

**ABLEISM AND GENDER:
READING BANKIM CHANDRA CHATTERJEE'S *RAJANI* AND
*ANANDAMATH***

**A dissertation submitted to the University of Hyderabad
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of**

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

In

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

SOLANKI CHAKRABORTY

Reg. no. 17HCHL04



**CENTRE FOR COMPARATIVE LITERATURE
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES
UNIVERSITY OF HYDERABAD
HYDERABAD – 500046**

JUNE 2019



**CENTRE FOR COMPARATIVE LITERATURE
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES
UNIVERSITY OF HYDERABAD**

DECLARATION

I, **Solanki Chakraborty** (Reg. No. 17HCHL04), hereby declare that the research embodied in this dissertation entitled “**Ableism and Gender: Reading Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s *Rajani* and *Anandamath***” submitted by me under the guidance and supervision of Prof. Sowmya Dechamma C. C., Centre for Comparative Literature, University of Hyderabad, in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy in Comparative Literature, is a bonafide research work which is also free from plagiarism.

I also declare that it has not been submitted previously in part or in full to this or any other University or Institution for the award of any degree or diploma. I hereby agree that my dissertation can be deposited in Shodganga/INFLIBNET. A report on the plagiarism statistics from the University Librarian is enclosed.

**Hyderabad
28 June 2019**

**Solanki Chakraborty
Reg. No. 17HCHL04**



**CENTRE FOR COMPARATIVE LITERATURE
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES
UNIVERSITY OF HYDERABAD**

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled “**Ableism and Gender: Reading Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s *Rajani and Anandamath***” submitted by Ms. Solanki Chakraborty, bearing Reg. No. 17HCHL04, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy in the Centre for Comparative Literature, is a bonafide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance and which is plagiarism free.

**28 June 2019
Hyderabad**

**Supervisor
Prof. Sowmya Dechamma C. C.**

Head I/C and Dean

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would firstly like to thank my supervisor Prof. Sowmya for her critical insights to my work, without whom it would have been extremely difficult a journey.

I also want to thank Prof. Deepa Srinivas, Prof. Suneeta Rani, Prof. M.T. Ansari, Dr. Leonard Dickens and Prof. Bheemaiah for the interactions I had with them in the course of my M.Phil.

I am deeply grateful to my parents for their courage and determination to ensure the best for me, in education and otherwise.

My classmates, Alice, Shivam, Muhsina, Suman, Zeba, Sharanya, and Manasi have been constants for me to fall back on in moments of doubt.

I owe a huge thanks to my friends Debomita, Mitaja, Aisarya, Sharon, Chodaganga, Arun, Duryodhan, Vandana, Sandhya, Shireen, for the various conversations we've had on a million issues that have helped me think, frame, and articulate my disparate thoughts in cohesion.

I also acknowledge a collective that I am part of, ALTERNATIVE, which has been a major determinant of some of the discourses that I have articulated in the dissertation.

Last, but not the least, I wish to thank Roshan for all his love and patient support that made research extremely pleasant and exciting. I owe to him the introspection that any work, be it academic or political, needs.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgement	v
Introduction	01
Section 1 Dis/ability and Ideal Womanhood	15
Section 2 Able Body and the Masculine Self	41
Conclusion	63
Bibliography	68

Ableism and Gender: Reading Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's Rajani and Anandamath

by Solanki Chakraborty

Submission date: 28-Jun-2019 10:59AM (UTC+0530)

Submission ID: 1147648076

File name: final.pdf (507.26K)

Word count: 18340

Character count: 91007

ABLEISM AND GENDER:
READING BANKIM CHANDRA CHATTERJEE'S *RAJANI* AND
ANANDAMATH

Introduction

Studies in Ableism, whose foremost critic is Fiona Kumari Campbell, came up as a complementary field in Disability studies that had previously been majorly focusing on the “production of disablism” (Campbell 1). This, according to several Disability critics, curbed the radical potential of the field by aiming to examine and comprehend Disability from the perspective of a disabled individual, in turn, otherizing the identity further. The suggestion, then, according to Tom Shakespeare is to instead “de-construct the normality-which-is-to-be-assumed” (1). In other words, an examination of the “production, operation and maintenance of ableism” would lead us to a deeper understanding of how the normative imaginary is formed and internalised so that human difference takes the form of a spectacle that is expected to generate awe (1).

It would be beneficial to go through a few attempts at understanding the phenomenon of Ableism at this point. Campbell herself refers to ableism as “... a *network of beliefs, processes and practices* that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability then, is cast as a diminished state of being human” (Campbell 5; emphasis added). Dan Goodley refers to Wolbring’s definition of ableism as being “the favoritism for certain abilities for example cognition, competitiveness or consumerism and the often negative sentiment towards the lack of favored abilities and has a long history” (Goodley 22). Goodley himself has attempted a definition of Ableism in which he focuses on its markers:

“Ableism’s psychological, social, economic, cultural character normatively privileges able-bodiedness; *promotes smooth forms of personhood and smooth health*; creates space fit for normative citizens; encourages an institutional bias towards autonomous, independent bodies; and lends support to economic and material dependence on neoliberal and hyper-capitalist forms of production”. (Goodley 21; emphasis added)

Ableism, then, cannot be confined to a single mode of operation; it is, in fact, situated in a *network* of the various forces that operate everyday and is a function of historical occurrences. Mitchell and Snyder study Ableism, thus, along with the phenomenon of Nationalism and trace the origin of, what they refer to as, ‘Ablenationalism’ in the Neoliberal era (Snyder and Mitchell 113). In quite a unique manner, Mitchell and Snyder propose that it is the modern state that determines who a disabled identity is or not, based upon the extent to which the latter is able to perform a certain amount of labor that Capitalism demands. Identifying this as a “global tactic” to preclude the provision of social benefits to disabled people and simultaneously to also maintain a pool of surplus labour to keep the labor cost lowered, Ableism is said to be working in surreptitious ways to value only the “productive labourer” (Goodley 30).

However, my dissertation is not concerned with the operation of ableism in the neoliberal world but traces its working in 19th century Bengal through the reading of Bankim Chandra Chatterji. With the 1857 revolt fresh in the memory of the political psyche, my argument is that personhood, health, and ability acquired a completely different meaning altogether. The various other discourses prevalent at that time helped shape the same. In my dissertation, I have focused primarily on the discourses on conjugality and masculinity in 19th century Bengal to examine the

peculiar form Ableism takes in order to privilege certain identities over others and how possession of ability translates into political power as well. In the section that follows, I explain some issues that I found to be the crucial determinants of what constituted ableism in that particular era. It needs to be clarified that while I am not suggesting these events to be responsible for the genesis of Ableism, my attempt is to read Ableism into the politically dynamic atmosphere of 19th century Bengal and study its ideological underpinnings in the events marking the said age.

Physical Strength and Political Power

19th century Bengal witnessed a crusade to compose an indigenous historiography of Bengal, the foremost leader of it being Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. Ranajit Guha delineates in his lectures on historiography how Bankim's agenda to compose a true history of Bengal necessarily echoed a simultaneous call for nationalism. Land being the sole determinant of socio-economic-cultural relations of the subject people, the English faced an unwillingness on the part of the latter to share their knowledge of the processes of revenue distribution. The English's inability to intrude into the body of indigenous knowledge made them use history as a tool to sneak into the pre-colonial history of land management. Such an effort brought out official reports based on diachronic surveys focusing on the economic relationship between proprietors and the state.

It is such historical narratives that disappointed Bankim into agitation as he identified the above history to be a false one: "There is not a single work in English that is a true history of Bengal...It has got nothing at all to do with the history of Bengal. There is no history of the

Bengali nation in it. A Bengali who accepts this kind of writing as the history of Bengal is not a true Bengali.” (Guha 56) He also calls for an autonomous historiography of Bengal, a call for self-representation when in 1800 he writes in *Bangadarshan*, a journal that he published, that “There has to be a history of Bengal...Who is to write it?...Anyone who is a Bengali, has to write it.” (57) For he himself proceeds to elaborate on this project of a true historiography in several of his essays and works. The five essays that Guha identifies to be laying the ground for this project are, ‘Bharat-kalamka’ (1873), *Banglar Itihas*’ (1875), ‘*Banglar Itihas Sambandhe Koyekti Katha*’ (1881), ‘*Banglar Itihaser Bhagnansha*’ (1883), and *Banglar Kalamka* (1885). In these essays, Bankim calls the falsification of the past by the foreign historiographers to be slanderous for the Bengali community, ‘kalamka’ or a matter of stigma, the word used in the first and the last of the mentioned essays. Removal of this stigma was the necessary prerequisite to recover the lost past of the Bengali. Both *Bangadarshan* and *Prachar* (another journal published by Bankim) were meant to achieve this goal, as Bankim himself says: “When *Bangadarshan* was first published, the very first article of its first issue was devoted to the refutation of a long-standing slander on India...*Prachar* is now emulating that example by undertaking to refute a long-standing slander about Bengal in the first article of its very first number.” (Guha 58)

This slander or ‘kalamka’ is recognised as the mark left by both the Muslim and the English historians on the past that each falsified for their respective agendas. However, in Bankim’s works, one finds his ire directed more towards the former as it on their accounts that the English relied heavily. He addresses them as “liars” and “Hindu-haters”; thus, the past that he accuses the Muslims to have falsified is implied to be a Hindu past (59). The failure of an acknowledgement of the “former glory of the Bengali people” is what constituted the falsified

past (59). This glory, Guha argues was primarily of two kinds- spiritual glory and physical prowess or *bahubol* (or strength of arms). While insufficient acknowledgement of the intellectual prowess of the Bengali was addressed by other contemporary writers like Nilmani Basak and others, Bankim's primary complaint lay with the omission of the glory of the latter.

