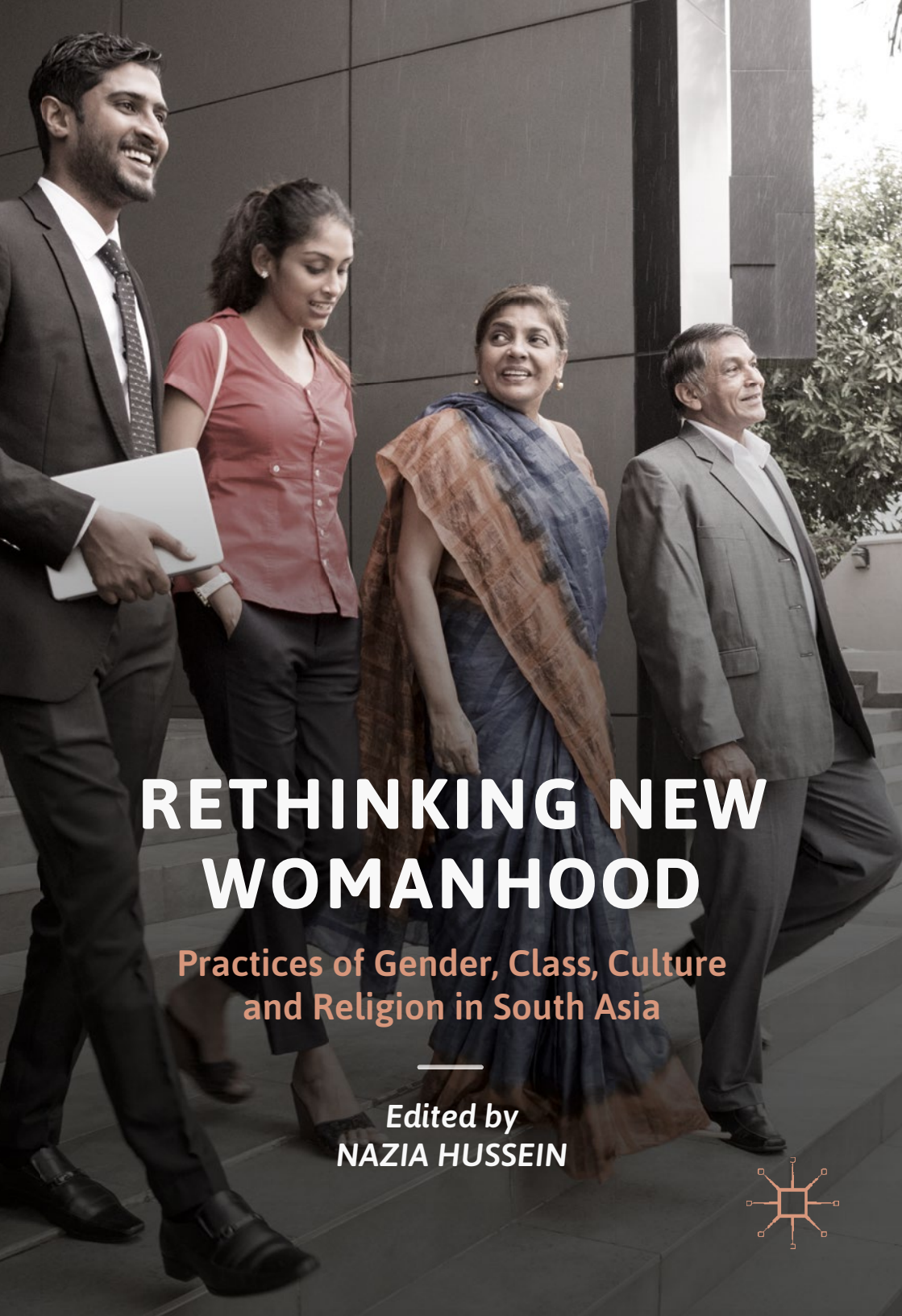

RETHINKING NEW WOMANHOOD

Practices of Gender, Class, Culture and Religion in South Asia

Edited by
NAZIA HUSSEIN

Rethinking New Womanhood

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Editor

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Introduction

Nazia Hussein

South Asian women are in crisis. The region has been identified as one of the worst places in the world to be a female, along with sub-Saharan Africa (World Vision 2016). South Asian women's position in society is constantly evaluated within patriarchal domination, right-wing nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and capitalist exploitation. Under these conditions, it has become essential to revisit the dynamic area of women's identity constructions in the region.

Colonial nationalist discourse in India responded to similar condemnation of tradition-bound Indian women by creating the image of the 'new woman', who was culturally refined and educated, yet also a devoted wife and mother. She represented a reformed tradition and nationalism based on the grounds of modernity and also marked her superiority to Western women, traditional Indian women, and low-class women (Chatterjee 1989). Partha Chatterjee (1989) called this a new patriarchy, which capitalised on women with the ambiguous honour of representing a distinctively modern national culture. To respond to the present predicament of

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the oppressed South Asian woman, we reconstruct contemporary 'new womanhood' in the region as a self-constructed—as opposed to imposed by patriarchal powers—agential complex intersectional identity. Using poststructuralist methods and deconstructing classification systems and discourses, this volume remakes 'new women' as those who perform constant boundary work to expose, negotiate, and challenge the boundaries of identity around 'modernity' and 'tradition', culture and religion, local and global, class hierarchy, and discourses around sexuality and feminism. The purpose of the volume is to unpack and undo existing discourses around South Asian womanhood in order to evaluate how women use their heterogeneous practices of 'new womanhood' as a privilege in neoliberal societies and the implications of these practices for gender relations.

To date, the impact of scholarship on gender in South Asia has been centred around three things: new and innovative empirical studies to broaden the field of feminist research and its contribution to South Asian studies such as religious fundamentalism, secularism, economic development etc.; rethinking of theoretical concepts from various scholarly fields such as colonialism, nationalism, women's movements, human rights, war, peace, globalisation, labour etc. (Loomba and Lukose 2012; Roy 2012), and opening up new areas of inquiry that complicate the understanding of gender through a focus on intersections between gender and class, caste, ethnicity, sexuality, and religion (Fernandes 2014). This volume addresses all three areas, primarily contributing to the third—reconfiguring 'new womanhood' as a symbolic identity denoting 'modern' femininity at the intersection of gender, class, culture, and religion in South Asia. Studying 'new womanhood' through these intersections enables a more complex, dynamic, and plural understanding of the concept than the existing, exclusively class-based ones. This volume provides disciplinary and interdisciplinary understandings of the concept, highlighting heterogeneous constructions of the 'new woman'. Through this focus on 'new', however, we do not propose replacement of old categories of womanhood with newer ones. Rather, we resist any boundaries of identification and highlight the process of identity construction as one that is never ending and perpetually unfinished. The volume captures the depth and range of various sites and expressions of femininities in the region today, addressing issues like cultural and literary representation, sexualities, education, labour, fashion, feminism, women's empowerment, and domestic violence.

Redefining the Third-World Woman

For a long time, postcolonial feminists have been concerned, among other things, with analysing and rejecting the production of the 'third-world woman' as a singular, monolithic subject by both some Western and some middle-class, urban third-world scholars (Mohanty 2003; Mani 1992; Kandiyoti 1991; Spivak 1993). Both Western (in all its complexities and contradictions) and local elite feminist scholars use textual strategies to set themselves as the norm and codify others such as rural, working class cultures and their struggles as 'others' to this norm. Recently, three South Asian countries—Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India—were placed in the top five most dangerous countries to be born a woman by Thomson Reuters Foundation (Bowcott 2011). Other South Asian countries appear no better. For example, in Bangladesh, studies of gender-based violence identify social, economic, and political structures in the country as discriminatory towards women, denying women any agency or autonomy (Jahan 1994; White 1992; Zaman 1996, 1999). Similarly, in the 1980s female factory workers in Bangladesh were presented as the emblem of capitalist and patriarchal exploitation (Elson and Pearson 1981a, b; Chapkis and Enloe 1983). More contemporary scholarship around Islam highlights *fatwas*[1] against NGOs and credit institutions, which are seen to be facilitating rural poor women's independence, as repressive religious measures against women (Feldman 1998; Hashmi 2000; Shehabuddin 1999; Shehabuddin 2008). Meanwhile the practice of the Islamic veil or hijab is often identified as oppressive, flagging the need for partnership with Western organisations and cultures to set an agenda for political action in the country.

Forceful critiques of the construction of the South Asian third-world woman as a monolithic group oppressed by social structures have been prominent in the region since colonial times. In historical writings Mani (1992), Sunder Rajan (1993), Loomba (1993), and Sangari and Vaid (1990) characterise women in colonial India as agents in political struggle rather than passive victims of oppression. Generalisations about Islam's oppression of women in contemporary South Asia have been refuted using Mahmood's (2005) provocative exploration of the Eurocentric understanding of the key feminist notion of agency and the need for theorising religious agency in Bangladesh (Rozario 2006; Hussain 2010;

White 2010), Pakistan (Jamal 2012; Roomi and Harrison 2010), and India (Kirmani 2013). In Sri Lanka, women have been redefined by Nesiah (2012) as agents of peace rather than just victims of conflict through a study of women's inclusion in conflict resolution and reconciliation positions in state's policy. Similarly, Abdela (2008) argues that in Nepal, issues of land distribution, minority rights, and federalism-related differences between Maoists and the Seven Party Alliance are resolved using woman-identified values, such as patience and empathy, in political engagement.

Following this tradition, our theorisation of 'new womanhood' in South Asia not only challenges the essentialised notion of the oppressed 'third-world woman' but also establishes 'new women' of South Asia as part of a new and potentially powerful symbolic social group, whose aspirations resemble what Mohanty (2003) identified as those of the privileged of the world—located geographically in both the global North and the South. South Asian 'new women' are symbolically produced through the challenging of normative practices of gender and sexuality, new aspirations around education, employment, fashion, and feminism, and self-construction of their identity as global neoliberal subjects.

Redefining 'New Woman'

The nineteenth-century Victorian 'new woman' has been configured as a type, a symbol, and a figure of feminist rebellion. Predominantly a journalistic phenomenon—a product of discourse—the 'new woman' with her short haircut and practical dress, her demand for access to higher education and to voting and income rights, challenged the accepted views of femininity and female sexuality as docile and subservient. The new woman was viewed as an ambiguous figure who triggered both anxiety and debate in Victorian Britain (Beetham and Heilmann 2004, p. 1). The concept was a somewhat semi-fictional one, with only some precise similarities with the lived experiences of the upper middle-class feminists of the late nineteenth-century women's movements (Ledger 1997, p. 3). The 'new woman' was set in opposition to the 'pure' and 'traditional' identity of the Victorian woman, who was a nurturing wife, subordinate,

and dependent on her husband with a strong emphasis on cultural purity, virtue, integrity, and honour—which symbolised the Victorians' respectability in society (Beetham and Heilmann 2004).

During the same period in New Zealand, the new woman was presented in similar ways—in rational dress, especially knickerbockers, and frequently riding a bicycle (Simpson 2001). Unlike in Britain, however, New Zealand's new woman tried to reconcile her position with conventional beliefs about femininity to create alternative yet respectable identities (ibid.:54). Particularly when riding a bicycle, they employed a number of 'protective' strategies, such as ignoring remarks from bystanders, riding in groups, and avoiding certain streets and places where they might find themselves in vulnerable situations in relation to unwelcome attention.

In the early twentieth century in Germany, China (Schmid 2014), Korea (Suh 2013), and Uzbekistan (Kamp 2011), the 'new woman' became a symbol of social transformation through women's education, participation in paid work, consumerism, social freedom, fashion, and beauty practices. Women's increased access to jobs, education, and participation in consumer culture through their income offered them greater independence from superstitions, arranged marriages, and extended family settings in rural areas, and granted access to Western fashion. But soon after, the 'new woman's' lifestyle choices, such as night-time socialising in dance halls and bars in Berlin and Shanghai or provocative Western clothes and hairstyles in Korea, began to be associated with sexual promiscuity and immoral consumption. 'New women' were blamed for the ills of society due to their excessive spending on Western fashion polluting national culture, loss of sexual and moral order due to increased participation in night life, and finally increased presence in the labour force and the drop in childbearing (Schmid 2014).

Colonial literature in India represents 'new women' as those who practised respectable femininity within the home and the public sphere, as opposed to the understanding of the 'new woman' in other parts of the world as a symbol of decadence. The middle-class 'new Indian woman' was expected to acquire education and cultural refinement which would make her a worthy companion to her husband, but she would not lose her feminine spiritual (domestic) virtues or jeopardise her place in the home (Chatterjee 1989, p. 628; Gilbertson 2011, p. 119). New women's

nationalism, femininity, and middle-class morality were evident in their merits of *pativrata* (the perfect wife) (Leslie 1989), merged with the Victorian image of the 'perfect lady' (Banerjee 2006, p. 78). During the early and mid-nineteenth century, the Indian nationalists split the domain of culture into two spheres—the inner domestic and spiritual worlds of women, which represented the Indian nation's true identity; and the outer material world of men, which fostered Western modernisation. The domestic and spiritual 'new women' of colonial India marked India's 'own version of modernity' and the country's anti-colonial stance. The nationalist ideology of the middle-class Indian woman and her domestic virtue distinguished 'new women' from both Western culture and the 'traditional' or 'low-class' India (Chatterjee 1989). This 'new woman' is also visible in various colonial literatures (Roye 2016; Bezbaruah 2016; Azim 2002; Chatterjee 1989). It is worth noting that despite this divide between the public and private, many women of the time, both Hindu and Muslim, such as the Muslim writer Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain, participated actively through their writing in the nationalist movement to free India from imperialist power and at the same time to free women from the seclusion of the home (Azim 2010).

Hence, the 'new woman' of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the female figure of 'modernity', which took its own course in different parts of the world, breaking the boundaries of normative forms of femininity through education, paid work, visibility in the public sphere, redefining sexuality, and fashion. In this volume, to study postcolonial South Asia, we use Partha Chatterjee's (1997) conceptualisation of 'our' modernity, which he defines as the experiences of societies which entered modernity under double violence—the violence of imperialism and the violence of alien structures of modernity such as capitalism, industrialisation, individuation, and the gradual decline of communal forms of belonging. South Asia's history of colonialism distinguishes its own version of modernity from the European one. For postcolonial societies, contemporary processes of globalisation, migration, and capitalism are not new phenomena but build upon older histories of colonialism, race, and empire (Loomba and Lukose 2012). While Western modernity looks at the present as the site of one's escape from the past, 'our' modernity sees the past as when there was beauty, prosperity, and a healthy

sociability. Hence, postcolonial South Asia's relationship with modernity is ambiguous; to fashion 'our' modernity, we need to have the courage to reject the modernities established by others (Chatterjee 1997, p. 20). In this volume, we see past and present, the local and the global as necessarily interconnected. The regional framework of this volume should not be misread as local to South Asia only; rather, we scrutinise the politics of the postcolonial local to understand the relationship between the local and the global.

Contemporary 'New Women' of South Asia

Contemporary perspectives on 'new womanhood' in South Asia can be categorised into two groups: the 'new woman' represented in the media and literature and the 'new woman' engaged in neoliberal economy, consumerism, and transnational mobility, constantly negotiating with social, political, and economic changes around her.

Constructions of the 'new Indian woman' have been analysed by feminist scholars through explorations of media such as television commercials (Sunder Rajan 1993; Munshi 2001), beauty pageants (Oza 2001; Runkle 2004), popular magazines (Daya 2009; Thapan 2004), and novels (Daya 2010; Mahajan 2015; Roye 2016; Bezbaruah 2016). These depict 'Indian new women' as an 'object' and their bodies as the surface upon which contradictory cultural messages are inscribed through a depiction of past and present, local and global, traditional and modern (Talukdar and Linders 2013). However, the majority of this literature is limited to studies of women's bodies as a vehicle of expressing 'superficial modernity', failing to penetrate beyond appearance. Thapan's (2004) study of Indian women's magazines demonstrates that magazines project new Indian women's bodies as glamorous through their choice of consumer goods, yet emphasise that such a lifestyle can be achieved by Indian women who are status conscious, economically independent, capable of taking decisions, 'modern', yet enshrined in tradition through adherence to family and national values, thus expressing their Indianness (ibid., p. 410). Similarly, in the Bollywood movie *English Vinglish*, the 'new woman' protagonist is a model of development and modernisation

who embraces crossing borders to the USA, seeking opportunities to learn a new language and lifestyle, and moving beyond the restrictions of the local and traditional, yet remains Indian, Hindu, nationalist, family-bound, and domestic—legitimising truly Indian qualities of motherhood and wifely duties (Chatterjee 2016). However, some alternative perspectives are also available. Hard Kaur, an Indian-born, British-raised female hip-hop artist, is defined as the 'new *Desi* (of homeland) woman' who represents young, transnational, future-oriented, capable, and assertive postcolonial femininity, as opposed to meek, subservient, docile femininities of the past (Dattatreyan 2015).

Like the majority of the studies in India, the Bangladeshi media representation of 'new woman' is similar to the Victorian new woman, who represented the fallen woman, thus not respectable, a contrast to the 'angel in the house' image of ideal domestic womanhood, the respectable ones. The 'new woman' represented in Bangladeshi media, particularly in television, is professional, 'modern', 'bold', and 'outrageous' (Begum 2008). In terms of appearance, the new woman in Bangladeshi media has short hair and wears the sari in a modern way[2], demonstrating her educated middle-class taste. Yet Begum notes how the narrative of the dramas often depicts these women as a dark force, disobedient of elders, who behave outside the prevalent value system of joint families, engage in immoral consumerism, and reject caring and nurturing roles. Hussein's (2017a, b) research participants self-identify as new women but disavow media representation of modern women as 'new woman'. As new women audiences, the participants argue that the Bangladeshi media represents either traditional women bound by patriarchal oppression or Westernised overambitious and hypersexual women; both representations fail to capture the complexities of new women's lives, which intersect with gender, class, and cultural and religious systems simultaneously. Alternatively, Chowdhury (2010) identifies the 'new woman' in Bangladeshi media as an 'efficient', 'skilled', and 'trained' development professional, whose (middle) class position allows her to transcend gendered vulnerabilities and assume the role of 'feminist saviour', rescuing the poor, rural, uneducated women who are victims of the patriarchal system of society (ibid., p. 316). Chowdhury argues that representation of the new woman as saviour of women victims symbolises her as an agent of neo-patriarchal

relations among differentially located women and reflects a consensual (patron) and contractual (the one to be saved) structure of patriarchy, much like that between men and women: the development expert who provides services to the client.

Feminist scholars have drawn on Partha Chatterjee's (1989) theorisation whereby negation of private and public or home and outside world is used to explain classed gender subjectivities and the practices that define postcolonial new women. This is most prominent in economically liberalised India, particularly in the 1990s, where a substantial amount of research that addresses contemporary Indian women's balance of old and new, traditional and modern, and national and Western conceptualises these women as middle-class new women. With a strong emphasis on class and gender, Radhakrishnan (2011) identifies the Indian new women as IT workers who are urban, upper-caste, educated, English-speaking professionals, who identify with the symbolic and cultural identities of India's middle class and are bearers of nationalist, family- and home-centred Indian culture, yet economically are a segment of the global elite class (ibid., p. 8). They are 'at the frontline of the global economy, and assert their symbolic position at the helm of new India' (ibid., p. 5). Talukdar and Linders (2013) identify new liberal Indian women as part of a modest segment of a 'new' middle class, who cannot be defined solely through material signs (e.g. income, wealth, work, education) but are new in terms of their distinctive social and political identity, which is an outcome of their close encounter with liberalisation (ibid., p. 108). In Bangladesh, the class reference remains intact, and 'new womanhood' is defined as urban middle-class women, whose education and profession provide them with the respectability and 'acceptability' to live their lives on their own terms (Karim 2010; Hussein 2015). Living 'on their own terms' may include non-heteronormative relationships (Karim 2010), avoiding the stigma of divorce (Parvez 2011), hybrid fashion, 50-50 work-life balance, and female individualisation (Hussein 2015). Feminist concerns in Bangladesh have changed to address 'new' women of the country who are fighting for their rights around sexuality, marriage, transnational mobility, and paid employment, rather than motherhood, children, and housework, considered matters relevant for previous generations of women (Azim 2007).

Although 'new womanhood' did not gain as much attention in feminist research in other parts of South Asia, like Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, these countries still address 'new' practices of femininities as legitimate, such as career aspirations and female militancy in Sri Lanka (Fernando and Cohen 2013; Thiranagama 2014), romantic love, fashion, and commodified beauty practices in Nepal (Liechty 2003), and religious modernity in Pakistan (Jamal 2013; Toor 2014). Although the public discourses around 'new womanhood' in South Asia raise important questions about gendered postcolonial modernity, they are also a useful tool to analyse the permeable boundaries of gender, class, and cultural and religious norms and to evaluate how 'new women', whether as an object in the media or as a subject outside of it, can test these boundaries and self-construct themselves as the 'new woman'.

'New women' of South Asia distance themselves from other women within their country and from Western women, creating inter- and intragroup distinctions in their communities (Hussein 2015, 2017a, b). Distinctions are drawn in four ways. First, class boundaries are drawn between 'aggressive' westernised women, who give up their families to fulfil career goals, and respectable middle-class women, who are 'not so ambitious' and view a career as a supplement to married life and children (Radhakrishnan 2011, p. 149). It is also recognised that many women must assume the breadwinner role in families and use their economic power to hire domestic help to look after their family (ibid., p. 153). Others co-opt other female family members such as mothers-in-law, or paid household help, who carry out new women's domestic chores for them, so they can achieve 50–50 work-life balance and maintain respectability (Hussein 2017a, b). In Nepal, Liechty (2003) demonstrates that middle-class women constantly distance themselves from prostitutes, who are from the lower classes and sexually available in the public sphere, as opposed to the respectable middle-class women who are visible in the public sphere, but are still within the bounds of middle-class sexual propriety. Existing literature on 'new women' in South Asia constructs them as those practising respectable femininity, which is fundamentally a middle-class symbolic capital. But as Saba Hussain in this volume articulates, respectable femininity is associated with larger progress of communities and nations and an expectation of enactment by individual women and girls

from all class backgrounds. Such a discourse of respectable femininity helps reimagine nations like India as developed and communities like Hindus and Muslims as modern or progressive. Elora Chowdhury expands this further in her chapter by arguing how narratives of '[new] women's uplift' and emancipation in the region fail to convey the precarity of the everyday struggles of 'new women', regardless of their class, living on the borders of neoliberal progress.

Second, cultural boundaries construct ideal femininity through women's conscious engagement with cultural and nationalist attires such as the sari and the containment of the sexuality or 'wayward modernity' of the West. But Indian 'new women' merge cultural boundaries through hybrid physical appearance, combining national and Western fashion, body size (thinness), and make-up. However, such hybrid sartorial choices are often condemned by women's parents-in-law in India (Thapan 2009). But professional women have challenged such scrutiny by their families through negotiation and strategising to practise multiple fashions in the diverse locations of workplace and family (ibid., p. 130). As Nazia Hussein demonstrates in this volume, in Bangladesh 'new women' participants merge the boundaries of various classed, cultural, and religious clothing practices to construct hybrid and context-specific 'smart' clothing practices as a distinctive practice of new womanhood. Finally, in terms of religious boundaries, in Pakistan Jamal (2013) demonstrates how women of Jamaat-e-Islami, an Islamic political party, embrace 'modernity' in relation to education, employment, political participation, and so on, yet reject notions of individual autonomy in matters of religious beliefs and practices. In this volume, Virginie Dutoya claims that Pakistani Muslim heroine characters in television serials claim their 'new womanness' through disassociating themselves from the superstition and ignorance of uneducated Muslim women and the arrogance of Western female heroines on cable television, simultaneously negotiating the boundaries of religion and culture. Similarly, Nandita Ghosh in the volume studies a Brahmin new woman character who eats non-vegetarian food, rejects arranged marriage, and has a boyfriend—all practices far outside the parameters of Hindu upper-caste Brahminical norms.

This volume also expands the above-mentioned boundaries to gender and geographical boundaries. Gender boundaries are drawn by flagging

practices of 'new femininities' located within the context of material existence that are fulfilled through consumer goods but also through recognition of women's desires and approaches of queering gender and sex. Queer groups have shifted from rooting their claims for rights of same-sex relationships and gender nonconformity to sex workers' rights, women's choices and practises of sexualities, and gender identities. In this volume Karim claims the acknowledgement of sexuality as part of constructions and expressions of new femininities and womanhood—particularly recognising women's sexuality in its plurality within the realms of various public/private spaces that they occupy. For geographical boundaries, Elora Chowdhury and Sushmita Chatterjee in this volume rightly note that it is also important to scrutinise transnational circulations of narratives of women's liberation and feminism in the South. Chowdhury focuses on transnational media representation of Bangladeshi female garment workers exposing structural inequality of globalisation, colonial relations between capitalist West and certain populations in the global South who are subjected to extreme violence and suffering. In her exploration of 'new feminisms' in India which are adaptations of feminist movements often identified as Western, Chatterjee questions the very construction of geographical boundaries when it comes to feminist politics.

The chapters in this volume suggest that boundaries of a variety of social categories determine 'new womanness' across time and space. In this way, without explicitly identifying as an intersectional study, the majority of the chapters of the book articulate 'new womanhood' as a complex, intersectional, and heterogeneous identity. In the following section, I explain the concept of boundary work as the primary tool for the analysis of 'new womanhood' in this volume.

Boundary Work of New Women

It is necessary to embed an empirical volume on South Asian 'new womanhood' into wider theories of boundaries and boundary work. Practices of 'new womanhood' constantly challenge and reinvent boundaries of gender/sexuality, class, culture, and religion. A classical element of the social science tool kit, the idea of boundaries, has gained much renewed interest in

studies of social and collective identity. Studying social relations through the concept of boundaries allows us an insight into how subjects create, maintain, negotiate, contest, and recreate social differences, for example, gender, sexuality, class, culture, and religion. It also enables us to look at cultural mechanisms of production of hybrid cultures. Lamont (1992) defines boundary work as personal investment in identity, 'an intrinsic part of the process of constituting the self; they [boundaries] emerge when we try to define who we are: we constantly draw inferences concerning our similarities to, and differences from, others, indirectly producing typification systems' (ibid., p. 11). Lamont's acknowledgement of 'typification systems' indicates that boundary work guides and organises both the self and other social identities into categories. Boundary properties, for example, permeability, salience, durability, and visibility, as well as mechanisms 'associated with the activation, maintenance, transposition or the dispute, bridging, crossing and dissolution of boundaries' (Lamont and Molnar 2002, p. 187) are particularly important for the studies in this volume.

Practices of new womanhood are a form of symbolic boundary work that separates these women into a symbolic group based on feelings of similarity and group membership that crosses national and regional borders. New women are a symbolic group or practices of new womanhood are a symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1992) that women studied in this volume adopt to establish their distinction from other women. Symbolic capital is the form any other kind of capital (economic-money, property; cultural-education, fashion; social friends and community relations) can take once they are perceived and recognised as legitimate. This process of legitimisation is a key mechanism in the conversion of symbolic capital (Skeggs 1997, p. 8). Legitimisation occurs when one's privileged taste and capitals are considered part of one's 'natural' capacity, misrecognising all others as inferior and reproducing dominance of the privileged. In this volume, new women legitimise heterogeneous practices of gender such as lesbian and asexual identities (Karim, Ghosh), hybrid cultural practices such as fusion clothing and context-specific aesthetic labour (Hussein, Adhikari), reinvention of respectable femininity not just as a middle-class capital but as an aspiration for all classes (Hussain), shifting gender order within patriarchy (Kirmani, Dutoya) and new woman's transnational dispositions (Chowdhury, Hussein, Chatterjee). Hence, new womanhood is

an essential medium through which women acquire status and distinction and monopolise resources and create social boundaries (e.g. sexual, cultural, or religious).

> 'distinctions can be expressed through normative interdictions (taboos), cultural attitudes and practices, and patterns of likes and dislikes. They play an important role in the creation of inequality and the exercise of power… [it] also refers to the internal distinctions of classification systems and to temporal, spatial, and visual cognitive distinctions in particular' (Lamont et al. 2015, p. 850).

For this volume gender as an intersectional subjectivity is not prereflexive or unconscious. The chapters of the volume recognise the ambivalent and nuanced efforts of the dominated—in this case women—to capture subjecthood wanting to change and adapt with an ability to add value to themselves. The volume demonstrates femininities—for us, new womanhood—as agential, heterogeneous, and fluid subjectivities in which individuals make their own choices, are critical of their situations, and think and organise, individually or collectively, against oppression. Such a construction of South Asian women as political subjects, as opposed to docile and oppressed objects, challenges the 'oppressed postcolonial women' predicament in dominant South Asian gender perspectives.

In this endeavour, the volume is organised around two major themes: (a) politics of representation—new woman in literature and the media, and (b) practices of gender, sexuality, class, culture, and religion—new women subjects in everyday life. Within the thematic sections, the chapters provide original research findings and critical assessment of the field of scholarship under consideration. The chapters make two significant intellectual contributions. First, they expand, challenge, and help reconceptualise existing approaches to the study of women and gender in South Asia and the global South. However, these revisions are in continuous dialogue with mainstream women and gender studies in the global North, providing a global perspective on gender. Second, the studies in the volume develop and expand the field of South Asian studies. The chapters show how rethinking constructions and practices of women and gender can contribute to new developments in studies of the region.

Politics of Representation: New Woman in Literature and the Media

Scholars' unpacking representations of 'new woman' as an object in the media, literature, or beauty pageants has deepened contemporary understanding of the ways in which conceptions of the global intersect with nationalist narratives and of the ways in which new subjectivities are positioned in liminal spaces, unable to be reduced to fixed identity categories or social locations. The chapters in this section expand our understanding of the representation of women, culture, nation, and identity in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.

Nandita Ghosh uses an innovative approach of 'border as method' to examine how women's bodies and sexuality serve as important boundary markers of power and citizenship, of violence and exclusion, and of negotiation and transformation. Through the theory of 'border struggles', Ghosh analyses how women resist constraints and open up new possibilities in two selected novels from the 1980s and 1990s and in the news coverage of the 2012 Park Street rape case of Suzette Jordan in Kolkata, India. She shows us how India's 30-year national discourse of modernity and neoliberalism stumbles when encountering the non-submissive female bodies of 'new women'. Elora Chowdhury uses visual and literary representations of Bangladeshi women in the garment industry to highlight the emerging identities of the empowered woman in the capitalist workforce, as well as structural inequalities that constrain their autonomy. She questions racialised and gendered labour in the context of the neoliberal capitalist globalisation of the political economy and defines 'new women' as dutiful workers dependent on wages who are neither self-sufficient nor autonomous, yet are socially constructed as emancipated through narratives of capitalist modernity. Virginie Dutoya shifts our focus to pro-women television dramas of metropolitan Pakistan, which explicitly address 'women's issues' such as child marriage, polygamy, violence, the right to education, or parents' preference for boys. She argues that these drama serials respond to the representation of the victim status of Pakistani women in the international media, which has become a source of 'national shame' for the country.

Practices of Gender, Sexuality, Class, Culture, and Religion: New Women Subjects in Everyday Life

Formulations of 'new woman' subjects have been most diverse in different time periods and spaces. The 'new' is often presented as a harbinger of modernity and progress, a code for the eclipse of tradition by wayward modernity, and finally a result of global discourses around capitalism and cosmopolitanism. In this volume, following contemporary feminist trends, we provide a picture of women's emancipation, initiated, developed, and achieved by women themselves to gain value as a 'new woman' in their respective societies. This is done through exploring social categories of class, culture, religion, and sexuality.

Three chapters in this section address intersections of gender and class through the concept of 'respectable femininity' without explicitly using intersectionality as a theoretical framework. Nazia Hussein uses women's sartorial choices as a tool to argue that by merging boundaries of class and respectable vs. 'modern' clothing practices Bangladeshi neoliberal middle-class women self-construct their 'new womanhood', at the intersection of gender, class, culture, and religion (Islam). Her analysis frames the symbolic value of 'new womanhood' as a marker of departure from the boundaries and constrictions of national culture and religious (Islamic) norms within which most gender scholarship of the region has been confined. Mona Adhikari researches hotels and casinos in Nepal to assess how women workers maintain respectability while conforming and negotiating with organisational policies of aesthetic and sexualised labour. Saba Hussain provides an unprecedented explanation of practices of 'new girlhood' among Muslim girls from diverse class backgrounds in Assam through balancing career and marital aspirations. She uses concepts of respectability, 'appropriate aspirations', and post-feminist girlhoods, effectively highlighting future pathways of 'new woman' research both in South Asia and more globally.

Nida Kirmani explores the impact of engagement in paid work on women's empowerment and, in particular, on their ability to negotiate and resist violence at the hands of their husbands and other family members. She argues that, despite the persistence of patriarchal structures, women's

narratives demonstrate the emergence of new models of womanhood at the local level as a result of paid employment, which provides their families opportunities of social mobility (in class structure) and cultural shifts enabling women to challenge abusers and end abusive relationships. Shuchi Karim looks at a group of Bangladeshi female sex workers who practise heterosexuality as labour and homosexuality as personal sexual desire, questioning politics of sexual diversity. She argues that these sex workers' 'personal is/and political' practices, and their almost invisible presence in an otherwise educated middle-class fabric of sexuality rights activism, question our middle-class-framed understanding of heteronormativity, womanhood, sexualities, and rights discourses in Bangladesh. Finally, Sushmita Chatterjee studies Blank Noise, the Pink *Chaddi* campaign, *Besharmi Morcha*, and other forms of urban feminist activism in India as 'new feminisms' to rethink the complex, hybrid nature of new feminist theory and activism to 'counter-perform' the language of the oppression of women in South Asia. She provides a timely review of Indian feminisms' engagement with 'Western' feminist activism and future pathways for feminist activism in the country.

Trends and Directions

The chapters in this volume capture the richness and diversity of feminist scholarship on 'new women' of South Asia. We defy any attempts at generalisation of a complex region and the complex concept of 'new womanhood'. We provide an important review of the key debates that have emerged from feminist scholarship on 'new womanhood' and reveal a range of methods and substantive new themes that preoccupy contemporary feminist scholars. Apart from challenging monolithic constructions of oppressed 'South Asian woman', this volume introduces new approaches and challenges to existing paradigms in the study of gender and inequality. In this attempt, we have recreated 'new womanhood' not just as a middle-class gender identity, like the existing studies available on the concept, but rather as a symbolic identity that can be assumed by women of any class, culture, and religion to traverse binaries of local and global, tradition and modernity, oppression and empowerment, change

and stasis to recognise that women themselves construct and reconstruct their identities in relation to societal change. We argue that 'new women's' gains are vested in a wider feminist politics and they have the potential to positively influence the terrain of possibilities for all women.

Notes

1. A ruling on a point of Islamic law given by a recognised authority.
2. A sari can be draped in numerous styles. In the modern style most of the cloth is draped around the waist with a single segment going across the breasts and the left shoulder to cover the upper body. The midriff is left bare in this style of wearing a sari.

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Part I

Politics of Representation: New Woman in Literature and the Media

‘(New) Woman’ as a Flashpoint Within the Nation: The Border as Method in Tales of Modernity

Nandita Ghosh

Introduction

This chapter examines the late twentieth- to early twenty-first-century literary and news stories which narrate the New Woman as a signifier that destabilizes established meanings within the nation. Middle-class females modify or subvert their assigned roles by freely embracing a lifestyle of their choice that breaks with normative gender and class expectations specific to their contexts. Partap Sharma’s novel *Days of the Turban*, published in 1986, looks at gender within the context of Sikh nationalism in the 1980s. Gulnari breaks codes of respectability when she joins the Akali movement as a revolutionary and interacts with men of different castes and faiths. Anita Nair’s novel, *Ladies Coupè*, published in 2001, looks at gender in the 1990s. Akhila, a 45-year-old income-tax clerk, buys a one-way ticket to the seaside town of Kanyakumari. She breaks conservative Tamilian Brahmanical norms governing her behaviour when she decides to explore if a woman can live feasibly without marriage. In news stories

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of the 2012 Park Street rape case of Kolkata, Suzette Jordan, a single working mother, broke a number of taboos when she was gang raped: of being out late, of accepting drinks at a bar, and of taking a ride home from strangers. These fictional and news stories are juxtaposed with each other and close read as narrative speech-acts,[1] each of which represents specific moments within a decade. These narratives are contextualized against representative interdisciplinary scholarship on gender and nationalism over the past 30 years in India. In these stories, the women's choices serve as flashpoints within the nation, problematizing its self-definition as a modern entity.

This chapter wishes to look at border as method; in so doing, it leans on Mezzadra and Neilson's (2013) discussions of the border. Under the late twentieth-century capital, they opine; crises in transformations of state sovereignty disallow borders from firmly demarcating spaces, people, and activities by failing to trace clear lines between what remains inside or outside of territories. It is in this ambivalent space of temporary borders that this chapter examines how women's bodies and sexuality serve as important boundary markers of power and citizenship, of violence and exclusion, and of negotiation and transformation. Border struggles, then, refer to everyday practices by which women internalize or resist these constraints and open up new possibilities. The women in these stories trespass on disallowed terrain and experience violence. Using the idea of a border as method, this chapter seeks to reflect on a 30-year national discourse of modernity and neoliberal challenges during a globalized era, a discourse that falters when encountering non-submissive female bodies. Borders are sites where the fault lines of these contradictions emerge, revealing other relationships between gender and nationalism under global capital.

The New Woman Then and Now

In order to examine relationships between gender and nationalism in the late twentieth- to early twenty-first-century postcolonial texts, it is necessary to analyse icons of the New Woman in this period and trace her genealogy to the nineteenth-century imperial British debates concerning

the woman question. Offen (2000) points out that the nineteenth-century nationalism made women's conditions, roles, and responsibilities central to nation-building efforts. Women were to be trained as wives and mothers, because these roles were essential to the nation. Such efforts at gender training opened the door to feminist activism regarding women's equal access to knowledge, print culture, the arts, and professions; women's freedom to move in public, to vote, to express their sexuality, and to enjoy full citizenship rights; and women's state recognition and support for motherhood and childcare. By the late nineteenth century, the New Woman came to denote educated, employed, single, upper-middle-, and middle-class women. She threatened marital monogamy by experimenting with her sexuality. She could take to the streets in political protest. She drank, smoked, and enjoyed a hectic social life. As per Otto and Rocco (2011), by the early decades of the twentieth century, media representations made the New Woman at once a symbol of progress and decadence.

These contradictions also occur in colonial India. As scholars on gender in South Asia have argued, the construction of Indian womanhood in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, forged in the interstices of anti-colonial struggle, tied the emergence of a 'respectable' middle-class female subjectivity closely to the nation.[2] Professional and semi-professional occupations marked a new, comprador class under the British that functioned as an aspirational elite, comprised predominantly of English-educated, upper-caste Hindu men who were rooted in land revenue rather than business. This national bourgeoisie, finding itself disempowered and culturally critiqued as backward and uncivilized by the British, divided the nation into public and private domains. The public domain was the official world under British rule, while the private realm of the home was where the moral and spiritual values of the nation were protected. The upper-caste, upper-middle-class New Woman, who embodied those values, belonged to this domain. The nationalist elite enacted laws against child marriage, legalized widow remarriage, and promoted women's education to a limited extent.[3] The New Woman drew upon notions of bourgeois domesticity, ideals of Victorian womanhood, and a purified Vedic past in order to reinvent traditions for the project of national regeneration. She was to be educated and modern in order to be an appropriate wife for these elite men and contribute to the larger body

politic. However, unlike westernized women, she was also to remain chaste, pious, disciplined, modest, and unselfish. The New Woman stood for an imagined, unified India. The lower-class and lower-caste working woman was excluded from this ideal.

Given such a history, feminist scholars point out how each successful challenge to orthodox patriarchy by middle-class women has also strengthened the new nationalist patriarchy and the class/caste stratifications of Indian society. This ambivalence has led Jayawardena (1986) to pessimistically conclude that the nationalist struggle did not permit a revolutionary feminist consciousness in India. However, Sangari and Vaid (1989) argue that a feminist historiography recognizes that all aspects of reality are gendered and that gender differences are structured by the wide set of social relations: race, ethnicity, class/caste, nation, and sexuality. It is from within such challenges of feminist historiography that Mrinalini Sinha (1994) poses the problem of locating Indian womanhood and the politics of feminism in colonial India: the simultaneous proliferation of discourses about women and their surprising marginalization in these same discourses. By insisting on historicizing the identity of the Indian woman, we can begin to critique the implications of the resurgence of an essentialized and ahistorical identity, divorced from the political and economic contexts in which it is produced and which it helps sustain (Sinha 1994). In the same spirit, Durba Ghosh (2013) reveals how women revolutionaries became inscribed in nationalist historiography as New Women who, as ideal mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters, acted violently to resist British rule and whose radical violence, while not respectable, was deemed noble in support of the national project (Ghosh 2013, p. 356).

Consequently, various feminist scholars attribute to these nineteenth-century icons of the New Woman, the task of laying the foundation for future reforms through the twentieth century.[4] The women's movement evolved rather slowly at first, from the early twentieth century through 1947. For instance, the first all-India conference was held in the 1920s. By the 1970s and 1980s, it had splintered into rural and urban groups[5] which variously protested against child and alcohol abuse, sex slavery, rape, dowry, bride burning, atrocities against Dalit women, and lack of alimony for divorced Muslim women and upheld the need for equal inheritance laws

for Christian women, equal wages, maternity leave, and working women's hostels. These struggles were in solidarity with Dalits, peasants, landless labourers, and union workers. Women's studies burgeoned in colleges where feminist historians dismantled the Hindu nationalist narratives by uncovering other suppressed histories. Through the 1980s, women's organizations agitated for open, gender-sensitive democratic processes. The 1990s and 2000s provided contexts for neoliberal policies of market-led economic growth, the rise of a new and expanded middle class, and the increased destitution of the working poor. Icons of the New Woman, circulating once again a century after the colonial moment, become the means through which these tensions are negotiated.

