in urban Bengal. The author’s Bengaliness in his liking for “rich puffed” and “rice-grain” served in a paper cone and the attraction towards Sarat Chandara

Chattopadhyay's Charitrahin (1937) are described at the same time as the depiction of the feudal landlord Maharaja.

Ramendra Singha's habit of collecting precious gemstones is distinctly Western (*Byomkesh Bakshi Stories by Saradindu Bandyopadhyay* 7). Despite their Bengali manners and clothes, Byomkesh and Ajit are trained in Western scientific knowledge, and despite their feudal background, Maharaja Ramandra Singh and Himanshu Roy are sympathetic towards the new domestic sphere.

Bandyopadhyay reveals his familiarity with modern education and institutions and his deep knowledge of oriental gemstones, which is partly irrational by Western standards. In India, the sapphire is associated with mystic powers. The stone is a representative of the planet Saturn. It has been said that the sapphire has made a millionaire out of a poor man, and vice-versa. For some, it is the luckiest stone possible; for others, it is the unluckiest. It is not that the same sapphire would be lucky for all its ushers. The stone that makes someone prosperous may also ruin someone else. That is why its cost does not depend on weight (*Byomkesh Bakshi Stories by Saradindu Bandyopadhyay* 3).

"The Locked Knot" (1968) portrays the post-independence urban domesticity of Anadi Chakraborty. The author simultaneously shows the impact of the Western family system and the conflict of the male-dominated patriarchy. The business-minded Anadibabu is against his son's attachment to the theatre. The relationship of Labani Ghoshal and Parag Laha is one of devoted love and mutual correlation, which Tanika Sarkar suggests is a feature of the new urban man-women relationship (Walsh 35). Though they face opposition from both families, their elopement is the mark of a new type of relationship. The story ends with the proposed consent of the family to the marriage of Nikhil Halder and Jhilli. True love breaks the barrier between "grehalakshmi" and "Kulata" which are the two criteria for judging female characters in Bengali families, as suggested by Dipesh Chakraborty ("Deferral of (A) Colonial Modernity" 12). Medini is the Kulata or beshya but the feeling of true love of Sanat Ganguly transforms the relationship and the feeling. Though the family of Anadibabu is patriarchal in mode, yet it starts resembling the "new patriarchy". All the young men and the women are allowed to acquire higher education. Both Laboni and Jhilli are the product of modern higher yet exhibits domestic skills and devotion to their womanly duties.

Satyajit Roy featured a film based on Bandyopadhyay's novella "The Porcupine Spike" made livelier by its exquisite narrative of the problem of a loveless match between two people from two middleclass urban families. The writer was not satisfied to recognize this story as merely a sleuth story or murder mystery. He asserts, "the story got all the usual ingredients- Byomkesh, murders, detection, and so on; and yet I do not know whether it should be called a sleuth story at all ... it is for readers to decide what they are going to call it" (2:1007). It is undoubtedly, a social novel showing intergenerational crises of the changing middle class. In another place he expressed his earnest will to make it social novel. Pratul Gupta asserts "Bandyopadhyay keeps the detective stories at an intellectual level and writes them to be simultaneously read as social novel" (3:646). Initially, the marriage of Debashis Bhatta and Deepa Mukherjee is determined against the will of Deepa. Prof. Uday Madhav Mukherjee and his son show a typical patriarchal attitude and restrain their daughter, Deepa Mukherjee from doing what she wants. Her oppression is characterized by Deepa's mother who is shown a "simple minded, silent, and always at domestic duties".

Written in 1961, "The Invisible Triangle" traces the emergence of the new woman in urban Bengali domesticity. Bandyopadhyay's female protagonist, Reba Sarkar is a modern woman who is educated, beautiful, and yet she plays the traditional Indian housewife and takes proper care of her father-in-law.

She has the ability to occupy the private and public sphere, as she visits club and movies. She drives the car by herself and resists the domination of her husband Sunil Sarkar. Pinaki Roy opines “She posits a symbolic challenge to the Indian patriarchal norms by restricting her husband to a monthly pension of three hundred rupees” (*The Manichean Investigators: A Postcolonial and Cultural Rereading of the Sherlock Holmes and Byomkesh Bakshi Stories* 213). Reba is free from the older patriarchal constraints in her personal life and public engagement. According to Partha Chatterjee this is the characteristic of the “new woman” (*The Nation and Its Fragment: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* 129). Her virtue is the typical bourgeoisie characteristic of new social norms of “disciplining, of orderliness, thrift, cleanliness and the personal sense of responsibility, the practical skill of literacy accounting, hygiene and then the ability to run the household according to the new physical and the economic condition set by the outside world” (130).