In the five essays mentioned above, Bankim mentions twenty-five instances of *Bahubol* displayed by Indians in the past, all of which are located in the pre-colonial period (and interestingly, the Muslim being at the receiving end of most, rather than the British). The recovery of the Hindu past and spirit of 'nation formation' or '*jatiprathistha*' was possible, for Bankim, only through an adequate display of *bahubol*, that he attempts in the above five essays. *Anandamath* was an exercise in the same- to conjure up enough *jatiprathistha* to defend with *bahubol*. However, as Guha notifies, the contradiction in Bankim's accusation lay in his own failure to locate relevant instances of *bahubol* in the past because, according to the latter, the Indians lacked the two important prerequisites to inculcate *bahubol*, viz., a sense of unity and a will to defend one's own nation by harming those of others, if required, by *bahubol*. Hence, Bankim's accusation of the Muslim historiographers of slandering the Hindu past, and in turn, its current identity, falls short in that he himself admits to there having been no instances of *bahubol* due to the aforementioned reasons.

Contrary to Guha's claim of *bahubol* being the premise on which Bankim's arguments were based, Partha Chatterjee claims that it is not strength but cultural inadequacy of Indians that bothered Bankim a great deal. Considering why the Bengalis were known to be weak people, Bankim is not content with only fertility of land, discouraging climate, food habits, child

marriages as the main reasons for the same, for the above only point to a lack of physical strength. Not limiting physical weakness to material conditions alone, Bankim differentiated between strength and power in that opposed to the former, power was a metaphysical category, a “social phenomenon” that could be harnessed by the application of “enterprise, solidarity, courage, and perseverance” on physical strength (Chatterjee 57). Since, the Bengali lacked these four necessary “national cultural values”, they were still a subjected people with no wish for independence (57).

In fact, Chatterjee argues that it was this very lack of desire for liberty and national solidarity, not a lack of physical strength that was responsible for the Bengali’s subjection. Thus, the instances that were replete in the five essays focussed on by Guha exemplify not *bahubol* of the warring Hindu communities but rather the potential of their fraternity and unity. In other words, for Bankim, *bahubol* was a given, dormant in the Bengali, that could be exercised only upon achieving fraternity and united action. Diverse territories, languages, races, habitat precluded the formation of national solidarity among the Hindus. It is this basis of unity that Bankim’s crusade was to locate; my argument is that his novels, particularly the two novels in my dissertation, betray the same uniting principle -- the 19th century woman.

Amalgamation of the East and the West

It must be noted that not only did Bankim give a call for national unity but also enlisted ways to achieve it. According to him, imitation of the culture of their English rulers would enable the Indians to cultivate a superior culture without losing their own essence that gets defined in “opposition to Western culture” (65). As opposed to the materiality of the Western

culture, the superiority of the East lay in its spiritual aspect; for, the Knowledge of God could not be learnt from the West but only in the East. This Knowledge required the ‘*anusilan*’, or ‘discipline’ of the Self so that one could perform his duty with no expectation of the reward. The unity of Knowledge and Duty was known to Bankim as Bhakti which would help the people to come out of their subjection. Indeed, the prologue of *Anandamath* sets off this project in the following way:

Will my heart’s desire never be fulfilled?

...What will you pledge in return?

The pledge is my life, my all, was the reply.

Life is trifling; anyone can give up their life.

What else is there? What else can I offer?

And the answer came: “Dedication”. (Chatterji 130)

Bhakti or “dedication” combined with the Knowledge of the Self and that of the World, the latter two being acquired from the West, would construct the perfect man, refined, religious, contrary to the “merely efficient and prosperous” Westerner (Chatterjee 67).

However, post 1857, there was sufficient emergent literature questioning the loyalism of the Bengali intelligentsia. Tanika Sarkar, too, traces three distinct strains of thought in Bankim, viz. Hindu Reformist, Hindu Revivalist, and scepticism of the loyalty of the Bengali Babu. The “progressive potential” of such a complicity of the Bengali male to the foreign rule began to be questioned (Sarkar 142). Hence the self representation of the Bengali was also marked by satire, “a mordant and black humour” (142). The Hindu man was no longer criticised for exploiting

women but for giving in to the British so as to have it control his body through colonial discipline. Having lost its redemptive potential, the Hindu woman became the symbol of “unconquered purity” (143). Being subject to strict laws from the childhood itself, the Hindu woman embodied the only potential of the formation of the Hindu nation.

Firstly, owing to the immense scale of circulation of foreign goods in Bengal in the 19th century, there was a marked decrease in the use of indigenous goods. Sarkar enlists a number of such objects -- flint, conch shell bangle, fabric, sindur -- that got replaced with “luxurious, foreign alternatives” (35). These were mostly household objects the responsibility of which depended on the women of the household, making it easy for the latter to hold a certain nationalist appeal. Thus, most of the evil women characters in 19th century Bengali literature were those who were willing to part with traditional objects of ritual with foreign objects, a mark of both laziness and avarice. In Bankim’s novels, too, we witness the women characters to be capable of renouncing worldly objects; it is, in fact, one of the primary pre-requisites of *anushilan* in both *Anandamath* and *Devi Chaudharani*.

Secondly, the figure of a woman “happily embracing” death by self-immolation served as a “unique political resource” for Bankim (158). Tanika Sarkar points out how in *Kamalkanter Daptar*, he has romanticized the practice of Sati, referring to such women as being the “true jewels of this country” (159). Not only Sati but also orthodox practices such as child marriage and austere widowhood got to be seen as forms of self-discipline that was necessary to redeem the nation from its current pathetic state.

To Sum Up

Susan Schweik in her essay “Disability and the Normal Body of the (Native) Citizen” (2011) explores the various terms used by the American government in relation to Native American citizens and in the process, ends up defining what an ideal citizen should embody. While a discussion on the idea citizenship would be anachronistic in that the 19th century was a pre-industrial period, one can definitely note the parallels in the ableist imaginary. For Bankimchandra’s primary aim being to establish the Hindu rule as an end in itself, required moral uprising of the Hindu population to an elevated state of belief in one’s dormant strength. As opposed to them, the identities that have been criminalized are basically either Muslim characters or lower caste men, or emaciated bandits, all of whom, displaying conspicuous differences in physicality, are needed to be either annihilated or subjugated in the process. Thus, the simultaneous forces of casteism and patriarchy needed the tool of Ableism in order to carry on its influence over the social psyche. The loss of Bengali *Bahubol* and the need for Women to play the unifying factor to trigger it implies nothing but a reminder to the male psyche of their inherent ableism that had been paralyzed into dormancy by British and Muslim historiographers.

About the Novels

Anandamath, first published in 1880, is a novel based in undivided Bengal, fictionalizing the removal of the Muslim rule and ushering in that of the British in Bengal. It describes the brotherhood of Santans that had led the rebellion against the Muslim rulers. In the process, a vaishnava code of life is laid out, the penalty for flouting which is no less than death. Only a diligent maintenance of the same would lead the santans to successfully defeat the Muslim rule that has been compared from the very beginning with death, destruction, and debauchery, the

famine of 1770 being undoubtedly a symptom of the same. The novel, therefore, is replete with metaphors of disease, (dis)ability, and physiology throughout.

The novel focuses on two married couples - Mahendra and Kalyani, and Jibananda and Shanti. While the former pair gets separated and later united due to fate, Shanti voluntarily dresses up as an ascetic to aid her husband in war and joins *Anandamath* for the same. What follows is a series of conversations among all the four characters and the also the leader, Satyananda on the role of conjugality in the national struggle.