The late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century icons of the New Woman are hybrid and even contradictory. Such a woman is often aggressive, confident, and urban. She fuses middle-class respectability with a professional career, Indian values with global citizenship. She is projected as possessing a pan-Indian identity. She is emancipated and yet heteronormative. She may indulge in illicit forms of sexuality but remains the guardian of the nation's morality; therefore, the discourse of the state renders invisible adultery, domestic violence, and forced marriages. She consumes newly available commodities and enjoys the benefits of economic liberalization. Not all working women have high salaries, however. Poor women are forced to work but are ignored by the emancipatory discourse of the neoliberal state, which upholds the middle-class New Woman as its prime beneficiary; the latter affirm the need for neoliberalism just as the nineteenth-century New Woman affirmed the need for empire.

Days of the Turban: Gulnari in the 1980s

The female character Gulnari in *Days of the Turban* is forced to commit suicide because her society is simply unable to pardon the many freedoms that she claims for herself. She is an educated, middle-class woman from a prosperous, rural Punjabi merchant family in the early 1980s.

She is first glimpsed in the novel trespassing outside the world of confining domesticity and into the larger world of Sikh militancy, clutching an apron filled with vegetables, to secretly conspire with Kumhareya, a

lower-caste Punjabi man, against the Indian government. In this deliberate camouflage, she is a player moulding social rules to enhance her freedom. She demands the same military training as her male colleagues. She is unafraid of being caught or imprisoned. Her actions bring her in conflict with the Indian state, which frames her as an anti-national. Her family are also jeopardized as suspects of harbouring anti-nationals. The Akali movement in the early 1980s accused the Indian government of internal colonization, underdevelopment, and exploitation of Punjab; hence, it demanded a separate state—Khalistan—that would embody and encapsulate the Sikh identity. This demand was repressed by the Indian government as terrorism, resulting in communal riots, the sacking of the Golden Temple, trauma, and migrations to the West. Gulnari's actions are set against this context.

She mixes freely with Kumhareya, whom she treats as a comrade. However, the villagers believe she is having premarital sex and condemn her for breaking caste laws. Instead of allowing her to pursue a career, her family wishes her to marry a Sikh living in the Canadian diaspora. She is presented as a Sikh woman caught between conventional social expectations and her own desires. Gulnari alternates between acquiescing, because 'Girls are brought up to marry by parental arrangement' (Sharma 1986, p. 58), and resisting marriage. Scholars point out the binding quality of lineage group exogamy and caste endogamy in North Indian male-dominated kinship systems (Clark 2016; Armstrong 2013; Chowdhry 2000; Niranjana 1997). Families cannot allow their children either to remain unmarried or to choose to marry outside the caste. Marriages give a kinship or caste group strength, identity, and advantage in the wider society and are often tied to the consolidation of land holdings, wages, and wealth. At the centre of these caste rules lies the need to control women's bodies, sexuality, and property inheritance rights. Those who infringe on caste boundaries meet intense violence. Gulnari bends social rules while seeming to follow them.

Gulnari's actions and choices contrast vividly to her beauty, liveliness, and physical prowess, which render her visible as a sexualized object. She is described in terms of colour, smell, and shape. Her clothes are blue, white, and pink. She has a light complexion with brown hair and eyes

like 'dancing peacocks, sometimes tabby cat grey' or 'coldly grey' (Sharma 1986, p. 55). Her fingers smell of mint and her body has the fragrance of talcum powder. Yet simultaneously with this conventional, sexualized evaluation of Gulnari in terms of beauty, Sharma, the author, painstakingly points out the differences. Gulnari is plump with a duck-like walk that Sharma assures us will not win a beauty contest. She is attractive because of her personality: her self-assurance, education, agile mind, and direct manner—qualities not traditionally associated with women. She is the New Woman of the 1980s, whose intelligence, unconventionality, and physical courage enrapture Kumhareya and Balbir, the two men framing her. The moment when Kumhareya first glimpses her, she 'seemed to freeze but without a camera' (Sharma 1986, p. 55) and then to Balbir she appears as a 'silhouette against the light that seemed to be held in the frame of the door' (ibid., p. 61). This positioning of Gulnari as a silent photograph, who functions as an empty signifier upon which meanings are placed by male lenses, provides an allegory for examining the interplay between gender and nationalism.

Gulnari crosses too many borders to be able to belong to her society. Her actions socially disgrace her family. Her father encourages her to commit suicide to safeguard the family's honour. She loses her mind before killing herself. Using the idea of the border as a method, her death forces a different reading of the nation. Gulnari is pathologized as the radical female presence that goes insane. The story of her death fits with the convention of honour killings and is melodramatized. It is narrated through Sharma's impersonal authorial commentary and is presented as a regrettable but inevitable outcome, especially in the title of the following chapter, 'A Way of Life and Death,' which normalizes the violence against her by presenting it as routine. Sharma seeks to contain Gulnari's radicalism by silencing her through death. His sympathetic yet conventional treatment of Gulnari through the realistic novel points to the way in which women have been notably rendered invisible in constructing a national community.[6] The visibility of women on the stage of politics in the 1980s challenged the story of India's emergence as a modern, developing nation-state by calling attention to the invisibility of women in the construction of that story.

Ladies Coupè: Akhila in the 1990s

In *Ladies Coupè* (Nair 2001), Akhila runs away from home in order to create opportunities for herself which were hitherto unavailable in her given context. She hails from a lower middle-class Brahmin family living in a small town in Tamil Nadu. Akhila's father, frustrated with his stagnant career, commits suicide when she is 19, and she has to work in order to support her family. Since she is somewhat educated, she passes the civil service examination to work as an income-tax clerk. It is in her capacity as the sole bread earner that she puts her siblings through school, settles their marriages, looks after her mother, and subsidizes any major family expense. Her work status brings mixed benefits. In most patriarchal societies, paid work outside the home has more value and enhances one's self-worth; however, poorly remunerated work devalues women's labour and increases their drudgery. Akhila's salary is meagre because as a woman she faces a glass ceiling at work and so feels unfulfilled by her situation there: 'She took the train to work every morning from Ambattur. Her job did not demand much from her; after all, she was just a clerk' (ibid., p. 78). In her domestic life she is liberated from undertaking domestic chores. Her family cannot really appreciate her individuality because she functions like a symbolic male head upon whom they place all their expectations: 'Akhila had become the man of the household. Someone who would chart and steer the course of the family's destiny to safe shores' (ibid., p. 76). However, Akhila is not a man and cannot enjoy the same freedoms, and so she faces a certain amount of erasure at work and at home:

> 'What Akhila missed the most was that no one ever called her by her name any more. Her brothers and sister had always called her Akka. Elder Sister. At work, her colleagues called her Madam. … So who was Akhilandeswari? Did she exist at all?' (ibid., p. 84)

Akhila represents an emergent group of economically active, middle-class women from small towns. In the 1990s—with the opening up of the Indian economy—such small towns represented a middle India where the gendered nature of labour markets restricted women's earning potential, controlled their labour, and constrained them from promoting their self-interests (Lahiri Dutta and Sil 2014; N. Rao 2014a). Such women

had the double burden of working at home in addition to their outside jobs; their daily routines were often a struggle.

The precarious nature of all gendered work, conditioned as it is by caste and class, is illustrated by Jaya, another character whose situation parallels Akhila's with some crucial differences. Like Akhila, Jaya comes from a middle-class Brahmin family; her father suffers a premature death, and she is forced into being the sole provider. Unlike Akhila, Jaya is not trained for any job and turns to sex work in order to sustain her family. Therefore, in the novel, upper-caste women who are ill-educated and economically deprived may be forced into the sex trafficking industry, which utilizes their labour while denigrating and violating them. Jaya has to face the daily violence and shame of sex work, while her family survives on her earnings. Women's bodies often bear violent marks of caste and national aspirations. Jaya, an upper-caste woman, cannot remain chaste, marry, or maintain her respectability while the Brahmin community revels in her family's loss of reputation and straitened circumstances:

> 'Even though they didn't live in an agragraham (Brahmin ghetto) the Brahmin community behaved as though they did. So Sarasa, her whore-daughter, her blind son, her soon-to-be whore daughters were excommunicated.' (ibid., p. 83)

Scholars like D'Cunha (1997) assert that the sex industry is extremely profitable due to the new forms of sexual needs triggered by migrant urban workers under capitalism, and so nation states collude with the sex industry in earning foreign exchange. The novel exposes the conspiracy of silence regarding sexuality. There is little discussion of the kind of men who hire Jaya's services. According to John and Nair (2000), patriarchies insist that women as reproductive beings cannot have sexual desire; therefore, sex workers are dangerous because their sexuality must be regulated. Her family, who pimp for her, regulate Jaya's sexual activities and earnings. She does not show sexual desire but only elicits it. In fact, upper-caste Hindu women are boundary markers of respectability; their bodies frame questions of tradition and modernity. As a respectable, traditional Brahmin woman, Akhila is expected to dress modestly, behave restrainedly, fulfil her obligations, follow caste rules, and eat vegetarian food: 'They lived quiet starched and ironed lives where there was no room for

chiffon like flourishes of feeling or heavy zari-lined silken excesses' (ibid., p. 78). She never marries nor does she date:

> 'Even then, Amma and her brothers never asked, "What about you? … Don't you want a husband, children, a home of your own?" … In their minds Akhila had ceased to be a woman and had already metamorphosed into a spinster.' (ibid., p. 77)

Akhila's repressed desires find an outlet when she meets Kathleen Harper, an Anglo-Indian colleague, who exposes her to the world of eating eggs, applying cosmetics, and wearing knee-length dresses. As a Christian, Kathleen is a cultural minority and exists far outside the parameters of Brahmanical norms; hence, she enjoys a certain amount of freedom and censure in equal measure as an inappropriate, loose woman:

> '"But you know what they say about Anglo-Indians. They eat beef and their flesh stinks. Both men and women smoke and drink. And they have no moral standards like us Hindus. …" Sarala [the Upper Division Clerk] said [to Akhila]' (ibid., p. 86)

However, Kathleen, who migrates to Australia, does not feel confined by such judgements. Akhila enjoys several moments of spontaneity with Kathleen whose irreverent joy is symbolic of everything Akhila's life is not. We learn that Akhila in her past had a boyfriend who was younger in age and from a different region. She refused to marry him because she was afraid of the social repercussions. Kathleen and Jaya act as foils in highlighting Akhila's structural limitations.

It is important for the reader to acknowledge Akhila's agency and empowerment despite the limitations of her context. However, such an exercise must take cognizance of restrictions in her freedom of movement, decision-making capacity, caste and class expectations, single status, age, small town location, and kinship support. The 1990s urban landscape in India witnessed the start of a globally dependent process of uneven development, a rapid downscaling of family solidarity, and insufficient employment (Clark 2016). This is the period of late capital, which exploits women by devaluing and erasing their labour, confining them to dreary domestic routines and menial positions at work (Vishvanathan 1997).

Akhila is embedded in unequal socio-economic interactions which reflect the weight of patriarchal judgement at all times. Having catered to these norms for most of her life, she rebels suddenly by taking an unexpected train ride in a ladies' coupe to Kanyakumari, the southernmost tip of India. A ladies' coupe is an enclosed space for women and an archaic reminder of Victorian attitudes towards respectability and the gendered division of a female-centric inner from a male-centric outer domain. It is in such a space that she meets other women who tell their stories by frequently interrupting her own. These stories function as testimonial accounts that intersect multiply to shape the novel. Globally, women have used the genre of the testimony to narrate their stories through the mediation of a translator and editor, whom they control in the act of storytelling. The novelist successfully uses this genre to position readers inside each character's thoughts and to provide the illusion of an unmediated intimacy. This positioning of readers proves to be useful in understanding Akhila's determination to please herself by taking a solitary holiday, checking into a hotel, and drifting on the beach. The train ride itself becomes a symbolic border crossing which readers undertake with Akhila as they contemplate the daily routines that stifle her. Using the idea of the border as a method, it is possible to understand Akhila's brand of radical protest. She breaks with her cultural conditioning to have a one-night stand with an unknown younger man. She leaves home with a one-way ticket giving her family no guarantees of return. She reaches out to her past lover to rekindle their relationship outside marriage. Did she leave her job? We do not know. Akhila is the New Woman in her role of debunking the false assurances of gender equality given by the neoliberal state. At this point, the novel rejects its grittily realistic narrative to help Akhila explore alternative possibilities that are unavailable within a realistic ending.

The Park Street Rape Case: Suzette in 2012

In February 2012, Suzette Jordan made the news headlines[7] when she was raped in Park Street, Kolkata. Suzette went to a nightclub at Park Hotel where she was supposed to meet a friend who was very late in keeping his appointment. After waiting for him for a few hours, she accepted

a ride home by a fellow club goer who gang raped her with his friends in a moving car and then threw her out. Suzette reported this crime but ran up against a deeply misogynist, patriarchal culture that blamed her for her tragedy. She was mocked and humiliated at her local police station, at the hospital by attending physicians, by her neighbours, in the media, and even by the female chief minister, Mamata Banerjee, who called her story fabricated. The female police officer—Damayanti Sen—who arrested three of the five rapists was demoted and transferred elsewhere. She was labelled a sex worker who was supposedly disgruntled at the payment she had received for services rendered: 'She had to defend allegations made by Trinamool Congress MP Kakuli Ghosh Dastidar that the rape was actually a "sex deal gone wrong"' (*The Hindu* 2015). Born into a lower middle-class Anglo-Indian family of schoolteachers, Jordan married after high school, had two daughters, and was divorced. She ran a call centre for a few years unsuccessfully. After her rape, Suzette became an activist and reached out to other rape survivors. The road to justice was long and gruelling, and Suzette did not live to see the process to the end, even though three of her assailants were eventually caught and convicted. Her story highlights signal issues concerning gender and the modern nation-state.

As an Anglo-Indian in Bengal, Suzette problematizes Bengali culture's secular self-image. As religious and cultural minorities, Anglo-Indians are often perceived as being poor, undereducated underachievers by the Bengali mainstream. Anglo-Indian women are often seen as westernized, promiscuous, disreputable, and lacking upper-caste Hindu family values. In postcolonial India, Anglo-Indians are often socio-economically vulnerable and politically underrepresented. All of these prejudices came into play in the public's reactions to Suzette's rape. She was characterized as a bad mother because she was divorced and had left two young daughters at home and gone to a bar in the late evening to meet a male friend. Mothers are not supposed to have a social life away from their families: 'Other ministers cast aspersions on her character, labelling her a prostitute and asking 'what kind of a mother would be out at the discotheque so late at night?' (Bhadoria 2014). She was perceived as promiscuous and so deserving of rape because she had accepted a car ride from unknown men. Some people labelled her a sex worker who was not raped but rather in disagreement with her clients over the transaction, the implication here being that sex workers cannot be raped. In short, Suzette, an Anglo-Indian

woman, was nothing like the iconic Vedic woman that has dominated the landscape since the late nineteenth century.

Suzette's rape instigated an energetic discussion about the endemic culture of violence against women. Scholars list the types of violence women endure: wife beating, female feticides, sexual harassment, rape, verbal abuse, suicide and self-mutilation, discrimination at work, neglect of ailments, and food denial.[8] They opine that unequal power relations within the family, as well as in state and institutional contexts—specifically, intercaste violence in defence of honour, personal vendettas, political unrest, and laws that ignore domestic violence and non-consensual sex—create a culture where most rapes go unreported, accused rapists are released, and women feel unsafe. A 1998 report by Saakshi (a Delhi-based NGO) corroborates these opinions through the attitudes of the judges it surveyed: that women need to preserve their families even if they suffer sexual violence at home, that women are partly responsible for their abuse, that provocative attire is an invitation to rape, and that rape victims are immoral. In such a context, to what extent is violence a part of the common grammar and performance of an unregenerate masculinity, these scholars ask. It is a context, they assert, where political parties have never hitherto prioritized women's issues in their election campaigns. In this context, women cannot move freely at any time and place or choose their friends or entertainment without repercussions.

Suzette's raped body became a public terrain on which discussions of shame and honour were conducted. Some of the scholars engaged in these discussions point out that, traditionally, a family's or community's honour has always rested on the control of women's bodies and sexuality.[9] In patriarchal societies, women who step out of their homes can be subjected to shaming, humiliation, and violence based upon an assumption that violence is an inevitable outcome of women's illegitimate desire for freedom and equality. The prevalence of shame culture is both countered and perpetuated by the television media, a fact that came to the forefront with media coverage of Suzette's rape:

> '"I am tired of hiding my real identity. I am tired of this society's rules and regulations. I am tired of being made to feel ashamed. I am tired of feeling scared because I have been raped. Enough is enough … My name is Suzette Jordan and I don't want to be known any longer as the victim of Calcutta's Park Street rape."' (Anon 2015)

These scholars note, however, that the collective struggles women fought through the 1980s and 1990s challenge such assumptions. Consequently, the meaning of honour changes to belong to women independently. Women who move freely in public have the right to protect themselves. At home they have the right to resist domestic violence and question the gendered division of labour that leaves them little leisure time and restricts their participation in political activity. These scholars argue that legal protections against violence may strengthen these struggles in rewriting the meaning of honour and shame.

Suzette's situation has also focused scrutiny on media coverage of rape and the legal system. Historically in India, the media has often commoditized women as objects of desire. Since the 1990s, the media has exploded with approximately 40 international and domestic cable channels, much of which are privately owned. Despite these changes, rape coverage remains gender insensitive, complain certain scholars:[10]

> '… Indian media organisations are in urgent need of a crash-course on how to report cases of rape, sexual assault and other incidents of gender-based violence... It is not uncommon for an implicit narrative of victim blaming to make its way into news reports.' (Khullar 2017)

Rape news is descriptive, visual, sensationalized, and normalized with television narrowly focusing on violence against urban, middle-class, upper-caste women and ignoring poor, marginalized women, they elaborate. In addition, these scholars suspect such media of misleading women into believing in their own advancement despite evidence to the contrary; in promoting consumerism, competition, and individualism, it discourages women from collective activism to eradicate inequality. These media strategies enhance the neoliberal rhetoric of female empowerment in structural adjustment policies, they opine. However, these critiques of the media are enlightening precisely because these are published in the media. Other media controversies on the law and gender violence are similarly enlightening. For instance, media demands that the paternalistic state protects women from violence through better policing of the streets, quicker conviction of rapists, reform of rape law, and favouring the death penalty over a 14-year life sentence focus our attention on the legal system. They also

cause scholarly disagreements about whether or not legal reforms against violence encourage women to enact victimhood in exchange for entitlements or if state officials are involving women in the daily work of governance to create new possibilities for gendered citizenship.

Suzette Jordan represents a new breed of middle-class and lower-middle-class Indian women who work in offices, commute on trains or buses, or shop in cafes and malls to claim public spaces—claims made possible by new opportunities for employment, mobility, and leisure in the early twenty-first century. Yet, as Suzette's rape testifies, these freedoms are contested by pre-existing misogynistic cultures of violence:

> 'Suzette Jordan … has alleged that a popular city restaurant denied her entry. The reason? The restaurant owner said he could not let her in because she was the 'Park Street rape victim'. … Restaurant manager Dipten Banerjee claimed, "She's a regular customer who had earlier come with different men and created ruckus in a drunken state. … Hence, I restricted her entry."' (Bhadoria 2014)

Suzette challenged this culture in many ways. She refused to accept any blame for going to a nightclub, leaving her daughters at home, accepting a ride from strangers, or being raped. She refused to be shamed into hiding her identity from the public. She insisted that the police and the government honour her in acknowledging the injustice of her rape:

> '"Why should I hide my identity when it was not even my fault? Why should I be ashamed of something that I did not give rise to? I was subjected to brutality, I was subjected to torture, and I was subjected to rape, and I am fighting and I will fight," she said at the time.' (Banerjie 2015)

She reached out to anti-rape activists and other rape victims to spread awareness and express solidarity. Her support base swelled to include all communities within Bengal and forced the police, law courts, and government to apprehend the rapists and convict them. In all of these ways, Suzette is the New Woman who crosses many borders to define what the relations should be between gender and the nation: 'She used a horrific, traumatic crime to emerge as a spokesperson of sorts for the larger issue of violence against women' (Bhandare 2015). In fact, the car in which she

was raped represented a border crossing after which her life changed. Suzette's life ended, but her actions after her rape started a movement that was to grow with the December 2012 rape of Nirbhaya in Delhi. It sparked national and international debates on the sexism in India, and consequently laws were changed to address gender violence. Such debates reveal new possibilities of a civil society that is geographically unbound and gender aware.[11]

Conclusion: Violence and the Female Body

The women in these stories—Gulnari, Akhila, Jaya, Kathleen, Suzette—present differing female experiences of oppression in the past three decades, during which India was transforming from a social welfare to a neoliberal state. They reveal a contemporary India beset by a corrupt, inefficient bureaucracy, rapidly dissolving rural-based economies, insecure social relations, and unstable markets. How can the precarious conditions of neoliberalism be read as having gendered consequences at the level of both violence and resistance, asks Atluri (2013). The fictional characters and media persona encourage readers to think of gender as an asymmetrical, hierarchical system. They remind us that gender-based violence arises from this system, that the concept of 'woman' is unstable as a universal category, and that eliminating gender-based violence requires a questioning of the gender system itself.

Such a questioning must take into account how confining women to unpaid and underpaid domestic labour is central to class formation because it can produce surplus value, assist in capital accumulation, and subsidize wage labour, Sangari (2000) reminds us. All patriarchal ideologies exploit personal relationships by idealizing the roles of wife, mother, daughter, and daughter-in-law, into which domestic labour services are packaged and cannot be measured in time and money. Capitalism pretends to liberate women but needs to subjugate them because it operates through patriarchies.

Gulnari, Akhila, and Suzette are national flashpoints revealing the ambivalent nexus of politics and violence. Using the border as a method is important in unpacking the cognitive and conceptual hierarchies of neoliberal capital, which informs the social structures that these women

inhabit, are exploited by, and resist. The methods by which they resist, make choices, and create possibilities cause them to redefine the colonial and neoliberal icons of the New Woman.

Notes

1. I am using the term 'speech-act' in a specific way. As part of a theory introduced by J.L. Austin and developed by J.R. Searle, it is concerned with the ways in which words are used to present information as well as carry out actions. It privileges external over internal contexts of utterances. Applied to fictional and news stories, statements made by characters, narrators, and the author express the socio-political agendas of their contexts. These texts then 'act' within their contexts to reveal relations between gender and nationalism.
2. See Partha Chatterjee (1989), Uma Chakravarti (1989), Dipesh Chakbrabarty (1994), Sangari and Vaid (1989), Indira Chowdhury (2001).
3. By the late 1880s, a few women started graduating from universities and medical schools. These numbers increased very slowly through the first half of the twentieth century. Alice Clark (2016) refers to the 1961 Census to point out that 14 years after Indian independence, only 2.9 per cent of urban women were educated to matriculate level or above, a category which totalled 1.02 million. The distribution of urban women workers who were matriculates and above working in services was 85.44 per cent.
4. See Ray (1999), Uma Chakravarti (2005), Jain (2005), Armstrong (2013), Phillips (2015), Dhawan (2010), Bhatt et al. (2010), Wilson (2015), Agnihotri and Mazumdar (2005), Sen (2005).
5. For example, Nav Nirman in Gujarat, Chatra Yuva Sangarssh in Bihar, the Chipko Movement in Uttarakhand, and the Kerala Fishworker's Movement focused dominantly on gender. Women visibly participated in the General Railway Strike of 1974, Bombay Textile Strike of 1981, and the APIKO movement of Karnataka.
6. Sharma's treatment of Gulnari must be read against the advances and retreats on gender issues through the 1970s and 1980s. For instance, in 1979–80, the Mathura rape case sparked widespread national protests that forced crucial changes in the Evidence Act, Criminal Procedure Code, and the Indian Penal Code. However, in 1986 the Muslim Women's Act deprived divorced Muslim women of alimony. In 1987, Roop Kanwar was burnt to death on her husband's funeral pyre, in an act

of sati despite its illegal status. Behind this act were contentious property disputes between Kanwar and her in-laws.

7. I am referring to news coverage by standard English language dailies like *The Times of India*, *The Statesman*, *Hindustan Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The Hindu*, and *Live Mint*, the *BBC*, and many others. Suzette's story has been culled from such coverage.
8. See Mala Khullar (2005), S. Rao (2014b), Geetha (2000), Narayana (2015), Clark (2016), Lotika Sarkar (1987).
9. See K. Wilson (2015), Roychoudhury (2015).
10. See S. Rao (2014b), Ganguly-Scrase (2003), Narayana (2015), Oza (2006).
11. I lean on Dattatreyan's (2015) analysis of how rap musician Hard Kaur creates, through her image as an assertive, strong, and humorous Desi woman, a globally diffuse national community—involving youth in India and in the UK, Canada, and USA—who are also inspired to assert these values.

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Made in Bangladesh: The Romance of the New Woman

Elora Halim Chowdhury

Introduction

This essay is inspired by the predicament of women's oppression and liberation in the Global South. Transnational media outlets and advocacy organisations frequently dichotomise these phenomena and interpret them as mutually exclusive rather than in complex conversation with one another. Within a capitalist and neocolonial reality, oppression and liberation are only legible if they are portrayed as separate entities rather than overlapping processes that interact in dynamic ways. As a scholar of transnational feminism whose work focuses on South Asia, I am often asked to comment on the 'backwards' and misogynistic cultures of the region as well as the so-called social and economic 'progress' it has made through neoliberal schemes like microfinance, NGO advocacy, and the ready-made garment industry. Within this framing, it is clear that progress is a linear process and that individual self-empowerment is the vehicle in which this is achieved.

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On the one hand, 'women,' understood as a homogeneous group, are perceived to suffer at the hands of patriarchal culture and religion and who are unable to help themselves, yet on the other they are portrayed as emergent 'new women' who are autonomous consumers and modern citizens. Their 'newness' however is defined within expedient frameworks of corporate globalisation, modernity, and consumption. Lost within this false dichotomy are the complexities of gender relations and socio-economic transformations as well as of women's varied subjugation, social mobility, and engagement within labour, kin, and community groups.

Dichotomous representations of womanhood are discernable in the social and cultural discourses of women's emancipation in Bangladesh. In recent decades, Bangladesh is witnessing a shift in the representations of ideal womanhood from the earlier anticolonialist and nationalist era when the middle-class woman was considered the epitome of spirituality, domesticity, and the non-Western core of an authentic Indian culture (Chatterjee 1989, p. 240–43). This chapter explores and analyses constructions of 'new womanhood' in the context of consumption, globalisation, and modernity within contemporary Bangladesh. I look at visual and literary representations of the 'new woman' across genres of photography, film, fiction, and ad campaigns in order to engage an analysis of the sociocultural issues they depict, specifically the changing notions of gender oppression and emancipation within the context of neoliberal and capitalist development.

The social construction of the identity of the new woman in colonial and post-colonial Bengal has been the subject of feminist theorising for some time. Partha Chatterjee has noted the ideal woman in the nationalist context was constructed as an elite woman (bhadramahila) in stark contrast to both the uneducated, downtrodden, and backward women of South Asia's poorer classes and her sexually liberated, modern, and amoral Western counterparts (Chatterjee 1989). A variation of the Victorian new woman of England, the ideal nationalist woman's counterpart in colonial and post-colonial Bengal and post-independent Bangladesh, has had diverse applicability across the domains of class and the rural-urban divide. Sonia Nishat Amin refers to the 'new woman' in the context of Bengal as 'layered,' 'a composite of many women,' and 'elusive' (Amin 1994, p. 137–40). At first blush, it appears that the empowered 'new woman' of

the Global South is a break from colonial rescue narratives and that she in fact represents an anticolonial and nationalist alternative to the downtrodden female of the developing world. However, contemporary constructions of the new woman are very much shaped by discourses of development and modernisation, processes that rely on the logic of neocolonial capitalism.

Utilising narratives of 'women's uplift' and emancipation as the benchmark of progress, native/local women are put in the contradictory positions of both the downtrodden/victim and the modern/autonomous citizen subject. These competing constructions of the new woman serve larger progress narratives of both the nation and Western imperialism. They replicate the victim-saviour trope of colonial feminism by assigning agency to the emancipated local woman (as the autonomous self-reliant worker) while simultaneously representing her as merely the victim of patriarchal culture or modernisation schemes. These multiple, composite, and distinct figures are co-constituted yet emerge as competing representations of the contemporary new woman.

These contradictions came to a head for me in the spring of 2016, when I gave a lecture on the occasion of International Women's Week at a private liberal arts college in the Midwest. My lecture was titled, 'Power and (in)visibility: Mapping transnational trajectories of suffering, violence and agency.' I talked about discourses of women's empowerment in the backdrop of neoliberal development and structural violence in Bangladesh. After my talk, a young woman of colour, a Women and Gender Studies major, approached me and expressed her discomfort with a visual I had shared as part of my presentation—an image taken by Bangladeshi activist Taslima Akhter of a man and a woman in a 'death embrace' in the rubble of the garment factories of Rana Plaza.[1] This student felt the image might be perpetuating the overexposure of bodies of colour in reference to suffering and trauma in the Global South. In this chapter, I want to reflect upon the question of women's liberation and how it converges with the neoliberal discourses of 'new woman' yet obscuring its violent subtext. Furthermore, I want to probe our ethical, political, and pedagogical commitments to feminist advocacy in instances where we speak of violence *done* to bodies of colour in contexts where such bodies are unintelligible or expendable within the frequently celebrated new woman paradigm.

This question is an ethical one in a context when visual images of trauma of black and brown bodies are often casually reproduced and circulated, resulting in a pedestrian consumption of violence. These images are routinised to the point that they are interpreted as the logical status quo of certain communities and locales. Akhter's photograph challenges this narrative of gratuitous third-world suffering and women's victimisation at the hand of patriarchal familial and cultural norms by drawing attention to the violent subtext of 'women's agency and empowerment' as it pertains to poor, racialised, and gendered workers in the third world. Alongside the spectacular, *Death of a Thousand Dreams* also conveys the gendered corporatisation of violence in factory work while simultaneously invoking the dual connectivity and struggle of male and female precarity in the contemporary capitalist stage. In capturing a tenderness in the midst of devastating circumstances, the image calcifies Rana Plaza as an event of spectacular suffering while also illuminating the precarious daily struggle of populations living on the fringes of the myth of neoliberal progress.

This myth of the neoliberal emancipation of women, as evidenced by the image on the Prothom Alo billboard poster to which I will turn later in this chapter, suggests that women workers are the backbone of the nation and its economy, and thus they are reciprocally empowered and autonomous citizens, dependent of course to their willingness to enter and participate in the labour force. The photograph, however, is a challenge to such a simplistic and instrumentalising narrative as it questions corporate and global patriarchy alongside familial and kin relationships. Indeed, it illuminates the composite 'new woman' through the paradox of this celebration and suffering and pushes us—viewers, readers, consumers—to think about whom/what the highly selective narrative of the 'new woman' enables.

My intent in that presentation was to tease out the contradictions embedded within the neoliberal framing of economic development and to challenge the discourse of self-empowerment through waged labour. In many ways, the so-called new woman is a paradox. She is both autonomous, self-reliant, and economically productive while simultaneously oppressed, menial, and 'third world.' This externally imposed, bifurcated identity was brought into sharp relief by the Rana Plaza industrial disaster in Bangladesh. To disentangle the relationship between globalisation,

patriarchy, capitalist development, and human suffering, I will engage contemporary visual and literary sources including photographs, ad campaigns, film, and short stories inspired by the Rana Plaza tragedy.

In a recent article, feminist scholar Dina Siddiqi demonstrates how dominant framings of violence in the third world simultaneously magnify and obscure certain stories, obfuscating the complexities of gendered subjugation and nonnormative expressions of agency and desire (Siddiqi 2015a). Siddiqi asks the questions: 'What counts as a feminist injury, for whom and under what conditions? Why do certain forms of violence generate more outrage than others? Under what conditions is the feminist gaze scandalised and what does this imply for the politics of seeing (and not seeing)? In the process, and perhaps most critically, what is obscured and what is magnified about the social and political worlds in which violence against women takes place?' (2015a, p. 509). Following the logic of these important questions, the feminist student's ethical question has prompted me to unpack the 'new woman' discourse and its various occlusions and magnifications in transnational media and advocacy circuits.

The Death of a Thousand Dreams

No other image, has captured the gravity of the Rana Plaza disaster as powerfully as Taslima Akhter's photograph *The Death of a Thousand Dreams*,[2] which was named the most haunting depiction of the tragedy by the photo editors of *TIME*. The photograph shows a man and a woman in an embrace in the last moment of their lives. We know neither who they are nor whether the couple shared a relationship outside of their death embrace. Perhaps they sought comfort in their last moments, feeling a profound connection to each other, humanity, and the divine as the plaster, steel, and concrete came crashing down on them like a deck of cards.

In depicting physical contact between a young man and a woman in an ostensibly 'public' embrace, the image defies many social and cultural norms. The enormity of what was about to happen perhaps made those considerations for modesty, shame, and honour immaterial. The man is seen to be covering the woman's torso in a protective embrace even as his own trauma is signified by blood—resembling a tear—trickling down from the corner of his closed left eye. While not minimising the reality of

male violence against women, I'd like to propose that this photo poses a visual challenge to Western feminist narratives of the 'downtrodden third-world female' and her 'violent and oppressive' male counterpart. It expands our understanding of women's oppression beyond the lens of 'male violence' to one of structural violence and offers a visual schema that encourages an analytic of connectivity, intersectional and relational gender dynamics.

Laxmi Murthy (2014) likens visual media attention to 'spectacular violence' occurring in third-world contexts to those occurring historically in the American South. The juxtaposition of these two contexts, one contemporary and in geographical regions outside of the United States, and the other historical and concerning racialised minorities within the United States, illuminates for us not only a continuity but also the propensity of systemic racism in the media. Viewers of such images become accustomed and anaesthetised to the complex and lasting implications that these depictions of violence have on the subjects that they portray. This is especially true in the way that the mass media portrays violence against women of colour. Reporting is frequently stylised and sensationalised, objectifying the subject in a way that erases her humanity and individuality.

Courtney Baker has similarly commented on the more recent overcirculation of images of black suffering, particularly in relationship to police killings of black youth and men in the United States, which are frequently portrayed without explanation or empathy. The lack of context and messaging is what differentiates this type of violent imagery from previous decades when African American activists would print explicit images of lynching in order to illustrate the systematic oppression of blacks in America. The circulation of gratuitous brutality was an advocacy tool in the hands of the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) because they used them to shake the consciousness of the American people rather than sate a pornographic desire to be shocked and titillated (Baker 2016). In taking ownership of these images, black civil-rights activists took control away from the white perpetrators of violence.

The repeated looping of acts of violence and their outcomes tends to produce a numbing effect or a 'normalisation' of the most bizarre forms of brutality. That is, the violence is seen as both exceptional—belonging

to the realm of the Other—and exotic, existing only and logically in the realm of the Other. The lack of personal details, no face or name yet the exquisite attention to personal details outlining the brutalities unleashed on to the bodies of the Other help to strengthen insensitivity and alternately create a pattern. I think the student's question was motivated by this dual tension where the violence is normalised and exoticised at the same time.

Violence against women from poor and marginalised backgrounds both enthrals and fascinates while simultaneously appearing to be in the routinised distance of the 'Other.' Yet, can these horrifying images which objectify the human body also have a transformative effect? Murthy and Baker both point to how the professional photographs of each stage of the lynching of Jesse Washington, a young African American farmhand, in 1916, were printed and sold as postcards in Waco, Texas. While these photos were first sold as souvenirs, they were later used to bring attention to the horrific practice of lynching. In the hands of social justice activists, these images served to jolt the American public out of their stupor and awaken them to the violent racism of their country.

In this vein, *Death of a Thousand Dreams* encourages us to see the global oppression of racialised and gendered workers within capitalist and neoliberal regimes where women are not categorically perceived as 'empowered' or abject victims, nor men as their intimate oppressors. The dead bodies of male and female worker raise the question of racialised and gendered labour in the context of neoliberal capitalist globalisation of political economy. *The Death of Thousand Dreams* draws our attention to the structural inequality of globalisation, colonial relations between supplier and buyer nations, corporate greed, corrupt state machinery, and disregard for poor workers, both, male and female, in each tier. These various power structures contribute to the exposure of certain populations in the Global South to extreme violence and suffering. The image also illuminates kin, communal, and human connection in that moment of final embrace—that is at the base of all of our existence. At the very least, it urges us to rethink some of the outdated, tired, and prejudicial paradigms that continue to limit the scope of our understanding and inspiration to practise more egalitarian, just, dignified, and humane interactions with one another.

Judith Butler's conceptualisation of precarity is useful in illuminating the complexity of the condition of vulnerabilities of garment workers: 'As a concept, precarity draws attention to the lived conditions, structured nature, and relational aspects of systemic inequality. Focusing on diverse forms of violence, inequality, and harm pervading contemporary life, precarity names a 'politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death' (Butler 2009, 25). Interrogating precarity as an embodied, political, affective, economic, ideological, temporal, and structural condition can thus illuminate how inequality is constructed and regulated. Akhter's photograph and the context in which it appeared—the immediate aftermath of the devastating Rana Plaza factory collapse—illuminates the gendered precarity of male and female workers, their complex struggles, and vulnerabilities.

Drawing from research conducted by the International Migrants Alliance Research Foundation, Rubayat Ahsan puts the precarity of factory workers in the new global economy in stark relief. He notes that: 834 Bangladeshi labour migrants, including 32 women workers died in the first four months of 2009. The majority of Bangladeshi deaths occurred in Saudi Arabia where 254 workers perished, followed by 157 deaths in Malaysia, 100 in Dubai, 55 in Kuwait, 34 in Oman, 24 in Abu Dhabi, and 21 in Qatar. Cardiac failure is cited as the most common cause of death, which is quite surprising given the young ages of the victims, usually ranging from 30 to 45 years. A study from International Centre for Diarrhoeal Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR, B), in association with International Organisation for Migration (IOM) revealed that only 14 per cent of male Bangladeshi migrant workers get medical assistance from their employers, although 70 per cent of them have health problems. A majority of the migrants are between 28 and 47 years of age, and almost half of them suffer from a variety of mental health problems, while about 60 per cent experience some form of workplace injury (Ahsan 2010).

In a parallel context within Bangladesh, 64 workers were killed in the Spectrum Factory collapse in 2005, 29 killed in That's It Sportswear factory fire in 2010, Tazreen factory fire killed 112 in 2012, Aswad factory fire killed 10 in 2013. Given the massive numbers of women workers in the garment industry, most of these deaths were of female employees.

These shocking statistics show the ways in which capitalist economies continue to exploit newer forms of indentured labour. These numbers tell the story of the precarious conditions and vulnerabilities of male and female workers and the consequent gender-differentiated stories about their struggles and deaths that circulate in transnational media and advocacy circuits.

Under Construction

Bangladeshi feminist film director Rubaiyat Hossain's second film, *Under Construction* is a modern adaptation of Rabindranath Tagore's play, *Red Oleander* (Rokto Korobi). Written in the 1920s, *Red Oleander* offered a trenchant critique of industrialisation, capitalism, and the isolation wrought on human lives by such processes. *Red Oleander* has also been celebrated for depicting its protagonist Nandini as a freedom-seeking woman who defies the oppressive capitalist forces that turn human beings to robot-like conformists. Tagore's depiction of wilful women in various novellas and plays who negotiate constraints of patriarchy, colonialism, nationalism, and poverty is well situated within the literature on new women.

Set in contemporary Bangladesh, Hossain's film traces a comparable mechanisation and modernisation of social relations and the paradoxical roles they inspire yet reify for women across class divides. The film takes place in a city in transition and under construction. These themes parallel the fluctuating identities of the film's 'new woman' protagonists. Moyna, a domestic worker, toils in the domestic space and later in the film, when she takes a job at the garment factory floor to create a life of dignity and integrity for herself. Roya, Moyna's employer, pushes against the constraints of patriarchal expectations of middle-class femininity that threaten to stifle her independent aspirations. Her mother, economically self-sufficient, pines for her husband who left her for an actress and finds solace in religion. The protagonist Roya is at once critical of her mother's yearning for her husband and Moyna's desire for her own *shongshar* (household). She is the modern adaptation of Tagore's wilful heroine 'trapped' within the expectations of marriage and motherhood and striving to define a new and autonomous self.

Filmmaker Rubaiyat Hossain portrays the construction-in-process of the composite new woman, and the limits and possibilities of intimacy and hierarchy between women of different classes in urban Bangladesh. Roya is married to Sameer, a successful and exacting architect. While he provides a comfortable life for Roya who is able to pursue her aspirations for a writing, acting, and directing career without having to worry about financial comfort, she feels the intense judgement of her husband and mother who would rather that she 'settles down' with a baby. Roya's best friend also juggles the dual pulls of career and motherhood and tells her in no uncertain terms that 'motherhood is the best.' Lonely and unsupported in her plight, Roya's only and unwavering support and confidant is her maid, Moyna.