The character of Reba gives an alternative picture of Bengali domesticity. The *doxical* Bengali norm *pativrata nari* (loyal wife) is challenged by her dominating position in public life. She is the new wife-literate and educated, yet trained in domestic duties. Her hard work and the efficiency in the financial affairs make her family prosperous and wealthy. The character of Reba underlines the shade of myth historical tradition. Roy comments “The litterateur also brings an Indian mytho historical connotation when he compares Reba Sarkar with the archetypal Hindu wife Sabitri and Sunil Sarkar with *Satyaban* whom *Sabitri* brings back to life through her purity and virtue.” (*The Manichean Investigators: A Postcolonial and Cultural Rereading of the Sherlock Holmes and Byomkesh Bakshi Stories* 206)

"The Firefly" (1965) offers another level of socio-cultural change in post-independent India. The story implicitly expresses the apparent intergenerational contradiction within the "new patriarchy" of the landlord, Deep Narayan Singh, who furnishes his house according to the European standard and employs chefs from respectable hotels in Calcutta (2:514). Bandyopadhyay shows a new kind of male-female relationship through the realistic depiction of this new patriarchy. Shakuntala is "a first-class first graduate from [pre-independence] Allahabad University" who skillfully plays the role of a wife in public and private life (513). The domestic sphere does not circumscribe her role as a new woman, but the economic aspects of her domesticity are maintained by her skilled education and knowledge that serve her during her husband's illness. The shade of the characters has a mythical undertone when Bandyopadhyay refers to the Sanskrit legend of the courtship of Dushyanta and the Shakuntala.

Though the apparent metropolitan domesticity despite seemingly solid in its tradition is already fluid space.ⁱⁱⁱ It was a site on the one hand for the practices of “Victorian fetishism” on the other the employment of the normalized domestic practices through the discourse of moral concern by the nationalist. “The Victorian middle class home became a space for the display of imperial spectacle...while the colonies...became a theatre for exhibiting the Victorian cult of domesticity” (Upstone 252). “The Hidden Heirloom” presents a fair picture of hybridized colonial domesticity. Cultural ambivalence is marked in the character of the Digindra Narayan Roy. Bandyopadhyaya’s attitude towards post-independent domesticity is ambivalent, in Henry Mason’s opinion it is something like “fluid space”. Byomkesh’s Harrison roads three floored boarding residence is a role model of hybrid colonial domesticity where the *bhadralok* created a sovereign space of multiethnic people from urban Bengal. Pinaki Roy compares the cosmopolitan urban colonial capital to Arthur Connon Doyle’s Victorian London: Doyle’s representation of the cosmopolitan character of London is matched by

Bandyopadhyay's depiction of Calcutta as housing non-Bengalis, pale-skinned Chinese and Oriyas (*Picture Imperfect and Other Byomkesh Bakshi Mysteries* 1, 7).

Hybridity, Class Dynamics, and the Boarding House

The pre-Independence Bandyopadhyay's story, *The Gramophone Mystery*, exhibits the Bhabhaian hybridity in the domestic life of urban Bengal. The house of Karali Charan Basu in the story "Where There is a Will" shows a different instance of hybridity in its internal decoration and the characteristic features of its inhabitants. The relation between employer and servants is predominant in colonial Bengal Hindu middle-class families. The servant was not presented as an image of "otherness", though the traditional lord has been shown as an oppressive figure within the mainstream narrative. The employer-servant relationship acted as a representation of the Bengali middle-class cultural identity. The repeated appearance of servants and maids in middle-class households testifies to the importance of this working population in the lives of their employers. Puntiram is an omnipresent figure in the Byomkesh household. His task is to maintain the household and detect Anukulbabu's cab number, which helps to catch the culprits.