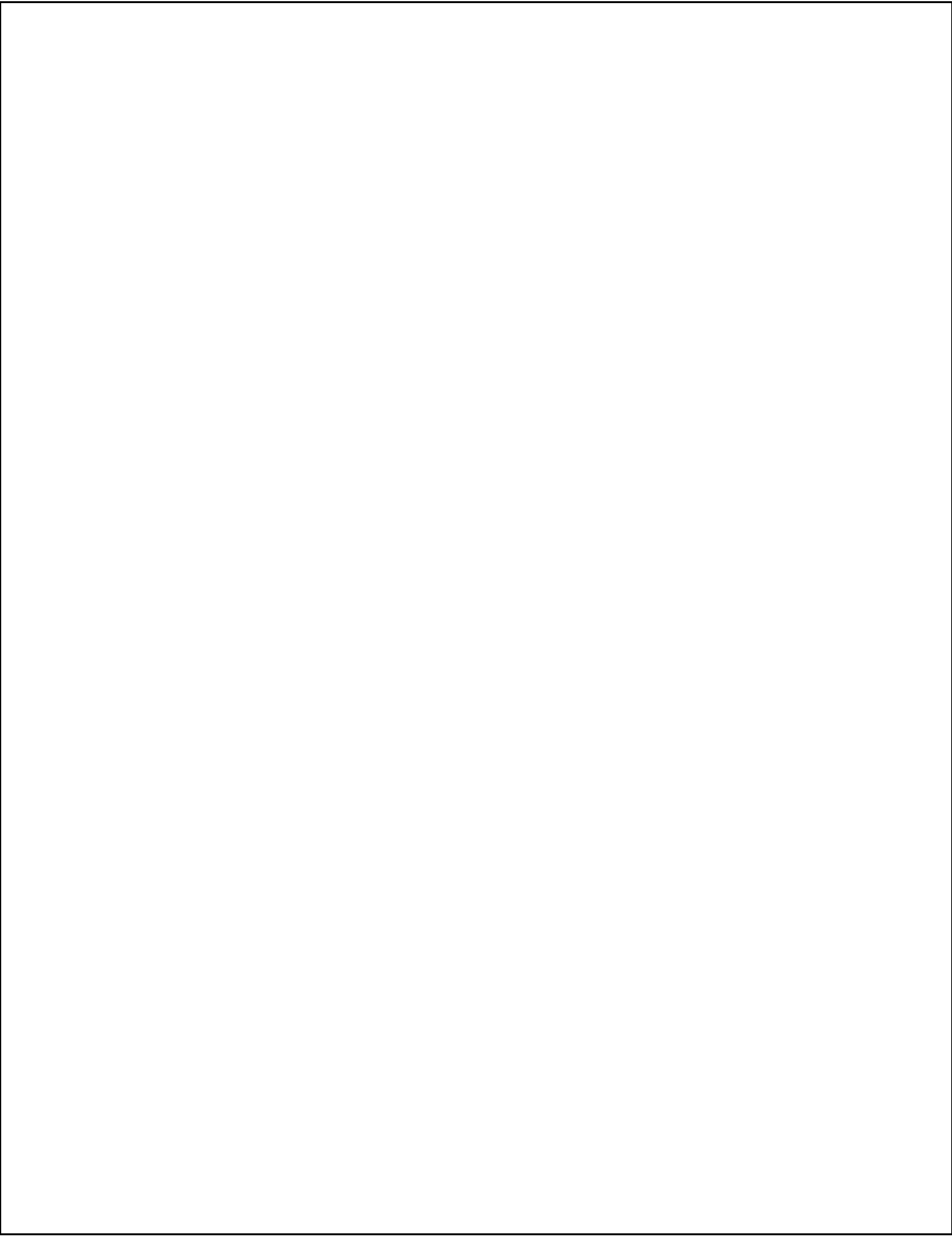
In contrast to the eventful plot of *Anandamath*, *Rajani*, published in 1877, follows the life of the eponymous protagonist who is blind by birth. Her family occupation being selling flowers, she often has to venture out alone on the busy streets of Calcutta and also to homes of customers. It is one such customer that she falls in love with, Sachindranath, who resolves to look for a suitable groom for her. It is then that Rajani decides to run away, being led by Hiralal, a man of ill repute. In the meantime, the reader comes to know of the true identity of Rajani which is the inheritor of the wealth that Sachindranath had been enjoying till then. To recover her lost wealth, she is aided by Amarnath, a samaritan. Also, Amarnath rescues Rajani from Hiralal when he deserts her on a solitary island. He soon proposes marriage to Rajani that she is unable to refuse out of gratitude. However, due to Labangalata's recurrent interventions, Sachindranath too realizes his love for Rajani and Amarnath is also dissuaded from marrying her. All ends well with Rajani and Sachindranath living in conjugal harmony and Rajani also gaining her eyesight.

Chapterization

This dissertation has been divided into two sections. The first section 'Dis/ability and Ideal Womanhood' explores two women characters in the respective novels and attempts to perceive their experiences in the light of the prevalent debates and discourse on women in 19th Century Bengal. More specifically, the section locates the women in the discourse on conjugality in the age. Both these women -- Shanti and Rajani -- display able-bodiedness in that their physical abilities for combat are highlighted to a great extent. The section attempts to counterpose the above characters against the definition of the new woman that gained currency during the discourse of conjugality. The term "dis/ability" refers to, firstly, an emphasis being paid to both ability and disability in the novels. While Rajani is a blind woman, whose disability is portrayed to be the reason for her ill-fate, Shanti is an able-bodied woman so much so that she is capable of assuming the role of a warrior and leader, a role that is exclusively reserved for men. Secondly, the term also indicates the swiftness with which both the women experience a shift in their physical capacities, either in cure or adversity, as is the case with Rajani; or while performing the identity of a woman in case of Shanti. However, despite their physical in/abilities being highlighted, both these women refuse to confine their identity to this aspect of theirs. Instead, their definition of their selves are located in certain intangible elements, womanhood and wifehood respectively. In exploring the terms of engagement these women have with their bodily in/capacities, the section interrogates the transgressive potential Bankim bestows upon these women, keeping in mind his concern towards the role of women in the nationalist discourse.

The second section deals with the major male characters of both the novels, namely Jibananada and Mahendra were in *Anandamath*, and Amarnath and Sachindranath in *Rajani*. The

kind of criticism that men of 19th century Bengal were subjected to, mentioned above, has been explained in greater detail in this section. In doing so, characterization of foils of the primary characters in each of the novels has been looked into, in turn, talking also about how each of the above figures are exemplary ones in that they become the ideal for the other lesser characters (and the readers -- the bengali male) to follow. For instance, for the woman of the 19th century, who was mainly confined to the household, the man became a metaphor of the World, marked by foreign rule. It is evident in the character of Sachindranath in *Rajani*, who is trained in Western medicine, yet has to submit to Eastern mystical processes of cure in the end. However, care has been taken that in the process of propagating the possibility of alternative knowledge systems, that of the West is not antagonized. Thus, the amalgamation of the East and the West that Bankim envisioned has been played out differently in case of men and women. It is only part of this alternate knowledge system that in *Anandamath*, the Santans in the Brotherhood undergo a strict disciplinarian regime that most of them almost violate; it is then that the women in the novel rectify them and, thus, become the embodiment of selfless sacrifice holding the only potential to also rectify the pathetic state of the nation that its men were responsible for.



Section I

Dis/ability and Ideal Womanhood

This section would look at how the epistemological ableism to be found in Bankim's two novels is woven into prevalent notions of femininity in 19th Century Bengal. This would be explored under two broader themes -- the first one being the role of dis/ability in the construction of the self of the prominent women characters in the two novels. The second theme would situate the author and his oeuvre amidst the 19th Century debates on conjugality, and view the women characters in the light of the same.

Role of Dis/ability in the Construction of the Self

The body has played an influential role in the construction of one's identity as the former is often the primary site through which one experiences and interacts with the social world. In 19th century Bengal, with 1857 being fresh in the social psyche and rampant spread of diseases, a healthy body was a rarity. It, in turn, affected the political representation of the Bengali in the administrative discourses that viewed the former with ridicule and scorn. As a result, one witnessed a constant attempt on part of the Bengali to come out of their image of lethargy in order to portray themselves as also being active political agents of change. Keeping this in mind, the following few pages would look into the characters of Rajani and Shanti as they negotiate with their respective physical in/capacities to project their identities as per the context of each novel.

Throughout the novel, Rajani is found to be constantly reminding the readers of her abilities: “Blind I may be, but I knew every corner of the roads of Calcutta” (Chattopadhyay 7290) or “A blind person’s hearing acquires extraordinary prowess” (7412). While doing so, Rajani communicates to the readers that her disability does not act as an impediment to her abilities; on the contrary, it heightens the latter, so-much-so that her blindness sharpens her sense of hearing. It is important to clarify at this point that the aim is not to suspect the veracity of the claim but to highlight the necessity of constantly reiterating it.

My argument is that it becomes imperative for Rajani to constantly evoke her bodily difference for reasons that are twofold -- firstly, that of reminding her readers of her legitimate position in the normative despite the differences; secondly, to remind them also of her vulnerability that is associated with blindness. In fact, once while pondering over her ill-fate, she rationalizes thus -- “just because I was blind and helpless, why would the karmic wheel move from its path?” (7520). On another occasion the love-struck Rajani pines -- “love blossoms in the heart of the blind girl too; why shouldn’t my heart respond, just because my eyes are sightless?” (7359). In both the above examples, Rajani uses her disability as a scaffold to further the narration of her experience. She pointedly dissociates between her corporeal experience of blindness and other aspects that situate her in the non-disabled realm, viz., fate and love. The readers realize that Rajani’s rationalization of her experience occurs simultaneously with the negation of disability as a lens for self-definition. She, thus, downplays the role played by disability in shaping her sense of self, which, however, is largely governed by a sense of virtuous femininity. On a particular occasion where she had to accompany Hiralal late at night in order to escape from an unfortunate marriage alliance, she worries -- “He was a young man and I was a

young woman- how could I go with him, unchaperoned?” (7509). She reminds the readers of her blindness only to describe the journey she had embarked upon with Hiralal -- “I was blind, the road was unfamiliar and I had stepped out at night- hence the normal signals by sound that I mark along a new road had been absent; so I could not go back home without help, and even there all that awaited me was that sinful marriage. Consequently, I had to go with Hiralal” (7514). Yet, while the former claim was raised as an objection to the situation, the latter appeared in the form of a literary descriptive tool; for the above anxiety is soon qualified by a new set of sounds that Rajani hears which helps her and the readers to guess the nature of the environment she has stepped into – “I followed his (Hiralal’s) footsteps. Somewhere, a clock struck one. No one was about, not a sound. A few vehicles were heard, a few drunkards in the grip of alcohol, singing a few lines here and there” (7520).