Moyna tends to Roya's needs in the domestic and emotional realms, where the latter provides her with a job and loving care. She wants Moyna to focus on her studies and extricate herself from her 'traditional' desires and beliefs around domesticity and romance. Moyna tells Roya a story about a girl who is destined to take a snake as her husband because it has tainted her with its bite. The girl had nurtured the snake in her own bed and fed it her own breast milk. This snake story is an important metaphor for the modern woman's predicament. The snake of tradition and domesticity that Roya suggests has wrapped Moyna in its coils—the snake that she is bitten by, whose poison fills her veins, and who she is driven to nurture as her adopted child. The idea that snakes drink milk is a common traditional belief in Bengali culture where proverbs such as 'nurturing snakes with milk and bananas' (*dudh kola diye shap posha*) are evoked to attest to the deceptive nature of snakes and in this context of domesticity, security, and patriarchy.

Moyna is seduced by the idea of love and *shongshar* as depicted in Bollywood films. When she becomes pregnant by Shobuj, the handyman of the apartment complex, Roya is furious and uncompromisingly harsh towards the couple. She slaps Shobuj across the face and asks Moyna how can she expect to be cared for by someone who operates a lift and collects trash? Moyna responds that she does not want to remain a servant for all of her life and chooses to go with Shobuj to make her own home. 'Your dinner is in the fridge' is her parting comment to Roya. Unlike Tagore's Rokto Korobi, where the oppressor is the evil patriarch King, Hossain's

adaptation presents a more complex web of patriarchy: that of middle class to working class, domestic to corporate, religious to cultural.

When Roya visits the couple in their one-room home in the slum bearing gifts of gold jewellery, Moyna is appreciative but honest about the impracticality of the gift. She cannot keep it in her home as her husband might be displeased. Roya is distressed at Moyna's living quarters when she hears the screams of domestic abuse from the couple in the adjacent rooms. She insists that Moyna 'come back to her' and the younger woman replies, 'I can never be like you.' In the next visit, Roya takes silver anklets for Moyna. Moyna's life inspires Roya to stage the modern adaptation of Tagore's *Red Oleander* in the garment factory shop floor. The protagonist, Nandini, is the pregnant worker who is distraught by the creation of the globalised, automated workforce by capitalist development and wants a different life possibility for her unborn child. The unborn child is Ranjan—not Nandini's love interest but her offspring—'a life full of possibilities.' It is the vision of humanity that drives Nandini. Out of the rubble of Rana Plaza, the modern interpretation of Red Oleander emerges, a story of human possibility and humanity—even as it is an appropriation by Roya of her maid's life story and choices. Perhaps, it is the final abstraction, which at once springs Roya to her autonomous self (her husband leaves, and she chooses to not accompany her mother for her medical treatment to London), and Moyna's life in the factory is given meaning.

In their 2009 study, Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum posit that Kolkata's culture of servitude is based upon three suppositions: firstly that servants are necessary to run a good household; secondly that servants are 'part of the family' and attached to the family by affective bonds of loyalty, affection, and dependence; and thirdly servants make up a distinct category with their own distinctive lifestyles, desires, and habits (2009, p. 172). They argue that 'these premises particularise and enact a culture of servitude that we have defined as one in which domination/subordination, dependency, and inequality are normalised and permeate both the public and domestic spheres' (2009, p. 172). Domestic servitude here is seen in conjunction to, and enabling of, its public integration of structural inequalities and difference of gender, class, and race/ethnicity in a global context.

Moyna and Roya share affective bonds and are co-dependent. The former reminds her employer that her dinner has been prepared even as she is getting ready to walk out of her job with her lover. The latter talks about her loneliness since Moyna's departure from her life. Yet their relationship is bound by a racialised, class-based, and gendered domination and subordination that leads Moyna from the space of the domestic to the factory, from the community to that of national and global inequality. Roya is the younger and more modern woman who tries to break away from a culture of servitude rooted in a feudal past, while concurrently struggling with the social demands of traditional womanhood (motherhood, domesticity). Moyna makes claims of her own rights and desires to her own *shongshar* (household) free of dependency and servitude to Roya. These demands are incommensurable with the grammar of neoliberalism, which thrives on the binary of the autonomous versus the oppressed woman.

Garments

Yet another depiction of women garment workers inspired by the tragedy at Rana Plaza is Tahmima Anam's award-winning short story, 'Garments' (2016). Anam notes, 'Garments was born out of that terrible tragedy, but when I went to write the story, it became centered on female friendship among three factory workers and their attempt to find security, love, and humor amid the brutal realities of their lives' (Diaz 2016, p. 293). Unlike cross-class bonding, Garments is the story of the alliance among three factory workers as they negotiate poverty, patriarchy, and capitalism. Mala, one of the characters in the story, is a 'broken' worker with an injured leg from the Rana strike. '… Mala's brother died in Rana. That Mala had held up his photo for seven weeks, hoping he would come out from under the cement. That she was at the strike, shouting her brother's name. That her mother kept writing from the village asking for money, so Mala had to turn around and go back to the line' (2016, p. 25). Jesmin, another worker, left her village in shame and dishonour when after having been molested by her teacher, a married man, she was subsequently sent to the punishing hut by the village elders. The irony here is noteworthy of course where the woman is punished for a man's transgression. She left

the village for Dhaka in search of work. Her mother told her in desperation, 'Go, go, she said. I don't want to see you again. Jesmin left without looking back, knowing that, once, her mother had another dream for her, that she would marry and be treated like a queen, that all the village would tell her what a good forehead she had. But that was before Amin, before the punishing hut' (2016, p. 23). In South Asian culture, having a good forehead alludes to having a good fortune or luck. The third character Ruby has three younger sisters she provides for in her home village of Northern Bangladesh. The three women hatch a plan to marry the same man, Dulal, whom they see as providing a remedy to each in negotiating their problems in the city.

Anam's story is a powerful antidote to the progress narrative of women's emancipation as seen through a neoliberal lens. Anam, in her powerful and nuanced prose, shines a light on the vulnerability of women, the sacrifices they make, and the impossible choices they face in light of familial, kin, and social obligations. She also illustrates the social transformations that are afforded, even if unwittingly and minimally, as women negotiate the city, the streets, the factory, and the complex landscapes of subjugation and desire. Anam writes about the presence of garment workers flooding the city streets, 'Walking home as she did every evening with all the other factory workers, a line two girls thick and a mile long, snaking out of Tongi and all the way to Uttara, she spots a new girl. Sometimes Jesmin looks in front and behind her at that line, all the ribbons flapping and the song of sandals on the pavement, and she feels a swell in her chest' (2016, p. 23). The sheer numbers of women on the streets, their visibility among the city's chaotic life, and their navigation of its risks, attractions, and hardships become evident in Jesmin's sweeping front to back gaze, hinting at women's claiming of agency, autonomy, and new subjectivity—however small, embattled, and dangerous. That small claiming of space too is a facet of the new womanhood even if overly celebrated in neoliberal discourse and always as a linear progression from oppression to empowerment. Anam's story on the other hand is a nuanced rendition of women's struggle and survival amidst the harsh oppressive structures of city life, labour conditions, and patriarchy. The author uses the protagonist's claiming of the cityscape through both her individual participation in the line on the street and the sweep of her

silent gaze over the snaking line of women on the street to encapsulate a claim to a 'new subjectivity'; but also this participation is a women's 'movement' towards claims of agency and autonomy. The tension between the individual participant and the community of women is key, even if that claiming of city space is tentative, even if it is ultimately illusory.

In the story,

> 'Jesmin sees marriage as a remedy. If you are a girl you have many problems, but all of them can be fixed if you have a husband. In the factory, if Jamal puts you in ironing, which is the easiest job, or if he says, take a few extra minutes for lunch, you can finish after hours and get overtime, you can say, but my husband is waiting, and then you won't have to feel his breath like a spider on your shoulder later that night when the current goes out and you're still in the factory finishing up a sleeve. Everything is better if you're married (2016, p. 26).'

As a single woman, landlords will not rent to Jesmin, and Ruby had to commute two to three hours every morning from her village to make it to the factory, thus 'Jesmin decides it won't be so bad to share a husband. She does not have dreams of a love marriage, and if they have to divide the sex that's fine with her, and if he wants something, like he wants his rice the way his mother makes it, maybe one of them will know how to do it (2016, p. 23).' When the ruse behind the arrangement comes undone, and it is revealed that in fact Mala paid Dulal to marry her and hatched the plot for him to marry three women, and she had to arrange for two more girls for him as a 'solution' for his impotence, Jesmin comes to the realisation, '…there's nothing to be done now but try and fix Dulal's problem, because now that they were married to him, his bad was their bad (2016, p. 30).'

The three women share their impotent husband and form a tight alliance as they encounter the harsh realities of the factory and the city. They share a laugh about the garments they stitch for the foreign ladies, keep each other warm under the blanket during the cold winter nights, and share the melted chocolate ice cream bar that they had used as an ice pack for Jesmin after Dulal had hit her. The illusion of security that comes from their marriage to Dulal gives them the legitimacy to be in the city and working in a factory. Jesmin is 'no longer the girl from the punishing hut,

but a garments girl with a room and a closed-up body that belongs only to herself' (2016, p. 33). This is preferable because Jesmin understands from Mala's plight (of losing her brother at Rana), 'that once you die like that, on the street or in the factory, your life isn't your life anymore' (2016, p. 24). The elusive security provided by the familial patriarchy enables women to occupy—but not own—the public spaces of the city and the factory.

Since the proliferation of garment factories in Savar and Tongi, the steady stream of women workers flooding the cities of Dhaka has inspired and reaffirmed the stories of female autonomy and empowerment. Garment workers are referred to as the 'golden girls' replacing the 'golden fibre,' jute, from earlier decades, as the premier foreign currency earner for the nation (Siddiqi 2015b). 'Sometimes Jesmin looks in front and behind her at that line, all the ribbons flapping and the song of sandals on the pavement, and she feels a swell in her chest.' This euphoric sentiment is also expressed in the nationalistic campaign by the Bengali language national daily newspaper, Prothom Alo, which inscribes ideas of national progress onto the body of the woman. One such poster features a young woman in a white shalwar kameez and a green and red orna signifying the colours of the Bangladeshi flag. The woman is wearing an expression of bold confidence and holding a tiffin box, giving the impression of a person on their way to work. The backdrop shows what could be construed a shop floor. The poster bears the following message: 'As long as the country is in your hands, Bangladesh will not lose its way.' This image puts the burden of the nation's progress on the hands of the new woman who in this image is self-content and emblematic of national pride but who bears little resemblance to those in Anam's fiction or Akhter's photograph (Fig. 1).

Made in Bangladesh[3]

In a recent article titled 'South Asian Women Caught Between Tradition and Modernity,' Aida Akl (2011) points to the immense contradictions in the region in regard to women's 'development.' While on the one hand statistics tell a dismal story about women's literacy, workforce participation, reproductive rights, and physical violence, on the other they also paint a picture of triumph and the so-called achievements of women in

Fig. 1 Prothom Alo poster (Photo credit: Nafisa Tanjeem)

political leadership. In Bangladesh, women have come to symbolise traditional culture and the fear of losing it to modernisation. Although women are seen as the vanguards of modernisation and are encouraged to work and go to school, these activities are only encouraged as long as women subsequently settle into marriage, reproduction, and domesticity. While neoliberal development initiatives such as microfinance schemes and wage labour paint the picture of women's empowerment through income generation, social and cultural mobility remain elusive for most Bangladeshi women. Furthermore, factories, which are championed as vehicles to women's emancipation, are simultaneously spaces of structural inequality perpetuating violence and inequality. But this form of violence is often unintelligible as at once structural and gender based. At the root of this misrecognition, I argue, is an inability to see poor women as fully human. As a group, they are valuable and represent the vanguard of the neoliberal conception of development but as individuals they are expendable.

The progress narrative of women's liberation obviously has transnational circulations and implications. A few months after the Rana Plaza disaster, clothing line American Apparel came out with a controversial ad campaign featuring Bangladeshi-born American model Maks. The ad features a topless Maks, with the words 'MADE IN BANGLADESH' boldly printed across her naked chest. The following account of her background is posted below her image:

> [Maks] is a merchandiser who has been with American Apparel since 2010. Born in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, Maks vividly remembers attending mosque as a child alongside her conservative Muslim parents. At age four, her family made a life changing move to Marina Del Rey, California. Although she suddenly found herself a world away from Dhaka, she continued following her parent's religious traditions and sustained her Islamic faith throughout her childhood. Upon entering high school, Maks began to feel the need to forge her own identity and ultimately distanced herself from Islamic traditions. A woman continuously in search of new creative outlets, Maks unreservedly embraced this photo shoot.
>
> She has found some elements of Southern California culture to be immediately appealing, but is striving to explore what lies beyond the city's superficial pleasures. She doesn't feel the need to identify herself as an American or a Bengali and is not content to fit her life into anyone else's conventional narrative. That's what makes her essential to the mosaic that is Los Angeles, and unequivocally, a distinct figure in the ever expanding American Apparel family. Maks was photographed in the High Waist Jean, a garment manufactured by 23 skilled American workers in Downtown Los Angeles, all of whom are paid a fair wage and have access to basic benefits such as healthcare. (Sherman 2014)

The script of the advertisement is a familiar one and depicts the 'brave journey' of a supposedly oppressed 'Muslim' woman on her path to self-empowerment on the sunny shores of California. Maks is meant to represent the Bangladesh of poor working conditions and stifling Islamic patriarchy and her arrival in the West symbolises her liberation. Her newfound freedom and supposed self-empowerment is underscored by her bold and defiant stare and shirtless stance on the advertisement.

Bangladesh's shift from a developing nation to that of Muslim developing nation, as alluded to in the American Apparel advertisement, is critical. At the same time, garments as the road to neoliberal development and emancipation on the one hand and the source of Muslim women's oppression on the other is a telling conflict between national and global discourses of the new woman. Two questions are pertinent here to illuminate the lesser told narrative of national and global exploitation of women workers: In what ways do social forces ranging from poverty, racism, patriarchy, and globalisation become embodied as individual experience of extreme violence and suffering? What are the implications of the use of hegemonic narrative framings that culturalise violence as opposed to illuminating the social forces that enable violence especially when the bodies in question are (read as) Brown/Third World/Muslim?

Following the Rana Plaza tragedy, Erin Cunningham chronicled American Apparel CEO, Dov Charney's reaction to international sweatshops in an article for the Daily Beast. He states: 'In Bangladesh, the problem with these factories is that they're only given contracts on a seasonal or order-by-order basis,' Cunningham quoted Charney telling the *LA Times*. 'There's so much pressure to perform, some of the working conditions are outrageous, almost unbelievable. It has completely stripped the human element from the brands… It's such a blind, de-sensitised way of making clothing.'

Cunningham further notes that in 2002 American Apparel declared itself 'sweatshop-free,' priding itself on producing pieces in Downtown LA, rather than outsourcing overseas like many other fast-fashion companies. The brand also cites on its website that its 'garment workers are paid up to 50 times more than the competition' (i.e. Bangladesh sweatshops). 'I think these retailers need their asses handed to them,' Charney is quoted to have said about the companies who outsource to unsafe factories (Cunningham 2014).

It is pertinent to juxtapose the two images from the Prothom Alo billboard and the American Apparel ad campaign. The first image portrays the modern self-reliant woman who serves and uplifts the nation. The second one ironically brings attention to the oppression of women in sweatshops and locates the US state and corporation as their rescuer. Maks, a free Muslim woman, has been extricated from her conservative Muslim

background, and she celebrates that freedom by displaying her body for public consumption. Ironically, a commercial for clothing features a woman with hardly any on her body. Furthermore, she conjures up the dangerous sweatshops producing garments for Western consumption and attests to American Apparel's so-called clean labour practices. Her body laid bare for public consumption is put to use to signify the cleanliness and freedom of America. Her defiant stance and look is both a symbol of cherished freedom and the underlying threat of immigrant labour. Particularly in the context of California, where Asians are noted for their immense contributions to the tech industry while simultaneously representing the 'threat' of American job loss to foreigners. Maks is the symbol of the successful immigrant who has redefined herself as free from her backwards culture. However, at the same time, she is perceived as a threat to the nation (the defiant look) which must be mitigated by literally exposing her female Muslim body to the imperial gaze, manipulating her immigrant body to comply to the demands of neoliberal capital and consumption. In both ad campaigns, the women signal the 'new' but defined by the state, the corporation, and the transnational media. It is imperative to ask here who gets to define the new and whether it unsettles or perpetuates gendered and racialised systems of inequality. One affirms the neoliberal narrative of women's empowerment absent its violent subtext while the other panders to the global morality market. Thus, it is prudent to consider the question, whom does the narrative empower?

In considering this question in relationship to the student's question, I evoke the work of African American feminist scholar Saidiya Hartman who writes about the historical suffering of African Americans and its continuing legacy in America. In her essay, 'Venus in Two Acts,' she discusses both the possibility and impossibility of recuperating African narratives of female captivity and enslavement and questions the intent behind such attempts of recuperation. She suggests that these recovery attempts may be a way to create a way of living in the world in the aftermath of catastrophe and devastation, a place in the world for the mutilated and violated self. However, the creation of the way of living or that space may not be as critically beneficial to the subject of the violence as it is to the consumer/narrativiser. The intent of such narration is not to give voice to the slave, but is intended to imagine what cannot be verified, a

realm of experience which is situated between two zones of death—social and corporeal death—and to reckon with the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance.

Hartman's observation on the abject suffering of African Americans is particular to the North American context where she argues the legacy of slavery still shapes blacks as property and not fully human. While the specificities of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and its consequences to contemporary black condition in America is unique, what does carry over to the condition of the wage labourers in Bangladesh is the notion of value and expendability of lives that are never quite considered fully human.

The factory system in South Asia depends upon the mass availability of disposable labour made up of poor women (and men). They are valuable in the sense that they make transnational capitalism possible, but as individuals they are invisible and expendable. Hartman's analysis helps us to interrogate who is calling for the 'new' in womanhood and how it relates to the social and corporeal death of the expendable third-world citizen in a globalised world. While it is the corporeal death of workers that may turn the gaze of the world towards their plight, socially they never acquired the status of human to begin with. Their liberation was only ever legible within, and tied to the logic of, the market.

Iyko Day's work is instructive in underscoring the market-driven instrumentality of Asian labour in North America. In this racialised landscape, the image of the exploited bodies of female third-world workers in Bangladesh can be replaced and neutralised by the image of Maks, who is (re)made in America. Nevertheless, she is still part of that racialised labour force, extricated from her conservative Muslim past yet not fully *American* due to her ethnic and religious heritage (Day 2016, p. 6). The defiance in her eyes speaks to the not quite/not white positionality of Asians even as they are at once contributing to the American economy while simultaneously seen as taking away jobs from white Americans. In this context, the 'new' is a continuum of, rather than a break from, past oppression. Maks represents a 'romantic anti-capitalism' whereby American Apparel can portray its labour practices as free from sweatshop exploitation and position themselves as the heroic rescuer of immigrant women like Maks (Day 2016, p. 26). Whether the labour is forced (as in the context of African Americans) or racialised labour (as in the context of Asians) is secondary to their subor-

dination to the overarching logic of capitalism (2016, p. 26). They are heterogeneously racialised. Asians in particular are not to be eliminated as such but to increase value or profit within the evolving economic landscape of racialisation in the global economy (2016, p. 33). Asian labour in this context is no longer bonded, however nor is it personally free.

Iyko Day points out that the typification of Asians as the model minority—educated, disciplined, obedient—emphasises their economic over human characteristics, reifies them as the ideal neoliberal subject who manifests 'human capital' (Helen Jun quoted in Iyko Day). This term, originally coined by Economist Gary Becker, stresses the role education plays in adding value to labour. Asians are thus regarded as an 'enterprise' valuable as they are for their capacity for self-development with the promise of high rates of return to society. Maks represents precisely that Asian subject adding value and labour to United States, clean profit to American Apparel and neutralising the backward sweatshop worker in Bangladesh.

Speaking to the visibility/invisibility of women garment industry workers, Sushmita Preetha (2016) points out in a recent essay that they are not invisible as such—they are integral to the national imagination as the bearers of the country's progress and economic growth. Collectively, they are visible and valuable even though there is a fine line to expendability. Yet individually their lives are disposable. Preetha writes about Sumayah Khatun, a 16-year survivor of the Tazreen Fire who later perished of an untreatable brain tumour—which might have been the consequence of working in toxic factory conditions. Preetha elaborates how well-meaning NGOs processed Sumayah's death certificate even before her actual physical demise—no doubt to seek compensation for the bereaved family. On the other hand, local government officials refused to issue a death certificate after Sumayah's corporeal death—in fear of litigation from the family and human rights community. As an individual worker, Sumayah was deemed replaceable and expendable by the garment owner, even the state. As a symbol of the garment girls—the collective—she was symbolically and materially valuable. Corporeal death is desired by the human rights community to seek compensation. Socially she had been dead already.

Conclusion

The photograph *The Death of a Thousand Dreams* is one of the most startling and publicised examples of the visibility-in-death, the value and expendability of workers in the garment industry in Bangladesh. Its inherent disregard for human life is evident in the series of deaths from factory mishaps but also in the forcing of workers into unsafe premises even while staff of other businesses like shops and banks were asked to not report to work in the same. Workers in this story matter most when they are either exploited labour or when their suffering is given weight in the initial outcry after a monumental disaster.

The image is also instrumental in opening a conversation about the necessity of an 'ethical engagement' with human catastrophe such as Rana Plaza. Such a reckoning cannot recuperate the catastrophic past, in fact in itself an impossible endeavour; nevertheless, it can strive for a political agency emerging from that paradoxical condition where recovery is impossible. It also forces us to reflect upon artistic abstractions of social abjections as a political project. If we accept that the catastrophic loss might negate full representation and that the harm exceeds language (Butler 2002). In that vein, we can strive for an ethical engagement that elicits a deeper appreciation of differentiated agency, suffering, and humanity. Saidiya Hartman, in an interview with Frank Wilderson (2003), talks about the pedagogy of suffering. In explicating, recuperating, reconstructing the African American subject position in America, she calls not for empathy per se, which she sees more of a self-aggrandising process, rather a visual schema of looking. The visual schema, Hartman (2008) suggests, is a classificatory system through which racialisation operates. In this system, racialised bodies are disposed of, appropriated, and fixed within a visual grid (1997, p. 191). Alongside empathy, Hartman calls for a seeing of this schema, which I believe is judicious in the case of the visual and literary works discussed in this chapter. An engagement with the contemporary visual and literary works as articulated in this chapter is a step towards that looking/seeing such that the condition and emergence of the 'new' woman does not occur absent its violent subtext. The new woman is a dutiful worker dependent on wages who is not ultimately self-sufficient nor autonomous, bound as she is within the logic of autonomy through capitalist advancement.

Notes

1. The April 2013 collapse of the Rana Plaza factory building in Bangladesh came as a powerful blow to the image of the 'self-reliant' third-world woman worker—the backbone of the national economy and the transnational supply chain. The factory collapse killed upward of 1100 workers in the ready-made garments industry. Garment products constitute 75 per cent of the country's foreign exports. Ready-made garments are the biggest source of foreign exchange next only to remittances. Currently four million people are employed in this industry, 90 per cent of whom are women.
2. Image available at: http://time.com/3387526/a-final-embrace-the-most-haunting-photograph-from-bangladesh/
3. American apparel advertisement available at: https://alalodulal.org/2014/03/13/sexuality-as-liberation/

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The New *Heroine*? Gender Representations in Contemporary Pakistani Dramas

Virginie Dutoya

Urdu dramas, which are relatively short (about 25 episodes) TV serials, have been an important part of Pakistani television broadcasting, first on public television and, since the liberalization of television broadcasting in 2002, on cable and satellite television (C&S TV) (Désoulières 1999; Kothari 2005).[1] As most of the Urdu dramas revolve around love stories and family issues in a heterosexual context, it is no surprise that women are often central in the narratives of these serials. But some recent dramas go further, explicitly addressing 'women's issues' such as child marriage, polygamy, violence, right to education, or preference for boys. These dramas champion women's rights, and their 'pro-women' stance has been largely recognized and celebrated by the English-speaking media in Pakistan and in India (Haider 2015; Dutt 2015), as well as on blogs and social networks (S. Haider 2013b; B. Haider 2013a; First Post 2014). Yet, while these dramas defend women's rights, they also propose specific representations of 'good' and 'bad' womanhood. The objective of this chapter is to analyse those representations.

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Though it is difficult to assess the audience of Urdu dramas, they are undoubtedly popular and widely discussed. My analysis rests on the postulate that TV serials are 'telling about society' (Becker 2007) and that they constitute a vantage point to analyse the elaboration and diffusion of 'a dominant position with respect to the way in which social relations and political problems were defined and the production and transformation of popular ideologies' (Hall 1980b, p. 117). In particular, television is both constitutive of and constituted by gender relations (Biscarrat 2014, p. 37), and dramas participate in the construction of gender, as a 'technology of gender', in the sense that they impact 'the field of social meaning and thus produce, promote, and "implant" representations of gender' (De Lauretis 1987, p. 18). Moreover, as it has been shown by various researchers in the contexts of India, Bangladesh, Egypt, or France, women are not 'encoded' (Hall 1980a) only in terms of gender but also in terms of class, religion, localization (urban/rural), and so on (Abu-Lughod 2011; Chatterjee 2016; Chowdhury 2010; Lécossais 2016; Mankekar 1999).

The objective of this chapter is thus to highlight the production of gender norms looking at four dramas aired on cable television between 2012 and 2015: *Zindagi Gulzar hai* (Life is a bed of roses), *Rehaai* (Deliverance), *Kankar* (Pebble), and *Chup Raho* (Hush).[2] These four dramas have in common to be presented by those involved in their fabrication (authors, directors, producers, or actresses) as well as by commentators, as fighting social stereotypes and practices that harm women.[3] By focusing on those dramas, my objective is thus not to uncover one hegemonic model of 'Pakistani womanhood' within the genre of Urdu drama but to look at the articulation of the notions of 'modernity' and 'tradition' in the construction of female role models, using the singularity of the dramas of my corpus as magnifying lenses. Indeed, because they make a specific claim of 'modernity', they constitute privileged sites to observe the discursive formation of the Pakistani 'new woman'. Using the concept coined by Partha Chatterjee to reflect on the encounter between the 'women's question' and nationalism (1987), I will analyse the framing of heroines in Urdu dramas, particularly looking at gender and class dynamics.

Methodologically speaking, while it would also be useful to look at the context of production and reception of these dramas (Abu-Lughod 2011; Mankekar 1999), this chapter is limited to the analysis of the 'text' (Chambers 2009) of the serials. To do so, as advised by Lila Abu-Lughod

(2011, p. 20), I have taken seriously the plots, characters, and dialogues of the dramas, and the representation of the social they propose. Urdu dramas are particularly adequate for such an analysis, as they are finite serials, constituted of a limited number of episodes. Thus, these dramas present a complete storyline, intended from the beginning by a single author.

I will first discuss the concept of the 'new woman' and how it can be used to analyse gender representations in TV serials before briefly coming back on the history of Urdu dramas, the place they have given to women and 'women's issues', as well as the recent transformations of the media landscape in Pakistan. I will then move the argument to the representation of the women in the four dramas of my corpus, analysing the framing of a 'new woman' in terms of gender norms and class.

Tracking the New Woman in Popular Culture

Paradoxically, there is nothing new about the concept of the 'new woman'. While the term was already used in the Victorian period (Hussein 2017), in the South Asian context, it was coined as an academic concept by Partha Chatterjee (1987) in the mid-1980s. According to him, the 'new woman' was the one able to balance 'modernity' and 'tradition' within nationalist discourses; she was educated, urban, aware of social and political issues, yet able to retain an authentic Indian spirit and infuse it into her home. It is thus worth questioning how this concept can be used to decode contemporary Urdu dramas. First, though it was initially developed in a Hindu context, the concept of the 'new woman' also makes sense when it comes to analyse the South Asian Muslim communities and societies. Several authors have shown the major role played by women and gender representations in the redefinition of social and political Muslim identities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Devji 2008; Metcalf 2004; Minault 1997). Muslim women were expected to participate in the uplift of their community, while ensuring the maintenance of its perceived religious, social, and cultural boundaries; they had to be educated and modern homemakers, pious (but not superstitious), and socially aware. This figure of a new Muslim woman played an important role in the debates that agitated Muslim communities on the issue of *purdah* (roughly the veiling and seclusion of women), as well

as on women's education, inheritance, or polygamy. Popular culture in the form of books and short stories in women's magazines was an important arena for these debates and for the construction and diffusion of renewed gender roles and norms (Bagchi 2010; Hasan 2013; Mankekar 1999; Minault 1997).

Popular culture, let it be television, advertisement, or cinema, remained central to the discussions on the new woman in South Asia (Chatterjee 2016; Chowdhury 2010; Hussein 2017; Mankekar 2009; Mehta 2004; Sunder Rajan 1993). The review of this literature highlights significant changes in the construction of the new woman since the early twentieth century. Focusing on public television dramas in the 1980s and early 1990s, Purnima Mankekar insists on the imbrication of the representation of women's issues in a larger discourse on the development of the nation. According to her, *Doordarshan,* the Indian public channel subjected its viewers to:

> …a 'virtual blitzkrieg' of 'women oriented' programmes. As during the encounter between colonial administrators and the indigenous male elite in the nineteenth century, there now seemed to be an 'incitement to discourse' (Foucault 1978: 18) on women in official and popular nationalist discourses'. (Mankekar 2009, p. 135)

Looking at media and institutional discourses of the same period, Rejeswari Sunder Rajan defines the 'new Indian woman' as such:

> She is 'new' in the senses both of having evolved and arrived in responses to the times, as well as of being intrinsically 'modern' and 'liberated' (…). She is 'Indian' in the sense of possessing a pan-Indian identity that escapes regional, communal, or linguistic specificities, but does not thereby become 'westernized'. (Sunder Rajan 1993, p. 130)

Analysing advertisement, Arati Metha adds 'hard-working' and 'socially aware' to the characteristics of this new woman (Mehta 2004, p. 209). Indeed, though women are generally shown within their homes, they are by no way inactive and their commitment to improving the welfare of their family (and of the nation) is demonstrated by their domestic work, their choices as consumer, as well as by their will to limit the family's size

by having no more than two children. To sum up, in the 1980s and early 1990s, the new woman was cast as a 'modern' homemaker and consumer, aspiring to a better future for her family and the development of her nation.

In this respect, many authors consider that the liberalization of the Indian economy in the nineties participated in reshaping the new woman, particularly as the development of cable and satellite television (C&S) affected the media landscape. According to Mankekar (1999, p. 356), in the nineties, the discourse on development and the nation became less central in dramas. Hence, recent works have shown that if 'contemporary constructions of the new woman are shaped by discourses of development and modernization' (Chowdhury 2010, p. 302), these constructions are now set in a globalized context that affects not only the economic circumstances of the new woman but also the circulation of ideas and norms, particularly regarding women's rights (Chatterjee 2016; Chowdhury 2010). In the case of Bangladesh, Nazia Hussein shows the role of a global cosmopolitan culture in the formation of a 'new womanhood' performed as a form of class distinction by urban, upper class, educated working women. (Hussein 2017).

Looking at these works, it appears that the 'new woman' is constantly renewed. Hence the interest of the concept does not lie so much in the specific representation of womanhood produced at a point of time, than in the process of constructing this representation. More than a finite role model, the new woman is a fluid discursive formation, particularly useful to analyse how women are used as a 'site[4]' on which notions of 'modernity' and 'tradition', 'global' and 'local', 'national' and 'foreign' articulate to one another.

Women in Pakistani Dramas: From PTV to Cable and Satellite Television

Urdu Dramas in Pakistan: Some Elements of Context

Television broadcasting started in 1964 in Pakistan, with the launch of the public channel. PTV kept its monopoly until 2002, when television was liberalized under the impulse of President (and former Chief of Army Staff) Pervez Musharraf. This led to the multiplication of private channels

broadcasted through cable and satellite that are largely dependent on advertising (Yusuf 2013; Baig and Cheema 2015). In 2013, Gallup Pakistan counted 88 local channels in Pakistan, for 21 million households equipped with television and 11.2 million households equipped with cable (Gallup Pakistan 2013, p. 3). There is a major rural/urban divide, as cable television remains quite rare in the rural parts of Pakistan, where PTV still holds a de facto monopoly on television broadcasting (Yusuf 2013, p. 16).

Audience measurement is widely criticized in Pakistan, as it relies on a limited sample of urban households (Yusuf 2013; Baig and Cheema 2015), but there seems to be an agreement on the importance of C&S entertainment channels. For instance, in one of its monthly 2015 newsletter, *Medialogic* indicated that entertainment represented about 44% of the market of cable and satellite television, and Ary Digital was the first channel among C&S channels, Hum TV the sixth (Medialogic 2015, p. 3). Ary Digital, on which *Chup Raho* was broadcasted, is an old player of C&S television in Pakistan, as it was initially launched in 2000 in the United Kingdom (with the Pakistani diaspora as a target audience), before broadcasting in Pakistan from 2002 onwards. Hum TV (on which the other dramas of the corpus were broadcasted) was launched in 2005 and has the particularity to have been created by a woman, Sultana Siddiqui.[5] While it is not the first channel in terms of ratings, Hum TV dramas have been among the most commented dramas in the last five years, not only in Pakistan but also in India, where they are broadcasted on Zindagi TV (First Post 2014; The Express Tribune 2014). In this regard, while this was not my choice to exclude PTV, the fact that the four shows of my corpus were broadcasted on private channels is revealing of the growing importance of C&S television in Pakistan.

Yet, Urdu dramas did not appear with C&S television. They are the heirs of Urdu theatre, a genre that developed with difficulty in the early twentieth century, before finding an outlet in radio plays. Many great Urdu authors participated in the development of radio serials in Urdu, including Saadat Hassan Manto (Désoulières 1999, pp. 58–59). In 1964, radio plays became TV dramas. According to Agha Nasir, one of the pioneers of Pakistani radio and television, and a playwright himself, dramas were meant to 'mirror social realities' and communicate a clear message

(Désoulières 1999, p. 65). Dramas in Urdu were also supposed to help the linguistic integration of Pakistan, as Urdu was not the native language of the majority of Pakistanis (Désoulières 1999, p. 67). In this regard, the dramas were initially conceived as having an educational dimension, much like it was the case in Egypt, where according to Abu-Lughod, 'serious television serials' were dominated by the aesthetic of 'development realism', that 'idealizes education, progress, and modernity within the nation' (Abu-Lughod 2011, p. 81). Similarly, in India, the first serials were meant to promote 'good family values' in order to strengthen the economic development of the country (Mankekar 1999, p. 70). In this perspective, women were constituted both a target and an important subject (Abu-Lughod 2011, p. 92; Mankekar 1999, p. 130).

In comparison to India, research on Pakistani dramas is scarce, particularly when it comes to the representation of women and gender dynamics. Only a few works have looked at gender representations in Urdu dramas (Kothari 2005; Chaudhary 2014). In her study of Pakistani dramas from the 1970s to the 1980s, Shuchi Kothari (2005) has underlined the centrality of the *zenana* (literally the part of the home male outsiders cannot enter and by extension the women's sphere) in these dramas. According to her, the importance of women and women's issues in these dramas has two main causes. First, they are catering to a female audience. Moreover, from the beginning, many dramas were actually written by women who claimed to champion women's rights, even though they didn't call themselves feminist (Kothari 2005, p. 296). According to Nabeeha Chaudhary (2014), earlier dramas represented women in a complex manner, showing the richness and density of their familial, professional, and social lives. She contends that this complexity disappeared in most recent dramas, which now present unidimensional female characters, restricted to the privacy of their homes. She connects those changes to the rise of consumerism and economic liberalization in Pakistan (Chaudhary 2014, p. 9). Indeed, in the last 15 years, economic liberalization and the multiplication of private channels had a strong impact on Urdu dramas, many of them being now produced by private channels, as it the case for the shows of my corpus. However, women and their issues remain at the core of those dramas.

Identifying Problems and Proposing Solutions: The Representation of Women's Issues in Dramas

The four dramas of my corpus revolve around women's issues. *Zindagi gulzar hai* focuses on the struggle of Kashaf, a young woman of the (lower) middle class, to reach a position of autonomy and ensure her mother's and sisters' security, as they have been deserted by her father. *Rehaai* is the story of three women, respectively mother and first and second wives of a violent man, who struggle for their safety and dignity. *Kankar* revolves around Kiran, a young woman facing abuse in her marriage, who decides to divorce against all odds. Last, *Chup Raho* tells the story of Rameen, raped by her brother-in-law and silenced not only by the perpetrator but also by her family. While it is not particularly original in the context of Urdu dramas, it is worth noticing that women played a major role in the making of these serials. All of them were written by women; *Zindagi gulzar hai* and *Kankar* by Umera Ahmad, *Rehaai* by Farhat Ishtiaq, and *Chup raho* by Samira Fazal. The three dramas broadcasted on Hum TV were produced by Momina Duraid (in partnership with Kashf Foundation for *Rehaai*), and *Zindagi gulzar hai* and *Rehaai* were directed by Sultana Siddiqui and Mehreen Jabbar, respectively (See Annex 1 and Table 1).

It is difficult to fully read the intentions of the authors and producers of these dramas. Different indicators point to the fact that they intended to take a 'pro-women' stand on the social issues they are depicting. The most obvious case is *Rehaai*. Not only director Mehreen Jabbar declared in interviews that she intended to develop strong female characters (Hussain 2012), but the drama was co-produced by Kashf Foundation. This foundation is often presented as an NGO, but it is actually registered as a company and presents itself as a 'wealth management company for low income households' aiming to 'alleviate poverty by providing a suite of high quality affordable financial and non-financial services to low income households, especially women'.[6] On its website, Kashf presents *Rehaai* as a drama that 'exhorts society to think differently about major issues being faced by women in society'.[7] This educational objective is quite apparent in the drama, as dialogues between the social worker from Kashf Foundation and the protagonists are used to inform the female audience about their rights and about the opportunities of microfinance.

Table 1 Issues addressed in the corpus

Title	Aired	Channel	Violence	Right to education	Polygamy	Child's marriage	Preference for sons
Zindagi gulzar hai	2012/2013	Hum TV		Yes	Yes		Yes
Rehaai	2013	Hum TV	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Kankar	2013	Hum TV	Yes				
Chup raho	2014/2015	Ary Digital	Yes				

In the case of *Zindagi gulzar hai*, Sanam Saeed (who plays the lead role) stated that she likes characters that can be role models for young girls' and 'help to change people's perspective' (The Express Tribune 2014). This pro-women stand could be a marketing strategy in order to generate audience and increase the advertisement revenue of the channels. This is a question worth asking in a context of the incorporation of the women's rights discourse within public and private institutions in South Asia (Zia 2009), as well as its increased marketability, as made evident by its inclusion in advertisement (Titzmann 2017).[8] However, such a question takes for granted that there is a single and clearly marked out intentionality behind these dramas, which seems dubious. It is more fruitful to take seriously their claim to address women's issues by looking at the way they frame women's issues.

Taken together, the four dramas point out to the discrimination women face in Pakistani society, one that starts from birth and goes on throughout their life; some heroines were unwanted because of their sex, others were prevented to study, forced into undesired marriages and/or subjected to violence. The societal ambition of the narratives is quite clear. For example, in *Kankar*, the issue of domestic violence is introduced in the first episode of the drama; as the heroine listens to a class on domestic abuse, in which the (male) teacher explains that the main reasons for abuse are economic stress and disobedient and belligerent wives themselves. Kiran protests that marriage is not a slave and master (*malik aur ghulam*) relationship. To that, her teacher answers that in 'our society', it is not a relationship of equality (*barabari ka rishtah*). Kiran's (female) classmates share this opinion on the widespread and ineluctable nature of domestic violence within their society. In spite of this introduction, throughout the drama, it is mostly the familial and individual dimensions of domestic violence that are stressed. There is no mention of the help Kiran could get from feminist groups and women's shelters, nor of the possibility (or impossibility) of getting help by law enforcement. The solution to Kiran's problems lies within her family; she has to convince her father to let her divorce, and then her new in-laws to accept her. Similarly, the drama *Zindagi gulzar hai* underlines the vulnerability of women when family laws (marriage and inheritance) do not guarantee their rights, but the heroine's final monologue insists on the individual dimension of her 'trust issues', and the need

for the spouses to compromise to make their marriage work. Thus it is not so much about social organizing as women, but about self-help and the ability of each woman to navigate a given patriarchal society.

Hence, if these dramas openly discuss issues faced by women, the final 'resolution' can be quite conservative. This is particularly obvious in *Rehaai*. During the larger part of the drama, we see the women of the household facing Waseem's violence, including the rape of a young girl (though the words rape and paedophilia are never used). The women resist to his abuses and end up forming a matriarchal family, with one grandmother and two mothers raising up together three little girls, and as one of the co-wives says to the other, the love of two mothers is as good as the love of a father (ep. 11). Yet, in the last episodes of the drama, Waseem is brought back in the household after he lost one leg; the women nurse him and eventually forgive him. Kulsum's 'deliverance' consists in marrying another man and being emotionally blackmailed by her mother-in-law to leave her daughters to the care of her former sister-in-law and ex-husband. In the final scene, Waseem appears as a respectable middle-aged *pater familias*, who has taken over the women's business and is protecting his elder daughter from early marriage.

