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Aparna Bandyopadhyay, *Desire and Defiance: A Study of Bengali Women in Love, 1850–1930*. New Delhi: Orient Black Swan, 2016, 303 pages, ₹1275. ISBN: 978 81 250 6235 6.

Desire and Defiance is a heart-wrenching historical account of women risking love or rather risking their whole selves to love in 19th-century colonial Bengal. In the book, Bandyopadhyay focusses her attention on what she calls ‘transgressive heterosexual relationships’ and its consequences in the lives of select women. The transgression and heterosexual mould of desire are posited against existing marital norms of the time. The subjects of her book are upper caste Hindu and Brahmo women and the object of inquiry is their intimate, realised and unrealised, aspirations. Right at the outset, the author clarifies that in attempting to provide an account of love and its fault lines, her lines of enquiry are not so much directed towards exploring the subjective realm of love and amorous desire as the social consequences of actualising these alliances and the potential for violence that they bring. Such an account is pieced together through a variety of archival and non-archival sources that include newspapers, periodicals, law reports and legal suits, autobiographies, memoirs and novels.

The book is organised into six chapters along with an introduction and conclusion that progressively builds for us a picture of the intimate life of the *kulin* (‘the highest echelons of Brahmin and Kayastha castes’, p. 3) maidens, ‘adulterous’, deserted and abandoned wives, widows and lovers as well as inter communitarian alliances, instances of elopement and cohabitation. There is considerable focus on the figure of the outcast women.

Let me provide a summary account of the major themes that Bandyopadhyay addresses in order to highlight the contribution of the volume to the historiography of colonial Bengal. The opening chapter of the book ‘Quest for Legitimacy: Love Marriages of Bengali Women’

presents a detailed social scape of the moral sexual worlds of marriage and conjugal life. This involves showing concomitant emphases on the twin virtues of *satitva* and *patibrata* (chastity and sexual fidelity) prescriptively upheld by the upper caste Bengali society. It is in the light of this moral environment that the author provides accounts from the lives of Brahmo women and men who sought to legitimise their choice-based unions through recourse to religious rather than legal acknowledgement even as collective social sanction for such love marriages remained elusive. Such religious legitimation also becomes a latent site of ritual innovation; as in the instance of the 'self-gift' ('*atm-sampradan*', p. 72) of the bride to her husband as compared to the Hindu custom of the patrilineal male elder gifting the daughter to the 'wife takers'. A certain reformist zeal of the time nurtured alliances of Brahmo men with child widows and educational and cultural centres like Rabindranath Tagore's *Visva Bharati* became a site for many interracial and inter-communitarian alliances. The larger conceptual thrust of the author here is to underscore the agential capacities of women in contracting such alliances and risking themselves in the face of familial and social disapproval for choice-based unions. Here one wonders if the methodological radii of locating woman as a subject can be extended by not just thinking of her as a recipient of social consequences of what she chose as a woman but by foregrounding her as a person, who, is constituted over varied social relations and her own voice continually emerges in imbricated response to those voices.

Further on, in 'The Novel and the Poison of Love', Bandyopadhyay shows how the emergence of the novel and its vivid portrayals of heterosexual love, marital and non-marital, became a site of politicisation of intimate aspirations. The proper nature of womanhood and conjugal relations, were subjected to threadbare analysis and the novel-reading wife/woman became a derisive figure. The literary public sphere sought to sanitise public culture of what came to be perceived as the immoral within the novel. And, as printed commodities came into circulation, censoring of the overtly 'erotic' and 'obscene' within the popular folk and performative Vaishnava tradition (such as *Gita govinda*) also found expressions. This was accompanied by a process of parallel education of upper caste women in the virtues of respectability and conjugal duty. Bandyopadhyay notes how the nature of love was a subject of lively debate and many critics were careful to distinguish indigenous understandings of love from their western counterparts as essentially non-dyadic and firmly embedded within the familial.

The next set of chapters, 'Byabhichar: Love, Death and Punishment', 'Kulatyag: Chronicles of Elopement and Cohabitation' and 'The Outcast: Struggles for Survival', take the reader through several cases of adultery and elopement by maidens, wives and widows and the fate meted out to these relations and persons. What particularly stands out is the case of *kulin* households where many unmarried girls from these families, unable to find *kulin* boys and caught in intimacies with non-*kulin* boys, were often murdered to save family honour even as paradoxically the *kulin* household remained the site of many incestuous relationships. Many widows who entered into intimate relations often risked disinheritance. In cases of elopement, the woman was often referred as a *kulatyagini*, that is, one who voluntarily renounced membership of her group and simultaneously lost caste in the process. It is equally instructive that in many cases of elopement, it becomes a contest between love and honour when women who have eloped do not testify in favour of their partners at the time of judicial questioning. In Bandyopadhyay's interpretation, it is rather implicit that honour is as much a site of social doing for these women as perhaps love. Indeed, it is the coming together of the concerns of honour, respectability and love that makes for a very tragic script in the end to which the suicide of many such women is testimony (see final chapter: Desire, Illness and Death: Discourses on Hysteria and Suicide').

The story of desertion and abandonment of women who had eloped with their lovers is commonplace. So is the framing of kidnapping and abduction charges against the boy by the girl's family as an honour-reclaiming strategy across several cases described by Bandyopadhyay. These practices continue to be part of an elementary structure of violence in present-day elopement cases as is well illustrated by contemporary ethnographies of love, marriage and elopement. The description of inter-religious, particularly Hindu-Muslim, elopement and its framing within the public sphere as an act of communal aggression or what in present day terminology goes under the name of 'love jihad' is equally resonant. Thus one finds continuities between the colonial and post-colonial period in terms of the framing of the politics of sexual governance and intimate life. The struggles of women to eke out a living in the face of desertion by both their lovers and families provide a sombre commentary on the afterlife of sexual transgressions.

The case studies in *Desire and Defiance* could be treated as a contribution to an archive of love and a history of emotions. The realisation of desires and their blunt denial is one part, the other is of women as characters in history that must be etched out in different shades. This is a

task that Bandyopadhyay does with great sensitivity making *Desire and Defiance* a deeply moving narration of the history of intimacies on the margins of marriage in South Asia.

Geetika Bapna

Postdoctoral Fellow

Nehru Memorial Museum and Library

New Delhi, India