Fiona Kumari Campbell, studying the operation of ableism as an epistemology and an ontological modality, situates the latter in the constant practice of highlighting one’s abilities especially by a disabled self. She argues that denial of the wounded body being impossible, the constant emphasis on those parts of the self that is capable of mimicking ableist norms is not infrequent (Campbell 26). This tendentious aspect of ableism necessarily stems from an acceptance of the superiority granted to it and also a requirement by the disabled self of an “identity other than one’s own” that can be realized only through ableist norms of acceptance (26). In the above cited instances of the novel, the oft-found urge in Rajani to separate her being-ness from her embodiment of difference indicates her refusal to be identified solely by her disabled body. Furthermore, in a world dominated by ableist narrative, Rajani’s self-perception depends upon this narrative too: not being experienced in the gaze that is considered to be a

crucial determinant of self-perception, Rajani remains miserably dissatisfied with the perception her form is subjected to. Regretting her lack of eyesight she laments,

“How do I look? On the face of this earth, how does the tiny speck called Rajani appear to the eye? Has anyone ever wanted to take a second look at me? Is there any such, lowly, tiny form that has ever found me beautiful? A woman without her eyes has no beauty to speak of -- I am sightless-- but then, why does the sculptor sculpt the female form and give her vacant eyes? Am I then as rock -hewn as that?” (Chattopadhyay 7364)

Her blindness dissuades her into believing that she might not be an attractive figure at all so-much-so that she is happy to seek legitimation of her own physical worth even from the lowliest of creatures. Her comparison of herself with a stone sculpture recurs frequently in the novel. Sachindranath, later in the novel, in a state of delirium echoes Rajani’s opinion and compares her to a “marble statue... fire trapped in stone” (8324). This recurring metaphor of a statue renders blindness as being akin to lifelessness; it gets further ratified with Sachindranath sharing the same view as Rajani without prior knowledge of the latter’s use of the exact metaphor to describe her own agony. He not only confirms Rajani’s evaluation of her own form as being no better than rock, but also shares her agony in recognizing her true self being imprisoned or “trapped” within the lifeless, blind body. In other words, the self doubt Rajani has about herself can only be legitimized by an able -bodied person, Sachindranath in this case, who, by doing so, paves the way to her unconditional ‘cure’ at the end of the novel, himself emerging as a Pygmalion figure.

Yet, there are several instances of Rajani repeatedly referring to her disability without any attempt of mitigating it. Take for instance the moment when Hiralal tries to seduce her with

a proposal of marriage and she objects -- "When the night ends, I shall meet hundreds of men kinder than you. They'd surely have pity on a blind girl" (7544). On another occasion, Rajani laments -- "'Even if there's no one to come to a blind girl's aid, there's a God above. He would never torture the wounded like Labangalata does" (7514). One would note that in both the cases, she wishes to evoke the sympathy of the reader and is disappointed by the absence of the same in the other characters of the novel. Furthermore, her attempt in the above examples is to bring to the reader's notice her utter solitude as a disabled woman in that no character in the novel has taken pity on her yet. Thus we see Rajani to be clinging on to her identity of blindness and pleading that it play a determining role in the way people behave towards her. It might initially seem to be contradictory that she, on the one hand, attempts to shun away her disabled identity and on the other, embraces it too. However, on a closer look, one realizes that the role played by disability in the novel is majorly a metaphorical one. It symbolizes the vulnerability of the *corporeal* figure of Rajani at the hands of other characters who get to decide on her fate; it renders her into a subject of cruelty and therefore, an object to be rescued. It is worth mentioning at this point the respective reasons for both the male characters to have taken an active part in shaping Rajani's fate. Sachindranath's insistence on getting her married, which, in fact, set her monotonous life into motion, was due mainly to his own failure to fix a match for himself -- "if I couldn't marry someone myself, I at least wanted to get her married" (Chattopadhyay 7862). Amarnath, too, set out to help a blind Rajani secure her lost wealth to address his own lack in life. Rajani's destitution was nothing but "a chore worthy of (him), something that'll hold (his) interest" (Chattopadhyay 7697). Thus, for both the men, Rajani's fate is simply a project that is taken up, a challenge that gets accepted, to be executed for one's own satisfaction -- for Sachindra, it is to help a blind, lower caste flower girl find a suitable match within her own caste;

and for Amarnath, it is no more than a social service that would hopefully be time-consuming. Yet both believe that each is, in fact, rescuing her from her own fate, which could have turned ugly but for their intervention, unhappy marriage, and utter poverty, respectively.

Yet, as said earlier, Rajani refuses to let her corporeal vulnerability determine her fate which, she feels, should be governed irrespective of her disability. Moreover, her tryst for a definition of self being *despite* her disability, her anger at Hiralal may be read as a protest against being held down by her blindness. Take for instance her display of physical strength to prevent any imminent assault on herself. On being accompanied by Hiralal, a man of ill-repute, Rajani decides on self-defense and asks Hiralal for his palm-wood staff.

“Hiralal handed me the staff. I broke it into two. He was probably astounded to see my strength. I handed him one half and kept the other half to myself. He must have also been annoyed to see that I’d broken his staff. I said, ‘Now I can relax— don’t be upset. You’ve seen my strength, you’ve seen this half of the staff in my hand— even if you so desire, you wouldn’t dare do me any harm.’ Hiralal was silent” (7525).

Rajani acts in this manner not only to convey her physical capabilities to Hiralal and the readers but to also assert that she is indeed *stronger than* an able -bodied man, for she proceeds to break the staff only after Hiralal confirms that he would be unable to -- she had asked, “ ‘What’s the staff in your hand made of?’ Hiralal replied, ‘Palm wood.’ ‘Can you break it?’ I asked him. ‘Not a chance,’ said Hiralal. ‘Just hand it to me once’ ” (7525).

Such an attempt by Rajani to highlight her strength is in tandem with her refusal to bog down just due to her blindness. By such a show of strength, Rajani attempts to thwart the

presumptions that are attached with disability of any sort, namely, incapacity for self-defense. Hiralal's silence gives away the fact that he had indeed underestimated Rajani's physical strength not only due to her being a woman but more so a blind one at that. Rajani's primary reason of anxiety is an imminent threat to her dignity that Hiralal's presence entails, dignity of the female self. Body being a container and a determinant of her dignity, blindness served as an impediment to its defense. She recognizes her experience of her blindness as only a hurdle to protect her true self, at least one she is most concerned about. The reason for such a differentiation will be taken up in later in the chapter; for now it would suffice to say that this denial of the influence of disability to her own formation of identity and a consequent re-iteration of the same is what Campbell recognized as "internalized ableism" that does in fact lead one to bring forth conflicting subjectivities, transcending disability on the one hand, and denial of it on the other (Campbell 27).

Yet we notice a difference between the two above modes of thinking. As said earlier, it is the readers, and the other characters in the novel that she appeals to, both being tangible elements, who are capable of executing action, in other words, Foucauldian "subjects" (Foucault 6). It is only then that Rajani evokes her disability to appeal for pity. For Campbell, ableism is located in "genealogies of knowledge" that has produced a "corporeal standard" which values a particular kind of body, abled one in this case (Campbell 5). The power of legitimation, subordination, or sympathizing lying only with these individuals, Rajani has to evoke her blindness as symbol of their superiority over her disabled body. Throughout the novel, we see three figures playing significant roles in shaping Rajani's fate -- Sachindranath, Hiralal, and Amarnath. However, here too, each of their engagement with Rajani indicates an apparent

hierarchizing of desirability. Both Hiralal and Amarnath emerge ill-suited as grooms for Rajani in the novel: while Hiralal has been established as a man of ill-repute from the very beginning, it is only later on that Amarnath too emerges with an unforgivable past that has left a permanent mark on his body. The role of his tainted body in his character development has been dealt with later in the dissertation. Throughout the novel, Sachindranath turns out to be the only character deserving of Rajani, who also facilitates her 'cure'. Both Amarnath and Hiralal fall short of Ableism in that neither of them fit the corporeal standard and the ideal self that is required to gain entry into its arena; Sachindranath alone can embody ableism, being the only one to possess an untainted body that is a mark also of his flawless character. Hence, Sachindranath emerges as, what Hahn refers to as, best "protector... role model... intermediate" for not only Rajani but also the repentant Amarnath, entailing a further glorification and valuation of able-bodiedness (19).

While in *Rajani* the protagonist struggles to mitigate the influence of her disability on the construction of her identity, in *Anandamath*, we find Shanti juggling her capacity for physical combat with a conforming, feminine identity. She is the wife of Jibanananda, a disciple in the Brotherhood of Santans, who had been forced to live without her husband as the latter's oath for defense of the motherland precluded his participation in conjugal household. Consequently, Shanti too sneaks an entry into the Brotherhood, dressed as a man, in order to aid Jibanananda to carry out his oath to fulfilment. In the process, the reader witnesses several transgressions on her part and also nuanced debates challenging the prevalent notions of conjugality.

Shanti's entry into the Brotherhood itself is a matter of sufficient contention. In order to fight for the motherland, she flouts the primary oath that every Santan had to take before entering

into the Brotherhood. For instance, the dialogue between Satyananda, the leader of Anandamath and Mahendra and Nabinananda (Shanti's disguise), new to be initiated, sheds sufficient light on the nature of the oath and reveals crucial information about the membership of the Brotherhood.:

"I ask you to declare solemnly in the sight of God: Will you obey all the rules of the Children's code?

We will.

So long as the Mother is not free, will you renounce the householder's life?

We will.

Will you renounce mother and father?

We will.

And brother and sister?

We renounce them.

Wife and children?

We renounce them.

Friends, relatives and servants?

We renounce them all.

Wealth, property, pleasures?

We've renounced them all.

Will you restrain your senses? Do you agree never to sit next to a Woman?

We agree. We will restrain our senses.

Solemnly declare in the sight of God that you will never seek wealth for yourselves or for your families. Do you agree to give all that you acquire to the treasury of the Vaishnavas?

We agree.

Are you ready to take up arms yourselves and fight for the Eternal Code?

We are.

Will you never flee in battle?

Never.

And if you break this promise?