The take on marriage in these dramas is actually ambivalent. In all dramas, the heroine is at some point married against her will, while she had strong reasons to oppose the marriage. In *Chup raho*, Rameen feared that her husband would not be able to protect her from her rapist. In *Rehaai*, Kulsum is a child; in *Kankar*, Kiran does not want to marry Sikander because her cousin is in love with him; and in *Zindagi gulzar hai*, Kashaf simply does not wish to get married as she saw the hardship marriage meant for her mother. Except for Kashaf, the first instinct of the young women is proven right as their marriage is a disaster. Yet, before the end of the show, all remarry (often reluctantly) and this time much to their happiness. Marriage remains the only destiny for women in these dramas, and the discrimination faced by women within this institution is not unambiguously condemned. For instance, in *Kankar*, Sikander is criticized for having beaten his wives, but the emphasis is always put on the fact that he should not have done it 'on such small issues'. In episode 18, when Kiran is told that the Quran gives permission to a man to hit is wife, she agrees, but says that it is only allowed for disobedient and rebellious wives, which she was not.[9]

For that matter, though they take a sympathetic stand vis-à-vis women, these dramas may not be considered as feminist. This was made very clear by the producer of *Zindagi gulzar hai*, *Rehaai*, and *Kankar*, who complained in an interview that she was 'branded' a feminist, adding: 'I won't say that women should rebel because God has made them this way—compromising. But at the same time they mustn't be completely submissive' (Anwer 2015). In itself, the term feminism is avoided, and the only time it is mentioned, it is in a negative light in *Zindagi gulzar hai*. In episode 10, we see Zarun (Kashaf's future husband) discussing 'feminism' while writing in his diary and expressing his scepticism: 'Why should a woman who does not make any compromise and cries louder than a man be liberated? And how can I stop Asmara [his fiancée at the time] from becoming such a woman?'

The rejection of feminism is not surprising in the South Asian context, as the term has a troubled history on the subcontinent, including among those who supported women's rights. In her anthology of Indian feminism, Maitrayee Chaudhuri has shown that many of the women engaged in the defence of women's rights in the colonial period had rejected the term for being 'western' and 'antinational', and that this rejection had been carried on after independence (Chaudhuri 2004, p. xx). Yet, let it be in Zarun's monologue or in the producer's interview, the rejection of feminism is not so much about its unsuitability to the Pakistani context. Feminism is presented as a set of inflexible practices that go against day-to-day compromises and lived realities. In that matter, the critique of feminism is close to the post-feminist stand that also exists in European and North American countries, in which feminism can be portrayed as an inefficient ideology, even by those who actually believe in gender equality (Aronson 2003). Similarly, in the four dramas, the emphasis is put on how women, as individuals, can navigate their families and societies to gain their rights, which might not be equal in the end. In fact, the liberties that some of the female characters demand (freedom to choose a spouse, to dress as one's wish, to have a life outside family) are constructed as irrational whims or errors, whose consequences are severe on women and their families. In this respect, the new woman is one who is able to assert her rights without being dogmatic about it and recognize that not all liberties are good for Pakistani women.

Constructing the Pakistani 'New Woman'

Balancing 'Liberalism' and 'Traditions': The Pakistani New Woman

Kashaf in *Zindagi gulzar hai*, Rameen in *Chup raho*, Kiran in *Kankar*, and Shamim, Shehnaz, and Kulsum in *Rehaai* are different in terms of personalities, age, level of education, or social class. Yet they share common characteristics whose repetition allows us to sketch the portrait of a female role model, the 'Pakistani new woman'. Kashaf is in many ways the most developed character, and I will focus on her in this last part of this text.

First, like Kiran and Kashaf, the new woman is educated, or at least aspiring to an education, as is the case for Kulsum. Though she does not necessarily want a career, she is ready to work and finds satisfaction in supporting herself. In different moments of the dramas, the importance of educating one's daughter is thus reminded to the viewers. For instance, in *Rehaai*, Shamim encourages Kulsum, her daughter-in-law, to study, telling her she will then ensure a better future for her own daughters. In addition to that, she is aware of her rights and does not accept everything from men; Kiran asks for a divorce, Rameen leaves her house, and Shamim throws her son out.

In addition to her educational and professional achievements, the new woman should be a good homemaker. A scene of *Zindagi gulzar hai* (ep. 20) is particularly telling, as he leaves his mother-in-law's house, Zarun realizes that he is missing a button on his shirt. Kashaf sews back the button in a few seconds. He tells his wife that he has never been so impressed by her, which is quite striking, as he met her just after she had topped the university entrance exam, and she was a better student than he was. The homemaking skills of the heroines are not only practical (cooking, sewing, etc.), they also involve her responsibility (*zimah dari*) to hold the family together. While she is entitled to respect (*izzat*), a woman should accept that men deserve a certain 'protocol' (as it is formulated by Zarun). This protocol is signified in different ways, let it be by using the formal *aap* to address her husband (while he says *tum* to her), bringing food to him,

asking him before going out of the home, even for visiting her parents or accepting to drop her studies, as Kiran does for her second husband in *Kankar*. The importance of self-sacrifice is clearly stated in *Zindagi gulzar hai*, when Sara (Kashaf's sister-in-law) reflects on the failure of her marriage, saying that she gave herself too much importance (*'xud ko kuch zyada importance de de main ne'*, ep. 22). In these dramas, women are thus encouraged to 'compromise' and show patience and tolerance (*bardasht*) vis-à-vis men's defaults. The message is clear; it is acceptable for a woman to resist excessive male authority and discrimination, but the excess of freedom on their side is equally problematic.

The difference between 'bad' and 'good' liberty for the new woman is made particularly obvious through the characters to which she is opposed, and how this opposition is marked. At first glance, it seems that several of these dramas (particularly *Zindagi gulzar hai* and *Kankar*) use the 'tired old tropes of class—poor girl with chadar equal to good and chaste; rich girl in jeans, spoilt and forward' (Zakariya 2012), which is fairly frequent in Urdu dramas (also see Chaudhary 2014, p. 4). For instance, in *Zindagi gulzar hai*, Kashaf, the lower middle-class, *shalwar kameez*-wearing girl with a *dupatta* over her head, is opposed to her classmates, who are wearing Western clothes and do not cover their hair. In particular, she is set in contrast with Asmara, Zarun's fiancée, whose sartorial choices (for instance trousers with a sleeveless shirt) are often pointed as unsuitable. Yet the opposition is not as straightforward as it seems. As Kashaf once says to her husband, she is not 'very liberal' (*zyada liberal*), yet she is not 'weak' (*kamzor*) (ep. 19). In many ways, she seems more 'liberated' than Asmara; she is a brilliant student who has no ambition to marry and after her marriage, she refuses to appear as emotionally dependent of a man, has a career and lives alone, none of which Asmara does. Interestingly, Kashaf's self-reliance is not only framed as feminine, but this trait of character is also connected to her class. She regularly scolds her husband for his untidiness, which is due to the fact that he has been used to having domestic servants. Similarly in *Kankar*, Kiran is once shown folding her laundry, saying that she likes to 'do her own work' (ep. 12). In this regard, Kashaf's *dupatta* does not only mark her religiosity but participates in framing her as a self-reliant and respectable middle-class woman.

The New Woman at the Intersection of Gender and Class

The issues of class and gender often intersect in Urdu dramas. First, women's economic dependence increases their vulnerability to violence, let it be in *Rehaai*, in *Kankar*, or in *Chup raho*. Moreover, and more importantly to this discussion, gender norms are shown to differ from one social milieu to another. This is particularly clear in *Kankar* and *Zindagi gulzar hai* as both dramas are constructed around the encounter of two classes; the upper and the lower urban middle class. Economic differences are often embedded in gender norms, let it be in terms of sartorial choices (veiling or not) but also in terms of accepting (or not) interaction between unmarried girls and boys. For instance in *Kankar*, Kiran's sister wonders whether her wealthy paternal cousin's parents have not become 'too modern' as they let their daughter alone with her fiancée, which her parents would never allow (ep. 3).

The values of the lower middle class are confronted to those of the upper class, to the advantage of the former. Kashaf, the quintessential new woman, is constantly opposed to Ghazala and Sara who are respectively Zarun's mother and sister. In the first part of the drama, both women are presented as too independent as they go out of the house at their leisure, without informing (or more appropriately seeking permission from) the men of the house. While Sara is generally shown wearing Western clothes (and is criticized for it by her brother), her mother wears saris, which are undoubtedly South Asian but generally associated with India, 'non-Muslimness', and the upper class. In contrast, Kashaf's mother invariably wears a *shalwar kameez* and often covers her head. Ghazala has many flaws; she does not cook, she does not take care of her husband's costumes, and she travels for her work. Her lack of commitment to her family is contrasted with Rafia's dedication, though she also works outside the home. Ghazala has to face the critics of her son, who reproaches her for not having made her children a priority, and later of her daughter, who says her mother should have encouraged her to compromise with her husband when he was trying to control her movements, instead of supporting her decision to divorce. She also accuses her mother of giving her a 'confused personality', by not teaching her what is suitable

for a woman. Within the course of the drama, both Sara and Ghazala atone. Sara decides to marry a conservative man, saying that she will try to change her nature (*mizaj*). In episode 24, Ghazala announces that she will now spend more time with her family. Kashaf managed to infuse her 'good values' into the women of her family.

It is not only 'westernized' women of the upper class who function as counter-models. There are two other types of 'bad women' in the dramas: the lower-class vamp (Zarina in *Chup raho*, Noor Jahan in *Rehaai*) and the superstitious, uneducated, and gossipy woman of the lower class. The vamp openly uses her sexuality and only makes a short appearance in the drama. Her moral unworthiness is presented as undisputable, and thus there is not much of an opposition between her and the heroine. On the contrary, the uneducated and gossipy women are present throughout the drama, often in the form minor characters, such as neighbours who call on the main characters. It is only in *Zindagi gulzar hai* that one of these characters has a substantial existence in the form of Nigar, Kashaf's father second wife. Nigar is a shallow woman, who pushes her husband to spend unreasonably and to neglect his firstborn daughters. Her only achievement is to have given birth to a lazy and not so bright son. She is said to be lazy (though she is often shown cooking), superstitious (she believes in the power of *taviz*, amulets), and she is often taunted for her lack of education. For instance, in episode 23, her son justifies his weak school results by the fact that his mother is uneducated, a statement his father supports adding that all she can do is watch television and gossip. Later in the same episode, Muztaza apologizes to his first wife for leaving her and asks her to take over her son's education.

Kashaf (as well as Kiran in *Kankar*) is thus opposed to both upper-class and lower-class women. This is not particularly original, as historians have shown than in colonial India as well, the debates over Muslim women participated in the construction of a *sharif* (respectable, decent) Muslim elite that was supposed to distinguish itself both from the superstitious and uneducated masses and from the decadent Muslim aristocracy (Devji 2008, p. 386; Metcalf 2004, p. 117). Yet, what is new here, particularly in the case of *Zindagi gulzar hai*, is the idea that the solution to the dysfunctions of the lower and upper classes does not lie in the formation of a distinctive middle class, but in the marital alliance of those

classes. Kashaf's and Zarun's families are constantly contrasted in terms of lifestyles, yet they both appear equally dysfunctional. Kashaf's lower middle-class family has suffered from 'backward thinking' as her father left her mother so as to have a son while Zarun's upper-class family has suffered from the lack of both a strong father figure and a 'motherly mother', because the women of the family are too liberal. The consequences of excessive modernity and backwardness seem similar: divorces, separations, as well as 'trust issues'. The union of Kashaf and Zarun corrects the dysfunctions of the upper and lower middle class without disrupting the class and gender hierarchies. In the end, while her character was initially quite critical of the upper classes, Kashaf eventually becomes one of them and does not seem to question these privileges. On his side, Zarun learns 'good values' from his in-laws, who are mostly interested in his *sharafat* (and not his income) (ep. 17) and who take him to the mosque in order to pray, an experience that is obviously new to him (ep. 18). As Salman Hussain aptly pointed out (2016), Kashaf and Zaroon's union marks the triumph of 'middle-class morality' and 'a class alliance emerging, as the ranks of the former are increasingly peopled by what may be described as the pious bourgeois'. This class alliance, formed in an urban setting, tacitly embraces consumerist lifestyles. For as much as they criticize upper-class women for their shallowness and celebrate the new woman's sense of economy, these dramas are constantly interrupted by advertisement for beauty products, jewellery, and other consumption goods.

Conclusion

The figure of the new woman emerged in South Asia to conciliate the need for modernity and for cultural authenticity, in the context of the development of nationalism (Chatterjee 1987). While it has been renewed ever since, this concept remains useful to understand the intertwining of gender and nationalism in this region. In contemporary Pakistani Urdu dramas, it is not so much the independence of the nation that is at stake, or its economic development, but its modernity, especially for the urban elites. Indeed, the status of women in Pakistan—often depicted as being particularly bad in domestic as well as international media—has become a

subject of 'national shame'. In contrast to the figure of the helpless victim, the new woman is an educated, professional, urban woman who takes care of her home and family and behaves as a respectable Muslim woman. Kashaf, the quintessential new woman, has a high-level career and can hold the comparison with Western women, and the show actually shows her discussing as an equal with a (female) representative of a foreign donor. Thus, if she (and the other heroines of the corpus) ends up conforming to the role of the dutiful wife, it is not because she is forced to by traditions but because she chooses to. She is able to put aside her 'ego issues' and make her family work. In this regard, it is not only a 'new woman' that is advertised in these dramas but also a 'new couple', one that would be based on modern notions of 'understanding' and 'communication', as well as on mutual respect, the preservation of distinctive gender roles and the ability of women to compromise.

'Modernity' and 'tradition' remain as crucial to the construction of the new woman as it was in the nineteenth century, but other issues seem to have lost their salience. In particular, the 'new woman' is not so much in charge of ensuring the distinctiveness of the Indian Muslim community, or even of the Pakistani nation, but of its unity. She has to bridge the social divide in Pakistan, by instilling some of her good values into the upper classes, without questioning their economic domination. Marriage appears as an alternative to class war, and the unequal yet harmonious relationship between the upper-class husband and the lower-class wife ensures the preservation of the social status quo. Moreover, we know nothing of the heroines' regional, sectarian, or caste background. This might very well express the will to cater to an audience as large as possible (including in India), and a focus on Sindhi, Punjabi, or Pashtun dramas would probably have given an altogether different picture. It remains that the heroines are unmarked in a context where sectarian, regional, as well as caste identities are important social markers in Pakistan. The way religious identity is treated is particularly interesting. Indeed, the piety of the (lower) middle class is often emphasized through the habit of praying (absent in the upper classes), the use of Islamic greetings or the dress style. Yet, at the same time, we rarely see the heroines engage directly in religious activities. In this regard, Islam is both conspicuous and absent in the dramas, as if religious difference was a non-issue in contemporary Pakistan.

Annex 1: Description of the Corpus

Drama	Director	Writer	Producer	Plot
Zindagi Gulzar Hai	Sultana Siddiqui	Umera Ahmed	Momina Duraid	Kashaf is rejected by her father. She struggles to become economically independent and to find marital happiness.
Rehaai	Mehreen Jabbar	Farhat Ishtiaq	Momina Duraid	Three women, who are confronted to child marriage and domestic violence, become economically independent.
Chup Raho	Yasir Nawaz	Samira Fazal	Six Sigma Entertainment	Rameen is sexually harassed by her sister's husband and silenced by her family.
Kankar	Aabis Raza	Umera Ahmad	Momina Duraid	Kiran is a victim of domestic violence and struggles to get social acceptance after her divorce.

Drama	Major female characters	Secondary female characters	Channel	Period	Number of episodes
Zindagi Gulzar Hai	5	3	Hum TV	2012–2013	26
Rehaai	3	4	Hum TV	2013	15
Chup Raho	3	2	Ary digital	2014–2015	28
Kankar	1	7	Hum TV	2013	25

Notes

1. I would like to thank Nazia Hussein for her helpful comments, as well as Emilie Frenkiel. The usual disclaimers apply.
2. See Annex 1 for a description of the corpus. I have watched these dramas on video-sharing websites, where the dramas were often uploaded by the

networks themselves. Some of the episodes were subtitled in English, but I tried to rely as much as possible on my own translations. I use a simplified system of transliteration, without diacritic signs or long vowels, unless it is the most common transliteration (e.g. in the case of *Rehaai*). I thank Gayatri Rathore for helping me clarify some of the dialogues.

3. These are not the only dramas meeting these criteria, but as one drama represents about 16 hours of videos, it was important to limit the corpus. I also chose to focus on dramas set in urban settings.
4. I am here inspired by Lata Mani's work on the debates over sati in colonial India (Mani 1987).
5. I draw my information on her from an interview she gave in the show *Mera Safar*, anchored by Ray Khan and broadcasted on BBC Urdu on 10 March 2016. See: http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03m4zbw (access 12/02/2017).
6. http://kashf.org/?page_id=15 (access: 22/07/16).
7. http://kashf.org/?newsandevents=tv-show-kashf-foundation-and-md-productions-bring-rehaii (access: 22/07/16).
8. Titzmann's work focuses on India but 'pro-women' advertising is also developing in Pakistan, as shown by the advertisement for the company QMobile released during the 2016 Ramadan featuring a young female cricket player struggling for her father's approval (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQ3X4CWStoM accessed 23/02/2017). This advertisement was largely commented in the social media.
9. *'kis aurat per hath utahane ki ijazat de Quran? Sarkash aur na-farman aurat, na mai sarkash thi aur na hi na farma.'*: 'Which woman does the Quran allow to hit? The rebellious and disobedient woman, I wasn't rebellious and I wasn't disobedient'.

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Part II

New Women Subjects in Everyday Life: Practices of Gender, Sexuality, Class, Culture and Religion

Bangladeshi New Women's 'Smart' Dressing: Negotiating Class, Culture, and Religion

Nazia Hussein

Introduction

Unlike its parallel in India, the 'new' middle class of Bangladesh receives little attention in significant political, social, cultural, and economic research on the country. Yet, there is a booming middle-class community in Bangladesh who are engaged in neoliberal market through employment and consumerism, economically affluent, invested in English education, and who exercise transnational mobility (Van Schendel 2009; Sabur 2010; Janeja 2010; Mapril 2013). Gender roles within this class are also changing as more women enter public arenas through education and paid employment, affecting women's status and opportunities as well as the domestic division of labour. An emerging literature in Bangladesh, and a more established literature within South Asia more broadly, identifies 'new women' as members of this neoliberal affluent middle class who are argued to hold a balance between the so-called progressive femininity, in terms of being highly educated and economically productive, and

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traditional gender roles surrounding domestic duties and moral propriety. Women's participation in neoliberal economy through employment and consumption marks them as part of neoliberal 'modernity', while 'traditional' gender roles within the household and propriety through practices such as sartorial choices are considered part of the normative conceptions of middle-class respectable femininity (Radhakrishnan 2009, 2011; Fernando and Cohen 2013; Gilbertson 2014; Talukdar and Linders 2013; Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase 2008; Tarlo 1996; Thapan 2004, 2009; Liechty 2003). Following these examples, I contend that respectability is an integral aspect of the construction of 'new womanhood' in urban Bangladesh and a useful tool through which to analyse how women contribute to the construction of the affluent middle-class status quo in the rapidly changing neoliberal society of Bangladesh. In this chapter, I study women's hybrid sartorial practices to investigate debates around modernity, tradition, class, culture, and religion, and demonstrate how neoliberal[1] affluent middle-class women of Bangladesh construct their 'new womanhood' at the intersection of these identities.

Discussions of the new woman can be traced to the nineteenth-century Western literature alongside women's rights and suffrage movements. During the same time in China, the Chinese 'new woman' was expected to represent Chinese cultural, racial, and national identity yet, through education and political participation, be committed to building a new, modern China (Stevens 2003). The bodies of South Asian 'new women' have historically been entangled in satisfying multiple ideals of womanhood. The social constructions of the 'new woman' in colonial Bengal, post-colonial East Pakistan, and neoliberal Bangladesh perceive the 'new woman' as a site upon which 'modernity' and 'tradition' are pitted against each other. 'New women' in Bengal[2] have historically been middle class and able to embody the nation and its culture across time and space (Mankekar 1999; Chatterjee 1989). Colonial Bengali 'new women' distinguished themselves from other women through the wearing of the Bengali cultural attire of sari, as opposed to the lower-class Muslim religious clothing of burqa[3] and the sexualized Western garb of the colonisers (Kabeer 1991; Loomba 1997). Post-colonial Bengali 'new women's' embodied cultural practices, such as bindi[4] and sari, marked Bangladesh's independence movement from Pakistan, seeking to establish a secular fusion identity combining religious (Islamic) and cultural practices (Kabeer 1991).

Following Azim (2007) I have defined Bangladeshi new women elsewhere (Hussein 2017a, b) as urban, neoliberal affluent middle class, educated, engaged in paid employment, and internationally mobile. They illuminate issues of sexuality, marriage, and paid employment, rather than the domestic roles such as reproduction and household chores which were ubiquitous for previous generations of women. While previous conceptualisations of the new woman symbolised change, I use the classed gender notion of respectable femininity to highlight both change and continuities in construction of middle-class womanhood and new women's negotiations with the boundaries of normative conceptions of middle-class respectable femininity in contemporary Bangladesh. I argue that these neoliberal affluent middle-class women do not abandon old structures of respectability; rather they negotiate and legitimise particular practices in particular fields which constitute alternative forms of respectable femininity and engage in defining practices of new womanhood in Bangladesh. The research focuses on women's voices, experiences, and interpretations to understand how the identity of new womanhood is constructed and performed at the individual level, through negotiation with the normative conceptions of Bengali middle-class respectable femininity around sartorial choices.

Theorising the Neoliberal Affluent Middle Class and the New Women of Bangladesh

I define new women's middle-class social status using Bourdieu's theory of class through capitals and distinction. Aesthetic[5] practices, such as clothing, are a cultural capital which represents an individual's distinctive class position and can be embodied, objectified, and institutionalised (Bourdieu 2008). Capitals confer strength, power, and profit on their holder (Skeggs 1997, p. 8). Bourdieu uses capitals and power as synonyms and claims that they determine the position of social agents in social hierarchy, thus organising class in a society. Bourdieu's ideas of taste, habitus, and field are useful to understand how classed distinction is produced. Habitus 'is the system of durable dispositions of being and acting that represent the internalized embodiment of social norms and

established patterns of behavior' (Watt 2006, p. 777) that generate and give significance to individual likes and dislikes (tastes) in the place within which individuals and their social positions are located (field) (Laberge 1995, p. 136; Bourdieu 1992, p. 101). To Bourdieu, social power is not dependent on economic capital alone but also based on symbolic capital; the socially legitimated translation of the different types of capital into an overall standing within the individual's field (1977, p. 244). Women draw on their feminine disposition (in this case feminine aesthetic practices)—a part of their habitus—to navigate the boundaries of the field (Ross-Smith and Huppatz 2010, p. 551). The outcome of this navigation is not transformation or overturn of the power regimes (or class structure, for this study) that dominate the field; rather, they merely adjust the boundaries in ways that are tactical and suitable for them (Skeggs 1997). Such self-conscious constructions of class enable women to 'self-fashion' themselves as 'modern'—a typical form of identity politics in contemporary societies (Giddens 1991). In this chapter, I will show how participants negotiate the boundaries of normative respectable middle-class clothing options for women in urban Bangladesh and create their own respectable yet 'modern' sartorial options which constitute the symbolic capital of global new woman identity.

Feminists have discussed the link between objective structures of power, such as class (structure), and subjective experience (agency), arguing that women are not just 'sign bearing' carriers of taste through capitals but subjects with capital accumulating strategies of their own (Lovell 2000; Skeggs 1997). Thus, women's taste in aesthetic practices can constitute their class position (habitus) in various fields (home, workplace, outside the country, etc.). For example, although the expectations of the families of Indian middle-class women with regard to cultural clothing represent a classed habitus, when women challenge their families' expectations by wearing Western clothes in their workplaces (Thapan 2009), they create a new cosmopolitan habitus. Through such acts, new women translate their cultural capital into economic capital in their workplaces and into the symbolic capital of the cosmopolitan global middle-class new woman within their nation. Finally, Bourdieu (1977, 1998) identifies slippages in class identity and the means that are employed to move between and amongst social groups. Accordingly, Skeggs (1997) has

argued that neither class nor womanhood is a fixed identity, and there exists considerable heterogeneity and fluidity in both identities over time. In Skeggs' research, working-class women dis-identify with their class by wearing 'respectable' clothes as opposed to 'tarty' or 'sexy' clothes, among other things; but they are still unable to achieve middle-class status. Here, respectability is conceptualised as a symbolic capital that provides cultural authorisation to women to exert power as part of a dominant group in society. It provides these women with a positive identity, establishing status differences within the same social class (ibid.). This strategy of intra-class distinction has been well documented in Britain and India among non-dominant groups (Radhakrishnan 2009; Skeggs 1997). I will demonstrate that in this research Bangladeshi women also dis-identify with any fixed class identity in their sartorial choices and distinguish themselves as cosmopolitan and global new women. I will also demonstrate how this global new womanhood is a symbolic capital and an integral part of the neoliberal affluent middle-class formations in Dhaka.

Sabur (2010) claims that the Bangladeshi middle class invests considerable money into clothing in order to maintain and display a neoliberal middle-class lifestyle, but she provides no further elaboration on respectable dressing. Research in India and Nepal indicates that middle-class women reconcile with and make use of contradictory cultural, religious, and classed aesthetic practices, arising from rapidly changing social structures in urban spaces (Gilbertson 2014; Talukdar and Linders 2013; Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase 2008; Tarlo 1996; Thapan 2004, 2009; Liechty 2003). They do so by finding a 'good balance' between respectable national cultural clothes and fashionable Western clothes (Gilbertson 2014) and by following multiple clothing norms in diverse locations of work and home (Thapan 2009; Liechty 2003). Although the Indian and Nepali literature suggests a conflict between the expectations of cultural attire from middle-class families and the demands for Western dressing made by neoliberal workplace cultures, it does not expand on this issue. I will take up the subject in this chapter in the Bangladeshi context.

Academic studies on contemporary Bangladeshi new women are scarce, and thus in this research I draw from Indian new woman literature to articulate the complex and fluid nature of women's embodied practices. New women of India represent the country's entry into the

global economy both as workers and consumers (Talukdar and Linders 2013). The new Indian women represent themselves as glamorous, independent, and conscious of their embodiment through adornments and self-presentation, while the remaining enshrined in the traditions of family and nationhood. They are 'new' in that they have the economic capacity to consume beauty products (Thapan 2004) and present themselves in thin bodies adorned in Western clothes (Talukdar and Linders 2013). They deploy their embodied practices as a sign of their professional ambition and rejection of the traditional ways of housewife roles (ibid.:117). But the clash between tradition and modernity is visible in controversies around beauty pageants in India. Miss India winners are viewed as ambassadors of new India. But this new modern female identity has caused much public debate, particularly because 'women's bodies were on display: dressed in 'revealing', Western-style clothes, especially swimsuits' (ibid.:107). Although Indian arranged marriage norms placed a high premium on 'slender' and 'delicate' young bodies of marriageable women, these characteristics were never to be publicly displayed. Women's bodies belonged to the *andarmahal* (interior quarters) or the private sphere of life (ibid.:107). The legacy of these colonial and historic notions of women's bodily practices creates the modern-day controversies around new Indian women's bodies in the public sphere.

Similarly, Bangladeshi media depict new women as signifiers of a transitioning society and a symbol of Bangladesh's modernity and Bangladeshi women's progress. The new woman is represented in the media as educated, professional, bold, and outgoing, expressing her desire to be 'free' from domestic drudgery (Begum 2008). Television advertisements show cultural change in defining womanhood by representing new women in stylised clothes and make-up in the workplace, as opposed to playing roles of mothers and housewives. New women's cosmopolitan middle-class taste is observable in their short hair, stylised cultural attires, Western clothes, use of consumer goods like make-up, fluency in English, and participation in paid employment (Hussein 2017a, b). But a closer look at the representations shows that the new women, with their modern, cosmopolitan appearances, are ultimately depicted as a dark force, dangerous and slipping out of control (Begum 2008, p. 156).

I draw from the reviewed literature in order to identify the new women of Bangladesh as urban middle-class, educated, professional women, who symbolise a progressive society. I argue that the new woman subject is more fluid and complex than the simplified traditional-modern progression of women in South Asia. In so doing I want to further explore the heterogeneity and multiplicity of new women's bodily practices in urban Bangladesh, where women are adding organisational aesthetic norms to their already complex negotiations of sartorial practices. Coined by Warhurst et al. (2000) and further theorised by Witz, Warhurst and Nickson (2003), aesthetic labour refers to management's overt utilisation of workers' 'corporeal cues of class written on the body' (Mears 2014, p. 1334). I will demonstrate that the new women participants of this research consciously change or adapt their aesthetic cultural capital and use it as an asset in the labour market, transferable for economic and symbolic capital of global professionals to gain value as neoliberal affluent middle-class new women.

Hybridization of Clothing and Fashion in Post-colonial Societies

Today as post-colonial societies encounter the capitalist forces of globalisation and neoliberalisation, hybridisation of national culture in terms of clothing and fashion is a common practice across the world. Rapid economic growth and the demand of new labour resources into the job market ultimately have an ideological effect on modernization through women's clothing. In many post-colonial countries, women's experience of modernity is parallel with Western fashion. In China, globalisation increased the popularity and availability of Western-style clothes for women while, at the same time, traditional areas such as tailoring attracted less and less apprentices, making traditional clothing China's national dress cheongsams very expensive for working-class women to afford. Additionally, the proliferation of Western retailers in the country resulted in arbitrary conflation of 'the West' and 'the good' illustrating the ideological apparatus of the economic hegemony of Western countries through globalisation (Chan 2000, p. 302). Similarly, in India in the late

1980s and early 1990s, capitalist advertising presented a different form of their national attire of a sari, one that represented Western notions of *haute couture* or high fashion. Additionally, Indian women were also represented in track suits, jeans, skirts, and dresses, choosing their own brand of cigarettes, method of contraception, and domestic appliances (Loomba 1997, p. 287). The spectre of Westernisation and deculturalisation still remains a major concern for the Hindu right, which protests against holding beauty contests in India with bikini rounds. However, Indian or Western clothing per se is no longer a rigid signifier of the line between 'us' and 'them'—partly because of the changes within even right-wing rhetoric of Indianness and femininity. A trouser-clad woman may be traditional inside, and in fact there are strenuous efforts to depict this as not just a possible but a desirable image. Moreover, such redefinition resonates strongly with the influx of 'global' cosmetics and clothing firms into the Indian market, and with the shifts within the indigenous fashion industry (ibid: 289).

To study these complexities, I articulate new women's heterogeneous and fluid embodiment practices in various fields as boundary work. Binaries and boundaries of appropriate clothing practices take centre stage in the above discussion. To theorise new or alternative forms of appropriate or respectable clothing practices among Bangladeshi women, the processes of negotiation and boundary work can be of use. In its Latin origin the word 'negotiation' literally means 'there is no leisure' (*neg* = not and *otium* = leisure or rest). Thus, the word negotiation stands for 'no rest' (Pereira 2010). Negotiation is continuous and never complete, and it demands boundary work. Boundary work is an everyday and ongoing labour which can help us understand how respectability is used by middle-class women to perform continuous negotiation with boundaries of respectable and unrespectable practices. Lamont (1992) defines boundary work as personal investment in identity to define 'who we are, drawing on similarities and differences from others which ultimately produce typification systems' (ibid.: 11). It guides and organises both the self and other social identities into categories. We also need to recognise that individuals do not always draw boundaries out of their collective identity and taste; rather, societal factors, such as access to resources, can also influence individuals to draw boundaries differently than the rest of their

class (ibid., p. 115, 147). Through boundary work, individuals, and for this research women, can create and recreate class distinctions and intra-class status differences.

Clothing Practices in Bangladesh

The normative clothing practices among Bangladeshi women, regardless of class, are the sari and the salwar kameez.[6] In colonial and post-colonial Bengal, the sari epitomised nationalist culture, resisting colonial and Western power. During Bangladesh's independence movement, the Bengali women's sari, along with other cultural practices, became part of the political movements because it was a way of celebrating their cultural difference from West Pakistan. Today a shift has come in the young, professional, and urban women's choice of cultural clothing, whereby saris are now termed as 'ethnic' dress suitable for occasion wear only; they are seen as appropriate for weddings, religious and cultural festivals, and any events termed most important to the family and nation. The salwar kameez is more popular among young women; girls aged 12–16 wear them as school uniforms in most parts of South Asia and in Bangladesh. The popularity of the salwar kameez among young women can be linked to societal changes. Traditionally, young girls would switch to wearing the sari when they got married, which was usually soon after puberty. But as South Asian women began to marry later, they faced a new dilemma of what type of dress to wear while they were still single adults. They could no longer wear the attire of their childhood but did not feel quite ready yet to wear the sari. Thus, they turned to the salwar kameez, which was a suitable outfit that met their modesty requirements. For many women today, it is regarded as a functional outfit that suits their modern lifestyle needs better than the traditional sari (HO 2013).

The third and less popular clothing practice among Bangladeshi women is '*hijab*', which in Islam is a state of modesty for women after they cross the age of puberty and not a particular piece of clothing, although in some Western contexts it has come to stand for the Muslim headscarf or the *burqa.* It is more popular among urban poor women working in the garment factories and lower-class young women in universities (Rozario 2006), though some middle-class women are also starting to practise it.

Finally, Western wear in Bangladesh most commonly means jeans and trousers paired with shirts or t-shirts and is worn by young women, mostly students and young professionals. Driven by infiltration of global media, rising disposable incomes, increasing number of women joining the workplace, and wider cultural acceptance, especially among the younger demographic, various forms of Western garb are more commonly visible in cities of Bangladesh.

Constructing Smart Dressing

Participants' boundary work in relation to clothing practices appeared nuanced and complex. Participants both drew from and sought distinction from clothing practices identified as upper class, middle class, working class, and Western. They also emphasised their knowledge of what is the appropriate clothing for which occasion. I articulate new women's smart dressing as an embodied cultural capital and a site of negotiation of their identities and practices of both respectability and progressive new womanhood.

Hybridization

Smart clothing is defined by the participants in two ways. The first is that of mixing two or more embodiment practices to find a suitable as well as comfortable practice for a particular occasion, such as stylising and Westernising (sexualising) cultural attires of a sari, or desexualising Western attires of trouser and top. By stylising, participants mainly refer to embellishments and accessorising attires with jewellery, bags, and shoes. Sexualising and Westernising are often used as synonyms by participants, referring to tight fitting clothes, sleeveless or very short sleeves, deep-necked tops, short tops, and clothes made of see-through materials such as lace or chiffon, while desexualising Western attires is explained as wearing long-sleeved shirt and loose trousers or pairing denim trousers with a long tunic top and a scarf, and so on. The clarity with which participants described levels and forms of sexualisation and de-sexualisation of attires indicates the strategic and political nature of developing their

self-defined identities—new women who are part of modern Bangladesh through their practice of smart dressing. These strategic aesthetic practices are facilitated by participants' employment in high-skilled and highly paid global jobs, which provide the necessary income to differentiate the new women participants of this research from struggling working-class women of Bangladesh.

Thirty-three-year-old Maliha works for a British NGO and says:

> Women who come from villages or working-class women might wear saris regularly. You don't really find young middle-class women working in multinational companies, foreign NGOs or private universities in Dhaka city wearing saris to work on a regular basis. It is now an occasion wear…and we have also glamorised it quite a bit with stylised blouses, trendy make-up and matching accessories which are often Western brands.

Thirty-four-year-old Naz works for an American donor agency and explains:

> Our kameezes are tight fitting, often have very short sleeves or are sleeveless…we wear our scarf on the side rather than covering our chest which is the traditional and conservative way of wearing it. Length of our kameez [top] and style of our shelwar [trouser] constantly change according to current fashion in Dhaka or other parts of South Asia…it's [style of salwar kameez] constantly changing and we have to keep up to date.

The statements above illustrate how participants distinguish traditional clothing practices from modern ones mainly through stylisation. Stylisation of Bengali cultural clothes signifies 'modernity' and wealth as well as stemming from the convenience of certain attires over others in terms of mobility. Wealth is symbolised through the distinction made from village women and working-class women, use of Western brands, which are more expensive than local ones and also signal the global organisations where new women participants work, indicating their high income. The signs of stylisation of cultural clothes are associated with mixing Western, less conservative, or more 'revealing' clothing styles with cultural attires, for example, sleeveless, tube, and deep-necked blouses with a sari. This mixing of Bengali cultural clothes with Western aspects is identified as a

smart way of wearing clothes today and a sign of the progressiveness and modernity of new women.

Second, the Bengali cultural attire of the sari is identified as 'occasion wear' by Maliha, who thinks it is inconvenient to wear a sari on a regular basis for an urban professional woman working in global organisations or the new woman. This is a change from the post-colonial understanding of Bengali new women's realisation of middle-class respectability via the sari. Through the sari, respectable middle-class *bhodromohila* (respectable women) disassociated themselves from lower-class and West Pakistani women's practice of Islamic burqa and the coloniser's sexualised Western attires. Thus, Maliha's comment suggests a change in new women's construction of respectability in clothing practices, which is now articulated via convenience of professional women as opposed to colonial cultural superiority.

It is interesting to note that these stylisations are often adaptations of clothing practices seen on cable television in Indian or Western shows, as 38-year-old Fatema, who is the deputy general manager of a multinational telecommunications company, describes:

> Our clothing practices have changed drastically since the early 1990s when we got satellite television for the first time. In fact, since then urban Bangladeshi society has become much more tolerant towards women's careers in the public sphere, relaxing traditional expectations of marriage and childbearing from young women and with it also came the practice of fusion clothing. Young women watched other South Asian and Western women in various kinds of clothes which were previously considered too sexualised and they started mixing those with their Bengali clothes. As long as they don't completely abandon their sense of culture and values and only introduce subtle changes to glamorise their attires these practices are welcomed by all in Dhaka.

New women participants mix attires labelled as sexual with their Bengali cultural clothes and construct smart dressing as a symbol of their distinct classed taste and aesthetic status quo. Enabled by their economic capital and exposure to foreign media, which is more readily available to the urban affluent middle class as opposed to the working class, the participants of this research position themselves as progressive and modern in relation to fusion smart clothing, yet careful to introduce what Fatema

calls 'subtle' changes, thus maintaining cultural respectability, as opposed to complete abandonment of cultural values in clothing in favour of sexual/Western clothing.

Fully Western attires are considered too sexual and are not compatible with norms of respectable femininity in Bangladesh. Western clothes are often referred to as 'revealing', which means showing too much skin, showing one's cleavage, skin-tight clothes, showing all the curves of a woman's body, and so on. Participants prefer to dress in less sexualised attires, to maintain their moral propriety and respectable femininity in the public sphere. Overtly sexual and Western dressing is also associated with the upper class. Thirty-eight-year-old senior lecturer Farrah says:

> Some young girls from wealthy families think they can imitate the fashion they see on television without any consideration of the society they live in… they buy these western sexualised attires in their travels to Western countries like tank tops and wear them in Dhaka…it is absolutely inappropriate.

Boundaries of smart dressing mark overtly Western and sexual fashion as inappropriate and a practice of wealthy upper-class young women which is in tension with smart dressing and its subtler sexual connotations. At the same time, there is a tension between the sartorial choices of young and older women, which I will further explore in the next section.

An ideal example of hybrid clothing is combining *kurta* (a long tunic top) with denim trousers (including skinny jeans, cropped trousers). As 35-year-old assistant professor Ramira says: 'My students wear them (fusion attire), even I wear them…they are a common fashion practice of modern women'. Mixing of Western and Eastern garb is considered 'fashionable' and is a common practice of participants. This is also a way to desexualise parts of Western dressing, such as wearing some long-sleeved shirt and loose trousers rather than wearing a short body-hugging top and skin-tight trousers or pairing denim trousers with a long tunic top/kurta and a scarf. By associating such a mix of Eastern and Western garb with 'modern' women, Ramira distinguishes new women's fashion from that of other women.

Finally, participants also highlight the stylisation of the religious practice of *hijab*. Faria who runs a *hijab* store for professional women sells stylised religious attires that both maintain the modesty requirement

and are suitable for the corporate working woman's professional look. She thinks that through such 'smart hijab', professional women can maintain their corporate jobs and the inflow of economic and symbolic capital (global professionalism), yet do not have to give up their personal religious practices. Faria's attempt to stylise religious attires enables her to negotiate aspects of religious dressing within the middle-class construction of respectable sari and salwar kameez by adding a headscarf to them or by adding headscarves to Western loose trousers and shirts with a long shrug or even long skirt, or a loose t-shirt and a shrug—all of which are identified as smart hijab as opposed to the traditional burqa.

Smart hijab is again a departure from colonial Bengali women's respectable cultural identity, which was valorised over Muslim religious identities. Bengali womanhood represented the modern nation and was pitted against lower-class veiled Muslim woman, who generated alarm and marked the growing '*Islamicisation*' of society (Azim 2010). However, new women participants of this research embrace their religious identity and do not consider religion to be a barrier to women's progressiveness or paid employment in Bangladesh. Rather, they choose to stylise their religious attires to distinguish themselves from conservative religious women of perhaps lower-class backgrounds whose mobility in the public sphere may be restricted. In this section, I have demonstrated that through negotiation of the boundaries of cultural, religious, and Western/sexualised clothing, participants legitimise various hybridisations of Bengali cultural attires as respectable, and this process of legitimising and normalising alternative practices of smart yet respectable clothing is key to their new womanhood.