From the second half of the nineteenth century, middle and lower strata of landed proprietors in the Bengal countryside increasingly struggled to sustain themselves on agrarian income. To prevent the impending loss of class and property, they needed to seek opportunities in civil professions. Western education, particularly a command of English, became essential for navigating life in a colonized society (Sarkar 160). Atul Mitra, disguised as Byomkesh, came to Calcutta in search of fortune, armed only with his "Western English education." His ancestral agricultural property was no longer sufficient for maintaining a self-respecting and decent life in rural Bengal. The chaotic lifestyle of urban Calcutta provided the bhadralok (gentlefolk) with the freedom to lead a more liberated social life and facilitated social mobility.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, boarding houses began to proliferate in the city. These establishments were filled with individuals from rural and suburban areas, who either sought higher education or aimed to become kerani (clerks) with moderate salaries. The emergence of modern educational institutions provided a space for young people from suburban Calcutta. Residences during this time often underwent minimal remodeling and were repurposed as offices, boarding houses, retail shops, and clubhouses (Chatterjee 102). According to Swati Chatterjee, this was notable because, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, many residences in the Chowringhee area were not single-family homes but were shared by multiple families or converted into boarding houses. This trend of shared living arrangements began as early as the 1850s.

In fact, by 1858, there were 12 boarding houses on Chowringhee Street, Wood Street, Park Street, and Theater Road. This number increased to 18 by 1872, although it slightly decreased to 17 by 1892. Meanwhile, the number of residences with shared occupancy surged from 26 in 1858 to 56 in 1892 (Chatterjee 130). For middle-class government employees, boarding houses became the last resort since clerks' salaries were typically insufficient to support traditional extended families in Calcutta. The story "The Inquisitor" (Satyanshi), set in the 1920s, highlights the pressing situation in colonial Calcutta. Characters Aswanibabu and Ghanaswambabu are government employees who struggle to settle their families in the city, which is seen as a place of opportunity for social advancement.

Ashwinibabu had been living in my house [boarding house] for the last twelve years. His home was in the village of Hariharpur in the district of Burdwan. He worked in a mercantile firm and drew a salary

of approximately one hundred and twenty rupees. On such a small income it was inconvenient to stay with his family in Calcutta and so he lived alone in the mess. (*Picture Imperfect and Other Byomkesh Bakshi Mysteries* 12)

Saradindu Bandyopadhyay began living in Calcutta while he was a student at Vidyasagar College. He settled in a boarding house on Harrison Road, which later served as the inspiration for the character Byomkesh Bakshi in his stories, including "Picture Imperfect and Other Byomkesh Bakshi Mysteries." Even the esteemed writer Nirad C. Chaudhuri fondly reflected on his own experiences as a boarding student at Presidency College. Byomkesh spent a significant portion of his life as a lodger on Harrison Road until 1965, when he moved to his home on Keyatala Road. Life in the boarding house inspired a younger generation of Bengali men who sought to challenge the authority of the extended family by fostering more nuclear, exclusive, and dyadic relationships between husbands and wives. In the nuclear family structure, the authority of the extended family is supplanted by the husband (Walsh 15). Byomkesh and Ajit built a new home on Keyatala Road in Calcutta, symbolizing a modern form of domestic life—a nuclear, urban microcosm of domesticity.

The last unresolved mystery in Bandyopadhyay's body of work, "The Bishopal Murder" (1970), underscores the evolving dynamics of male-female relationships in urban Calcutta. The companionate relationships found in middle-class families are characterized by cooperation, self-reliance, and equal opportunities in both public and private spheres. Couples such as Brajadulal Ghosh and Santi, Manish Bhadra and Malabika Bhadra, Dasarathi Chakraborty and Nandita Chakraborty, and Sulachana and Bishu Pal exemplify mutual coexistence in both their public and private lives (2:556). The professional lives of these modern couples rely on self-reliance and equal opportunities across both domestic and public domains. These empowered women have gained "control over their own lives, be it personal, social, or economic" (Bordin 2).

The new generation undermines traditional family authority by establishing a more nuclear, exclusive, and dyadic relationship between husband and wife (Walsh 63). Bandyopadhyay's depiction of urban domesticity reflects the conventional Bengali domesticity of nineteenth-century Bengal. Dasarathi Chakraborty and Bishu Pal, despite having an extended family in urban Calcutta, have created a nuclear family separate from that extended network. The Byomkesh Bakshi stories are engaging detective tales that utilize modern science and technology to showcase the intellect of the Bengali sleuth. At the same time, these stories reveal a depiction of Bengali domesticity, providing a literary space for the Bengali middle-class Bhadraklok.

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