Then we will forfeit our life by entering a blazing pyre or drinking poison.” (Chatterji 180)

In the above dialogue, it becomes evident that Shanti’s entry into the math would be frowned upon not only because she was herself a woman but also because she would have been expected to be a distraction for her husband, Jibananada, the penance for which is death. Yet, she intrudes, dressed as a bearded sage; this, however, does not escape Satyananada’s keen observance and she is chided initially by the leader. In response,

“the wretched Shanti covered her eyes and hung her head for a while. Then she quickly removed her hands, flashed a glance at the old man and said, “Master, I’ve done no wrong. Surely women can have strength of arm too!” (183)

Shanti, too, evokes *bahubol* (strength of arms), and claims it as well, in order to justify her participation in the fight for the motherland. She, in fact, questions the presumptuous guru for believing that women possessed strength of the “tiniest amount” as compared to men (Chatterji 183). Strength of arm being the primary criteria for gaining an entry into the Brotherhood, Shanti swiftly proceeds to perform the test that only four disciples had managed to conquer -- stringing a bow:

“Satyananda fetched a steel bow and a length of iron wire and said, ‘They’re supposed to fit this wire to this steel bow. The wire is three and a half feet long. As the bow is strung it jumps up and pitches you forward. Anyone who can string the bow is really strong’” (183)

following which

“Shanti took up the bow and the wire, easily strung the bow, and dropped it at Satyananda’s feet. Satyananda was amazed and taken aback—dumbfounded! After a moment he said, ‘Are you a goddess, or a human being?’ Placing the palms of her hands together, Shanti said respectfully, ‘I’m just a lowly woman, but I also live a celibate life’” (Chatterji 183).

Having crossed the primary criteria of *bahubol* and Celibacy to be a legitimate part of the Brotherhood, there remained another hurdle to be overcome: how was she to negotiate with the strict oath that had forbidden her husband from proximity with his wife? Refusing to perceive the conjugal relationship in terms of physical intimacy alone, she offers a re-definition of the same that seems to transcend Satyananda’s reductive view of marriage. In the following dialogue, for instance, the reader witnesses an evocation of mythic male characters who are as known for their valour as for their respective conjugal lives:

Shanti looked up and said:

“Is it sinful, Master? The wife follows her husband. Is that sinful behaviour? If the code of the santans calls this sinful, then the code itself is sinful! I’m his partner in life. He’s following a particular code, and I’m here to share in it. That’s all.

...Satyananda was pleased, and said, “You are a virtuous woman. But look, child, the wife is her husband’s life-partner only when he follows the householder’s way of life. A woman has no place in the code of the hero”.

“But which great champion became a hero without a wife?” replied Shanti. “Could Rama have become a hero without Sita? Tell me how many times Arjuna married! And Bhima had as many wives as could match his strength! ...”

“What you say is true enough”, said Satyananda, “but which hero brings his wife to the battlefield?”

“Well, who drove Arjuna’s chariot while he fought with the Yadavi army from mid-air? Without Draupadi would the Pandavas have fought in the battle of Kurukshetra?” (184)

However, as can be noted, Shanti evokes those women characters who are remembered more for their devotion to their respective conjugal lives than for their roles in combat, even in situations of conflict. What is curious about such allusions is the fact that Shanti had already established herself as being on par with her husband vis-a-vis physical strength. For, it is only after a confirmation of the success of Jibananda in the test that she proceeds to string the bow:

“Shanti - Has no one passed this test?

Satyananda: Only four.

May I ask who?

I don’t see why not. I’m one.

And the others?

Jibananda, Bhabananda, and Jnanananda” (Chatterji 182).

That her ability to string the bow is enough to endow her with a superhuman aura indicates that physical ability was considered to be the forte of men alone. However, the physical strength of a woman does not find easy translation into defense of the motherland by combat. For Shanti, too,

like Rajani, is unwilling to locate her identity in her physical self; she locates her *bahubol*, instead, in her service to Jibananda who had pledged his life to the motherland.

Kathryn Hansen, in her study of the Virangana as portrayed in myth and popular culture, traces the various connotations of figures like Sita, Sati, and Savitri. According to her,

“in each case, the self-abnegation and subservience to the husband are seen to bestow power upon the wife. This power may be used for various ends. but customarily it is directed toward the welfare, long life, and good name of the husband and the couple's offspring, particularly the sons. The epic stories do not portray women as powerless, but define their power as derived from self-effacement in a relationship of subjugation to the male.” (Hansen 25)

Indeed, Shanti, too, undergoes willing self-effacement in that she refuses to be identified as both a mere woman distracting her husband from his duty and an extraordinary one to have demonstrated indomitable *Bahubol*. In other words, her wish to enter the Brotherhood, to fight for the motherland, is perceived by her as her conjugal duty, and her able-bodiedness is merely a tool to achieve it; her evocation of women characters in non-combatant roles further ratifies her argument. This is in resonance with Harleen Singh's study of the ambivalent warrior figure of Rani Laxmi Bai; she states that the stories of “Rani Lakshmi Bai do not extol women's aptitude to lead but are rather exemplary tales of women's ability to serve, in the tradition of ‘national family romance’ , the private and public sphere as mothers, daughters, sisters or even queens” (Singh 4). As per Singh's analysis, the nation , too, is likened to be a physical entity to be served, as one serves a son, a father, a brother. Unlike the widowed Rani, Shanti's pledge to serve the nation is in harmony with her serving her husband, as she herself explains later --

“My husband is great to me, but my duty is greater than he, and greater even than that for me is my husband’s duty. I can make light of my duty any time I please, but how can I make light of my husband’s duty” (Chatterji 202).

Shanti’s *bahubol*, then, becomes a necessary weapon to assist her husband in not only remaining loyal to his promise but also in carrying his oath to fruition.

Engagement of dis/ability with the conjugal debates of 19th century Bengal would be taken up later in the same section; for now, I would attempt a more detailed analysis of Shanti’s character. The character of Shanti had been conspicuously a rebellious one. Educated along with boys, having been stifled by marital life, she played truant and was trained in traditional martial arts by a group of sannyasis. In order to assist her husband in the fruition of his vow, she had not hesitated to don the garb of a male to secure a place in the order. Despite such visible transgressions, the author frequently reminds the readers that her transgressions were not at the cost of feminine attributes:

“Shanti had not had the chance to learn the meaning of modesty, yet now the modesty that comes naturally to a woman appeared of its own accord. The wonderful radiance of chaste womanly conduct superimposed itself on her masculine ways and enhanced her other qualities. Shanti gave up her studies” (173).

Later the author also points out with reassurance:

“Living with her husband, Shanti’s masculine ways gradually disappeared or were suppressed, and the delightful characteristics of a woman began daily to appear” (174).

Later as well, “these delightful characteristics” do not desert her and it gets highlighted during various instances in the novel -- her swift transformation into a charming vaishnavi when in

espionage or the arch glance at Kalyani, while still in disguise, that gave her away to Mahendra. On one occasion, she even pulls away her deerskin and undoes her matted hair during an armed confrontation with a Captain Thomas and mocks at his savagery. In fact, it is not her ability to lead/combat that gets repeated in the novel but her ability to do so while retaining her 'natural modesty' that grabs more attention, both in the form of genuine amazement and through licentious behaviour on her own part. Yet, she remains virtuous, in that she scoffs at the Englishmen who make advances towards her, drawn by her physical beauty. The aforementioned Captain Thomas invites her to live as his concubine as her husband would surely die in the battle. To this she responds contemptuously and runs off laughing. However, virtue is not to be limited to sexual chastity alone for, she soon joins her husband and engages in a conversation explaining to him her role in the Brotherhood --

“I’m your wife in the code you’ve adopted, your partner and your helper in that code. You’ve taken on a rule that’s extremely hard, and I’ve left home to help you see it through. I’m living in this forest so that the two of us can follow that rule together. I want to increase your virtue. So as your wife in virtue how can I act as an obstacle to it? ... But why are you talking about penance? Have you committed a sin?” (193)

Virtue, thus, is likened also to the one’s determination to fulfil one’s oath, especially the husband, and wife’s was to assist him in doing so. However, it is only Shanti’s chastity that could render her useful to her husband. As said earlier, it was both her *bahubol* and Celibacy that granted her an entry into the Brotherhood. Consequently, we see her engaging in battles as leader, as spy, and also as an intellectual in holding conversations with the leader, Satyananda only by virtue of her chastity; she is indeed “armed with virtue” and *bahubol* to become the embodiment of ‘heroism and virtue’ (Chowdhary 100). For she not only chastises men who try

to seduce her but also her husband who occasionally is drawn to her. As a consolation to her husband, following the conversation on virtue, she re-defines their love as being synonymous to their duty towards the motherland, culminating in a joint singing of the hymn - -

“Look, Gosai, even in this life, has our marriage been without fruit? You love me and I love you. Can there be greater fruit than this in this life? Sing Bande Mataram”. Then both sang Bande Mataram together” (Chatterji 194).

Reiterating the argument Shanti has with Satyananda, she replaces householder life as the primary aim of marriage with conjugal love. That having being achieved between her and Jibananda, she explains to the latter that devotion to the motherland would not be a hurdle in its path: their singing of hymn is, in fact, indicative of the fact that conjugal love and love for the motherland is a simultaneous process also coextensive in that one is the necessary predecessor of the other.