Context Specificity

Smart dressing also means context-specific clothing practices. For instance, although participants may prefer to wear Bengali cultural clothes such as the sari for family occasions or at international functions as a representation of their culture and nation, for everyday wear or work clothes, they choose to wear more convenient clothes such a salwar kameez, a fusion of Western/Eastern attire of trousers and long tunic tops or desexualized Western clothes such as shirts and trousers. This is particularly common among older participants.

Forty-year-old Keya is a director of a manufacturing company and explains:

> When I am travelling abroad for work, I drink wine, wear Western clothes and go dancing with my peers from all over the world. At this age if I did all these here in Dhaka I would become a hot topic of gossip in my social circle.

Another participant, 45-year-old Nadia who is the CEO of a research company explains:

> I often wear clothes for my professional parties that I otherwise avoid in family functions. For instance, I wear sleeveless blouse with a trendy chiffon sari, which my husband and teenage daughters don't like me wearing on an everyday basis. Women my age usually avoid such provocative clothes in Dhaka.

To Keya drinking wine, wearing Western clothes, and going for a dance are Western practices, against Bangladeshi cultural and religious norms (alcohol consumption is forbidden in Islam), and are considered 'inappropriate' and immoral, thus unrespectable, particularly for women who are in their forties, married, and have children. However, as part of her global profession, she attends international events meeting other global competitors, many of whom are from Western countries and with whom such behaviour is both acceptable and expected; thus she adapts to such practices. Hence, among older new women participants, context-specific Western dress and practices are acceptable when they are outside the country.

Keya and Nadia also add how one's family and social circle draw boundaries which require middle-aged married women to avoid smart clothing at family occasions. 'Trendy' or smart attires such as a chiffon sari and sleeveless blouse are considered 'provocative', which is also read as sexualised in the Bengali community, and thus inappropriate, immoral, and unrespectable for middle-aged women. But to maintain their global careers and inflow of economic capital through income, participants like Nadia take on context-specific smart dressing, illuminating the performative aspect of modern and progressive professional new womanhood, yet also conform to norms of Bengali respectability by wearing traditional style Bengali attires for familial occasions, upholding cultural practices above sexualised aesthetic practice.

Younger participants also choose to wear Western clothes in their travels to Western countries. Thirty-five-year-old Ramira says:

> During my MA and PhD in the UK I wore all types of Western clothes, like dresses, skirts and everything…I just don't wear them in Bangladesh as they are inappropriate here.

Some participants mention the unspoken requirement of their organisations to dress a certain way to maintain the image of the organisation, which they often have to follow while at work. Corporate businesses such as mobile telecommunication companies—public relations (PR), advertising, and architectural firms—and manufacturing and marketing organisations often require participants to dress in smart clothes (stylised cultural clothes). These organisations also have the highest salary scale, and some of them are multinational in their organisational structure. Thirty-four-year-old Tamanna works for a public relations company and says:

> I have had to wine and dine with big corporate clients, take them out to fancy hotels and away days. So, I have to dress and look appropriately. I mostly wear modern Bengali wear like a Salwar kameez or Sari, but often also have to wear Western outfits.

The 'appropriate' and 'modern' look required in the PR industry is identified in terms of stylisation and Westernisation of salwar kameez and sari, which I defined as smart dressing previously. The appropriate look also refers to the occasional use of Western outfits, which alludes to the context specificity of smart dressing—Tamanna qualifies that she often has to wear Western clothes, indicating that it's not her choice but rather a requirement of her organisation.

Corporate aesthetic norms are associated with approachability and confidence of employees. When I asked participants if dress expectations are made explicit in the job advertisements in their sector, those who worked for the media industry or public relations firms said that job advertisements sometimes mention the required dress code to be 'smart' or 'formal'. When asked how they interpreted 'smart' and 'formal' dressing, 35-year-old public relations director Samia said:

> I am not sure actually! Our everyday clothes like salwar kameez and sari are considered formal wear in this country, though for men it obviously means no jeans or shorts… I think in our public relations offices we need to look approachable to clients and companies. If a female employee dresses too conservatively, like covering her head, some clients may think she is not approachable which may cause loss of clients…I have always worn smart Bengali clothes. When I was younger I also wore Western clothes occasionally.

Public relations industries uphold their organisational aesthetic standards to match their clients' lifestyle more explicitly than other industries. The 'lifestyle' of the targeted clients in this industry is constituted through elements such as a taste for wining and dining in expensive restaurants, after office hours socialising, secular outlook, approachability, and so on, which signify the characteristics of global middle-class professionals. Thus, these organisations set clear boundaries between those who are conservatively dressed and therefore unsuitable employees, and those who are dressed in a smart and 'approachable' manner, thus suitable employees. To meet this 'approachable' and global professional look, participants like Faria mentioned in the previous section wear smart hijab or stylised hijab.

Shanta and Shazia lived in Western countries for some time for higher education and work purposes and often wear Western outfits by choice at work and outside. Thirty-five-year-old Shanta, however, works for a US-based development organisation's Bangladesh branch and highlights that context specificity is still important when choosing to wear Western clothes at work:

> At the beginning of my career when I used to go to the ministries and government agencies where the staff are mostly men, they used to think I am a secretary, receptionist or note taker of some American development organisation employee who came to represent her boss! Sometimes they would not even acknowledge my presence, especially the lower level staff like the secretary of a minister to whom I would have to go to make appointments to meet the minister. Then I started wearing saris to these offices to look older and kept asking questions even if they gave me short reluctant answers first, they eventually realized I mean business and I am not going to quieten down after they give a half-hearted answer.

Shanta highlights the importance of mixing the boldness of modern women with Bengali cultural attire like a sari and how this combination gives her more authority and respect among the Bangladeshi male government officials she has to interact with. Mount (2017) showed that in India the cultural attire of sari accord women respect and authority and symbolise them as a 'mother figure' who must be respected by all. Here, although Shanta's personal taste of Western fashion is contrary to both her organisation's clients' expectations and middle-class respectability norms in Bangladesh, she uses her knowledge of what clothes are appropriate for each context to maintain her partnership with various organisations. Thus, it cannot be said that there is a single cultural flow from the West to the East which dominates hybrid fashion cultures in Bangladesh. Hybrid fashions of post-colonial societies are influenced by a variety of aspects, and women today have developed a heightened sense of self-consciousness and embody their own version of modernity. Aesthetic labour is an embodied aspect of 'professionalism', a form of cultural capital that can be converted to other forms of capital—such as economic capital as income or symbolic capital of global professional womanhood—to reproduce social class by employees. An organisation's brand is aimed at particular social groups and seeks to appeal to their senses; it is capable of adding cultural and symbolic value to the target customer and the employees, creating 'lifestyles' that mark differences of class and status (Pettinger 2004, p. 171). I argue that new women participants' workplaces play an important role in their self-construction of new womanhood through alternative practices of respectable clothing, to the degree that women are able to evaluate the costs and benefits involved in converting their cultural capital of smart dressing into the economic capital of income or the symbolic capital of global professionalism in various organisations they work for.

Finally, dresses and skirts exposing lower legs and long gowns, which are often sleeveless or halter necked and expose shoulders and cleavage, are occasionally worn by younger participants who lived in Western countries for many years as party wear. Again, these are not suitable for family occasions, weddings, or cultural and religious festivals. Rather, these are only worn for parties with friends of the same age group in five-star hotels or someone's house, outside the purview of the rest of the society.

Gilbertson (2011, p. 170) argues middle-class 'cultural capital, then, is not just about being able to afford fashionable clothes, but also about knowing what kinds of clothes are appropriate to each occasion or field'. I identify participants' knowledge and boundary work of adapting to organisational aesthetic norms, Bengali middle-class respectable aesthetic norms, and their personal choices of wearing Western clothes in Western countries and Western party wear within Bangladesh among their peers of the same social class as the cultural capital of smart dressing. This knowledge and boundary work provides them cultural authorisation for alternative forms of respectable femininity and new womanhood. Participants also convert their cultural capital to the symbolic capital of global professionalism as well as economic capital through sustained income from their workplaces. I argue that participants' capacity to convert their capitals reiterates their position and represents a defining practice of new womanhood.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have used women's sartorial choices to investigate how urban, highly educated, professional, affluent middle-class women of Dhaka self-construct their new woman identity at the intersection of gender, class, culture, and religion. I conclude that new womanhood is constructed by the participants through merging the boundaries of respectable middle-class Bengali cultural attire—sari and salwar kameez—with working-class religious attires and upper-class and Western women's sexualised attires, a hybrid and context-specific aesthetic practice which I call smart dressing. New women's choice of smart dressing (both stylisation and context specificity) is a cultural capital and a site where they demonstrate their agency, negotiating power and self-definition of neoliberal affluent middle-class new womanhood. Smart dressing practices distinguish new women participants as a status group by recognising the power of cultural capital, which is converted to economic and symbolic capital, to distance them from the other classes in the country. Smart dressing distinguishes new women as symbols of global professional womanhood who can strike the 'right balance' between moral propriety through subtle changes in

their cultural and religious attires and economic modernisation through participation in highly paid neoliberal jobs. This is contrary to lower and lower-middle-class women's practice of hijab to hide their inexpensive attires underneath and a religious licence to gain access to work opportunities which are otherwise considered unrespectable spaces for them (Rozario 2006; Hussain 2010). Smart dressing also disassociates new women from the upper class' materialism and practice of Western fashion without consideration of Bengali culture, which cause a loss of respectability (Hussein 2015). Finally, by rejecting normative conceptions of middle-class respectable attires and 'conventional/traditional' ways of wearing saris and salwar kameez, they also create intragroup distinction whereby their alternative practices of respectable clothing (stylised and context-specific use of saris and salwar kameez) give them 'status power' to 'order status structure' and distance themselves from other middle-class women. Hence, practices of new womanhood allow cultural and symbolic class analysis in Bangladesh through the discussion of symbolic boundaries that include and define groups and people according to distinctions expressed through normative interdictions (taboos), cultural attitudes and practices, and patterns of likes and dislikes while excluding others (Lamont et al. 2015). I have demonstrated in this chapter that new womanhood is a symbolic capital, and practices of new womanhood play an important role in the construction of the neoliberal affluent middle class of Bangladesh as a powerful group with internal distinctions of classification systems.

I further argue that neoliberal workplaces like corporate organisations and non-Bengali Western spaces provide women the freedom to experiment or negotiate with norms of middle-class respectability and propriety and by extension their new womanhood. At the same time, women constantly test the boundaries of respectable attires by Westernising their Bengali cultural clothes, adding expensive global-branded accessories to their outfits, adding religious headscarves to cultural and Western attires, and desexualising Western clothes when worn in Dhaka. All these practices can be read as signs of new women's boundary work and ability to negotiate with classed, cultural, and religious aesthetic demands while incorporating individual choice, self-presentation, and personal taste. However, they are only able to negotiate with the accountability structure of female propriety by still practising Bengali cultural aesthetics with

subtle changes and continuing to wear sari and salwar kameez for occasions that are important to the family, culture, and nation, such as weddings, official events where they represent the country, and religious and cultural festivals. My findings expand the South Asian literature of respectability and new womanhood by adding organisational aesthetic labour norms to the complex negotiation of aesthetic practices undertaken by new women. New women conform to organisational expectations through context-specific smart dressing to reap the benefits of economic capital via high income and symbolic capital via global professional new womanhood. Thapan (2004, p. 416) called this 'managing the destabilising contradictions' produced by globalisation and neoliberalisation in relation to middle-class respectability in India, whereby new women balance their role as symbols of good (respectable) yet 'modern' womanhood, participating in paid employment and well versed in a contemporary consumerist and trendy lifestyle. I argue such conscious management of cultural respectability and Western modernity enables new women participants of this research to contribute to the creation of their 'own' version of modernity, which does not accept Western ideals unconditionally and values aspects of local culture and religion which Western societies may not consider modern at all (Chatterjee 1997).

The implications of the above for our understanding of formations of new womanhood as a symbolic capital of the neoliberal affluent middle class of Bangladesh is that the new women of Bangladesh provide an image of womanhood that is contrary to the poor, uneducated, traditional, religiously conservative, sexually constrained, and victimised 'third-world woman' (Mohanty et al. 1991). They are part of a new and potentially powerful social group, whose aspirations resemble what Mohanty (2003) identified as those of the privileged one-third of the world located geographically in both the global North and the South—those who are economically and socially within a transnational class, occupying a privileged position in the society they live in. At the same time, these new women survive and navigate through the multiple respectability norms that are imposed upon them in relation to sartorial practices. New womanhood and social change are in a dialogical relationship with one another. New women partake in continuous boundary work to become subjects of value and dissolve old bases of their inferior position in a patriarchal society.

Notes

1. I have identified this same class as 'new affluent middle class' elsewhere (see Hussein 2017a, b).
2. Colonial Bengal was split into two segments during the partition of India. Part of it (known as Kolkata) remained within India, and the other part constituted post-colonial East Pakistan and contemporary Bangladesh.
3. An enveloping outer garment worn by women in some Islamic traditions. Often black in colour, it covers a woman's whole body and has a separate headscarf.
4. A spot on the forehead, between the eyebrows, traditionally worn by Hindu women as a symbol of their marital status but later adapted by Muslim and Hindu women as a cosmetic feature.
5. I use the term aesthetic to mean clothing or dressing practices in this chapter and use the terms aesthetic, clothing, and sartorial practices interchangeably.
6. A salwar kameez is a three-part dress consisting of a long loose fitting trouser and a long tunic top paired with a scarf which can be worn in various different ways.

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Nepalese (New) Women Workers in the Hotel Industry: Exploring Women's Work and Respectability

Mona Shrestha Adhikari

Introduction

This research attempts to contribute to the scant existing literature on women's work in the hotel industry in Nepal. I discuss women's experiential accounts regarding their performance[1] of gendered work, aesthetic labour (Warhurst et al. 2000) and (hetero) sexualised[2] labour (Warhurst and Nickson 2009). I explore how they are conforming to, but also resisting and negotiating, organisational rules and respectability at work. When discussing women's work, it is important to understand how gendered work is continuously changing, as well as its implications for new womanhood. I question if the negotiation and resistance exhibited indicates an emergence of new women workers in the hotel industry of Nepal.

Women's entry into the labour market is important not only in terms of wages but also because it challenges existing constraints on women's mobility—restrictions to the household, which is normatively women's domain. Acker (1990) argues that organisations are not

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gender-neutral, and gender stereotypes exist at the workplace, which at times are reinforced by organisational policies and management practices. Notions of masculinity and femininity are attached to defining the job and the hierarchy in an organisation.

Globally, there has been an expansion in the service sector which, according to McDowell (2007, p. 408), 'has been associated with significant changes in the gender divisions of labour and in the significance of gender relations and embodied performances in workplaces'. Studies on (interactive) service work (see Hochschild [1983]2003; Enarson 1993; Adkins 1995; Pettinger 2005; Deshotels and Forsyth 2006; Wolkowitz 2006; McDowell 2009) have explored how emotional labour, aesthetic labour and sexualised labour are gendered.

In Nepal, tourism is an important sector of the national economy and a major foreign exchange earner. Government policies in Nepal have focused on the economic development of the country by harnessing the potential of the tourism industry. The government has also recognised women's economic contribution in it.

According to CBS (2009), 1.65 per cent of all women in the service sector labour force are employed in the hotel and restaurant sector. These both show an increase in the proportion of their female workforce from 45 per cent in 1998–1999 to 52 per cent in 2008 (CBS 1999). Due to a lack of detailed data, the extent of changes to the casino workforce is unknown. However, while the number of women joining the workforce of hotels, resorts and casinos in Nepal seems to be on the rise, there is very little gender disaggregated data that 'counts women' and their participation in organisations.

For example, few studies such as those by CBS (2004), Khanal (2005) and Upadhyay et al. (2011) on gendered employment in the hotels and resorts have documented the masculinisation of the sector. Demonstrating field survey data in 2008, Upadhyay et al. (2011) note that 18 per cent of the workforce in five-star hotels and 35 per cent of the total casino workforce were women. Thus, women workers are significantly outnumbered by male workers in hotels and resorts. Yet, Khanal (2005) finds that managers preferred to employ women in some departments, such as the reservation, sales and marketing, guest relations, front desk and housekeeping departments, because women were considered to have more convincing

and negotiating capacity than men as and to be more patient, soft-spoken, polite and dedicated to work.

Fernando and Cohen (2013) point out that while studies of women workers in the West have not considered moral issues explicitly, in South Asia, concerns about respectability in relation to women's behavioural norms outside the home have been raised as a crucial issue. Radhakrishnan (2009) highlights that respectable femininity is an ideological gendered construct. In her study on the IT industry, professional women present themselves as balancing work and family, culturally appropriate yet modern, exercising the right amount of freedom and conforming to 'appropriate' sexual behaviours. Additionally, Hussein (2015), in her study on urban middle-class professional women in Bangladesh, alerts that only by examining how women are redoing respectability and shifting the binary understanding of respectable or unrespectable, modern or traditional, can we analyse their progression towards new womanhood.

Moving beyond gendered workforce data, my study contributes to the more general understanding of women's performance of interactive service work by taking a deeper look into how women conform, resist and negotiate at work. I explore how women perform gendered work, aesthetic labour and sexualised labour in the Nepalese hotel industry and further analyse women's engagement in bringing change in the way femininity is produced in interactive service work. I also explore how women negotiate respectability at work; this, I suggest, has implications for new womanhood.

Interactive Service Work and Respectability

Gender underpins sets of assumptions regarding masculine and feminine behaviour which are guided by sociocultural norms of different societies (Charles 1993; Forseth 2005; McDowell 2009). These gendered expectations or assumptions also prevail at work as 'workplaces are dynamic and changing and are themselves embedded within wider social structures and attitudes and assumptions about gender and sexuality' (McDowell 2009, p. 54).

Acker (1990) suggests that one of the ways in which the 'gendering of work' can be analysed is by examining the gender division of labour. The concept of 'occupational segregation' (Hakim 1981) posits that labour

is divided on two dimensions: vertical and horizontal. While vertical segregation describes who is employed and where in the organisational hierarchy, horizontal segregation describes who is employed in which kind of work in the different departments within an organisation and more widely across the labour market.

Studies on gender, sexuality and work support the idea that men and women do different kinds of work when they are in the same occupation (Hochschild [1983]2003; Adkins 1995, 2001; Dellinger 2002). This is noted by McDowell (2009, p. 53): '[I]f femininity structures less-regarded jobs, masculinity is associated with management of skills'. Additionally, Acker (1990, pp. 149–50) asserts that the concepts of both 'a job' and 'hierarchies' are gendered. While 'a job' contains the gender-based division of labour and the separation of the public-private sphere, 'hierarchies' are also constructed on the assumption that those who are committed to work (invariably men) are more suited to authority and responsibility and therefore are employed at higher ranks, whereas those whose commitments are divided (largely women) are in lower ranks.

Literatures on the hotel industry illustrate that women and men experience gendered occupational segregation (Crompton and Sanderson 1990; Levy and Lerch 1991; Adkins 1995; Sinclair 1997). Women's work is confined to traditional areas like housekeeping and reception duties, categorised as secondary labour and termed as 'semi-skilled domestic work'. It is often viewed as an extension of their domestic and household activities. Women are also generally seasonal workers who face the risks of job insecurity. Men, predominantly, occupy skilled and managerial jobs.

Hicks (1990) mentions that the hotel industry gives the 'personality' of a person high weightage when recruiting. Further, the term 'personality' is often used to mean sexual attractiveness and/or certain specific feminine skills and attributes (Filby 1992). Hall (1993, p. 456) explains that '[H]iring young attractive women and dressing them in uniforms to highlight their "sexy" looks is commonplace'. Adkins (1995, p. 126) states that women bar staff in the hotel she studied were required to wear their gingham dresses off their shoulders, and bar managers would sometimes physically pull down their dresses to maintain the 'appropriate' appearance. Adkins (1995) also notes female workers in particular being expected to cope with sexual advances from customers, considering it to be part of the job.

Warhurst et al. (2000) refer to the process of organisationally producing employees' bodies to fit the desired aesthetic of the organisation and work for organisational benefit. Employees' embodiment in service work creates affective interactive service with the customers with the intention of 'satisfying the customer'. It also creates a perception that employees have to be 'good looking' or simply have the 'right look'. It is this focus on 'looks' that can be analysed to identify the extension of aesthetic labour to sexualised labour. In the words of Filby (1992) 'selling the service' also takes the form of 'selling sexuality'.

Warhurst and Nickson (2009, p. 385) argue that to understand sexualised labour, 'a conceptual double shift' is needed: first, 'from emotional to aesthetic to sexualised labour' and then from employee sexuality 'that is sanctioned and subscribed to by management to that which management strategy prescribes'. They identify three differing forms of sexualised work where employee sexuality is:

(1) S*anctioned by the management*—Sexuality that is driven by the employee, but not prescribed by the management. In this case, management is aware but remains silent.
(2) S*ubscribed to by management*—Management permits and promotes the sexualised work by subscribing to it and also capitalises on this for the organisation's commercial benefit.
(3) *Prescribed by management (organisationally driven strategy)*, whereby the management has a strategy that is intended to create a distinctive, prescribed sexualised 'look' as a style of service.

Their distinction between sexualised work and sexualised labour is important; only when sexualised work is prescribed by the management can doing such be counted as sexualised labour.

Although one sees control over workers through organisational policies and practices, it is important to acknowledge that at times workers also resist. For feminist scholars, resistance at work has been an area of interest, illuminating processes of change and transformation (Cockburn 1991; Thomas and Davies 2005).

Studies on new womanhood present them as change agents. Discussion about the 'new woman' dates back to the nineteenth-century Britain, when respectable Victorian young women of the middle class were trained

solely to be fit wives and mothers and were confined to domestic space, primarily as caretakers of the family. In contrast, 'new women' pursued a more active role in the public sphere.

In the South Asian context, the analysis of 'respectability' among South Asian women is gaining prominence where the notion of respectable femininity generally includes women prioritising family above work through domesticity, caring and socialising roles and moral propriety (Ansari 2016; Fernando and Cohen 2013; Hussein 2015; Liechty 2003, 2005; Radhakrishnan 2009). In Sri Lanka, Fernando and Cohen (2013, p. 160) examine the relationship between respectable femininity and career in a context where respectability is prominent and find that demonstrating good moral behaviour limits women's career progression but is vital in winning respect from colleagues and superiors. For them, good moral behaviour includes trying to excel in work, limiting acquaintances with male colleagues, not being seen with a man after office hours, maintaining physical and emotional distance from men and not staying out alone at night. In Pakistan, Ansari's (2016) study on professional women in the public sector finds that those who abided by the respectable femininity principles of domesticity faced hurdles in career advancement, as there is a clash with the traditional career management techniques. Hussein's (2015, p. 267) study on professional women in Dhaka contends 'that the power of new womanhood lies in their ability to legitimize which status claims are respectable in what context, rather than conforming to generalized norms of respectability across all fields, or abandoning them altogether'.

In Nepal, there is no research that analyses women's work in the hotel industry using the concepts of gendered work, aesthetic labour, sexualised labour and respectability. Closest is Liechty's (2003, 2005) work in which middle-class women are considered as objects of male consumer desire. Women are increasingly involved in the new consumer culture of leisure particularly in Kathmandu (the country's capital) where the 'emergence of both restaurants and prostitution represent the public commodification of transactions (whether in food or sex) that, until only a generation ago, had been almost always private and domestic' (Liechty 2005, p. 7). He mentions that long-prevailing social and sexual stigma linked to women's work in the market economy often causes jobs like waitress, receptionist and secretary to be seen as more or less synonymous with prostitution and thus unrespectable (ibid., p. 22).

Exploring how women's performance at work in the hotel sector in Kathmandu is shifting the way Nepalese womanhood is produced raises questions about the transition towards new womanhood.

The Nepalese Context

Nepal has an ethnically diverse population of 26.62 million, which comprises of 48.56 per cent male and 51.44 per cent female (CBS 2011). Political instability which began in the eighteenth century has been continued by the armed insurgency waged by the Nepal Communist Party (Maoists) between 1996 and 2006 (Dixit 2011). During the research, the growth and activism of trade unions (TUs)[3] was attracting the attention of the government and private industries in Nepal. The All Nepal Hotel and Restaurant Workers' Union (ANHRWU) had become powerful, along with the United Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (UCPN-M), which was in power from August 2008 to May 2009.

What the Maoists consider the 'people's war' (1996–2006) disrupted normal life and affected many industries including the tourism industry. Certain labour disputes demanding fair wages, facilities and permanent status for workers have affected the hotel subsector, with repercussions including the closure of several hotels.[4] Fifty-eight hotels and resorts in Nagarkot, a tourist hub near Kathmandu, were shut down for almost four days in November 2008 as the trade union (ANHRWU) demanded an increase in salary for all workers (Upadhyay et al. 2011).

The area of casino operation has remained largely untouched by researchers, although a few journalists have investigated issues related to crime and labour disputes in such establishments. Recently casinos came under public scrutiny due to tax evasion, so TUs there started to question the high level of profits earned. This resulted in strikes and protests. The closing and opening of casinos was ongoing as negotiations continued (Prashain 2011). These circumstances indicate the fragile employment situation in casinos, which carries implications for workers' income and job security.

International Labour Organisation (2004) documents that women working in hotels and restaurants are at risk for sexual harassment, which is said to be more prevalent in hotels and restaurants although it is persistent

in almost all workplaces. Within hotels, those working in health clubs are most vulnerable as they have to work on the bodies of customers. Women working as waitresses and housemaids also experience harassment from male colleagues and guests.

Research Design

When I started this research, there was no gendered workforce data on the hotel industry in Nepal. As per the Hotel Association of Nepal (2001), there were eight five-star hotels, five deluxe resorts and eight casinos in Kathmandu. I administered questionnaires to personnel managers in all 21 establishments about their workforce during my preliminary field visit to Kathmandu in July and August 2008.

During the second visit, between April and December 2009, I chose two establishments from each of the three categories—namely, five-star hotels, deluxe resorts and casinos based on the relatively high proportion of women in their workforce. To maintain confidentiality, I chose to use pseudonyms: Platinum hotel (PH), Gold hotel (GH), Sun resort (SR), Moon resort (MR), Dazzle casino (DC) and Glitter casino (GC).

I conducted 65 interviews with different groups of people (workers, managers, male family members and policy experts), organised two focus group discussions with women working on the gaming floor of casinos and made observations. Using mixed research methods of questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions and observations allowed me to gather both quantitative and qualitative data.

In this chapter, although I do not focus on class as a category of analysis, I relate women workers to the similarly emerging 'urban middle-class', as referred to by Liechty (2003, 2005). The women respondents have joined the formal labour market; many have migrated from rural areas to cities for work and aspire to gain economic independence and respect. Most respondents could be categorised as lower-middle class to mid-middle class primarily due to their limited education level, ranging from a few years of schooling to higher secondary school level. They wanted to look both 'modern' and 'traditional' at work.

Research Findings

I discuss my research findings in three sections. First, I explain how women conform to gendered work, aesthetic labour and sexualised work. Second, the way in which women resist and negotiate organisational codes of conduct drawing on support of the TU is discussed. Finally I present how women negotiate respectability at work.

Conforming to Gendered Work, Aesthetic Labour and Sexualised Labour

The research finds that the nature of gendered work varies depending on the type of sector/industry and the kind of services provided. While hotels and resorts provide food, accommodation and related services, casinos focus on entertaining customers. The backbone of hotels and resorts is the back office and in casinos it is the front office where most workers are concentrated.[5] My research finds that in all establishments, women are conforming to gendered work, aesthetic labour and sexualised labour to some extent.

Gendered Work

Data gathered during my preliminary field visit shows that a majority of the workers are men, with women comprising 14 per cent and 21 per cent in hotels and resorts, respectively. The casinos, a relatively new area of employment, have fewer men, with 32 per cent of the workforce being female. The workforce in hotel, resort and casino sector in Nepal is not feminised overall, but certain occupations within it are becoming feminised.

The analysis of vertical gender segregation in the sample establishments shows a 'gendering of hierarchies' (Acker 1990); managers are mostly male in all establishments. Analysing horizontal gender segregation has shown that there is a 'gendering of jobs' (Acker 1990) in hotels and resorts, women are concentrated in departments that involve so-called feminine work such as housekeeping, serving food and beverages,

spa and beauty care, and in casinos, on the gaming floor assisting and entertaining customers, largely men, who gamble. Men comprise the majority of the workforce in other departments. The workforces in some departments, such as engineering and laundry in hotels and resorts and transport in casinos, are exclusively male, but there are no departments where the workforce is exclusively female.

Gendered work may be due to the gendered ideologies held by managers and workers, which are underpinned by essentialist views that attach attributes of masculinity and femininity to certain jobs. Managers' preferences for women workers are based on supposedly 'natural' reasons: first, that women have often acquired certain skills like cleaning and caring at home—skills acquired at home are assumed to be easily transferrable to work—and second, that women are generally more presentable, with charming personalities, good interpersonal skills, soft-spoken manners and a liking for work related to beauty and body care.

Aesthetic Labour

Using the framework of Warhurst et al. (2000), I found that both men and women workers are with imparted grooming skills; workers are trained and monitored to perform aesthetic labour. While all workers are trained to look good, managers expect women to look glamorous. There is high scrutiny of women's appearance by the management. Thus, more is required of women in terms of codes of grooming. Performance of aesthetic labour differed between working practices. Babita (27, Cook, MR) revealed that it was skills that mattered to her at work, as she did not interact with customers, '… but those in the reception, and customer services need to look good because that is where customers come and interact'.

In the casinos, some women were of the view that good looks helped them get recruited. Madina (GC) is tall and believes that tall girls are selected in the gaming section. She further adds that her supervisor emphasises grooming classes because '…it is to train the girls to look good'. Women dominate as croupiers and guest relation assistants and are required by the management to adhere to specific grooming standards

delivered through training and a staff handbook; these include applying makeup as taught, maintaining an appropriate body weight (a slim figure is preferred), and wearing high-heeled shoes, seemingly for the purpose of looking heterosexually available. Madina mentions that their supervisor 'comes checking from the shoes, length of the skirt to the way girls have applied their makeup'.

During the field visits, I observed that workers in all establishments had uniforms (dress codes), and all wore name tags. In hotels, men at the front office wore Western outfits: a shirt and trousers and occasionally a bow-tie, or tie, and a jacket. Unlike men, some women were dressed in Western and some wore Nepali costume[6]—a blouse and a sari. The front office workers at SR had similar uniforms to the hotel workers. MR workers at the front office looked different as most wore the national costume[7]: *daura-suruwal*, *topi* and a waistcoat. Management controls women's aesthetic and sartorial practices and performances of labour through organisational codes of conduct, projecting women as 'customer oriented' and perhaps also as 'modern' and/or 'traditional' women.

Sexualised Work and Sexualised Labour

Using Warhurst and Nickson's (2009) framework, I find that women's work in the hotels, resorts and casinos is sexualised through aesthetic labour in that a particular look, one assumed to appeal to heterosexual men, is required of women workers.

The management of the sample establishments 'sanctions or subscribes to' women's sexuality. Women workers' discussions about flirting with male customers and colleagues indicate the way establishments 'sanction' sexualised work. As explained earlier, women workers having a certain appearance is considered useful to attract (male) customers. More work is required from women to follow the skills related to 'looking', which for them are more detailed and extended than they are for men. Women are also policed on their appearance to a greater extent. It can thus be said that women's sexuality is 'subscribed to' by the management that permits and promotes women's sexualised work and also capitalises on this in all establishments (Warhurst and Nickson 2009).

Sexualised work is 'prescribed' by the management through the hiring of young and (hetero)sexually attractive women workers on the gaming floor as croupiers and guest relation assistants. This can be construed as a management strategy to attract male customers. The women are also prescribed to perform sexualised labour through the acts that their role requires them to perform, such as lighting cigars and kissing chips. In addition, women workers' accounts reveal that casino management requires that uniforms be tailor made to fit them in a certain way. Most women on the gaming floor at GC that I observed were wearing closely fitting clothes.

Sexualised labour is therefore legitimised by the management as part of women workers' job in the casinos. Their work requires them to appear 'attractive 'and to play up to male desires, which necessitates a certain type of dress and make-up in order to be seen as heterosexually available (Adkins 1995). Doing sexualised work has implications for the way women's work is perceived in wider society particularly in relation to respectable femininity.

Resistance and Negotiation at Work: Role of the Trade Union

The support of the TU emerged as an important element in my study and was particularly perceived by women as a source of 'power' that was important for their resistance (Deshotels and Forsyth 2006; Sallaz 2005). TUs can be seen as an evolving player in the hotel industry, gradually shifting power away from management. In the sample establishments, although employees need not necessarily belong to a TU to be recruited, TUs operate to a large extent as closed shops.[8] According to several communications with workers and employers within the TU, women's representation on the executive board, and the visibility of women's issues, has increased over the years. The establishments felt threatened by TUs as they realised that not fulfilling TU demands could result in strikes, closures and business disruption.

When interviewing managers, I came to understand that they were challenged by the TUs. Their accounts further highlight the intervening role of the TU in the recruitment process, which makes it difficult for them to

continue recruiting on the basis of 'looks'. More and more workers are drawing on their connection to TUs to show resistance at work. For example, the quote from the manager of MR below shows how workers are using the support of the TUs to disobey organisation rules:

> These days they [workers] stay on leave without prior notice. If you scold them, they say sorry and that's it. We give them a verbal warning and that's all. We cannot fire them, they know it. … Earlier workers would abide by the rules, only a few would disobey but now it's the politics… the union is active.

Overall, some women resist and negotiate on certain aspects of their work, aided by the TU.

Challenging Gendered Ideologies

Although workers generally conformed to gendered work, a few women workers challenged the gendered ideologies by resisting the gendered aspects of work. For example, Karuna (22, MR) and Dolma (27, PH) had to prove they could work in the kitchen when faced with resistance from male workers. Karuna expressed, with anger, 'some men suggested that only they can lift the heavy utensils. I felt they were trying to tease me… Once, one of my male colleagues said I was not strong enough as them… That really annoyed me…' Likewise, Dolma said she did 'everything from lifting big pots and standing long hours in front of the oven just to prove myself that I could handle the tough work'. Thus, while male workers seem to draw gendered boundaries at work by resisting women's entry into certain departments, these women are challenging the understanding of femininity as weak and fragile and are negotiating by taking up work that requires them to use physical strength.

Defying Codes of Grooming

The emphasis on looking good seems to be slowly changing with the new recruits through the influence of the Maoist TUs, as explained by managers of both casinos. For example, when I asked the manager of DC what they looked for in women and men workers, the manager replied, '…we

now face labour militancy. The union gives us a list of say fifty names and we just select say twenty'. The allusion to the role of TUs in the recruitment of workers was echoed by some casino workers.

Not all women comply with the standards of looking glamorous set by the management. They are comfortable 'looking good' and 'dressing up smart', which gain respect at work. But despite the emphasis on their aesthetic labour, they defy some codes of grooming. This does not mean that they do not like to 'look good'. They do have an interest in putting on makeup if it suits their uniform and their own style. It is the manner in which management wants them to look good that women resist: they contest and negotiate the grooming techniques taught to them.

It is particularly those working in the back office of hotels and resorts who defy the codes of grooming. For example, Dolma (PH) said, 'I don't understand why I should apply makeup on my face. I just don't. … If I am called to face the customer; I will … they should like the food I serve, not my makeup'. Similarly, Sumnima (33, Housekeeping, SR) mentioned that although she applied makeup, it was in her own style. She said, 'my style is not like what was taught to me in training on grooming, although I did learn some techniques'. Both these women negotiated on the extent to which they would do makeup. When I asked how they managed to get away with it Dolma said, 'I got this job because I had links with the trade union and I know the management does not dare to take action or say anything to workers, especially to us who were recruited through them'.

Another female worker, Deepika (GC), said that if she did as she was taught in the grooming training, she would look horrible. She said, 'it's just too much makeup … and the hairstyle is even worse, as if I am trying to look sexy…' suggesting resistance of sexualisation. Deepika grooms herself in her own way, transgresses the way the casino aims to produce femininity and creates a 'new' femininity, one that she called '…just in the right manner'. She asserted '… I don't want to be seen as a prostitute' showing her desire to maintain 'respectability' and avoid association with an occupation that is often linked to women's work in casinos.[9]

In GC, women as a group on the gaming floor defied the grooming codes by hiding their mobiles in their stockings. Deepika mentioned, 'I think even our supervisor knows we hide the mobile inside our clothes, but she does not say anything because now most of us are doing it', indicating

loosening control of management. Sonali (24) mentioned, 'married women cannot wear *potay*, bangles and s*indhur* during work', but I observed that some women wore them, hiding *potay* and bangles under their shirt and *sindhur* covered by their hair.[10]

Later when I asked Anju (31) to explain the situation, she said:

> Actually although earlier, we were not allowed to wear them at all, it's been a few years, we can wear them during festivals like Teej[11] …only for that day. But then it's been so many days now that the festival is gone and still some of our colleagues continue to wear them … the supervisor I think pretends not to see or comment … these [women workers] are the ones who got the job with the influence of the Maoist trade union.

By allowing certain exceptions to grooming requirements during festival times on a temporary basis, casinos are relaxing their control over women's appearance. Some women continue to carry on with the same appearance long after the festival, which further suggests that women are negotiating on their looks and sartorial practices. As Anju explains, these women had support from the TU, which could be the reason why they could show their resistance without too much risk to their employment.

While some women choose to overtly flout the rules, others do so covertly, resisting management's prescriptions of how femininity should be done through hidden acts. These strategies to both maintain 'traditional' values (married women's adorning accessories) and embody 'modernity' (carrying mobile phones) point to a 'new' form of womanhood. The examples above also illustrate that some women are negotiating aesthetic labour, and a few women are also claiming respect as they resist the organisational codes of conduct.

Confronting Sexualisation by Customers and Male Workers

Some women workers confront the sexualisation of their labour, mainly from customers, by protesting sexual harassment. I specifically asked the workers, 'Did you or any of your colleagues face sexual harassment at work?' In the casinos, croupiers (largely women) face customers who make passing offensive remarks, as shown below:

> Basanti (30): We have the power to discipline the men in the casinos. We tell the customers to behave and sometimes when they do not, we signal the bouncers, who immediately come and handle the situation.
>
> Neetu (30): These men [bouncers] are so strong that they will just lift the customer and take them to a corner, have a discussion and make them understand the rules of the casino.
>
> Basanti (30): … some customers try and harass us but we are the ones who control them in the casinos because we decide when to signal the bouncers.

The above quotes show that croupiers feel that they have 'control over' drunken and sometimes abusive men. This helps them feel more secure working in the casino. Croupiers have the 'power' to call (male) bouncers; this is a 'power' gained by women and is 'new'. Nonetheless, the conception that these women have 'power' can be questioned. In this case, croupiers' 'power' is conditional; they could mobilise men as bouncers which is a novelty but one sanctioned by management.

Women workers also found themselves sexually harassed by their male colleagues. As Dolma (PH) explained, 'I do see some men who brush their shoulders, their hands as they walk past some of the women colleagues at work. I don't think this is appropriate … well some women may complain but not all'. When she faced such harassment herself she 'told the guy off, never to repeat'. She was hired because of the TU, which perhaps explains why she was able to contest sexual harassment by speaking up.

Negotiating Respectability

Women repeatedly claimed respect at work. They raised concerns over their work being stigmatised and disrespected. Women working particularly in the hotel industry are disparaged based on a common perception that 'daughters of good/respected families' do not work late at night, especially where the work environment involves people gambling and requires serving guests (predominantly men) alcohol.

In both casinos, during focus group discussions, women (especially unmarried and young women) expressed that they faced negative social perceptions. For example, women from GC said:

Madina (25): The house owners who lived in the flat above ours would often ask my mother what kind of job I do in the casino. … If any male colleague came to visit me at home or even dropped me off on his motor bike, I knew my mother would be questioned the following day.

Deepika (30): Oh yes, working in the casino is a challenge for most of us. People think because Nepalese are not allowed in the casinos, anything can happen inside, such as prostitution … but this is totally wrong…

Sonali (24): I fully agree. It is because Madina is not married there is so much suspicion about what she does. … These negative beliefs about our work in the casino will take a long time to change.

The social anxiety about women's work in the casinos is often related to its sexualisation. All the women who participated in the focus group discussions raised concerns about the negative images of casino work perpetuated by society. Madina added, '… we now are dropped off by the casino van and I don't hear my mother being questioned these days…'. indicating possible changes in these perceptions. Sonali's prediction that social perceptions about women's work in the casino would take a long time to change reflects the wider social norms about women's sexuality and work; women's work which has sexual connotations is associated with shame.

In hotels and resorts, some women workers explained that there has been little (if any) change in the negative social perceptions of women's work—particularly that which involves housekeeping and body massage. Their work used to be stigmatised, associated with providing sexual services:

Hotel work was earlier not seen as good work. I think people associated sexual activities with hotel rooms and assumed women working inside rooms get involved in providing sexual services to customers … but this kind of perception is slowly changing. … I don't think people recognise the work we do in housekeeping. (Sabina, 28, Housekeeping, PH)

Here, the job I do involves massage and spa treatment. We work for women customers only. Those who do not know may think women workers like me have to work with the bodies of male customers too … some relatives… had raised questions in my work… had barely any respect or recognition. (Meena, 27, Health club/Spa, SR)

Most women workers highlighted that their work was tough, tiring, skilled and demanding but was not valued as such. For example, Kalpana (36, MR) said, '[housekeeping work] is very tiring, my back hurts … but when I tell someone what I do in the resort, I don't see any appreciation and recognition for my work'. Meena on the other hand explains that her relatives request that she find jobs for other girls in the family at her resort. She says, 'I think they now understand and recognise what I do at work. If they did not respect my work, they would not want their daughters to join too'. Madina, working in the casino, also had her relatives request help in getting a job there. A few women, like Sabina, Kalpana and Madina, consider social perception to be slowly changing and feel that their work is gaining respect.

In the casinos, women workers at large were concerned with social perception about their work. For example, Rohinee (30, GC), however, said, 'I still do not feel confident or I am not proud to say I work in the casino, it is not seen with respect'. Neeta (27, DC) said she hesitated to tell her friends and relatives that she worked in a casino because she was from a 'good' and 'respectable' family.

Women are disheartened that their work is undervalued, unrecognised and disrespected. They consider their jobs to be tough, skilled and requiring training. Women consistently try to claim respectability at work. The above discussion shows that women are shifting towards new womanhood as they strive to negotiate this.

Conclusion

This research contributes to the understanding and debates on gendered work, aesthetic labour and sexualised labour analysis of interactive service work in Nepal. I make three contributions: first, I find that gendered work, aesthetic labour and sexualised labour are all exemplified in the sample establishments. The hotels, resorts and casinos are not feminised sectors, although there are relatively more women employed in casinos. In contrast, studies in other parts of the world (Crompton and Sanderson 1990; Levy and Lerch 1991; Enarson 1993; Adkins 1995; Chandler and Jones 2003; Sallaz 2005; Jones and Chandler 2007) showed the hotel and casino as decidedly feminised sectors. In the case of

Nepalese casinos, this research has found that although women do not make up the majority of employees, card dealers or croupiers are mainly young women, similar to the findings of Enarson (1993) and Jones and Chandler (2007). Casinos hire young, heterosexually attractive women on the gaming floor to attract male customers and differ from hotels and resorts in the way gendered work is constructed and performed there. Findings illustrate there is a 'right look' that is required of all workers, but this look is both gendered and dependent on the nature of interaction with customers.

Second, women's resistance and negotiation on organisational codes of conduct with the support of the TU suggest that women are contesting the way management controls their work and are trying to bring about changes in the way women work. Women rely on the power of the TU to resist and negotiate while performing work. I also find that croupiers in both casinos perceive themselves as having gained 'power' which is a 'new' achievement for them. In this case, croupiers' 'power' is conditional; they can mobilise male bouncers, which is a novelty, but one sanctioned by management. This shows that power, albeit conditional, gives women a form of confidence that reflects their femininity; their self-perceived strength results in the generation of a 'new' form of womanhood that claims respect.

Finally, women are negotiating respectability at workplaces. As in Fernando and Cohen (2013), notions of being a 'respectable' woman recurred as my respondents described some aspects of their work as still stigmatised, devalued and disrespected for various reasons. While some women consider the support of the TUs to have improved their situation, many continue to struggle for respect in their work by resisting and negotiating organisational codes of conduct.

In conclusion, women's resistance and negotiation with managerial prescriptions of how femininity should be done suggest a challenging of management's control over women; they are shifting towards bringing change in the understanding of 'respectable' femininity. As Chatterjee (2016, p. 1189) notes, the newness in 'new woman' represents '…looking forward, an urge to meet the demands of a changing world… [that] exists only in companionship with the 'old' as configurations that co-constitute each other'. Likewise Hussein (2017) asserts that women engaged in negotiating respectability posit the emergence of 'new women', who have been conceptualised as those constantly negotiating change and stasis in

their everyday lives. Hence, I agree with Hussein (2017) and argue that by claiming respectability and negotiating and challenging gendered, aesthetic and sexualised labour, the women who participated in this research emerge as new women. I have provided a crucial starting point for further research asking if there is the emergence of the shift towards 'new' womanhood in the Nepalese labour market.

Notes

1. I explored how women were doing their work in the hotel industry. I limit the use of the term 'performance' to mean 'doing' and use the terms interchangeably throughout the chapter. I mention this to avoid confusion with the meaning of performance as performativity, which is not something I examine.
2. Throughout the chapter, unless otherwise specified, I use the term sexualised to mean (hetero)sexualised in the case of hotels, resorts and casinos in Nepal. I came to understand that the context in which gendered work took place in these establishments was guided with notions of heterosexuality as the norm. Therefore, when I say there is sexualised labour I mean there is (hetero)sexualised labour in these establishments.
3. In sample establishments, there were three major trade unions: All Nepal Hotel and Restaurant Workers' Union (ANHRWU) affiliated to United Communist Part of Nepal-Maoist (UCPN-M); Nepal Independent Hotel, Casino and Restaurant Workers Union (NIHCRWU) affiliated to Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist-Leninist party (CPN-UML); and Nepal Tourism and Hotel Workers Union (NTHWU) affiliated to Nepali Congress (NC).
4. The Hotel Yak and Yeti, one of the five-star hotels in Kathmandu, was closed for almost eight months (February–August 2006) as the trade unions (ANHRWU and NIHCRWU) demands were not met.
5. In service work, particularly the hotel, resort and casino sectors, it is common to hear the terms front office and back office. Front office departments have high level of customer interaction such as reception, sales and marketing, restaurants within food and beverage, security and so on. Back office departments often located at the rear of the premises where entry is restricted to staff include human resources, administration, finance, housekeeping, laundry and so on.

6. National costume for women includes blouses and saris. A sari is normally a 5 or 5.5 metres long cloth wrapped around the waist and over one shoulder. Debate exists on whether the present national costume represents the diverse ethnic costumes of the country's different groups.
7. National costume for men includes *daura-suruwal*, *topi* and a Western style of waistcoat and a jacket. The *daura* is a closed-neck shirt with five pleats and eight strings that serve to tie it around the body. The *suruwal* are fitted trousers made from the same material as the daura. The topi is a Nepali cap, with its peak offset from the centre giving it a slightly lopsided look, which completes the outfit.
8. Closed shop refers to a place of work where all employees must belong to an agreed trade union.
9. According to Liechty (2005), the rise in number of prostitutes in Kathmandu took place alongside the heavy concentration of restaurants, hotels and lodges, which were new forms of public space for the rising urban middle-class population.
10. Traditional Hindu married women wear the symbolic *potay* (necklace made of beads) and *sindhur* (vermillion in the hair parting) that signifies and portrays their married status.
11. *Teej* is a Hindu festival celebrated by women, wherein they dress in their finest attire and decorate themselves.

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Merging Career and Marital Aspirations: Emerging Discourse of 'New Girlhood' Among Muslims in Assam

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Recent studies on 'new womanhood' in South Asia understand 'new women' as part of the neoliberal, affluent middle class who claim distinctions based on academic qualification, employment, and exposure to transnational lifestyles, alongside their gendered, classed, and culturally attuned selfhoods performed through dressing, work-home balance, and individualism. 'New womanhood' is legitimised by alternative and multiple practices of respectability that depend on variables like age and profession. In that sense, 'new women' forge alternative forms of respectability that do not abandon old structures of respectability; rather, they conform to, negotiate, and potentially transgress normative conceptions of middle-class respectability (Hussein 2015). The literature on new womanhood in South Asia, however, has paid scant attention to practices of respectable femininity of adolescent girls. In many Western accounts, young women/girls are fetishised as model subjects in the neoliberal cultural landscape. Using the idea of 'global girl', McRobbie (2009) suggests that girls are now thought to be the ideal rational actors who have succeeded in reinventing themselves by

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adjusting to the global market forces through educational achievement, employment, practices of 'makeover', and so on. In both sets of literature, however, there is a void in understanding practices through which 'new girlhood' is enacted. Given the literature also focus on normatively idealised upper/middle class and white femininities, it gives an impression as though only women/girls of certain groups are able to respond to changing economic and cultural changes. My account of 'new girlhood' in Assam draws from both the increasing focus on girls as economic actors and girls as markers of national and local cultures that should be protected and policed. This research ties with emerging set of literature on class and aspirations in South Asia that focuses extensively on how the middle class in India have strategically achieved their aspirations of class mobility by positioning themselves in certain ways in the neoliberal development model (Gilbertson 2017; Jeffrey 2010; Fernandes and Heller 2006).

This chapter makes the case for the emergence of the discourse on 'new girlhood' among lower, middle, and upper-class Muslim families by paying attention to the changing, yet continuing, ideals of normative femininity in parental and individual aspirations of girls. The 'new' in 'new girlhood' is not necessarily about who they are or the power relations they are situated in, but how the families and communities position themselves in a neoliberal nation. In particular, this chapter pays attention to the 'new' practice of merging career and marital aspirations among young girls through a discourse on appropriate aspirations. I conceptualise appropriate aspirations as family-approved personal aspirations which support women's career and education ambitions while maintaining the marital, family-centred ideals of respectable femininity. Through the discussion on the practice of merged career and marital aspirations for Muslim girls, this chapter will develop an understanding of the changing contours of girlhood and individual and collective aspirations in contemporary South Asia.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section discusses the data collection methods used and briefly introduces the issues of class and ethnicity in postcolonial Assam. The next section reviews recent literature on 'new womanhood', 'new girlhood', and the place of individual and collective aspirations in the discourses on 'new girlhood'. The third section talks about the merger of marital and career aspirations in parents' constructions of 'appropriate aspirations' for girls. I show how parents from different

classes merge ideals of empowerment and financial independence, with those of good family and marriage to construe the idea of good girlhood. I locate the issue of appropriate aspiration within Bourdieu's theorisation of cultural authorisation, with particular attention to respectable femininity as symbolic capital. The fourth section focuses on the responses of the Muslim girls in my study to the gendered nature of parental conception of aspirations. The girls articulate both personal and family's 'aspirations' as well as 'victimhood' as conceptualised by Harris and Dobson (2015) in their conception of 'suffering actors' to understand women's agency being located both in their victimhood and their action to ameliorate their situation.

Data Collection

The fieldwork for this study was undertaken in five schools located in Assam's Nagaon district. The choice of 'field' was dictated by various strategic reasons, like demographic composition, literacy levels, political significance in Assam, and excellent road connectivity. The data was gathered from 20 focus group discussions, 37 interviews with school going Muslim girls, 26 interviews with parents, and 24 interviews with teachers from September 2013 to April 2014. This chapter focuses on data from the interviews with Muslim girls and parents. My initial scoping study in Nagaon indicated that the educational system in Nagaon, as in the rest of India, is deeply fragmented around factors like public or private governance, co-ed or gender segregated, religious or secular, and regulated by Central Board of Secondary Education or Secondary Education Board of Assam. Schools in Nagaon are also class segregated. The schools where the upper and upper middle classes send their children became obvious based on the fees charged by the schools. The fees of the schools, public perception of the schools' reputation and level of difficulty of the admission process were fairly accurate indicators of the nature of a school's student body. But finding schools which attracted students from lower middle and lower classes was comparatively more challenging. The five schools in my sample were chosen based on the requirements of accessibility, presence of Muslim girls, class composition, type of governance, and religious orientation. The nature of these schools is detailed in the Table 1 below.

Table 1 Nature and composition of schools in the sample

Pseudonyms	Type (faith school vs. secular school)	Type (governance)	Class composition	Muslim children (%)
City School	Faith school (Christian) with a secular curriculum	Government unaided/run by the Don Bosco Convent	Upper class, upper middle class, middle class	10%
Northern School	Secular	Government aided	Middle class and some lower class	25%
Meadow School	Secular	Government aided	Lower class and lower middle class	50%
Sanctuary School	Secular	Provincialised	Lower class	100%
Kaleidoscope Madrassa	Faith school (Muslim) with an Islamic curriculum	Provincialised	Lower class	100%

Source: Fieldwork data 2013–14

In my research, class is understood both as an economic and a socio-cultural measure. The income-based classification by the National Council for Applied Economic Research conceptualises three broad classes. This classification further divides the middle and upper classes into income-based subcategories (Shukla 2010). I expand the income-based understanding of class using Bourdieu's theorisation of cultural production and reproduction of class. Bourdieu's (1984, p. 114) formulation classifies people on actually usable resources and powers, namely, social capital (connections to high capital individuals and groups) and cultural capital (education and other forms of knowledge) along with their access to economic capitals. Bourdieu's (1984) theory of practice views the distinction between classes not as a priori but as being constructed through practice. In other words, people can claim affiliation to a certain class identity through a range of noneconomic capitals and practices. In this context, the literature on India's 'new' middle class highlights its ideological character, lending it a disproportionately strong

ability to imagine the Indian nation (Chatterjee 1989; Deshpande 2003; Fernandes 2000; Fernandes and Heller 2006). Thus, even when a majority of my respondents are not middle class in the economic sense, it is important to study middle-class values and norms to understand aspirations across classes. Fernandes and Heller (2006) have said that the 'hegemonic' authority vested on new middle classes to speak on behalf of all Indians and to stand for all Indians makes an understanding of middle-class values and norms integral to the understanding of aspirations across classes.

In Assam, the picture of class is further complicated by the issue of ethnicity. In 1841, the British estimated about one sixth of Assam's population to be Muslims (Robinson 1975, p. 252). Muslims had syncretised Islam in precolonial Assam and participated actively against the Mughals, including in the historical Saraighat Battle of 1671 (Hussain 1987; Baruah 1986). Independence from the colonial rule and partition in 1947 led to the creation of linguistically homogeneous state of Assam, thus making the Assamese-speaking population numerically and politically dominant in postcolonial Assam. The Assamese middle class, which consisted mainly of high caste Hindus and a section of Assamese-speaking Muslims, consolidated their social standing during this period. As a result, they became a politically and culturally dominant force. With the strengthening of the educated middle class and the creation of a more stable and linguistically homogeneous territorial unit, an anti-immigrant Assam Movement emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s. More recently, the migration of young middle-class professionals to join the growing sectors of knowledge economy and Information Technology India has contributed to the merger of Assamese nationalism with Indian (markedly Hindu) nationalism.

Mapping Key Literature: New Womanhood, Girlhood, and Aspirations

In colonial India, middle-class women became the bearers of modern nationalist culture, which was superior to the cultures of the West and traditional or lower-class India (Chatterjee 1989). Postcolonial constructions

of Indian women hinge upon a notion of the family and idealised forms of domesticity (Mankekar 1999; Rao 1999). New women in India represent the postcolonial nation and nationalism through their commitment to the family. In the contemporary post-globalisation era, the success of Indian women in international beauty pageants and their increasing participation in the workforce has opened debates around the nature of legitimate 'Indian' femininities. Questions around the extent of Westernisation, sexual autonomy, public visibility, and participation in the global economy are being posed to identify the essence of contemporary 'new' womanhood in India. Studies suggest that this 'new' Indian woman is also a 'global' woman—a virtuous woman who could be a global worker and consumer while remaining 'essentially' Indian (Radhakrishnan 2009; Thapan 2004; Ahmed-Ghosh 2003). These are often affluent middle-class, English-speaking, working women, seen as holding a much revered balance between so-called progressiveness, through education and economic activity, whilst also delivering the traditional gender roles associated with the family. Thus, the stay-at-home mother has been dislodged as a middle-class icon by the professional 'new' woman. The later earns her symbolic status through the 'assertiveness and autonomy afforded by her education and earnings' but still focuses on serving the family and the nation by prioritising family above work (Radhakrishnan 2009, p. 25). Overall, the literature suggests that historically the image of 'new' women is being created and reinvented continuously, but the changes are circumscribed by classed and gendered practices of respectability and associated discourses on middle-class women's domesticity and propriety. Following Radhakrishnan (2009), I understand respectable femininity as a type of symbolic capital in Bourdieu's formulation. The conceptualisation of respectable femininity as a constitutive element of 'symbolically authorised middle-class-ness' helps us to understand the ways in which certain types of femininities are legitimised over others (ibid., p. 201). The processes of producing, seeking, and negotiating authorisation are central to this chapter.

The literature on professional 'new womenhood' suggests that the issues of respectability come into play only when women enter the global economy through work places whilst being deeply embedded in patriarchal family structure. By focussing on girls, I contend that the considerations of the symbolic capital of respectability and pursuit of cultural

authorisation are central to a woman's life cycle. The penetration of images of a professional new womanhood into households across the socioeconomic spectrum in India has normalised the possibility of these new types of feminine subject, yet the considerations of respectability remind us about the continuity of gendered societal norms. Contemporary new woman, unlike the new woman of the past, is viewed as bearer of choices on spending, career, marriage, and so on. Girls in my study were often viewed by their parents as 'new women' in training. Parents frequently spoke about the enablement of their daughters. These girls are expected to participate in the global economy, earn, and make some of the 'choices' outlined above. Yet, as I will show through parents' narratives, these 'choices' remain circumscribed by considerations of respectability and cultural authorisation for themselves, for the families, and even for the community.

Girlhood studies is an emerging field of academic research, especially in the global North, which has concerned itself with ways in which various structuring socioeconomic forces that constrain and control adolescent girls. Duits and van Zoonen's (2006, p. 114) analysis of girls dressing in headscarves and porno-chic clothing in the West shows 'both conservative and liberal discourses end up denying female subjects their agency and autonomy', instead constantly resignify girls' choices through the cultural idioms of appropriateness. This research is a useful starting point to consider ways in which discourses on 'new girlhood' come to control and constrain girls using the stories of feminine enablement and respectability. In the process, such discourses on 'new girlhoods' co-opt feminism. These processes have involved an over-representation in media and popular culture of girls' and women's professional, financial, personal and sexual achievements and successes (Douglas 2010, p. 5). McRobbie (2009) says that young women are now constrained by the story of their enablement, such that the articulation of 'suffering marked by structures' such as patriarchy and neoliberalism is hindered. I find similar discourses about girl power and girls' inherent enablement in my fieldwork, which breaks away from traditional ways of talking about women and girls in contemporary South Asia. This was particularly evident in parents' views of girl's career aspirations. Yet, in very real ways through the strategy of merger of career and marital aspirations, parents powerfully resignify

girl's aspirations as appropriate and within the parameters of respectable femininity. In the process, they co-opt girls' resistance and conflicts between aspirations and gendered societal norms into a neat conceptual whole of appropriate aspirations.

Gonick et al. (2009) highlights the need for new 'more complex and nuanced' approaches to understand girls' agency and resistance. Such an approach must be attentive to both their articulations of victimhood and resistance to various structuring forces in their lives. Such an approach is interested in women's reflexive capacities instead of binary labels around victimhood and agency. Adkins (2004) views reflexivity as a situated process ambivalently related to norms; not necessarily transformative, de-traditionialising or individualising, nor simply incorporating the social order: '[R]eflexivity must therefore be understood to involve reflection on the unthought and unconscious categories of thought, that is, the uncovering of unthought categories of habit which are themselves corporealised preconditions of our more self-conscious practices' (ibid., p. 194). Harris and Dobson's (2015) formulation of the 'suffering actor' helps in capturing reflexive capacities of the girls in my study. This formulation pays attention to both injury and action in the lives of young women due to the structures of surveillance placed upon them whist recognising their agential actions to make the most of their situation.

Another set of literature relevant in the study of girlhood in contemporary India is the study of middle class and their values like aspiration and mobility. Studies suggest that India's middle class is defined by aspirations of mobility and the various strategies deployed in that direction. Fernandes and Heller (2006, p. 20) argues that there is an 'intertemporal interpretation' at play here, wherein people aspire for and anticipate future consumption-based benefits by investing in individualised strategies of upward mobility rather than being critical of the current socioeconomic order under the neoliberal model. Jeffrey (2010, p. 33) suggests that India's 'middle classes maintain their power through a strategy of deliberate waiting'. Both Jeffrey (2010) and Fernandes and Heller (2006) focus on the centrality of education to this strategy of class mobility, particularly through a process of 'strategic credentialing' that involves acquiring new skills or upgradation of existing skills which allows these groups to maintain their superior socioeconomic position in order to

benefit from liberalisation (Fernandes 2000). Appadurai (2013, p. 188) views aspiration as a 'navigational capacity' that varies with one's socio-economic location. Gilbertson (2017) however proposes an alternative view of aspiration which not only includes relative capacity but also relative compulsion and consequence. Her research shows that while the privileged perceive themselves as having superior capacities to navigate towards a better future, the lesser privileged ones are compelled to work towards a more secured future through credentialing strategies in the absence of economic capital. This view is useful in analysing how parents in my study attempt to pursue cultural authorisations for their daughters as 'good girls' and for the families as 'middle class' whether or not they are middle class according to income-based classification. However, the research on middle classes and aspirations discussed above do take into account gender and its impact on aspirations and credentialing strategies. This chapter contends that the strategy of merging career and marital aspirations can then also be seen as a gendered credentialing strategy in a context where women's career aspirations, their intellect, and interests need to be authorised through their association with family.

New Girlhood and Appropriate Aspirations

This section will discuss how the Muslim parents in my study enact this merger of economic and cultural ideologies by fusing career and marital aspirations into a single concept of 'appropriate aspirations'. Such a concept of aspirations is instrumental in the emerging discourse on new girlhood in the global South that has been shaped by the post-feminist girl power discourses emanating in the global North. In a patriarchal society, the concept of appropriate aspirations caps girl's aspirations by considerations of respectability. From the perspective of respectability, 'appropriate aspirations', leading ultimately to 'appropriate jobs', allow women to be economically active, consume, invest on oneself and on the family, whilst maintaining their subordinate position in family and society. And their association with the family will produce cultural authorisations for individual girls and their families as symbolically authorised middle class.

Mehmuda, a middle-class woman, connects her daughter's career aspiration of becoming a doctor with the possibility of finding a marital alliance 'from a good family'. The concept of appropriate aspirations and the neoliberal post-feminist concept of 'choice' come together as she establishes a link between her daughter Moni's ability to pursue an appropriate aspiration with her ability to realise a choice bearing subjecthood.

> Her father has very high hopes for her. So he has even told all relatives that she will marry a suitable guy only after she becomes a doctor. That way we can choose a well settled guy from a good family, instead of just marrying her off early to just any guy. If she is a doctor, obviously, people will queue at our door with proposals. If a woman is financially independent, then she has more say in the in-laws' family also. It is very important. (Mehmuda, Interview 14 November 2013)

While placing family at the heart of woman's self-worth is not a new phenomenon, viewing appropriate aspirations as an integral part of a women's marital prospects signals the emergence of a 'new' discourse that combines education, career, and marriage. Mehmuda also views the possibility of delay in marriage of her daughter for career development as a 'symbolic' investment in respectable femininity. Such an investment, in her view, will give Moni more choice of middle- and upper-class partners in the future and a better bargaining position within the marital family. In this sense, having an education and a career helps in bringing together various constitutive elements of what is considered as respectable femininity in contemporary Nagaon.

Like Mehmuda, Begum, from a lower-class background, connects the choice of Madrassa education for her daughter, Bina, with the possibility of finding a suitable matrimonial match.

> It will be really good if she can get a job as an Arabic teacher after her FM[1] exam. Maybe then we can find a 'doctor-engineer'[2] son-in-law (giggles) if Allah is willing!! Nobody likes an illiterate wife nowadays; they want the wife to be educated and sensible, so that she can look after the kids and the family better than an uneducated woman. (Begum, Interview 8–9 March 2014)

Begum views appropriate aspiration as the criteria that 'new' girls are expected to fulfil in order to be deemed desirable in the matrimonial market. Mehmuda and Begum both show that the choice of education and employment being accorded equal importance as marriage and family in contemporary India has been socially validated. However, they also show that this validation still happens within the confines of the considerations of future marital prospects. Examples from my fieldwork suggest that for young women, becoming a doctor or having a career has in many ways become the benchmark of respectability. This view is solidified by the idea that educated professional women are able to discharge their gender roles at home as wives and mothers better than uneducated women. Viewed through this line of reasoning, educated women with careers are seen to compensate for delaying marriage by becoming better in delivering their gender roles, as Begum suggests above.

In addition to paying attention to professional respectable femininity, parents in my study also frequently discussed a gendered path of 'strategic credentialing' by highlighting how their daughter's career trajectory will be determined by her marital and reproductive trajectory. The parents, thus, not only had a particular vision of appropriate aspirations but also had specific ideas about the timing and nature of career choices for girls. For instance, Sahida, a middle-class woman and wife of an academic, discusses her preference for teaching profession for her 15-year-old daughter, Shabnam:

> She has been saying she wants to be an IPS[3] officer, but personally I feel that the teaching profession is best for women. I will, of course, support her if she wants to take the UPSE,[4] but my personal ambition for her is that she enjoys both sides of life – family life and professional life. I want her to have the best experience in both. If she is a lecturer, for example, she can take a break to have a baby, but instead of just wasting that time doing nothing, she can also improve her qualifications, maybe do a PhD like you [pointing to the researcher]. We are also there with her in every step of the way. She can get as many higher degrees as she needs to establish herself in the teaching profession. At the same time the family will also grow. In IPS, I don't know how the two things can go hand in hand. You know, women have to be smarter in their careers if they want to succeed. That is why I keep telling Shabnam, now is not the time to have fun, now is the time to study really hard and get ahead in life. (Shahida, Interview 24 Dec 2013)

Shahida's quote suggests that parents are increasingly paying attention towards their daughter's careers, including advance planning to mitigate disruptions around maternity. The narrative above is clear about aspiring for the daughter's professional success through the tried and tested middle-class strategy of 'strategic credentialing' during what is seen as taking time off for the family. Shahida also highlights her support towards the daughter's career plans through help with childcare in the future. Similarly, most parents in my study articulated both their availability to help and support their daughter's career plans, while exerting a significant amount of control around what those plans could or couldn't be. Their class position dictated the nature of the surveillance. For instance, middle- and upper-class parents in my study carry out this supportive surveillance by investing extensively on private coaching to be delivered at home. In comparison, the lower and lower middle-class parents often accompanied their daughters to the coaching centres and even waited there for the session duration of 1–2 hours. This type of surveillance and support around girl's aspirations, in my view, is a striking feature of the discourse on 'new girlhood' in contemporary Assam and, perhaps, more widely in the subcontinent.

Similarly, an upper-class woman, Safiya, talked about how 'new' women/girls now are able to have a good education and career whilst having a family. Yet, as she illustrates with the example of her niece, women's aspirations still continue to be bound by family. A woman's achievements in her chosen career is seen as equally important as developments in their marital and reproductive lives. The narrative largely ignores the ways in which women's career aspirations are limited and even hindered by marriage and family, by highlighting the final outcome of a 'happy family'.

> It is not like the olden days now, girls have so many opportunities to become independent individuals. There are so many career opportunities… look at the news channels these days – they are full of female anchors, reporters and panellists. One of my nieces used to work in an Assamese news Channel. She had her own show…she was doing really well. Afterwards, she married an Assamese software engineer based in Huston (USA). Now she has two kids and a happy family life there. She is thinking about studying there once the kids are a little older and starting her career again. In our days, once you had children all your personal aspirations were

> over. It isn't like that anymore…that is really wonderful. That's why I always tell Jenny (14 year old daughter) to focus on her education and to make the most of these exciting opportunities… She should also choose a partner that way-someone supportive of her career, so that she is able to have a good work-life balance. (Safiya, Interview 21 Feb 2014)

What is striking about the narratives above is the hegemonic imposition of the idea of 'balance' between family and career aspirations. And the way in which parents, such as Shahida and Safiya, are attempting to achieve this sense of balance in their daughter's future is through a close surveillance of career aspirations and educational choices so that they remain compatible with the ideal family. The notion of respectable femininity for adolescent girls is ingrained in the values of domesticity and the centrality of the institution of heterosexual family. The discourse of 'new' girlhood has come to incorporate issues like choice of career, choice of partner, and a stronger voice for women in the marital relationships within the parameters of respectable femininity. Viewed in this way, Muslim parents across classes seek cultural authorisation for their daughters as legitimate actors in the field of education, hence reimagining themselves as 'good families', an attribute often associated with middle-class families.

This merger of career aspiration with marriage has spurred parental focus upon girls' education and future career aspirations. All the parents in my study were deeply invested in girls' education and career aspirations, often pressuring them overtly and covertly to aspire for careers with high 'symbolic capital', such as doctor and teacher. Yet, given the merger of marital and career aspirations, such focus upon female achievement cannot be seen as subverting the gender order. This model of respectability that Mehmuda, Begum, Shahida, and Safiya conceive for their daughters through the merger of educational and marital goals is new in many ways. The fact that parents across classes connect education with marital prospects indicates the entrance of new discourses and practices of femininity, respectability, and girlhood in their local context, and perhaps, farther. These discourses are new since they focus on a 'new' liberal Muslim girl who embraces education, pursues a career, exercises choice of partner, and delays marriage. These enactments of respectability are also new because they are not limited to the middle class but are widely articulated

by parents from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. In another sense, however, the model of respectability that Mehmuda and Begum conceptualise for their daughters is a continuation of the colonial and nationalist models of respectable femininity from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Radhakrishnan (2009) reminds us that a concept of larger progress of communities and nations is at the heart of the discourses on respectable femininity and the expectation of enactment by individual women and girls. Such a discourse of respectable femininity helps reimagining certain nations (like India) as developed, communities (like Hindus and Muslims) as modern or progressive, and families (like the Muslim families in my study) as 'good families'.

Inhabiting 'New Girlhood': Aspirational Victimhood

This section draws attention to the ways in which girls in my study navigate 'appropriate aspirations' in their everyday lives. In negotiating 'appropriate aspirations', girls in my study exhibit a range of attitudes: conformity to the parental model of respectability, using the parental model of respectability to expand the boundaries of respectable/appropriate jobs, and challenging the model of respectability using Koranic knowledge. I find that the girls in my study often narrate their experiences and negotiation using a storyline of the 'aspirational victim' self. By 'aspirational victimhood', I refer to subjectivities that are deeply ambitious about accessing new patterns of consumption and autonomous lifestyle while being deeply entrenched in gendered and ethnicised discriminatory regimes, conceptualised generally as suffering actors by Harris and Dobson (2015). Here I show that, in fact, by articulating 'aspirations' and 'victimhood' in relation to various social forces, Muslim girls in my study manifest the types of reflexivity conceptualised by Adkins (2004).

Fourteen-year-old Naina is the eldest child of a lower middle-class family. In the quote below, she highlights gender difference in parental expectation of aspirations. As in the case of most of the girls in my study, education is one of the top priorities in Naina's family due to its perceived relevance to class mobility. Naina experiences parental gendered expectations, both

through her incorporation into the caregiving roles at home in contrast to her brothers, and through a disproportionately higher expectation of academic achievement. This regime of surveillance is part of parents' strategy of compliance with the economic and cultural ideals of respectable femininity. Her experience of gendered aspirations mirrors Radhakrishnan's (2009) formulation of respectable femininity underpinning the balance between education/career roles and domestic/caring/reproductive roles.

> I think parents expect too much from daughters. Like me, I have to help out at home, be nice to guests, help younger siblings and also do well in my exams. If I get bad marks they ask me 'why did you perform so badly'. They act like I have disappointed them in a big way. But if my brother doesn't do very well, they say 'you should try harder next time'. They behave as if I should be good at everything. They just wouldn't accept me getting mediocre or bad marks, even for once. (Naina, Meadow School, Interview 20 October 2013)

Naina drives home the gendered nature of parental expectation and aspirations in contemporary Assam and India in general. Girls' narratives in my study show that academic performance is overemphasised for girls since it is seen as an integral part of the pursuit of respectability and the symbolically authorised middle-class-ness. As Shahida's quote suggested, girls are seen to have a much narrower window to achieve their career aspirations given the normative marital and reproductive roles they are also expected to fulfil. Offering further critical insights into parental aspirations, Moni shows how certain occupations, such as medicine and teaching, are implicitly encouraged as 'appropriate jobs', whereas physical, labour-intensive, entrepreneurial or technological careers are seen as inappropriate. In the lived experiences of the girls, these gendered parental aspirations turn into an asymmetrical emphasis upon academic performance for girls compared to boys. Not only is their academic performance important, their subservient behaviour while pursuing these academic ideals is equally important to the performance of respectable femininity.

> My parents say that it is ok if boys don't study but girls should study properly so that they can get a 'decent' job. All jobs are not for girls, you know! (Moni, Meadow School, Interview 12 Nov 2013)

Both Naina and Moni paint the picture of gendered overemphasis upon academic performance and appropriate aspirations. This overemphasis can be linked to the centrality of academic or career aspirations in the discourse of 'new girlhood', even when conceptualised in relation to marital aspirations.

Seventeen-year-old Khushi's narrative below also highlights the gendered nature of aspirations of many Muslim girls, following parental aspirations for symbolic capital. She acknowledges that parental or family approval takes precedence over personal aspirations. Khushi follows the terms of appropriate aspirations laid out by her parents. In doing so, she helps to access the symbolically authorised middle-class-ness for the entire family.

> After finishing school, I hope to complete my degree and get a good job. I don't want to get married soon. After the degree, teaching or office-based work will suit me best as my parents will not be worried about the work atmosphere. Then maybe I can get married. I will only marry a guy who allows me to work… It is really important that I get a say in the choice of partner, after all I have to live with him for a big part of my life. I have told my parents that I will do as they say but they must listen to me when it comes to marriage… I will tell them about my boyfriend if they talk marriage. He is a really nice guy, very supportive of me studying or working after marriage. (Khushi, Northern School, Interview 14 March 2014)

Given Khushi's sociocultural milieu, she expects marriage talks soon after she turns 18, so she pragmatically invests in her future aspirations by seeking greater control in the choice of partner who she perceives to be supportive of her career goals. She enacts respectability by choosing respectable, gender-appropriate jobs and by putting the family at the centre of all career decisions. She is deeply conscious of the bargaining power that compliance to 'appropriate aspirations' gives her in negotiating for her choice of partner. She mirrors many of the parents' perspectives on the need for 'balance' in personal and professional lives for women. At the same time, she is conscious of making the right choice of partner to achieve her career aspirations. In doing so, Khushi is forging what Kandiyoti (1991, p. 24) has called 'patriarchal bargain' with her family, where she exchanges personal career aspirations for a choice in her marital partner. The latter, she believes, will play a significant role in materialising her future personal and career aspirations, in line with the

widely reported assertion of Facebook's chief operating officer, Sheryl Sandberg, that 'the most important career choice you'll make is who you marry' (Groth 2011).

Similarly, Tina, from an upper-class family, negotiates her aspirations within the larger narrative of respectability. Her aspiration of a career in fashion is not seen as appropriate for a 'good girl' or 'respectable' family, but she gets parental approval by pitting one type of transgression of respectability against another. She bargains the acceptance of what may be seen as lesser of the two transgressions. In doing so, she realigns the boundaries of respectability within the family, without necessarily transcending it. At the same time, she compromises one right in order to access another.

> My family makes fun of me when I say I want to be a fashion designer. They think it is the same thing as being a tailor [Giggles!]. It is better to get married, my father says, than to be a tailor. Because I am not so good in studies, they think I can't aim to be successful. But I am quite stubborn about what I want. Just jokingly I told my father the other day that if they don't let me study for a degree in design in Delhi or Bombay, I will run away and get married to a Hindu guy they won't approve of. My ex boyfriend was Hindu, so I have no problem with that. But I know that will piss off my father, so I said that to scare him a bit. He then said it is better to be a tailor than to bring disrepute to the family. [Giggles] (Tina, City School, Interview, 19 January 2014)

Both Khushi and Tina downplay the suffering marked by structures in narrating the bargain between career choice and marital choice. Such strategies of negotiation can be understood as a type of non-transformational agency that enables people to survive, but without disturbing the power structures that make their survival difficult in the first place, as described by Williams (2012). The narratives above show that they inhabit the aspirational victim subjectivity in response to the parental aspirations that disregard their personal aspirations.

Girls attending the Kaleidoscope Madrassa were often in the unique position of challenging parental aspirations around marriage by using their greater Koranic knowledge to make a case for further education. They were consciously aware that any case against marriage must be framed in religious terms, as Bina does below. She comes from a lower-class family,

and both her parents are illiterate. Bina uses a specific verse from the Koran to garner parental support for her aspiration of university education. Being the most educated person in the family, she attempts to channel her parents' notions of 'appropriate aspirations' towards achieving her own educational and career aspirations.

> I really want to study in a university like Rumana baidow [a teacher]. First I have to go to college in Nagaon, then Guwahati, if Allah wishes… My father says that he wants me to study as much as I want but stay here. There is no university here, so after finishing Madrassa I have to go to Nagaon, maybe with daily commute. But to go to university in Guwahati or Dibrugarh I have to live outside. So I told my father that the Koran says that you should pursue knowledge even if you have to go to distant lands. By studying further, I will be doing Allah's work, and as a teacher I will be spreading his words to younger people. He agreed with me! (Bina, Kaleidoscope Madrassa, Interview 17 March 2014)

Bina challenges her parents' idea of appropriate aspirations both by stretching its definition to include higher education and presumably by delaying her marriage in future. At the same time, her desire to be an Arabic teacher aligns with the specifications of appropriate aspirations for women. Another way in which some other girls inhabit the aspirational victimhood subjectivity is through an uncritical conformation to parental aspirations. For instance, Rejia expresses disdain for all things outside those normatively seen as appropriate for adolescent girls. In doing so, she has secured her mother's trust and support for her education and future aspirations, in spite of the family's precarious economic condition. Being involved in a heterosexual relationship is viewed to be detrimental to that relationship (with her mother), posing a threat to her educational aspirations.

> I don't like girls who waste time by having boyfriends. My mother works really hard to put me through school and trusts that when in school, I will only be studying. I don't know about other girls, I just mind my own business, and think about my future. After I have a good job, there will be a lot of time to enjoy myself. (Rejia, Northern School, Interview, 12 March 2014)

Like Rejia's acceptance of the regime of 'appropriate aspirations', in her research on British Muslim girls' 'survival strategies', Shain's (2000, p. 164) respondents often showed conformity to the stereotypes of quiet and shy Asian/Muslim women. However, she views this 'apparent conformity was part of a conscious strategy of survival' (ibid., p. 165). Similarly, I find that future career aspirations were central to the survival strategies of most of my lower-class respondents, often leading to 'deferred gratification'. The imagined deferral, as Rejia suggests, is until they feel that they have achieved their future career aspirations. Girls conforming to parental considerations of respectability do not involve themselves in rule-breaking activities, nor do they confess to engaging in relationships that might threaten their existing positive relations with parents (ibid., p. 164).

Conclusion

Parents of Muslim girls are often depicted as unsupportive of girls' education in the media and policies. In my study, I found that Muslim parents from varied classes rejected these demonisations, instead highlighting their commitment to the education of girls. In fact, parental support for girl's education and aspirations can be seen as discourse marker of 'new girlhood'. At the same time, parents of these 'new' girls stay deeply committed to certain forms of femininity and feminine aspirations. This leads them to deploy a regime of surveillance that ensures that girl's aspirations are compatible with the economic and cultural ideals of respectable femininity. Thus, the idea of 'new girlhood' is as much about girls and their aspirations, as it is about parental and collective bids for cultural authorisation of 'good families'. One of the ways in which the Muslim parents bid for cultural authorisation is by merging career and marital aspirations, using the concept of appropriate aspirations. The discourse of 'new girlhood' allows families across classes to reimagine themselves through the supposed reimagination of gender relations. This reimagination is articulated in the language used to express girls' present and future choices in various aspects of life. Yet, my study reveals that as part of the larger discourse of feminine enablement in 'new girlhood', girls have a powerful discourse of choice but not 'real' choices. Instead, the 'new' girls are seen as

malleable objects to be deployed in certain gendered ways in the transaction of both economic and symbolic capitals. I, therefore, conclude that school going Muslim girls serve as symbols through which Muslim, Indian, Assamese identities are imagined afresh. This formulation allows us to 'examine the interplay between gender, class, and religion in everyday practice' (Radhakrishnan 2009, p. 211).

I also find that girls in my study, through the storyline of aspirational victimhood, demonstrate that they continuously reevaluate the positions they are expected to inhabit as being without value, thereby showing a self-conscious or reflexive practice. In doing so, they show an agency that may or may not be transformative, but which can simultaneously articulate the suffering caused by the rules of the game, as well as the ameliorative actions that help them negotiate these rules. They also constantly bid for cultural authorisation as legitimate actors, demonstrating an acute awareness of the politics of authorisation. The success of these bids depends on their individual location. However, their constant bidding for authorisation is a marker of their personal agency.

Notes

1. Fadir-ul-Madarass examination is a qualifying examination held by the State's Madrassa Education Board, at the end of 10 years of Madrassa education.
2. The term 'doctor-engineer' is used colloquially in Assam to convey the idea of someone, in what are seen as stable professions.
3. Indian Police Service.
4. Union Public Service Examination.

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Earning as Empowerment?: The Relationship Between Paid Work and Domestic Violence in Lyari, Karachi

Nida Kirmani

Introduction

Based on extensive interviews in one of Karachi's oldest working-class areas, Lyari, this chapter explores the relationship between women's engagement in paid work, their experiences of domestic violence, and the issue of empowerment more generally. The research includes interviews with women engaged in domestic service, in the public and private education sector, in the field of health, in the service sector, and in short-term and seasonal work in factories or small-scale industries. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the impact of engagement in paid work on women's empowerment and, in particular, on their ability to negotiate and resist violence at the hands of their husbands and other family members. Despite the persistence of patriarchal structures, women's narratives demonstrate the emergence of new models of womanhood at the local level as a result of wider economic, social, and cultural shifts.