Discourse around Conjuality in the 19th Century

19th century colonial Bengal was home to a prevalent discourse on conjuality that took place through debates on the Age of Consent Bill. Drawing a distinction with Victorian novels, Tanika Sarkar states that in Bengali fiction of the 19th Century “domestic relations alone constitute the axis around which plots are generated” (Sarkar 198). She explains further that the Bengali household and conjuality was seen as the “last independent space left to the colonized Hindu” and hence it played a significant role in shaping the discourse of anti-colonial thought in 19th century (198). According to her, the relationship between a husband and his wife became of primary importance so-much-so that the mother-son relationship was also considered secondary

to it and could gain currency only towards the end of the 19th century. The arena of Home/Ghar was seen as the hub of spiritual values, that had to be safeguarded from western influence, and the relationship between a husband and his wife formed the crux of it.

Post 1857, the body of the Hindu man was viewed as incompetent by the educated middle class Bengali litterateur. Quoting a number of news dailies of 19th century, Sarkar states that these dailies too helped propagate such an image of the colonized Hindu male. For instance: “the term ‘Bengali’ is a synonym for a creature afflicted with inflammation of the liver, enlargement of the spleen, acidity or headache” (Amrit Bazaar Patrika, 4 Feb 1873) or “their bones are weak, their muscles are flabby, their nerves toneless” (The Hindoo Patriot, Aug 16 1887) or “Bengal is ruined. There is not a single really healthy man in it. The digestive powers have been affected and we can eat but a little. Wherever one goes one sees a diseased people.” (The Amrit Bazar Patrika, 28 Jan 1875)

The feeble Bengali male was said to be “marked, maimed and completely worn down by colonialism. It was a visible site of surrender and loss, of defeat and alien discipline” (Sarkar 202). On the contrary, the woman’s body was still untouched by the throes of colonialism as it was still controlled by the Hindu Shastras. Such a discourse bestowed on the woman a healing capacity for the whole community, as she was endowed with inherent grace that originated in her ability to bear a severe disciplining of her own body in the form of self-immolation or austere widowhood upon the death of her husband, as also through non-consensual child marriage.

In fact, it is on such a ground, especially in the practice of Sati, that Bankim recognized the women of Bengal to be the “true jewels of this country (Sarkar 203). Though there are no significant instances of the above practices that get mentioned either in *Rajani* or *Anandamath*, there are subtle markers of this innate grace of the Bengali woman that get voiced in both the novels. Rajani’s refusal to claim victimhood due to her disability and her humble profession points to her resilience that gets justified in her upper caste origins. In fact, in 19th century Bengal, with women’s question being a heated debate; it was only consistent that the traditional feminine ideals of the high caste Hindu woman be preserved from the throes of western modernity. Hence, it is not surprising when Rajani turns out to be actually of Kayasta origin who had become a flower seller by misfortune. One realizes that Rajani has been performing the role of a “bhalo meye” or a virtuous woman (Ghosh 59), as is wont to women of similar caste position; and it is this high class origin of hers that prevents her selfhood to be impaired either by disability or by fate. Nandini Ghosh, studying the experiences of disabled women explains that the term “bhalo meye” is interpreted by disabled women in two ways -- firstly, it is used to refer to non-disabled women; and secondly, as a term for legitimizing their own “existence as women who conform to and actualize the ideal notions that the gender culture attributes to women” (60). Despite the category being an anachronistic one, one witnesses an overlapping of the same with the 19th century idea of the ideal woman in Rajani. My argument is that Rajani’s tryst to prove her abilities despite her disabilities, apart from glorifying ableist norms of inclusion, also illuminates the kind of self that she wishes to project in the process. Rajani’s body, in turn, becomes the most productive site for the operation of the 19th century discourse on womanhood. Amarnath’s rescue of herself and consequent role in her economic promotion is considered to be an adequate reason for her to give in to his proposal. It is this sense of gratitude and self-sacrifice

that overwhelms Amarnath into deciding against marrying Rajani in the end. It is her virtue itself that becomes a marker of ableism in the novel; she embodies the Ghar/Home/female domain, that “hub of spiritual values”, which was the author’s primary aim to safeguard from Western influence (Chatterjee 121).

Rajani’s subsequent rescue and return to the domestic sphere symbolizes a disciplining of the female body back to its stipulated domain. It is a reminder of the cultural and spiritual limits drawn by “newer forms of patriarchy” that erased the older boundaries of mobility only to create newer ones, in opposition to educated Western woman (Chatterjee 130). For Rajani’s escapade is soon forgiven as it is recognized that she indeed had an aristocratic origin and had not let her blindness become a hurdle to preserve the celebrated innate grace. However, it is forgiven in so far as her return to the domestic realm. The being-ness that she had laid claim to entailed a capacity of supreme self-sacrifice, her acceptance of Amarnath’s proposal of marriage is proof enough for the same. Having sufficiently secured her legitimate place in the 19th century norm of the virtuous woman, the miraculous cure of her blindness might also be viewed as a reward. Yet, the moment of her cure offers a rich spectrum of possibilities. The figure of the sannyasi in the novel is a symbol of the incomprehensible east. Capable of performing medical and fantastic miracles, Sachindranath’s dilemma of the East-West dichotomy is settled thus --

“Some knowledge the English have, some our ancestors had. What the English know, the saints of yore did not and what the saints knew the English still don’t know. Those ancient arts and skills are now extinct. Some of us know one or two that we keep hidden -- we do not reveal it or teach it to anyone” (Chattopadhyay 8077).

Not only does he simplify the harmonious coexistence of Western science and Eastern mysticism but also establishes the monopoly of a section of the population over this knowledge, maintaining the status quo in the process. This has a tangible manifestation in his cure of Rajani's congenital blindness that had failed even Sachindranath, who was a practitioner of western medicine. Thus, Rajani's disability becomes an aberration that needs to be removed to challenge the supremacy granted to western scientificism.

Rajani, in the end, becomes that figure of consolation who promises maintenance of patriarchal order to the 19th century ethos, by way of her compliance, but in no way antagonizing the colonial masters. She herself is rewarded with sight, having been successful in preventing disability's influence on her selfhood. Home/spiritual domain being the primary site of nationalist politics in 19th century Bengal, and especially for Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Rajani's subsequent cure at the hands of the sannyasi gains even more importance. It not only signifies the self-sufficiency of the Hindu spiritual culture but also tangible preservation of the sanctity of the "ghar/spiritual/feminine domain" from colonial materiality. Further, restoration of both sight as well as upper caste status being simultaneous, it indicates an overlap between the domains of ableism and caste, where an ideal able bodied person is assumed to possess an upper caste identity and vice versa.

In *Anandamath*, on the other hand, a significant portion of the plot revolves around the discourse related to conjugality. Though most of the above section has been devoted to the character of Shanti, another female character named Kalyani has been used as a foil to her. For, unlike Shanti, Kalyani is ready to remove all obstacles that could prevent her husband,

Mahendra, to fight for the Motherland, the primary one being herself, so -much -so that she willingly gives up her life for the same. Following the death of their infant, she too consumes poison and consoles Mahendra, thus:

“I’ve done the right thing, so that you don’t neglect God’s work for the sake of a useless woman. Look, it was because I disobeyed the divine call that my daughter’s gone. And if I had continued in this way, I may have lost you too” (Chatterji 156).

She continues: “I’ve become a weight around your neck. I’ve done well to take my life. Bless me, so that I can return to that . . . to that world of light and meet you there again” (157).

As has been said before, the 19th century was home to heated debates on the women’s question. With there being increased protests against orthodox rituals like, Sati, Austere Widowhood, and Child Marriage by the Reformists, it became necessary for the Revivalists to defend the Hindu conjugal space from Western influence. In order to do so, the latter had to deny the subordination and tyranny of the woman as the basis of Hindu marriage and “naturalize” her love as its basis instead, the above rituals being read as a willing self -sacrifice, thus (Sarkar 40). In other words, for the household to act as the alternate order, as an “embryonic nation”, free from the clutches of colonialism, it became essential that conjugality be defined solely in terms of love and be held at a higher spiritual grounding than the Western “contractual” pattern of courtship (40).

While Kalyani’s devotion to Mahendra’s duty towards the Motherland echoes her capacity for self-sacrifice, Shanti’s attempt to re-define the meaning of marriage in order to partake in the functioning of the Math along with Jibananda filters the higher ideal of conjugality

from the petty mesh of household and asserts her legitimate, and indispensable place in the code of a non-householder husband, who is a hero. In the above mentioned dialogues, we witness her arguing both with Satyananada and her husband regarding the meaning of marriage. Defeated by Shanti's justification of her presence in the Math, Satyananda argues:

"Ordinary men become very attached to women and that stops them from the task at hand. This is why the Children vow not to sit next to a woman. Jibananda is my right hand. You're here to break my right hand!"(Chatterji 184)

To which Shanti replies:

"I'm here to strengthen your right hand!" said Shanti. "I'm a celibate woman, and I'll live as one with my husband. I'm here to practise virtue, not to attend to my husband. It's not that I'm pining for him. Why can't I have a part in the code my husband's adopted? That's why I'm here" (184).

Refusing to be reduced to a sexual being, Shanti identifies her virtuous womanhood to be confined to her devotion to her husband as an aid to him and her physical ability becomes only the convenient medium for her to carry out the same. The conversations she has with the guru, Satyananda, points further to the immense importance granted to the discourse of conjugality in the 19th century that even a spiritual leader could be chastised for his parochial understanding of the same. He, too, realizes later that Shanti was indeed the strength of Jibananda and confesses to Shanti – "With you (Shanti) in mind he (Jibananda) can stay alive, and has been doing so all this while. Only then can my work be accomplished" (202). Shanti, thus, gets portrayed as the reason for Jibananda's resilience on the battlefield. It is the fulfilment of her conjugal duty that qualifies her into such a role. For Kalyani, too, is described by Mahendra in a similar way. As soon as she

consumes poison, the bereaved Mahendra regrets -- "Kalyani, my all, why have you done this? Oh, you've cut off the very hand by whose strength I could hold my sword! I am nothing without you!" (155)

That the capacity for *bahubol* is a function of conjugal harmony, more specifically, a self-sacrificing wife, can be brought out through the above dialogue where Mahendra situates his ableism in the companionship of his wife and Satyananda, too, locates Jibananda's in Shanti's proximity. The readers realize that the humongous project of liberating the Bharat Mata, or servitude to the Motherland, is only synchronous with maintaining one's conjugal life.