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Recent years have witnessed a slow increase in women's participations in paid employment, which is leading to the emergence of new forms of womanhood across the country. This includes an increase in public visibility of women living in urban areas and their increasing involvement paid employment. However, is this necessarily leading to women's empowerment? Women in low-paid, informal, and precarious forms of employment, which are characteristic of neoliberal economies,[1] do not necessarily experience a strengthened position within the household and neither are they insulated from domestic violence. Rather they often face multiple forms of violence and are often exploited within and outside the home. The few women who are able to secure well-paying, secure forms of employment appear to be more confident and more willing to stand up against violence if confronted, but many of these women are also often trapped in abusive situations due to a combination of social and cultural pressures related to preserving a sense of honour and respectability. This is reflective of the persistence of patriarchal structures despite a growth in women's employment.

Background: Violence Against Women and Employment

As in all contexts, because of a lack of available data, under-reporting due to fear and shame, and varying definitions of 'violence', it is difficult to provide a precise figure for the occurrence of violence against women in Pakistan. However, available estimates range from 39% of all married women experiencing domestic violence according to the Demographic Health Survey to Human Rights Watch, which estimates that between 70% and 90% of women have experienced some form of domestic violence.

Definitions of 'violence' vary considerably both within academic and popular discourse. In terms of the academic literature on gender-based violence, violence includes acts that are physical and psychological in nature and operate at the intimate, interpersonal to the societal, macro-structural levels. Gender-based violence is most often targeted at women and girls, although members of the transgender community[2] and some men and boys are also at times victims. These forms of violence often take

place in both the private and public realms and include acts of physical violence as well as threats, coercion, and harassment of any form. Gender-based violence can also include an economic or material aspect, which is often neglected in the literature. This can include exploitation, such as paying women lower wages or denying them pay altogether. This can also include disallowing women control over resources within the household or their own earnings. Also, while gender-based violence has been shown to be a universal phenomenon, the ways it manifests itself must be viewed as context specific.

If the definitions of violence vary greatly within the literature, they are even more varied in popular discourse, which makes research on the subject particularly challenging (see Rajan 2016). Respondents had widely different understandings of what constituted violence, with some reserving the category 'violence', or '*tashaddud*' in Urdu, for only very extreme physical acts and not thinking it noteworthy to include slapping or shoving in their narratives. For example, when asked about the occurrence of violence, one woman stated, 'If you have a normal fight and slap once or twice, you don't call that violence; violence is a very big thing; it is very torturous'. Others focused on psychological forms of violence in their narratives such as a lack of emotional engagement or care on the part of their husbands. Several women spoke about the stress that women faced as a result of having to juggle several responsibilities and material deprivation as forms of violence. Furthermore, while research on gender-based violence in the Global South and in Muslim-majority societies often focuses on the 'cultural' aspects of violence (see Abu-Lughod 2013), culture itself must be viewed as processual, dynamic, and contested (see Sewell 2005).

While violence against women takes multiple forms, and includes violence committed in the home and outside, at the hands of family members, acquaintances, and strangers, and can occur at the physical, psychological, and structural levels, this chapter focuses in particular on the relationship between women's economic participation and their experiences of domestic violence—violence committed by intimate partners or family members within the home. Research conducted so far in this area has presented multiple and sometimes contradictory findings (Vyas and Watts 2009; Taylor 2015). Much of the research conducted on women's economic participation emphasizes the positive impacts on women's

lives (Quisumbing 2003; World Bank 2012; Kabeer 2003; Dwyer and Bruce 1988; Aizer 2010). However, a number of studies actually document an increase in women's experiences of various forms of violence as a result of economic participation including discrimination in terms of organizational patterns, the confinement of women to particularly low-paid and insecure forms of work (Cruz and Klinger 2011), and harassment and violence at the workplace (and on the journey to and from work) (ibid.; Sarwari 2015).

In certain instances, violence experienced at home has also been documented as increasing as a result of women's economic activity. Relative resource theory suggests an inverse relationship between men's economic resources and instances of violence against women (Goode 1971; McCloskey 1996; Macmillan and Gartner 1999; Panda and Agarwal 2005). In other words, when women start earning more than their husbands, men can at times respond with violence in order to reassert their patriarchal authority. This is especially true in contexts where the cultural expectation that men be the sole breadwinners is stronger (Neville et al. 2014). The contravention of the local gender order caused by women's increased earnings and male un- or underemployment can sometimes lead to a violent backlash (Jewkes 2014; Goetz and Sen Gupta 1994).

The purpose of this research is to gauge whether any relationship between the women's involvement in paid employment and their experiences of domestic violence exists and, if so, what form(s) that relationship takes. This chapter explores whether engagement in paid employment increases women's empowerment in terms of providing them with an improved bargaining position within the household (see Agarwal 1997; Kandiyoti 1988). By focusing on women's experiences of domestic violence in particular, it also explores new ideas and practices of womanhood emerging at the local level, which may or may not be linked with an increase in women's engagement in paid employment.

The Case of Women in Lyari, Karachi

Lyari is one of the oldest settlements in the city and began as a fishing settlement in the eighteenth century. The population of the area grew significantly during the period of British colonial rule, when the British

began modernizing Karachi's port and people began migrating in larger numbers from what are now Balochistan, Sindh, and the Kutch regions of Gujarat because of the employment opportunities provided by the port (Viqar 2014). Since then Lyari has been shaped by multiple waves of migration of people from across the Indian Ocean region. Although it is often characterized as a Baloch area in popular discourse, the Baloch make up approximately 50% of Lyari's residents. Lyari is also home to a significant Kutchi population, various other Sindhi groups, Punjabis, Pashtuns, Bengalis, and a small number of Urdu speakers, known in Karachi as Muhajirs. It is also religiously diverse including a large number of Hindus and Christians as well as members of the Zikri community, a heterodox Sunni sect originating in Balochistan (Sabir 2008).

Lyari has been the subject of structural neglect since the period before partition, when some of the city's most polluting areas were located in its vicinity. Since the formation of Pakistan, Lyari has continued to be sidelined in Karachi's urban development with the state giving preference in terms of housing to those who had migrated from India. Since the 1970s, Lyari has been dominated by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and has relied on the party's patronage for whatever development that has taken place in the area. The PPP also awarded a small number of government jobs to residents from Lyari, which helped some families achieve a modicum of social mobility. Other families benefited from the out-migration to Gulf countries of male labour during the 1970s and 1980s, whose remittances enabled some to improve their social position considerably. Many of those who benefitted from these trends have migrated out of the area. However, most of Lyari's remaining residents remain trapped in insecure, low-paid work despite a rapid rise in education levels.

An estimated 22% of women in Pakistan participate in wage labour—one of the lowest rates in the region (World Bank 2014).[3] Most of these women are engaged in agricultural labour, and the vast majority is engaged in the informal sector. According to a survey conducted in Lyari by our research team, the number of women in the paid labour force is similar to the rate at the national level (approximately 20%), but their occupational profiles differed significantly.[4] While the ratio is relatively low, significantly more women are engaged in paid work than in the previous generation when the rate was approximately 10%. The increased participation of women in the paid labour force is leading to changes

within the local gender order and new understandings of womanhood, which include a gradual expansion of women's mobility and resistance to patriarchal power structures within the home and outside. However, as the findings demonstrate, this process is far from straightforward.

Most of the women who reported being in paid employment in Lyari were engaged in low-paid domestic work in neighbouring areas or in the more affluent parts of the city. The second most common occupation for women was teaching, which included employment in government and private schools. The vast majority of teachers, however, were employed in private schools following a boom in recent years in the low-cost, low-quality private education sector (see Heyneman and Stern 2013). These teachers earn significantly less than their counterparts in government schools. However, many young women still chose to teach in private schools because this was considered a 'respectable' job by their families both because these jobs involve little contact with unrelated men and because they generally do not involve travelling far from home for work. There were also fewer women engaged in the service sector, sales, healthcare, and manufacturing. Findings revealed that while increasing numbers of women are engaged in paid employment, the jobs available to them are generally low paid, insecure, and in the unregulated informal sector that are the hallmark of neoliberal economies (see Benería 2001; Benería and Floro 2005; Menéndez et al. 2007).

Researchers rightly distinguish between 'economic engagement' and 'economic empowerment'. While being involved in any time of waged labour qualifies a woman as being 'economically active', this does not necessarily translate into 'empowerment'. As Kabeer (2012) argues, market forces often reproduce gender inequality rather than decreasing it. The unfettered market forces that are characteristic of neoliberal economic arrangements can also alter patterns of gender inequality in terms of discriminating against women in terms of wage rates and hiring practices (see Anker et al. 2003). Furthermore, there is an assumption that economic engagement necessarily translates into women's control over their own incomes, that women have access to social and legal support, and that financial independence, even when it is achieved, will allow women to exit abusive relationships ignoring complex social contexts. However, economic engagement can only lead to empowerment if it leads to a

transformation in gender relations at the household and structural levels. More realistically, and as this research reveals, oppression and empowerment do not exist as binary opposites. Rather, women's economic participation has complex impacts on their agency and power depending on the nature of their employment, the power relations within their families, and on the dynamics within their respective communities.

Research for this chapter involved a combination of qualitative methods including semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. It was supplemented by a survey of approximately 400 residents focusing on trends related to employment and education. Interviewees were purposefully selected in order to reflect the dominant forms of employment engaged in by women in the area. Interviews were carried out largely with women from the Kutchi and Baloch communities who were employed as domestic workers and teachers as these were the most common areas of employment for women. However, interviews with women employed in a range of other professions including sales, healthcare, and manufacturing were also included along with interviews of a few women who were not engaged in wage employment.[5]

Women in Low-Paid Work

Findings revealed multiple and often contradictory trends with regard to the relationship between income earning and violence, with many women arguing that their involvement in paid work increased pressures within the household and could contribute to the occurrence of violence. Some of the women who were interviewed argued that women's economic activity placed a strain on family relations, which could lead to tensions between husbands and wives over domestic responsibilities and, at times, could also lead to physical violence and divorce. Speaking about the women in her own social circle, Sakina, who was currently unemployed but who had previously worked in factories and as a teacher, said:

> *Because of doing a job women have to face more violence. This is because women have to contribute 10-12 hours in the company or household they are working in if they are working as maids. When they come home they are obviously tired because they are human too, so they aren't able to give time to their*

children, their husbands or their household chores…so when the husband comes home he expects everything to be ready for him. If he doesn't get his food on time and the woman puts his food on the table after a long wait, he will get angry. This leads to fights and even divorces. The husband says to the wife, "you don't give me time". Women say to their husbands, "the money you contribute towards household expenses isn't enough"….This way they both get hot-tempered and this leads to more fights. Then the woman fights with her tongue and the man with his hand.

According to Sakina, women's economic engagement was, for the most part, borne out of necessity rather than choice and was the result of their husbands not earning enough to support the family. Many women, including Sakina, resented having to earn as they believed in the male breadwinner model. This was exacerbated by the fact that their earnings rarely had an impact on the division of responsibilities within the household. Their husbands still expected them to complete domestic chores and to give them attention. The strains caused by this 'double burden' were frequently reported as leading to conflict and, at times, to violence.

Some women also reported experiencing violence as a result of conflicts over the control of their earnings. While most women claimed that they had control over their income, a few women mentioned having to turn their incomes over to their husbands. I met Ayesha while I was interviewing a mother and daughter, Neelofar and Haseena, at a local beauty parlour run out of their home. Ayesha was in her 40s and worked in a school canteen. Her husband was regularly physically abusive, which is why she often spent time at her mother's house as a means of escaping the abuse—a common strategy adopted by women as a means of coping with physical abuse without actually exiting the marriage. Ayesha recounted that her husband once hit her with an iron hammer for not giving him the money she had saved for her 'committee'.[6]

While involvement in paid work often placed increased pressures on women, most women did not view their economic activity as the primary reason for the problems they were facing in their marriages. Neelofar, who ran the beauty parlour and was in her 40s, said that her husband was not physically violent but that he neglected her emotionally, which caused her a great deal of distress. Her mother, Haseena, who was in her 60s, was

abused by her husband severely throughout her marriage both physically and verbally. She worked as a domestic worker and a local midwife. All three women said that their involvement in economic activity was not the cause of their husbands' maltreatment; they were just cruel. Rather, they claimed their husbands were quite happy that they were earning because it took the pressure off of them for having to provide for the family.

While all three women were involved in low-paid work, there was a difference in the ways that Ayesha and Neelofar coped with their unhappy marriages as opposed to Habiba, which reflected a generational change. Ayesha and Neelofar were both willing to distance themselves from their husbands in order to cope with physical abuse, in Ayesha's case, and emotional neglect, in Neelofar's. Both women felt that being in a stronger economic position would allow them to do this. Haseena, on the other hand, withstood the violence throughout most of her life. She said her only means of coping was to be patient and put her trust in God. She even prayed that she would die first so that her husband would eventually realize the value of his wife.

Other women in Haseena's age group also reported patiently withstanding violence throughout their marriages, while women in subsequent generations seemed to be less tolerant. While most women were still unwilling to withdraw formally from their marriages, they were willing to distance themselves from their husbands by moving back to their natal homes either temporarily or permanently. They were also more vocally opposed to the abuse than their mothers' generation. For example, Afroz, who was in her 60s and worked as a domestic servant, said that her husband beat her since they got married. She said the abuse was more severe when she lived in his village because she had no support there. Her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law were also abusive towards her. Afroz said he beat her less when they moved to the city because her natal family was close by, which strengthened her position (Rajan 2014). While her husband did not live with her and her children most of the time, he visited regularly. When I asked Afroz why she allowed him to enter her house despite the fact that he was still verbally abusive and provided the family with no financial support, she jokingly responded that she has become accustomed to the verbal abuse: 'I am not at peace until I hear him cursing me'.

Her daughter, Rabeea, who was in her early 20s and also worked as a domestic servant, was also abused by her husband soon after they got married. She said that he beat her and starved her while she was pregnant and blamed her sisters-in-law and mother-in-law for turning him against her. She eventually moved back in with her mother in order to escape, and he divorced her over the phone. While she did not instigate the dissolution of the marriage herself, Rabeea's move back to her natal family contributed to her divorce. Hence, there seems to be a change in attitudes taking place between women of different generations as to the acceptability of abuse. In these cases, economic participation did not seem to impact on the experience of violence, but the response to violence by women varied in terms of the age of the respondent with younger women more likely to resist withstanding abuse, which signals a cultural shift in terms of attitudes towards gender-based violence amongst women.

It is important to note that engaged in low-paid work was still not viewed as being desirable by the vast majority of women. Rather, most of the women I interviewed who were involved in domestic or other forms of low-paid, insecure employment would prefer not to have to work outside of the home and resented the fact that their husbands were unable to support them and their families financially. While some recognized that earning also provided them with some level of independence, and while a few women also spoke about the enjoyment of being away from home, particularly if others were taking up the domestic responsibilities, most would still prefer not having to earn if given the option. For many women involved in low-paid, insecure work, the stress of earning while balancing domestic responsibilities was itself viewed as a form of violence.

On the other hand, women whose husbands or sons were earning enough to support their families often enjoyed a particular status. For example, Afroz's sister, Noor was introduced to me as a 'success story' in her neighbourhood. She worked for most of her life as a domestic worker, but when I met her, she had not been working outside of the home for several years. This was because her sons had started earning enough to support the family, and her husband was also earning as a construction worker. Her sons were proud of the fact that her mother did not have to earn anymore as it confirmed that they were fulfilling their responsibilities as men, and Noor was proud that the men in her family were able to

provide for her and her daughter. Hence, while attitudes towards the acceptability of domestic violence may be changing, the male breadwinner model still persists amongst women of all generations.

Women in Higher-Paid Professions

For the minority of women who were in higher-paying, more secure forms of employment, their involvement in economic activity was framed as a choice rather than a necessity and was often described as source of personal fulfilment for them. However, for those few women who were able to secure such forms of employment, this did not come without a cost. Women who were engaged in work outside of the home before marriage were often the subjects of gossip, taunts, disapproval, and scorn within their families and communities. This was particularly true of those women who travelled outside of their neighbourhood to work and who were earning relatively well. This was a cause of great emotional distress for them and for their immediate families, threatening their reputations and their potential to find a partner for marriage. In a context in which the notion of honour (*izzat*) is linked to the control of women's sexuality and, by extension, their mobility, maintaining an image of 'respectability' was a major constraint in the lives of young women in particular.

Aneela, who was in her 30s and worked as an advocate in a law firm, was unmarried. She spoke about how her family was never supportive of her education or her career although they happily took money from her. Aneela said that women who left the house for work were labelled in a negative sense and looked down upon within the community:

> *Over here, people neither let women be independent, nor do they like independent women, and if some woman tries to survive in her life like this [independently], she is first of all labeled as a little too free, not in a good sense, in a negative sense.*

Aneela was previously engaged to her maternal cousin, but her aunt broke off the engagement when Aneela refused to leave her job. Despite the fact that Aneela contributes to her family's earnings, she faces constant pressure from her family to leave her job, stay at home, and get

married. While earning a decent income may allow Aneela to live a relatively independent life, and while she enjoys her job, the pressure she faces as a result of her family and community's disapproval is a cause of considerable stress for her.

Similarly, I spoke to two sisters, Mahnaz and Sara, about their experiences working in the retail sector. While their mother spent most of her life engaged in low-paid domestic work, these sisters were able to secure higher-paying jobs partially because, unlike their mother, they had access to fairly decent education. Sara, who was 21, had been married for two years and had a one-year-old daughter. She worked for several years in the retail and sales industry and earned a relatively decent salary before she left her job in order to get married. She married a man from a different caste group, which was viewed as being controversial by her family. Like many women in her community, Sara quit her job when she got married and became financially dependent on her husband, who earns much less than she did and spends his earnings on himself and her father-in-law. Since her marriage, Sara has faced regular physical abuse from her husband especially when he is drunk. She is unable to leave her husband because of the pressure from the community and her family to remain within the marriage. Her uncle is particularly vocal about her remaining in her marriage: 'My maternal uncle told me on my marriage day that now that you are going from this house in a bride's dress, then you are allowed to leave your new house only in your funeral shroud'. Sara feels even more pressured to remain in the marriage because she defied her family's wishes to marry outside of her community.

Mahnaz, who was 25, worked at a large department store in one of the city's fanciest shopping malls. Mahnaz has worked her way up the retail ladder and earned far more than anyone in her immediate family and more than the vast majority of the people in her neighbourhood, which may be a source of resentment and envy as she has been able to afford a much higher standard of living for her family than most others in the area. Like Aneela, this also made her an object of a great deal of gossip and scorn, which also caused her and her family a great deal of distress. In order to protect her reputation and to maintain an image of 'respectability' in her community, Mahnaz agreed to marry one of her cousins. Despite the fact that he was unemployed, he and his family insisted that

she quit her job after marriage. For this reason, Mahnaz was postponing the marriage for as long as possible.

In some cases, having access to an independent income has made it more feasible for women to leave an abusive situation. While one would assume that women with more secure, higher-paying jobs would be more likely to exit an abusive situation, this was not necessarily the case as various other factors intervened in the determination of women's choices and constraints. For example, Shagufta was married for many years to a man who was physically and verbally abusive towards her and has one daughter with him. She has worked as a domestic servant for many years and could barely support herself and her daughter with her earnings. While her husband did contribute to the household earnings and did not object to her working outside of the home, he was cruel in various ways. When he refused to allow Shagufta's ageing, blind mother to live with them, Shagufta finally decided to leave him with her daughter. She has since been independently and is hiding from her husband for fear that he would take her daughter away from her. Despite the fact that Shagufta earned extremely little as a domestic worker and could barely make ends meet, she chose to leave her husband after years of withstanding abuse.

On the other hand, women with more secure, higher-paying jobs sometimes still stayed in abusive marriages for complex reasons including social pressures, the maintenance of respectability, and emotional attachment to their abusers. Tahira worked for several years as a life insurance salesperson and had two young children, a girl and a boy. She was paid relatively well and enjoyed her job. Her husband had been unemployed for several years, and hence she was the one supporting their household financially. Despite this, Tahira said that her husband asserted his authority over her and subjected her to 'mental torture'. She described him as controlling, paranoid, and hot-tempered. While it was unclear from her narrative whether he physically abused her or not, Tahira was subjected to constant mental anguish and was very vocal about being extremely unhappy in her marriage. However, she had not left her husband as yet because she was worried that it would affect her daughter's future, particularly in terms of her marriageability as having a mother who was a divorcee would threaten the respectability of the mother and her children. At the same time, throughout our discussion, Tahira emphasized

the fact that the most important thing for women was to have access to their own money so that they could stand up for themselves. She gestured towards her bag and told that she carried divorce papers with her at all times and was waiting for the day that she would be able to sign them. Therefore, while social pressure was keeping Tahira in a violent marriage, the fact that she had access to an independent income allowed her to at least imagine the possibility of eventually exiting this abusive situation.

Conclusions

Findings from discussions with women in Lyari reveal a complex relationship between women's involvement in paid employment, their experiences of domestic violence, and empowerment in general. While most women did not identify a clear link between employment and an increase or decrease the in the occurrence of domestic violence, women's involvement in paid employment came with a combination of costs and benefits. For some women, earning an income provided them with the ability to leave or at least plan to end an abusive marriage. However, simply earning an income did not guarantee that women would be able to leave a violent marriage as the social pressure to remain within a marriage in order to preserve one's respectability was extremely great, particularly if one had children.

Furthermore, while the number of women in paid employment is still relatively low, mirroring the trend in Pakistan as a whole, more and more women are joining the paid labour force every year signalling shifts within the gender order and the possibility of new ideas of womanhood, which include an increasing acceptance of women's engagement in paid employment and visibility in the public sphere. However, most of these women are engaged in low-paid, insecure forms of employment, which are characteristic of neoliberal economies. Many women spoke about the pressure of carrying the double burden of paid work and domestic responsibilities as a form of violence in and of itself. Engagement in paid work also often led to increased tensions within the household as men often expected women to continue to fulfil domestic responsibilities even when they themselves were not employed. This could lead to arguments and might also contribute to violent situations. For these reasons, most

women in this group would choose not to work outside of the home if they could afford to do so, which testifies to the persistence of the male breadwinner model.

On the other hand, women in well-paid, secure forms of employment spoke positively about their jobs. However, they often faced other kinds of pressures, particularly psychological and emotional stress as a result of disapproval from their extended families or communities. While they may have enjoyed their jobs, this did not come without a cost. This was largely due to the centrality of the notion of 'respectability', which maintains that the honour of a woman and her entire family is linked to the control of her sexuality. Women who held well-paying jobs outside of their localities were viewed with suspicion as being more likely to have frequent contact with unrelated men, which could tarnish their own reputations and that of their entire family. These constraints may be indicative of a backlash against changing gender norms.

Therefore, women's economic engagement and new practices of womanhood related to increased mobility and economic participation did not necessarily guarantee empowerment. While it usually strengthened women's bargaining position within the household, it also came with a variety of costs. The fact that women are entering the labour market in greater numbers at a time when there are few well-paid, secure employment options available to them diminishes the empowering potential of paid employment. Furthermore, the persistence of gendered notions of honour and respectability placed constraints on women's mobility and restricted their ability to remain in paid employment.

At the same time, women's narratives point to a wider change in the gender order. While one cannot conclude that women's engagement in paid employment is leading directly to empowerment, their increased participation in the paid labour force can be viewed as both a cause and an effect of this shift. The fact that more and more women are willing to challenge gender norms by engaging in paid employment either out of choice or economic necessity is one indication of this change. Furthermore, the increasing number of women who are refusing to tolerate domestic violence as compared to their mothers' generation points to the emergence of a different conception of womanhood—one in which patience is not necessarily the ultimate virtue. While patriarchal

structures continue to constrain women's ability to exercise their agency at all levels, an increasing number of women are pushing the boundaries in the context of their everyday lives and challenging normative conceptions of womanhood.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this chapter, 'neoliberalism' will be used to refer to the decreasing role of the state in regulating the economy along with the opening up of borders in terms of economic trade. While 'neoliberalism' has been critiqued for its lack of precision as a term, I find that it continues to hold some explanatory relevance when it comes to referring to particular economic, social, and political processes.
2. Members of the *khwaja sira* community, who are most often categorized as transgender women, in particular face multiple forms of violence encompassing physical, psychological, economic, and social forms.
3. The Global Gender Gap Index places Pakistan at 141 out of 142 countries in terms of women's economic participation and opportunity (WEF 2014).
4. The vast majority of women engaged in paid employment in Pakistan were involved in the agricultural sector.
5. Interviews were conducted in Urdu and later translated into English.
6. Committees are a common, informal savings mechanism in South Asia. In a committee, several people contribute a fixed amount every month, and one person in the group receives that amount per month. This is especially common amongst women who may not have access to bank accounts.

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Heterosexual Profession, Lesbian Practices: How Sex Workers' Sexuality Right Positions Through Intersection of Sexuality, Gender, and Class Within the Hierarchy of LGBT Activism in Bangladesh

Shuchi Karim

Introduction

This chapter is part of a larger study titled 'Living sexualities: Understanding Heteronormativity in Urban Middle Class Bangladesh' (Karim 2012, 2014), on heteronormativity and its everyday politics, at both individual and collective levels in the context of Bangladesh during the period of 2007–2012. In doing so, it intended to understand through the perspectives of non-normative gender and sexuality practices that are lived outside the dominant heteronormative matrix in Bangladesh. Women's sexuality issues always remained either on the periphery or at the bottom of a rather struggling and short-lived LGBT movement in the country. Even within women's sexual identity politics, class has and continues to

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play an important role in deciding inclusion, representations, and visibility (Karim 2012, 2014).

The new social perspectives on sexuality, especially brought through feminist discourses over the past decades, show how gender and sexualities are more of embodied social constructions rather than only biological phenomenon. Women's sexualities in particular are now understood as something being socially constructed and shaped around serving as well as sustaining men's social and political dominance. Increasing researches on women's sexualities reveal diversity existing in women's choices and practices of sexualities and gender identities, proving that sexualities are historically emergent and meanings are always varying as well as changing (Seidman 2011; Menon 2007, John and Nair 1998). Women do not use sexual identities in simple linear or straightforward manners, but instead they can and do use sexual identities either to indicate a specific sexual desire, practice, or to take a political standpoint. Gender (identity, roles, and norms) is central in understanding sexuality as part of constructions and expressions of femininities and womanhood—and that is why it is crucial that we understand women's sexuality in its plurality within the realms of various public/private spaces that they occupy, inhabit, and claim. In the context of South Asia (including Bangladesh), the emergence of 'new womanhood' through neo-liberal economies has brought forward a construction of a 'new sexualities'. Though most studies of new womanhood are done in the Indian context, the general ideas can be applied broadly across the region. An urban localized, educated, professional middle class positioned image of womanhood—a new avatar that is visible in public sphere, blurring the pre-existing boundaries of private-public/home-outside binaries (Chatterjee 1993, 1989; Sarkar and Sarkar 2008; Mohsin 2010) though never to jeopardize the notions of tradition and feminine modesty. It has renegotiated the (female)self by evading a direct challenge or critique of power relations within the family. The newly found financial independence of this 'new woman' is not seen as powerful enough for her to entirely take over decision-making agency of the self though it is a leverage that can be used strategically (Lisa Lau 2010, 2006; Daya 2009; Dhawan 2010). This construction of 'new Indian woman(hood)' has been criticized as only an image that is created as an effective tool for the management of liberalization without disturbing the structural inequality of a capitalist society and in the process

ignoring working-class women who have always been visible and present in public spaces (Dhawan 2010). The women's body still preferred (and expected) to be presented in a pure moral format that is palatable to a hetero-patriarchal imagination of its culture. This imagination of hetero-patriarchy still remains central to this creation of new womanhood, as it is evident that the legacy of the colonial and traditional discourses surrounding women's bodies (and therefore sexuality) has continued to affect the perception of women as they enter the public spheres. Nevertheless, critiques observe that despite all these, the new womanhood does reconcile and make use of contradictory cultural signals surrounding their bodies that arise out of rapidly changing gender and class structures, and there are ways in which they resist and embrace cultural demands on their bodies and sexualities (Talukdar and Linders 2013; Daya 2009).

Keeping intersection of gender-class-sexuality as the lens, and using a critical reading of 'new womanhood' in south Asia in particular for its exclusionary framing, this chapter approaches women's same-sex desires, especially those of a group of female sex workers belonging to lower economic class in Bangladesh, who term themselves as 'lesbians' in LGBT spaces. It attempts to delve into a deeper understanding of how intersection of gender, class, and sexuality constructs sexual identities for a certain group of women, how new sexualities contribute to challenging the constructions of new womanhood (in the context of Bangladesh), and how these influence this specific group's strategic positioning in relation to the sexual politics of a LGBT movement at a particular point in time. Taking the case studies of two women's support groups, first one consisting of urban educated middle-class women who rejected 'lesbian' as an identity label for their sexuality and another one organized by commercial sex workers who owned the same label for strategic reasons—the paper looks into the respective groups' processes of organizing members through their own politics of visibility and representation especially within the LGBT movement at a particular time and context. It shows how the latter group works these intersections of class and gender to its benefit and helps to bring about new thoughts regarding sexuality, space, and organization. It also shows how unlike the other class-privileged group/s, the sex worker 'lesbian' group did not struggle internally as a result of class and generational tensions as all its members found solidarity within their marginal existence in the society through commonalities in income struggles, professional backgrounds, and living arrangements.

This chapter in discussing gender, sexuality, and body politics through the informally organized activism of 'lesbians' participates in the broader discussions of this book around south Asian femininities through the challenges and reconfiguration of new womanhood through discourses around new sexualities across the lines of gender and class, in the context of Bangladesh.

Methodology

Based on qualitative research methodology, using ethnography, life-history, and focus group discussions along with document analysis, data was collected between a research period of 2007–2012. Fifteen non-heterosexual (in/interested in same-sex relations) women (age range 18–60 years) participated through life-history method in this research, which forms the narrative base of this chapter. Two non-heterosexual women's support groups (S1 and S2) were studied as case studies. These groups can be described and divided by class (based on founders' and members' class belongings). The first group 'S1' comprised of mostly middle-upper middle-class educated (from 12 years of education to master's level) women though at one point they had membership from relatively less privileged economic backgrounds, and the second group S2, which is the main focus of this chapter, comprised of lower socio-economic class sex workers (from no schooling to less than 10 years of education). Since the groups were nonregistered and informal in their organizational style and visibility in the mainstream, case studies were conducted based on informal documents that were made available to me. All names used in this chapter are pseudonyms, and the two women's group names are chosen not to be disclosed to ensure the groups' and members' security in mind (given the recent backlash and killing of LGBT activists in 2016). This chapter mainly focuses on S2 group and its members, and to have a better understanding of the class-gender-sexuality dynamics of women's sexualities in general and in LGBT activism in Bangladesh during the aforementioned timeline, S1 group is discussed as a referral point and not as the primary focus.

The chapter is divided into two broad sections. In the first section, 'Bon'ding Through Love and Sexuality, I explore ways in which individual

awareness of sexuality takes place in a dominant homosocial culture and family environments and the ways in which agency is applied in negotiating sexual subjectivity through a creation of non-normative family households. It specifically focuses on female sex worker 'lesbian's households and how they make use of their class, profession, and sexual subculture to establish alternative households. The next section, '*Shomopremi*' Versus 'Lesbian', looks into the politics of sexual identity and labelling and how female sex worker 'lesbians' strategically positioned their group for recognition and survival within the LGBT movement, which ultimately takes us to the discussion of a possible emergence of a new understanding of 'new sexualities' in the context of Bangladesh.

'Bon'ding Through Love and Sexuality: Organization of Same-Sex Households of Female Sex Workers

Much of the existing work on women and sexuality in Bangladesh has been on sex workers which can range from victimhood to empowerment (Blanchet 1996; Tahmina and Moral 2004; Haq 2006; Karim 2004), which indicates the dominant practice of separating sexuality from 'respectable' mainstream women positioned and carefully placed within family structure, from the other or 'fallen' woman of sex trade. While in mainstream society the issue of women's sexual pleasure remains a taboo and women remain unvocalized, sex workers present a different scenario where in many cases they can and do ensure that sexuality is presented as an embodied reality. For example, in brothel culture, attitude towards sex, sexuality, gender, and normativity might appear to be subversive (and they are to some extents); often these reflect the mainstream middle-class values and norms of gender and sexual inequality between men and women, between normative sexuality versus sinful dissident ones. Sex worker 'lesbian' informants of this research are to be understood from the subculture of brothels and its troubled relation of agency versus subversion trajectory of sexuality as some of these informants started their professional life in brothels. Because of their sexual orientations, practices, and identities as women in same-sex relations, but practising heterosexual sex work,

the narratives of their life histories show a distinct dynamic of gender, sexualities, assertion of desires, and identity formation processes. Though most would acknowledge that since their childhood or adolescent days they felt a strong bond towards female friends and/or desire to be more like the 'boys' by taking part in farming activities, outdoor games, and dressing in male clothing—but none of these seemed alarmingly different in a way that screamed out 'female homoerotic desires'. Most of the informants came from rural backgrounds and became commercial sex workers for socio-economic reasons (though a couple of informants originated from lower middle-class families from Dhaka). Shaheen and Chameli were considered as 'senior' (40 is considered old for this profession) in this group and would term themselves as 'former sex workers' and currently as 'activists', though they admitted that when necessary they fell back on their profession to meet financial needs especially during a crisis or emergency. Both women had long-term live-in partners. While Shaheen had already given her child up for adoption, Chameli's constituted her own family with multiple adopted children. Ruma and Begum were a couple in their 20s. Tania was in her early 30s and also living with her then long-term partner. All these women are part of S2 support group that formed a close-knit community of women. The bond between these women originated not only from their profession and sexual orientations but also from the fact that each one of them spent months in state-sponsored/administered 'vagabond' or 'correction centres' (now known as 'rehabilitation centres) where street children and sex workers are systematically sent and kept until they are 'reformed'. In the all-women units, friendships are formed and partnerships are made. But it is an error to think that this 'homosocial' environment is the sole reason for forming homoerotic relations. When asked if homosociality was the reason behind their 'lesbian' identity, everyone answered in the negative (and noted that they always had access to men if they desired), and many had heterosexual encounters before and after their prison time. It was recognized by informants that long period of traumatic time spent together in the centres, where they were deprived of resources, compassion, and support—the women only had each other for comfort and the bonding established there had more to offer than mere sex. Many women were initiated into the actual act of homoerotic sex in the centres, but it was female camaraderie and love that lasted beyond the walls and time of the semi-prisons. Even though same-sex relations were

commonplace in the confinement of the correction centres, it still had to be kept a secret form the authorities who were known to handle such 'deviant acts' and 'abnormalities' with strict discipline. Almost everyone narrated episodes of 'punishment' (ranging from isolation, verbal and physical abuse to flogging) after getting 'caught' or being exposed by others. The abuse, trauma, and humiliation of being imprisoned as a 'vagabond' or 'fallen woman' (in Bengali, *Potita*) and then punished for their sexual choices was no doubt a painful process which shaped these women's resolution to stick to what was felt 'right'. When freed, they set up homes with respective female partners or love interests and continued life as heterosexual sex workers for economic survival.

Motherhood is coveted by most of these women, and so they either already had biological and/or adopted children or planned to have children someday. These all-women households with children did not see the absence of a father figure as problematic, but at the same time, the sexual aspect of the relationship between mothers was kept a secret from children, and it was described as a normative practice of mainstream heterosexual family homes where this 'aspect' of parent's conjugal life is never made visible to children.

'Bon' or sister is a generic term used within the sex worker community to indicate love and a possible erotic relationship between two women. The term 'bon' or sister in general encapsulates a strategic move to negotiate heteronormative structures within Bangladeshi society. At one level, sisterhood ('bon') is revered as a relation and the term can be applied to a wide range of social meanings. For example, 'bon' can refer to blood sisters, cousins, friends, co-wives, and so on, but in this context a very strict 'non-sexual' meaning is understood, thereby removing any connotation of incest. At another level, because most women in sex trade come from rural areas and work in the city, the use of the term 'bon' and being accompanied by one may help them establish a level of respectability when they visit parental or even spousal homes in villages. Most create a married woman's image when they visited family homes in villages, legitimizing any children they might have had as a result of their work or personal choices. Sex worker women participants preferred to live in a close social cluster with other women from same profession as it provided an understanding of lifestyles and protected them from threats from mainstream society. Sisterhood is essential for networking and survival,

especially in case of police harassment, arrest, or violence. Finally, most women desired motherhood, biological or adoptive, and raising children with another 'bon' or within a sisterhood which provided these women with a sense of security and care within the spaces of households for their children.

Because of their triple marginalized status in society (women, sex workers, and non-heterosexual)—these women appeared to be extremely resolute and strategic in how they pursued life, livelihood, and their personal desires. Within the private spheres, the heterosexual model of 'husband and wife' was followed, and in some cases, there was a tension between couples regarding the roles and responsibilities of the partner who assumed the male-husband-provider role, which meant that the wife-female-partner was expected to withdraw from sex work and stay at home and not share her body with others. Monogamy on the 'wife's part was expected. But such restrictive boundaries of the body often could not be maintained because of financial stress. There were no practices of cross-dressing or dressing like the 'masculine-husband' versus 'feminine-wife' in any of these couples, and the reason for that was made very clear—to be a commercial sex worker in a heterosexual world, one needed to maintain a desirable feminine appearance irrespective of whatever gendered role model was maintained within the boundaries of home. Also, none of the women mentioned any acute or inherent aspiration to look like a man, but rather some expressed the desire to be able to live in the world like a 'man', that is, with freedom, mobility, security, and privilege. This is just an indicative of the power the masculine gender has in a hetero-patriarchal structure which everyone understood and wanted. The concept of a 'queer' family does not even feature in the socio-sexual discourse in Bangladesh. It was/is therefore difficult for me to address this as a generically and loosely termed as 'queer' family.

The issue of respectability that is attached to middle-class culture and mainstream society's value system—and values originally defined the middle class or Bengali *Bhoddrolok* and its *Shongshar* (family household) identity in south Asia—remains central to the norms, roles, and decisions women (especially in relation to the construction of Muslim *Bhodromohila* or gentlewoman) make regarding their sexualities, its expressions, and assertions (Azim 2010; Amin 1996; Akhtar and Bhowmik 1998; Begum

and Haq 2001; Nahar 2005). Sex workers, irrespective of their sexual orientation or identities make a separate connection between sex as a bodily act and economic performance and sexuality as an expression of desire and emotions. Because there is a limited number of class-based sexual taboos or moralities attached to meanings of sex and sexuality, gender roles can be performed in a range of alternative ways. Urban sex workers in same-sex relations participating in this research, because of their need to move in and out of their own circles and mainstream society (and the lack of a definite physical boundary like that in brothels), learnt to associate sexuality and gender within the dominant middle-class normative parameters. Performances of femininity and marriage normativity are integral part of their socio-sexual identity. Desire of the agential body is associated with monogamous love relationships, whereas performance of the erotic body for economic purposes is separated from the personal life. Homoerotic desire is framed within the context of middle-class heterosexual marital relations (of provider husband-care giver housewife). The agency lies in their ways of internalizing same-sex desires as a natural part of life, unlike in brothels where it is seen problematic. Resistance occurs in the creative avenues which they use to navigate through the multiple layers of gender role performances in life and the plural worlds that they inhabit. The women are constantly strategizing performances, images, and routines in such a concerted way that it enables them to have separate pockets of life, each pocket with different but functional relations with families, friends, and lovers. These women lived on the periphery of the respectable middle class and inhabited a smaller circle of community space that had its own subculture of sex, gender and sexualities, and norms of acceptability that often differed from the mainstream middle class. And it is this inner space of the community that allowed women to have same-sex relations, household partnerships, and co-parenting arrangements for children. Same-sex marriage, cohabitation, and the right to have children are still components of a Western queer movement agenda that cannot be automatically translated into a Bangladeshi social-legal context, yet. Nonetheless, these narratives illustrate that the concept of 'family' must be re-examined with an understanding that sexuality in totality as a concept is a part of its discourse rather than just understanding it as a mere physical 'sex act' (Malone and Cleary 2002).

Creating a social network and securing a safe private environment is crucial to any marginalized or non-heteronormative group, especially of women. The small but crucial breathing spaces give women opportunities to find friendship, bonding, and camaraderie—but also provide all-important grounds for organizing themselves, debating the politics of sexual rights and identities, and extend support to fellow members of the community. Women create homes, support groups, or simple inner circles of friends to come together as a community—sometimes these communities have intergenerational characteristics, sometimes they are based on professional commonality or commonality of education, marital status, or simple family affiliation.

The (unintentional) comparison between non-heterosexual women from different class groups, as individuals as well as groups, who live their lives in a different economic position within the vast-varied spectrum of the Bengali middle class, is a fertile ground for addressing questions of class, sexuality, and differences. Female sex workers in same-sex relationships are grounded in the same hetero-patriarchal social context, but their take on gender hierarchies and heteronormativity has different interpretations and performativity because of their marginalized position as sex workers. Their status is at the bottom of any hetero-patriarchal hierarchy, but their household arrangements and relationships, and how these were maintained within the broader familial and social contexts, can be termed a *queer habitus*. As they formed a very close-knit community (of sex workers and 'bon'/sisters), it is the reality of an *extended family* that helped them to maintain multiple social-sexual identities. The support derived from these networks helped them cope with demanding roles, which included keeping the appearance of a 'respectable' working woman when visiting the village family home,[1] acting as responsible mother, being involved in a sex workers' network (providing safety in instances ranging from client violence to police cases), and maintaining an intimate relationship with another woman within home. Living with another woman is compliant with homosociality, but it is the immediate community of sex workers who prefer to live in clusters that provide a sense of space and freedom. This is in contrast to the mainstream 'respectable' middle-class existence that requires supervision and surveillance of women living outside matrimonial arrangements. If family support is crucial to many educated middle-class non-heterosexual women, for these sex workers it is their immediate community that forms

a *family* and whose support provides a safety net that allows them to maintain a same-sex family household.