In fact, in the notice to the first edition of *Anandamath*, Chatterji had specified his intent behind composing such a work --

"The wife of the Bengali is in many situations his main support; often she is not. And often enough social rebellion is no more than self-torment. The rebels destroy themselves. The English have freed Bengal from misrule. These matters are explained in this work" (Lipner 127). Such a notice makes clear that the novel was not only a tryst to locate the then-ongoing anti-colonial discourse in the concatenation of issues related to the conjugal sphere but also specifically in the role of the Hindu wife in the same. In the novel, both the leading women characters Kalyani and Shanti, are of the opinion that the duty to the motherland that their respective husbands had to take up or had already taken up were greater than their conjugal responsibilities. Thus, qualifiers such as 'useless', 'lowly' are replete during their self-description. Both the couples undergo physical separation, Kalyani -Mahendra twice, in order to participate in the Brotherhood. However, it is only after their union that the plot proceeds towards the climactic battle. Both Kalyani and Shanti embody the respective traits of Sacrifice

and dedication, an amalgamation of which is needed for the ideal woman/wife. The prophetic voice of the narrator, in the end, resolves the conflict between the Healer and Satyananda thus --

“Knowledge had come and taken hold of dedication. Duty had come and taken hold of action. Sacrifice had come and taken hold of honour. Kalyani had come and taken hold of Shanti. Satyananda was Shanti, and the Great One was Kalyani. Satyananda was honour, and the Great One was sacrifice.

Sacrifice had come and departed with Honour”. (Chatterji 230)

To sum up

The body of the woman became the primary site for the nationalist politics of 19th century Bengal. It is in this light that the women of characters of both the novels have been examined in this section. Their bodily peculiarities have been imbued with meanings that they had to perform in order to embody the notion of an ideal woman. Rajani's ableism lies in her frequent attempts to not let her disability meddle with her self-perception; she creates a disjoint between her two identities of a woman and a disabled person and prioritizes the former during interaction with the outside world. In doing so, she becomes the perfect representation of Ghar/Spiritual domain that cannot be affected by any factor without be it the Western culture or disability. The kind of self that gets highlighted in the process is that of an upper caste woman that cannot be altered as it remains resilient in the face of all troubles. Thus, disability gets equated with deviance that an upper caste self has to keep at bay in order for it to maintain its sanctity. This is not the case with Shanti who has to check her ableism from overpowering her sense of self that she prefers to define in terms of her role in conjugal sphere. Her role in the novel is primarily to aid her husband to fulfill his oath towards the motherland. Her refusal to be

identified as anyone but as a partner in conjugality in anticipated in her physical capacity being referred to as being superhuman in nature. It implies that ableism is used just as a tool by her to reach the end- conjugal bliss by helping her husband in serving the motherland.

Section II

Able Body and the Masculine Self

This section would examine the male characters of both *Anandamath* and *Rajani* in how their masculinity is played out vis-a-vis the various discourses on gender and nationalism that have been discussed in the previous section. This would be done by initially laying out the ongoing discourses on masculinity in the 19th century. Firstly, the influential role of the figure of Bharat Mata in shaping the above discourse would be explored following which the event of the Hindu Mela as well as the contemporary figure of Vivekananda would be discussed in that the importance of a healthy physique in both their ideologies would be examined. It would be succeeded by, secondly, extensive examples from *Anandamath* about how the ideal physique becomes synonymous with political order and how the glorification of the Hindu body necessarily entails an otherization of Muslim and lower class and/or caste identities. The rest of section would be observing the several implications that a disabled/tainted body generates in the normative psyche, with the novel *Rajani* in mind. All the male characters of the novel would be examined in the backdrop of un/blemished body.

Physical incompetence of the Bengali Man

“Lord, what a farce! Here in this land!

With resolute neck and furious brow!

The ten-armed terror- with hands of power;

In a Bengali's home there's a woman warrior!

Oh what a farce! Has the land come to this?

...

The Bengali alas! Is always pathetic,
Eats, Dresses, Slumbers, and guards his Domestic,
Should you give him a meal- no matter trash or treat,
That instance he's your slave and falls at your feet!
So why does he worship those red feet with flowers?
Abandon your lion-riding, in these parts O Mother,
Should such a breed worship you, who will then be porters?
Who will be the pen pushers? And toil in hordes?
For Mother you can never make them unlearn ever:
Bengalis have been slaves forever and forever." (as quoted in Chowdhury 1)

Widespread socio-economic and medical turmoil resulted in the swift loss of all previously enjoyed status by the Bengali male. As is evident from the above excerpt, composed in the 19th century, he had become a subject of denigrating humor. What role did the figure of a goddess play in energizing him? Did it generate even a minute strand of insecurity in the Bengali male? My argument is that the mother goddess, despite seeming to have driven the discourse on nationalism in 19th century Bengal, still played a subservient role with respect to the Bengali male. It was a myth that got deliberately re-kindled in order to re-masculate him.

In one of his essays, Bankim raises similar concerns and delineates what it means to be a Vaishnavite. He dismisses vegetarianism and parochialism in idol worship and propounds exactly the contrary. Explaining why it is completely natural for a Vaishnavite to worship a

Goddess of the Shakta tradition (the Mother Goddess, in this case), Bankim proceeds to explain the true meaning of the word 'Shakti'. Through the narrator's voice, who is a senior Vaishnav monk, Bankim interprets 'Shakti' to be nothing but the manifest power of the Gods. In other words, "the power to burn down an object is the god Agni's sakti, known as "swaha". Indra brings down rain and the power that makes it happen is called Indrani. Similarly, Pavan's sakti is called Pavanani" and so on (Sen 206). In fact, the narrator monk of this essay chastises the disciple who limits shakti to refer only to the respective wives of the Gods. Wifehood, thus, is likened to the power manifest in the man, the driving force behind his physical capabilities.

The readers would very well recall that the Santans of *Anandamath* belonged to the Vaishnavite tradition as well. One cannot but help conclude the above essay to be an accompanying piece to the novel *Anandamath* as the latter has extensive conversations on the role of conjugal life in the code of a hero which has been examined in the previous section. In the various dialogues held between Shanti, Jibananda and Satyananda, it becomes clear that Shanti does not join the Brotherhood to fight for the Motherland alone but also to enable her husband to perform his duty better. In fact, Jibananda had been hinting from the beginning itself the place Shanti occupied in his life. Comparing her to his duty to the Motherland, Jibabananda cries out:

"On the one side there's duty, wealth, pleasure, salvation, the concerns of this world, my vow and its religious rites. All this on one side—and on the other, there's you—you alone! And I can never work out which is the weightier! Shanti, you are my country. What use is it to me without you? Give me a small piece of this land, and with you I could turn it into heaven. What would I do with it otherwise?" (Chatterji 166)

Holding her to be above the country, he states his priorities and can be persuaded into a performance of his duty only by Shanti as it happens several times later in the novel. Further, it must be remembered that the novel has instances of persuasive and explanatory passages of the meaning of Vaishnavism and how violence is not contradictory to the code of a Vaishnavite. Take the below excerpt by the leader Satyananda in a dialogue with Mahendra, persuading him to initiate into the Brotherhood:

“Lord Caitanya’s Vaishnava code is not the true Vaishnava code; it’s just the half of it. Lord Caitanya’s Vishnu consists only of love. But the Lord is not only love, he is also infinitely powerful. Lord Caitanya’s Vishnu consists only of love, while the Children’s Vishnu consists of power alone. Both of us are Vaishnava, yet each is only half a Vaishnava” (Chatterji 179).

Power, for the Vaishnava, meant the power to destroy the evil in order to protect the good. For the power of Vishnu gets evoked by Satyananda only in his destruction of the “demons Keshi, Hiranyakashipu, Madhu, Kaitabha, Mura, Naraka and others in battle, as well as the ogres Ravana and so on, and the kings Kamsa, Shishupala and the rest” (Chatterji 179). Later, Satyananda also elaborates upon the nature of Power that the Children aspired for -- not merely a “temporal power. All we wish to do is uproot the Muslims completely because they are enemies of our Lord” (Chatterji 180). Why the Muslims became the target of such Power has been explained in the Introduction itself. What becomes interesting here is how the entity of Power that got propagated by Bankim in literature is rendered tangible in the socio-cultural ethos of 19th century Bengal. I argue that it is an urgent need to acquire and perfect one’s physical prowess that corresponds to the acquiring of political power as well. For , the poem that I began with not only chastises the Bengali man for his conspicuous slavishness to power but also relates

it to his slovenly lifestyle. The situation demanded an immediate correction that would jolt the Bengali man out of his parasitic comfort into active agents of political change.