The private aspect of that space—often critiqued in feminist scholarship as the prime site of violence and discrimination of women—can actually function as a protective cover for non-normative sexual arrangements. Jackson (2011, p. 13) suggests that analysis of heterosexuality must address 'two interrelated aspects of its social ordering: first the ways in which institutionalised, normative heterosexuality and its associated practices serve to marginalize those who live outside its boundaries; second the social ordering of relationships *within* heterosexuality'. The first aspect looks into non-normative lives from the 'heterosexual' assumptions, practices, and prejudices; while second aspect looks into how heterosexuality is classed and how the hetero-homosexual binary intersects with class in regulating intimate life. These two aspects are integral parts of this research in its close examination of heterosexual assumptions of Bangladeshi society and its intersection with gender and class. Narratives from non-normative lives depicted in this chapter show exactly how individuals integrate heterosexuality and heteronormativity to push the boundaries of norms in order to create spaces for multiple expressions of erotic desires. There is no linear way of negotiation even within the same gender groups living in different economic class. The variation in class identities and experiences within the same group or forum brings a complex but interesting dynamics as it organically and continually push each other's boundaries of respective gendered normative performances especially in reformulating erotic performances in newly claimed places and spaces. The coexistence of conflicts (based on labels and respectability of class privileges) and solidarity (based on being marginalized and often invisible) in fact subtly pave ways to the constructions of new forms of sexualities in its politics and practices.

Shomopremi Versus 'Lesbian': The Politics of Identities, Visibility, and Representation

Identity is a fluid term, and the narratives of the non-heterosexual women in this study indicate that the process of constructing or articulating sexual identity is anything but *straight*. One can make strategic decisions to move

in and out of different sexual identities (Eves 2004). In understanding the sex worker 'lesbian' women's activism and positionality within the then LGBT community, reference and comparison are to be made with another informal support group of women who belonged to educated urban middle class (S1). 'Lesbian' is a term that is more problematic as it either highly contested or strategically appropriated in the context of this research. The process of identity construction and labelling is done at two levels: firstly, at the personal level, and secondly, at a collective level which takes the 'personal' to the level of the 'political'. For the purpose of this chapter, I will focus on the collective identity (and its politics) mainly because in LGBT activism or sexuality rights movement 'identity' of the collective in terms of groups plays a crucial role. This is where groups differentiate from each other based on their respective sexual politics. For example, the S1 'shomo (same) premi (to love)' (to love the same) group of women—who were also the most visible in the LGBT community at the time of this research—had a debate over the labelling of 'lesbians', weighing the term's political correctness as well as its political usefulness in the broader sexuality rights movement/framework. They preferred to describe themselves as *Shomopremi*, emphasizing on 'love'. These group members used 'lesbian' to describe their sexual identities but refused to 'label' themselves as such. 'Lesbians in Bangladesh prefer the term Narishomopremi[2]…relation between two females is spiritual, mental, and social. Sex is not central, but part of the larger construction of a relationship' (workshop on Sexual Diversity and Coalition Building in 2009, 2010). It indicated that image is an important element to social life in Bangladesh. Thus, one should use terms of identity that have less sexual connotation. While they reject the English term 'lesbian' in the context of Bangladesh, they recognize its relevance in international forums. It was clear that this group of educated urban middle-class women's concepts of gender and femininity was influenced if not moulded after the traditional role of women within Bengali society—a cultural setting where women's overt projection of sexuality or emphasis on 'sexual desire' is not welcome. Recognition that women are sexual—and in this case sexual in a way that is deemed 'deviant'—undermined the mainstream notion of 'respectable female sexuality', which is understood as transcending the sexual to an almost spiritual level.

I met with S2 in the then LGBT coalition office in January 2011, during a social event to celebrate one of the organization's anniversary. I was introduced to the group and its leader by one of the Coalition leaders/organizers. It was intriguingly insightful to know how female sex workers could organize and claim space within an otherwise educated, middle-class and male-dominated LGBTQ landscape in Dhaka. The group was initiated and formed by a former sex worker, Kohinoor (28), who felt the need to organize fellow sex workers (within Dhaka) in same-sex relationships and to look into their (and their children's) welfare. Kohinoor had started the initiative only about a year ago but managed to get an initial membership of 25 women. The membership had been increasing ever since, and Kohinoor was working relentlessly to gather resources, information, and space through networking with other sexual identity-based groups within the LGBT coalition that had formed two years prior to this. She was introduced to the Coalition through a transgender group, and after some meetings, her group was given membership, which in turn allowed her to gain access to a small seed fund to hold monthly meetings using the Coalition's office space. The group was administratively well organized in terms of maintaining meeting minutes, documenting proceedings, and transparency of accounts and accountability. Membership came with a monthly fee, which was mainly used as an emergency fund of its members (like releasing a sex worker from police custody or bailing a member from the court). Most members were also part of the Sex Workers' Welfare Organization.

Their experience of sex workers' rights movement and practical experiences in organization/administration of such group efforts provided them with related pragmatic skills, and this marked a major difference between *S2* and similar same-sex support groups (for both men and women). It should also be mentioned here that the initiative to set up *S2* as a separate group based on sexual identity created anger and hostility within their umbrella Sex Workers' Welfare Organization, which resulted in threats, violence, and punishment (in the form of monitory compensation) for Kohinoor. One of the main objections of the Sex Worker's Organization was that identifying and organizing as a 'lesbian' group would label the entire sex workers' community as more deviant, which might be harmful

for the image of the association. This indicated that sex workers find it easier to work and strategically benefit from the heteronormative structure of the society, even though they are positioned at the bottom rung of the social hierarchy.

Group S2, representing the female sex workers in same-sex relationships, had an interesting route to the term 'lesbian' and its useful power of labelling. They said that did not even know that such a term to identify or express one's sexual desire of a particular kind existed until the HIV/AIDS prevention health campaigns introduced the term to them (they were told that they were 'doing lesbianism'). But S2 didn't find any trouble, ideologically or linguistically to use 'lesbian' as an identity of sexual orientation or practices as long as they could benefit from it by attaching the group within the LGBT groups at that given period. S2 members including its leaders, who had experiences in sex worker's social movement and organization previously, understood sexuality politics through identities and were not interested in getting entangled in the disputes over terminology that were profoundly class and gender based. They reasoned that people understood it more readily than the Bangla terms as there were too much taboo and ambiguity around sexuality and identity in the native language. Their decision to be affiliated with sexual rights activities and to join a broader platform made them cautiously choose the English label of 'lesbian' because it has a more universal currency and access to resources. I also feel that women sex workers did not feel the need to be viewed in the 'respectable middle-class Bengali woman' image, and/or they simply accepted that society would not view them in any other way in any case. Their approach and lived experiences of sexuality through their profession, in a way, allowed them to deal with sexuality and identity in a more straightforward manner than the women from different socio-economic class. Being a sex worker, part of their social identity is related to professional identity, which is sexual in nature.

What makes sex workers' sexual identity a more complex and intriguing issue is that it shows that sexual identities can be as plural or diverse as an individual's sexual practices. Being commercial sex workers, these women not only assumed heterosexual identities in public but they also practised it. While sex (the act) is central to the heterosexual identity, 'lesbian' is an identity that is used for a broader purpose of welfare, of

which sex (the act) is only a small part. 'Social identities, individual selves', as puts it, is central to the problematic of sexual identity labelling for non-heterosexual women in this study. Identities are not only expressed through labels but more through day-to-day expressions of living arrangements, lifestyle, dress codes, associations, and images that are more social than individual. As individuals get more comfortable and confident with their sexualities, many find a middle ground of self-expression that allows them some continuity or fluidity of movement between different spaces, and their separate identity performances get reduced.

Connecting women's conflicts, negotiations, and personal politics of sexual identity with that of organizational politics is extremely significant to understanding how support groups organize, conduct, operate, and thus position themselves in the broader field of sexual rights 'movements' and/or initiatives. Despite the conflicts, threats, and violence inflicted on Kohinoor, she was determined to carve out a space for her group with the help from other Coalition members. Unlike *S1*, *S2* established and maintained a closer relation/affiliation to the other groups and their leaders, especially the transgender groups mainly because of their class affiliation and a commonality in their marginalized social position. *S2* was looking for allies that would benefit them and did not want to challenge anyone or any group ideologically. They refrained from participating in all debates and discussions mainly because of their then newcomer position and also because of their lack of efficiency over the educated English dominant language and jargons of sexual discourses. They rather preferred to focus on the organizational stability of the group itself. Though the group used the term 'lesbian' as their sexual identity, all documentation and communication is actually done in Bangla so they use the term 'nari-premi' (women-loving-women). Interestingly, they mentioned in our discussions that they could do without getting into the politics of identity, labelling, framing, and so on, because they were not educated or informed enough regarding these politics. They had identified welfare as their topmost priority, and this strategy and attitude actually benefited the group.

Unlike the groups, and S1, which eventually came out of the Coalition and disintegrated as a group by 2011 because of internal disagreements over intergenerational issues like visibility and relatability, *S2* did not

seem to struggle internally with class and age tensions. All its members come from similar professional backgrounds, realities, and living arrangements, and they were united in protecting themselves from the outside hetero-patriarchal world that oppressed them socially, economically, and sexually (both mainstream oppression and marginalization, as well as hostility and marginalization within the sex workers' community). The extent of their common ground strengthened the group and helped them to stay together. Also group members are all between 20 and 40 years, and, as a practice in the sex workers' community, seniority was respected and hierarchy was maintained within the profession's norms. Also, because socially the group was considered lower middle class or even working class (despite the fact that many of them had a relatively higher income bracket [something of a fact which they preferred to hide for safety and security reasons]), within the sexual identity-based organizations and LGBT activism, they were not seen as a threat and could be kept under control unlike the other women's group (whose class, age group, and network privilege were seen as challenging and problematic).

Leadership appeared to be a contested issue within the sexual identity-based LGBT movement in general, therefore, within non-heterosexual women's groups too. The main reasons for the disintegration of S1 were generational differences in the understanding of 'movement' and activism, conflicts regarding agenda and funding, debates over how much sexuality rights need to be 'politicized' and how, and finally, a failure to approach sexuality as a 'lived experience' rather than as an isolated 'identity-based' discourse and how sexuality impacts different people and different genders in the wide range of class and location. 'Does a lesbian identity necessarily offer a natural and secure platform for lesbian politics? Is the name "lesbian" a self-explanatory one, a homogenous embodiment of marginalization and therefore a bearer of a radical transformation?' asks Biswas (2007, p. 276). Bacchetta, in her reflection on the 1980s' lesbian history in Delhi, says that India dealt with this identity and positionality that was crucial for the lesbian women's agency, organization, and activities in the 1980s. In fact, in the 1980s there was little agreement among lesbians, and among 'lesbians', and between them about terms of identity, and in some work a multiplicity of terms surfaced precisely to dismantle fixity (2007, p. 112). Just like in Delhi in the 1980s, in Bangladesh, especially in Dhaka, one finds women informally grouping

and organizing themselves based on their sexual identity or orientations. And as in Delhi, in these informal organizations, autonomous discussions were arranged in smaller private spaces like middle-class homes. And just like the present debates around sexuality, identity politics, and rights discourses resulting in backlashes around the region against sexuality rights—women's sexuality in general and women's sexual diversity in particular did not only faced internal conflicts and contestations, which resulted in splits among the middle-class women's same-sex group, while sex worker lesbian group survived these testing times by staying low, aligned with more established groups like the transgender. The question of representation around identity claims and labelling politics threw challenges to both the groups: while S1 found itself disintegrated much earlier in the movement, S2 used strategy and its existing marginalized position of gender, sexuality, and class to claim a mainstream identity to organize and stabilize itself with a larger collective. The question of visibility was an ongoing debate amongst all LGBT groups at the time of the research: while the male sexually diverse groups made a dash to visibility to promote sexuality rights as an agenda in public eye, women's same-sex group refrained from it as a strategy. S1 not only refrained from visibility as a collective group but also questioned the purpose and future of such approach fearing a backlash and counterproductive outcome from rushed activism. S2 concentrated on staying put and keeping its members safe and build capacity in one way or the other. One cannot conclude if one strategy was better than the other between the two women's groups, but the fact that S2 still exists and has survived backlashes is an indication that strategy and alliance are keys to asserting sexuality as a right, however salient its features might be. In this sense, what the women's sexual identity-based groups were going through is not uncommon if one looks at the history of LGBTQ communities around the world.

Conclusion

There are major gaps in the knowledge base about sexuality in Bangladesh and the socio-sexual conditions of people of different genders and sexualities. There is almost no in-depth knowledge base about women's sexualities, its diversities, and social practices. The gaps in sexuality and activism

are illustrated by the lack of a coherent, inclusive approach to sexuality, as an embodied concept, as part of the bodily integrity discourse. Spaces for alternative discourses that often stem from different sites of resistance created by the individuals through life's strategic lessons are absent in documented forms. As Sharma, J. (2009) puts it, and what my findings agree with, reflecting on lived realities is a crucial entry point to sexuality politics, especially in the case of women. Lived realities of women with diverse sexualities belonging to different socio-economic class, like the two groups discussed here, show us the processes of challenging norms, of negotiating norms which are processes of not only strategic living but also of the widening possibilities of sexual politics at both private and public spaces.

In the emergence of 'new womanhood' through renegotiated femininities and power relations, most of the discussions have remained within the ever-expanding middle class in south Asia. Sexuality still remains taboo and ignored from the debate around the construction of this new womanhood. Within the sexuality rights and feminist debates around politics of body and sexuality of women, working-class women remain invisible. Sex worker 'lesbian' women and their organization of themselves around rights and welfare—as discussed in this chapter—throw a challenge on the dominant discourses of both new womanhood and sexualities as they clearly demonstrate how sexuality can be expressed differently yet simultaneously as labour choice, desire, and identity—and all of these are done strategically by women making use of gender and class norms. Thus, these women challenge the prevalent politics of 'forgetting' the working-class women from new womanhood (socio-economic discourses) and sexualities (by the LGBT discourses) but silently 'claiming' a space through sexuality. The 'new' ness of their womanhood lies in the reality that while they access labour market through paid employment through the most tabooed profession, but they maintain the appearance of the household, the private space through normative order, though inside that space, norms are once again deconstructed and reshaped according to personal choices. The constant conformation-negotiation-resistance is something that is beyond the possibilities of their middle-class counterparts within the same urban locations. Within the activism or restricted public space of LGBT activism, the same group of women are placed at the bottom of hierarchy based on gender and class, and they

do not contest that positioning for strategic reasons while making gradual progress in securing safe space and welfare for its own members through strategic invisibility. Their sexuality, its labelling, and use of professional choices that allows certain sexualization of bodies are all manifestations of renegotiated and resistant womanhood and sexualities, something that needs to be further understood and recognized for at least symbolic significance.

Notes

1. All sex workers (in this research) are migrant women, who maintain one household in Dhaka and support parental family back in the villages. The shaping of one's public image has to be done at two levels: covering up professional identity and sexual identity. Professional identity is also part of personal identity as a woman, who needs to carefully establish an image of a respectable working woman staying away from home village/family but whose economic contribution is crucial for others too.
2. A workshop entitled 'Sexual Diversity and Coalition Building' among the Bangladeshi LGBT community was held February 6–7, 2009, in Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh, with financial support from the Norwegian LGBT Association (LLH Norway). The topic of 'Gay Women: Issues and Concerns—Perspectives from Bangladesh OR Bangladesh in Perspective? Perspective of Bangladesh' (where this *Shomopremi* group represented the only 'gay women's' group) was addressed.

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‘New’ Feminisms in India: Encountering the ‘West’ and the Rest

Sushmita Chatterjee

Feminism is contentious. A buoyant belligerence marks its presence, regardless of space and time. One aspect of its contentiousness is marked by situating it as a western ideology framed by a rights-based discourse (i.e., right to vote, right to equal pay, right to education), while others notice its persistent prevalence through different geographical spaces and temporal trajectories. For instance, significant instances of feminist agency from all over the world mitigate against crediting or discrediting the ‘west’ as the harbinger of feminism and feminist politics. Notwithstanding, many different nuances to the conversation about western feminism—its history, politics, and imperial stakes—the spectre of the ‘west’ haunts Indian feminism in significant ways. Through different time periods, instances of what could be called feminism are seen as an alien imposition and western influence, colonial manifestations, and at odds with India’s unique traditional values and agentic capacities. This essay questions the meaning of the ‘west’ in new Indian feminisms. Just as ‘India’ remains an amorphous entity subject to myriad intersectional politics,

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the 'west' has no clear lines to neatly demarcate itself from the rest. The rest resides in the west and vice versa. What are some implications in working with dichotomous notions of India vs. the west? How does it colour our perception of 'new' feminisms in India? Ultimately by complicating the notion of space and ideological delineations, my essay theorizes on the 'new' as offering a space for us to rethink our categories of alliance and disavowal, which though seen as ostensibly western influenced could help us unwrap our understanding of the 'west' and 'India.'

Right at the offset before embarking on the journey of this essay, I would like to briefly lay out some curious conceptual delineations which will help the reader understand my persisting bafflement and inspiration in grappling with this topic. While this essay addresses the issue of 'new' feminisms in India and its relation to the 'west,' it is important to point out that all the terms under purview come with a prolific baggage in terms of usage, debates, and different nuances. I will provide concrete examples of these conceptual oscillations as we move forward in this essay. At this point, I simply lay out the meaning plays which make the terms under purview an easy target to shift according to intention and objective. 'Feminism,' 'west,' 'India,' and 'new' are all terms which can be used in multiple ways. Very simply understood, feminism in the west has no clear-cut connotation as different ideological feminisms proliferate (i.e., liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, ecofeminism, and others) with considerable overlaps at some intersections and no commonality at others. Further, an ahistorical conceptualization of feminism in the west also offers no clues to the subject under consideration. Moreover, feminism in the west itself is inundated with critiques from the west about its elitist, middle-class, white, cis, and straight alliances. Working-class women fighting for humane wages in the west would hardly see themselves as a hegemonic west, and rural women in the agricultural sector in India can see urban Indian women as the quintessential west. In many ways, the west is formulated as an insider/outsider mechanism with the west being the oppressive outside. Similar to slippery definitions of the west and feminisms, the 'new' operates as a political strategy in most ideological conversations. Sometimes, the new is good and the harbinger of progress, and other times, it stands for a contamination of tradition and a nostalgic loss of the pristine 'old.' The inevitable flows of migration, diaspora, and social media activism make it impossible

to define a pristine 'India' with a definite tradition. Noting the concrete materiality of political boundaries, it is also important to frame its constructed nature within a certain history and politics. Having briefly teased out/with some of these definitional impossibilities, I turn next to the trajectory of my essay, its logical flow.

Here, first I draw our attention to some important conversations on feminism in India and its relation to the west. This section presents arguments on the hostility towards feminism in India as seen, for example, in Madhu Kishwar's often-quoted essay and also how others have worked with a critique of indigenous women's politics and parsed out a conversation between differences. Next, I bring to the fore some examples of new feminisms in India which are critiqued as being influenced by the west because of being urban-centred, English-speaking, and for using new media practices. Finally, and in the last section, I endeavour to push this conversation on new feminisms and its western tutelage by drawing on my earlier work on this topic alongside other examples and theorists who help us think through the many different facets to the conversation. I turn to Mithu Sen's exhibit, 'Aphasia' (2016), which encourages us to rethink the construction of boundaries and geographical delimitations. What are we really critiquing in our uneasiness with western and new feminisms? And, what am I defending when asking us to deconstruct our positions of critique and encounter with differences?

Feminism, the 'West,' and Theoretical Tensions

This section elucidates on the tensions in defining new feminisms in India and its relation to the west. I draw inspiration from Nivedita Menon's (2012, p. ix) work *Seeing Like a Feminist*, where Menon outlines a feminist method whereby 'seeing' becomes '…a gesture of subversion towards power; it disorganizes and disorders the settled field, resists homogenization, and opens up multiple possibilities rather than close them off.' Inspired by, and different from, James Scott's *Seeing Like a State* that articulated seeing as control and order, Menon writes about 'seeing' as subversion and thereby the crafting of varied subject possibilities. She writes, 'To see like a feminist is not to stabilize, it is to destabilize. The more we

understand, the more our horizons shift' (Menon 2012, p. xii). Menon's writing illustrates the endeavour to engage critically with location and the practices of feminisms. She mentions that when reading Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* or bell hooks' *Feminism is for Everybody*, we don't situate them as simply writing about France or the USA (Menon 2012, p. x). Weaving her way through instances of 'Indian' and 'Western' theories and practices of feminisms and the women's movement, Menon showcases a critical 'feminism' which uses different theoretical prisms to see patriarchy in its similarity as well as differences based on context and location.

Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid in *Recasting Women* add to this conversation critical of assuming labels and question patriarchy irrespective of its origin. They write (1999, p. 17), 'Both tradition and modernity have been, in India, carriers of patriarchal ideologies.' Contrary to formulations which posit a pure, unadulterated cultural tradition 'inside,' at odds with the dysfunctional 'outside,' *Recasting Women* helps us see the constructed nature of discourses and urgency to unravel epistemic strategies which make claims based on ideological agendas. For example, Partha Chatterjee's (1999, p. 238) influential essay in this volume, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question,' addresses Bengal during the nineteenth century, and he writes about nationalisms' discourse of the 'outer and the inner,' 'the home and the world' where the outer world corresponds to material pursuits and is dominantly masculine. Women constitute the inner home which must remain uncontaminated by the outer world (Chatterjee 1999, pp. 238–239). Men and women were thus positioned differently in the encounter with modernity and westernization (Chatterjee 1999, p. 243). As Chatterjee (1999, p. 244) succinctly writes, 'The 'new' woman defined in this way was subjected to a *new* patriarchy' Nationalism anchored the 'new woman' in a space distinct from the western outer and also the patriarchy of indigenous cultural traditions. Indigenous tradition was selectively appropriated, as Chatterjee (1999, p. 244) writes: 'this was a deliberately 'classicised' tradition—reformed, reconstructed.' The 'new woman' in this formulation is different from 'coarse, vulgar, loud' lower-class women and the 'parody of the westernised woman' (Chatterjee 1999, p. 244). Chatterjee's article showcases the manipulated 'new-ness' in the nationalist construction of the 'new woman' in Bengal and helps us notice convergences in the discourse surrounding 'new' feminisms and the new woman implicated in a curious relation to the 'west.'

Moving from the nineteenth century in broad strokes, it is easy to discern many critiques and affirmations of 'new woman' and feminisms. Maitrayee Chaudhuri (2004, p. xix) sums it up well in the introduction to *Feminisms in India* when she writes: 'At issue therefore are two related themes: one our ambiguous relationship to the *westerness of feminism*. And two the linked phenomena of a persistent desire to *search for indigenous 'roots'* and the *problems of defining the indigenous* in a *plural society*.' This two-pronged observation emphasizes the relatedness and reactionary impetus in delineating the west and indigeneity. It is futile to deny the involvement of the west, whether as the source of ideological legitimacy or as the crafter of the right position for women contrary to indigenous patriarchy. And, the defensive urge to search for authentic cultural traditions which are based on valuing women follows in quick succession. In India's multihued cultural milieu, the problem remains as to the privileging of a singular traditional trajectory at the expense of others, for instance Muslim cultures. Chatterjee's analysis described in the previous paragraph, alongside Chaudhuri's study of Indian feminism, situates the conversation on Indian women and feminism as intimately implicated in a binary play between self/other and Indian/Western.

Here, I think it is important to briefly peruse two examples of important theoretical contributions on the topic of Indian feminism which help us see the complexity and dialectics framing this issue. I urge us to think with Madhu Kishwar's oft-quoted 'A Horror of 'Isms': Why I Do Not Call Myself a Feminist,' alongside Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's 'Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?' in order to grapple with the many nuances to the conversation. I juxtapose the two conversations to frame the complexity to the issues, the binaries which dominate the conversation (i.e., west and self), and the impossibility of defining a pristine, oppression-free position. The two texts delineate very different understandings of feminism, one criticism, the other a deconstructive engagement, and frame the theoretical tensions in defining feminism and the west.

Madhu Kishwar (2004, p. 26) unequivocally critiques feminists and feminism while pronouncing her 'estrangement' from this ism. Her essay offers many reasons for her stance: Feminist gatherings become spaces for 'intellectual regimentation' and the 'feminist establishment' based in urban cities define feminism for all Indian women (Kishwar,

pp. 26–27). Those feminists who are based in urban areas enjoy the support of international donors and agencies but are unable to reach out to the real needs of Indian women. Kishwar writes about how most ideologies are culture and time specific whereby making them travel to other conditions may often be unproductive. In this instance, cultural conditions specific to India may not be hospitable or even receptive to the individualism seen in western feminism (Kishwar, p. 31). She writes, 'most women here are unwilling to assert their rights in a way that estranges them not just from their family but also from their larger kinship group and community' (Kishwar, p. 31). A relentless mimicking of the west, western women, its ideology, its rationale, does little for Indian women and serves the singular interests of the 'feminist establishment.' Starkly, Kishwar (2004, p. 47) points out, '…the feminist elite have developed a vested interest in the poverty and misery of Indian women.' At variance from feminism's western baggage, Kishwar asks us to be attentive to the Indian context. However, what is the Indian context? Who gets to define it?

Vastly different from Kishwar's critique of feminism, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan takes us along a plane of thinking which makes us discern the political investment of different positions and perspectives. Grappling with the question, 'Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?' Sunder Rajan (2004, p. 320) urges us to think through different facets to the question: 'Who is saying this? Who is opposing it? What is at stake here?' She points out that those who bank on the feminist spirit of Hindu goddesses are upholding a certain view of Hinduism and its religious tradition (Sunder Rajan 2004, p. 320). By situating the issue as a political question which panders to specific agendas, whether those of nationalism or feminism, Sunder Rajan (2004, p. 326) frames the 'instrumentality of religion in the post-colonial nation.' Complicating notions of agency, liberty, and empowerment, Sunder Rajan (2004, pp. 327–328) alerts us to the fact that by harping back to a certain tradition even as a safeguard against western feminism, 'it simultaneously aggrandizes the scope and politics of that tradition and coopts women's agency for its own ends.'

While Kishwar's essay prompts us to consider the proselytizing offshoots of western feminism, Sunder Rajan questions the basis in positing a goddess tradition with *Sree-Shakti* (feminine power) as a celebration of

Indian women which in fact panders to exclusionary and oppressive Hindutva politics. This conversation helps us discern the oscillation between western and indigenous traditions where no singular position offers a real solution for women's empowerment or feminist agency. The position of the 'west' through these theoretical moves remains amorphous, all pervasive, and sharply cuts through attempts to define the self. The next section analyses certain concrete moments of art and activism to frame the question: Who is the 'west'? And, how are 'new' feminisms embroiled with/in this conversation?

Visual Politics, New Feminisms, and the West

In this section, I draw our attention towards certain manifestations of new feminisms in India with a few selected examples. Women's movements in India have a long heterogeneous history and are involved with many different issues, often working in tandem with other movements, for example, on environmentalism, reproductive health, unequal pay, and/or legal reform (e.g., see Menon 2001; Chaudhuri 2012). Whether we agree or not with a framing of the Indian women's movement into three waves, or even using the label of 'feminist,' are points of interrogation and ongoing conversation. With the explicit aim of looking anew at the 'west' in Indian feminism, I first briefly describe a few highly publicized instances of new feminisms and its entanglement with the west.

In February 2009, Mangalore was the centre of national media attention after a Hindu right-wing organization, Sri Ram Sene, attacked women in pubs (Menon 2012, p. 136; Gupta 2016, p. 157). The women were attacked because they wore western outfits and were ostensibly corrupted by western pub-going values. A leader of the Sri Ram Sene, Pramod Muthalik, warned couples against being seen together on Valentine's Day with the immediate threat of being married if seen as a couple (Susan 2009). A journalist from New Delhi, Nisha Susan, launched a Facebook group 'Consortium of Pub-Going, Loose and Forward Women,' which urged women to send pink *chaddis* (underwear) to the Sri Ram Sene office, an on-the-face gesture of subversion and non-compliance. Hemangini Gupta (2016, p. 158) writes about the immediate spread of the group

where within a few days it had 50,000 members and spread through Indian cities. So was born the Pink Chaddi Campaign which gathered tremendous national and international public visibility.

By banking on the 'pink chaddi,' the group simultaneously sexualized and desexualized their protest and activism (Menon 2012, p. 137; Gupta 2016, p. 158). Using the femininity in the colour pink and the artefact of underwear, the campaign smudged the protocols of private and public sexuality by signalling the pink underwear as a public motif of political protest. The visual politics of sending and displaying pink underwear was a blatant signifier of defiance and mocked the charges of westernization by doubly reinforcing them. In other words, the imagination behind the campaign literally washed dirty linen in public to showcase the hypocrisy behind castigating western morality as the oppressive force. Nisha Susan (2009) writes, '…for many of those who signed up, neither Valentine's Day nor pub-going meant anything. What we agreed on is the need to end violence in the name of somebody's idea of Indian culture.' As a result of the activism, members of the Sri Ram Sene were put in preventive custody on Valentine's Day, and various segments of society reached out in support of the campaign. Criticisms were also prolific. Was this feminism light? What about the real problems faced by women dying of hunger on Indian streets?

Notwithstanding the virtues or the criticisms of this campaign, which I am sure deserve more attention, or a questioning about why it received the kind of attention it did, and a deeper introspection of its media framing, the presence of the west in this, and other instances of, Indian feminism draws out the contours of its presence. The Pink Chaddi Campaign was inspired by attacks of westernizations and for imbibing wrong western morals. Besides the many different connotations to the pink chaddis, sending chaddis to the headquarters of a Hindu right-wing organization also played on the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) and its khaki shorts (Menon 2012, p. 137). This playful and mischievous tug with meaning situates the position and the connotations of being western or the west in an interesting frame. Overlaying Hindutva and western meaning through the play with the pink chaddi, in this context lets note that the khaki shorts were also an inspiration from the British in colonial India. It becomes difficult to draw the lines around the contours of any supposed singularity, India or the west. Underwear as a symbol of politics

is not alien to western feminism, going with the well-known visual symbol of the bra-burning feminist. This intimate juxtaposition of Indian and western stereotypes helps us ponder new kinds of activism animating urban streets in India.

Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh was also home to India's first SlutWalk in 2011 (Mitra 2012). Other cities like Delhi and Bangalore followed in quick succession. The name of the protest march was changed to 'Besharmi Morcha' or 'Shameless Rally' to better speak to the Indian context, and participants were asked to attend in their usual clothes (Lakshmi 2011; Mitra 2012, p. 254). As an organizer put it, 'In India, no matter what we wear, even if we are covered head to toe in a sari or a burqa, we get molested and raped' (Lakshmi 2011). Street theatre and other public awareness campaigns on sexual harassment were part of the morcha's activism. SlutWalks have their origin in Toronto, inspired in defiance of a Canadian police officer asking women not to dress up like sluts to prevent harassment. The activism thus comes with an ostensibly western genealogy and it was thus easily susceptible to criticisms of being too western and not applicable to India. Criticisms pointed to the 'exclusionary' nature of the movement and its resonance among urban, upper class, western women in Indian cities (Mitra 2012, p. 255). On the other hand, an organizer succinctly pointed out, 'What part of SlutWalk is not part of Indian society? The victim blaming? The term 'slut'? …I have heard that term being used enough times, in more languages than one.' (Mitra 2012, p. 257).

The movement against sexual harassment and sexual violence in India has been gaining increasing momentum, more so from 2012 and Jyoti Singh Pandey's death in New Delhi. However, several creative manifestations of new feminisms with their own unique visual politics date much earlier, even in our contemporary moment. Blank Noise is one such initiative. The founder of Blank Noise, Jasmeen Patheja, speaks about her inspiration from feminist activism, feminist art, and an evolving understanding of art as a means to create languages of empowerment and self-definition (Ferrario 2015). Based on working as a 'collective' with a constant endeavour to come up with new movement strategies, and ways to form community, participants in Blank Noise projects are called 'Action Heroes.' A self-conscious vigilant model of responsible citizenship working against street harassment and other forms of violence frames

the role and energy of Action Heroes and marks their presence. Hemangini Gupta (2016, pp. 161–162) writes, 'Blank Noise interventions are built on the individual dreams of participants, inviting them to express their desires and to use these as the bedrock for future interventions.'

Started as a graduation project by Jasmeen Patheja, the Blank Noise initiative has traversed a multi-chequered path in terms of movement strategy, use of media, street theatre, teach-ins, strong cyber presence, and various modalities to build feminist consciousness and make starkly visible the everyday persistent abuses against women and their bodies. For example, Blank Noise asked women to send in the clothes they were wearing when they experienced harassment which were then used to set up installations in public spaces (Agrawal 2016). Campaigns have countered threats and intimidations faced by women on a regular basis in the streets of India, as well as strategies to combat the climate of fear about walking home alone at night or sleeping in the park. As the founder, Patheja points out that 'Each and every person has the ability and power to influence a safe space' (Abraham 2016). Building itself on individual agentic capacities and urge for safer spaces, the collective has also met criticisms citing the strategies as exclusionary, urban-oriented, and elitist. Patheja counters the critiques with an open-ended invitation for critics to join the collective and change it (Ferrario 2015). With its creative use of social media, consistent widening of movement base, and evolving techniques, Blank Noise is not simply relegated to 'a' space. Initiatives such as Blank Noise provide a useful intervention to rethink the contouring of specific spaces for feminism because it doesn't underwrite the critiques levelled against it, but instead its playful defiance and vivacious politics urge us to think about the oppressive spaces which make its politics seem out-of-place and incongruent. If sleeping in the park is a western modality, what is it about this act which makes it out-of-place in Indian parks? So, the point being that maybe what we need to think about are spaces and their protocols which legitimize only certain forms of action in place and render others as 'western' and inappropriate.

Trishima Mitra-Kahn (2012) provides us with a nuanced analysis of urban women's activism in Indian cities in her essay 'Offline issues, online lives? The emerging cyberlife of feminist politics in urban India.' Mitra-Kahn (2012, p. 116) points out that Blank Noise's campaigns cannot be

demarcated as solely 'physical' or 'virtual.' She writes about the movement's 'political theatricality' which draws inspiration from diverse feminist movements globally and paves its own (2012, p. 116). As Mitra-Kahn (2012, p. 124) writes, 'Unlike the early IWM, which was cautious about appropriating western vocabularies, a new generation of middle-class women does not seem to be a priori dismissive of western grammars solely on the grounds of their lineage.' Instances such as Blank Noise provide us with intriguing prisms to view changing public spaces in India which interject with the 'outside' in multiple ways whether through activism, issues, or movement discourse. The 'outside' or western is also irrevocably altered through these interactions as the changing discourse in some feminisms illustrates. The visual politics used in these instances of new feminisms, whether SlutWalk or Blank Noise, provide manure to rethink the politics of representation in new feminisms, its changing profiles, and needs.

Territoriality, the West, and New Feminisms

In this final section, I derive inspiration about spaces of playful subversion from Indian artist Mithu Sen. Her prolific work on gender, sexuality, and animality using hair, leather, faux fur, and multimedia tactics has carved out a unique space for her in the national and international art scene. Her creative subversions through art shows like 'Unbelongings' 2001, 'I Hate Pink' 2003, 'BLACK CANDY iforgotmypenisathome' 2010, and 'Border Unseen' 2014 have created her reputation as an artist who helps us undo constructions of ideal Indian womanhood, proper sexuality, or a protocol-bound contouring of bodies, physical and territorial. I find it extremely useful in this essay to briefly describe her art performance called *Aphasia* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum & Asia Society Museum in New York (2016). *Aphasia* was a presentation of Sen's art's practice where Sen (counter) performed through non-language or nonsensical discourse and (dis)guided the audience through her art exhibits. Sen—brandishing a wand—talks gibberish, gestures at unknown things, and showcases the ridiculousness of protocols and expectations on her as an artist, Indian, woman, and in western territory. The audience has to actively work to understand, rather than simply consume, and they become co-conspirators in the process of engaging

with Sen's performance (see Chatterjee 2016b). An Indian woman artist in New York displaying her art, Sen instead (counter) performs the opposite; the audience creates the art through their active engagement while the artist truly enjoys herself onstage. Vivaciously playful this thought-provoking interrogation of artistic method helps us think about rules, territoriality, and 'seeing like a feminist,' invoking Nivedita Menon from the first section of this essay. Destabilizing, deconstructing, and irreverently playful, I consider Mithu Sen's parody of expected performance to be invaluable in helping us decentre the gaze of the west and counter-perform.

In *Aphasia*, also titled 'Radical Hospitality, Counter Capitalism, Unmonolith Identity, Lingual Anarchy Performance,' Sen (2016) plays with space and expectations by treating her audience to a projection of nonsense, senses known only to her, and which her audience can retrieve only through sustained engagement with her work. Slides follow in quick succession on stage, with glimpse of Sen's exhibits from India and various parts of the world. What becomes important is not the singularity of the slides but the process and holistic picture. The artist as a courageous activist onstage before an international audience inspires a questioning of the borders between art and activism, India and the west, form and content, language and non-language. Sen's visual politics through this subversive counter-language or non-language provide a moving repertoire to think through ways of being in a space and countering it so that it can 'see' itself.

'Seeing like a feminist' with Sen and Menon, how can we rethink the efficacy or even the affective politics of Blank Noise? With a public display of clothes worn by women when they were harassed or with Action Heroes standing at traffic lights with letters which read 'Y R U LOOKING AT Me?' to counter street harassment, or sending pink chaddis to right-wing organizations, we are encountering creative moments of activism which inspire us to move beyond theoretical gates of western and Indian and think about the counter-performance of expectations, feminisms, territoriality, and politics in these blazing out-of-place new feminisms. Like Sen's audience in New York, the observers and onlookers on Indian streets were dislodged in their territory, however micro or macro.

The examples discussed in the previous section originate from urban spaces even though campaigns such as Blank Noise have spread through more than a dozen cities in India and have a wide international following. Through my use of selected examples, I am not suggesting that new femi-

nisms are simply urban and English-speaking. Tanika Sarkar's (1991) important work on women in Hindu right-wing organizations elucidates the increasing mobilization of women in social movements which are not considered feminist and spans the length and breadth of the country. Here, by actively narrowing down on a few examples of feminisms that are critiqued for being western, I seek to pull out the manipulation of the 'west' in these conversations. I am also mindful that any attempt to speak with a different voice not resonant with local patriarchies could be qualified as western, irrespective of its urban, rural, or class basis and bias. One does not need to speak English in order to be seen as western. Speaking in a different tongue, ideological or linguistic, may define one as the outsider. Moreover, other considerations also infiltrate my frames. My interrogation of the western cannot forget India's colonial history, anti-globalization struggles, environmental catastrophes, persisting battles with capitalism, multinational corporations, and entanglements within neoliberalism. There is a definite power hierarchy in the global political landscape, and theorization has to be anchored to power frames. Imperial feminism is also a tangible fact, and much feminist theory/praxis moves in a unidirectional mode with western feminists defining issues, legitimizing struggles, and literally and politically drawing the lines. Recall here Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (2006, p. 240) critique of 'western feminist discourse' and its representation of third world women as static and unchanging, while representing Euro-American women as complex agents of change.

Thus, many considerations jostle for attention while trying to fathom the contours of the west in new feminisms in India. In an earlier essay (2016a), I have theorized on 'new women' in Bollywood cinema. I reiterated that 'new women' have never included all women with explicit exclusions based on class and religion. I learn from Elora Halim Chowdhury's (2010, p. 302) work on the topic who writes, 'contemporary constructions of the new women are shaped by discourse of development and modernization.' Thus, thinking about new women under 'complex circuits of power,' the local-global matrix and transnational flows of people, good, and media reveal 'complex contradictions' (Chatterjee 2016a, p. 1190). I urged attention to the 'power play intrinsic to each framing' of the 'old' and 'new' (2016a, p. 1191). In this essay, I continue with my emphasis on power framings and the constructed nature of terms such as 'new' and 'west' and 'Indian' which selectively panders to certain interests.

Without positing the 'new' as radical or pure, I ask us to think creatively about these playful subversions which intentionally or not may change the protocols of space and behaviour towards widening possibilities for lives and people. The 'west' as geopolitical reference point, economic exploiter, and cultural oppressor can be subverted in its own territory. We just have to be mindful that this territory can be anywhere in the world, urban or rural, in Kolkata or California as the 'west' wears many garbs and so does its counter-politics. While ostensibly western influenced, it is very simplistic to describe any form of activism under one mode of analysis, western or indigenous. Blank Noise, the Pink Chaddi Campaign, Besharmi Morchas, and other forms of urban activism spill over and around attempts to singularize them with a single genealogy. This is not to cover faults or undermine criticisms against any feminism. Rather, I think that by moving beyond amorphous categories, we can better understand the complexity of power relations in our contemporary works where, as mentioned earlier, activism in many modes, and oppression, is both physical and virtual, Indian and western, multipronged, multidirectional, and animated by heterogeneous forces. Of course, as I write, I am mindful of my own position within western academia. Writing 'inside western eyes,' as reminded by Mohanty, I wonder whether this push towards reckoning with the complex, hybrid nature of new feminist theory and activism can help us, optimistically, 'counter-perform' the language of the oppressor. Is it possible to see whether 'new' feminisms through their complex entanglements within intertwined spaces can open up more possibilities for different lives?

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