The Hindu Mela

In 1867, the Tagore family began an annual nationalist gathering by the name Hindu Mela. It was begun with the aim to counter the colonial state apparatus by providing an independent space for crafting a nationalist assertion and identity. It not only was a space for exhibition of agricultural produce, animals and birds but one to promote literary and martial capabilities by awarding the best essayist, lyricist and gymnast or athlete. Thus, physical prowess was perceived as being an indispensable part of the culture the organizers sought to propagate and inculcate into the participants of the Mela. Compelled and enraged by the “colonial evaluations of what characterized India and her inhabitants” the Mela envisioned to promote nationalist feelings in the members of the educated class of Bengal (Chowdhury 13). In order for that to happen, an alternative to Western modernity was being proposed that would require a return to the indigenous culture after a careful process of sanitizing which would include not only “cleansing” the native customs of their superstitions and inebriation but also a minute attention to the physical health of the Bengali (13). And such a return to indigeneity would have to compulsorily comprise of an improvement of diet and physique.

The National Paper, the main organ of this Hindu Mela, run by Rajnarayan Basu propelled the Bengali to possess “strong, robust, healthy constitutions” in order to be identified as “*men and heroes*” (Chowdhury 21). While the lower class men were already identified as being capable of prowess, though misplaced (as they were mainly either lathials of rich zamindars or dacoits), the Bhadrakalok class were criticised of being exploitative in nature, as is evident in the above poem,

which was the major cause of their physical weakness. Thus, the body became indicative of the social class to which one belonged and a change in the physicality of the male body was believed to be a manifestation of his moral and spiritual enterprise. One witnesses a significant influence of the Graeco-Roman model of gymnasiums in the below poem that was read out in 1868 in the Hindu Mela:

“If you discipline your body even as you study,
You’d be blessed with a healthy mind in a healthy body.
Why oh why are Bengalis so weak?
Because they exploit the toils of the meek.
Every other race labours oh so gladly
Thus they enjoy so many luxuries”. (as quoted in Chowdhury 21)

It is no surprise then that schools were established by contemporary intellectuals that would instruct in physical education and advertisements ran in the National Paper of at least six Gymnastic schools in Calcutta itself.

Indira Chowdhury refers to this project as nothing but a “redemptive pedagogy of manliness” that sought to render the effeminate man masculine (21). This was done by not only thwarting the colonial binary created between the martial races of Punjab and the non-martial Bengali, for such a comparison was considered to be impossible, but also by emulating the masculinity of the colonizer. While the former got played out in annual wrestling matches between sportsmen of the two above races, the latter got betrayed by their performance of European physical exercises along with indigenous ones to a European audience of the Hindu Mela.

The only aspect in which the nationalists chose to differ from the colonial model of masculinity is by reverting to indigenous models of the same. It must be remembered that most of the 19th century nationalists including Bankim, had not denied the progress of the West. However, the terms of comparison were different as each maintained the superiority of the West in terms of material knowledge and that of the East in the spiritual. According to Ashish Nandy, as opposed to the lower classes whose manliness got demonstrated only by a showcasing of their sexual prowess, for the Upper classes, especially the Brahman, manliness comprised of “sexual distance, abstinence and self control” (Nandy 10). Here I would like to digress into an examination of the ideals of another contemporary, famous thinker, that of Swami Vivekananda’s, for his entire oeuvre of speeches and writings seem to echo the concern of the manliness and physical strength of the Bengali and would help comprehend the 19th century obsession with robustness in physique better.

Swami Vivekananda and his Project of Manliness

As has been said, there was a perceived difference between the Western ideals of manliness and that of the East. While the former was considered to be an offshoot of their material and economic progress, Vivekananda preferred to situate the latter in the “emulation of certain noble spiritual qualities” (Chowdhury 129). And while he is awed by the potential of the Westerners to work with diligence and advises the Indian youth of the same, he integrates it with an additional attribute -- that of celibacy -- which he considers to be the only timely alternative available to the Indians to regain their lost physical prowess. For, he explains the conversion of sexual energy into cosmic energy through a preservation of the semen. This, however, he delineated with the

Hindu backdrop that the body is merely a vessel for the soul; it is in contradiction to the Islamic and Christian perceptions of the body being a marker of “aggressive virility” and corruption and sin respectively (129). Hence, his turning to sanyas for an alternate model of masculinity is a call for a fusion of “the active, passionate masculinity of the Kshatriya, with the sterner and self-denying aspects of the Brahminical tradition” (127). It was this ability to renounce worldly life that was considered to be a marker of mental and spiritual strength of the Indian.

His crusade against child-marriage was also mainly carried out because it rendered the body of the participants and their offsprings weak and emaciated that he considered to be the “main obstacle” on their aim to “bodily improvement” (as quoted in Chowdhury 126). In other words, the binary of frailty/strength dominated a major portion of the discourse of masculinity in 19th Century Bengal. It is no coincidence, hence, that *Anandamath*, too, is replete with instances of the importance of renunciation. In fact, most of the characters of Bankim’s novels have inculcated the trait of renunciation and asceticism. In *Devi Chaudharani*, the protagonist, in order to become a dacoit, has to undergo a rigorous training for renunciation of luxurious food and goods for a period of five years which she manages to pass without any difficulty. Rajani, too, kindles appreciation for herself in the other characters as well as the reader by way of her prioritizing virtue and gratitude over riches. The protagonist in *Kapalkundala*, too, is unhappy with worldly comforts that the urban household has to offer and prefers her earlier life of solitude and calm to the former. What was being indicated in all these examples was an expression in “spiritual terms” of a Hindu than in “mere physical” one; the ableism of the corporeal body is just held to be in synchrony with one’s spiritual capacity where both are perceived to be in a cyclical relationship.

***Anandamath* and the Glorification of the Hindu Body**

The novel is replete with evocation of past instances of *Bahubol* (strength of arms) of the Bengali male:

“When struck by (Mahendra), our worthy sepoy spun around and fell senseless”. (Chatterji 140)

“(Bhabananda) suddenly snatched the officer’s sword from his side and with a single blow cut off his head” (143).

“There isn’t a Muslim in Bengal who can hold (Satyananda) against his will. (167)

The hymn “Vande Mataram” stokes the dormant strength of the Bengali as well and urges him into action:

“With the strength of voices fell
Seventy millions in their swell
And with sharpened swords
By twice as many hands upheld
To the Mother I bow low...
In our bodies the living force is thine!
Mother, you’re our strength of arm,
And in our hearts the loving balm.” (145)

Compare it with the description of contemporary Muslim figures in the novel:

“Their (the Britishers’) task was to collect the money, while the responsibility for life and property belonged to the evil Mir Jafar, a vile, treacherous blot on the human race. He was unable to look after himself, so how could he look after Bengal? Mir Jafar took

opium and slept, the British took in the money and issued receipts, and the Bengali wept and went to ruin” (140).

While Mir Jafar was a statesman, a similar description is found to be attached to even the Muslim commoners. Comparing them to the English, Bhabananda points out:

“An Englishman won’t flee even to save his life, whereas the Muslim will run off when he begins to sweat; he’ll slope off in search of a cool drink! Again, the English hang on, they’ll finish what they’ve begun. But the Muslim plays fast and loose. The sepoy risk their lives for money, even then they don’t get paid. And finally, it’s a question of courage. When they see a single cannonball a whole tribe of Muslims will flee, whereas a tribe of cannonballs can’t make a single Englishman run!” (148)

In the above examples, legitimacy of successful statesmanship is derived from the said ruler’s physical appearance. For, Mir Jafar’s inability to look after Bengal is attributed to his corresponding inability to tend for himself. His being a slothful opium addict is held to be responsible for the current pathetic state of Bengal. Hence, even the Muslim army is considered to be as cowardly and inactive as their head. In other words, the Muslim’s potential to rule the nation is itself being questioned as they have been proven to be physically incapable of even self-care. Hence, the constant reference to the condition of Bengal is succeeded by a cursing of the Muslim rule in India: “It wasn’t an English jail; English law didn’t exist at the time. Today we live in a time of order; at that time there was no order. Compare the times of order and disorder” (158).

With the objective of instilling fear in the psyche of the readers, Bankim wants the latter to imagine what would have been the state of law and order in the country during Muslim rule.

Opium and drugs being the order of the day, the Muslims could easily be lured by a sniff of addictive material. After releasing Mahendra and Satyananda from the above-mentioned jail, Bhabananda narrates in a mocking tone:

“I came here with some bhang mixed with datura. The Khan who was guarding the jail made the most of it and now lies sleeping on the ground! This outfit with the turban and lance belongs to him” (160).

Apart from this, there is a repeated emphasis on their physical appearances throughout the novel. For instance, a reference to the muslim as “bearded degenerates” or “bearded cooks” or “baldies” points to the conspicuous markers of difference that Bankim wanted the readers to keep in mind the foreignness of the Muslims. For later in the novel, there is a more direct reference to them not being an indigenous people:

“For a long time we’ve been wanting to smash the nest of these weaver-birds, to raze the city of these Muslim foreigners, and throw it into the river—to burn the enclosure of these swine and purify Mother Earth again! Brothers, that day has come... We worship Vishnu—who destroyed Madhu and Kaitabha, who wreaked the downfall of such powerful demons as Hiranyakashipu, Kamsa, Dantavakra, and Shishupala, by the loud whirling of whose discus even the immortal Shambhu became afraid, who’s invincible, the giver of victory in battle. It is by his power that we have infinite might of arm... Come, let’s raze that city of the foreigners to the dust! Let’s purify that pigsty by fire and throw it into the river! Let’s smash that nest of tailor-birds to bits and fling it to the winds!” (169)

However, though Bankim wanted to constantly generate the readers' hatred towards the Muslim by such untoward description of them coupled with their inadequacy as a ruling class, his description of one of the Santans in disguise of a Muslim is full of awe:

“Bhabananda then went into a private room and removed some clothes from a large chest. Suddenly his appearance changed: instead of the saffron robes he was now decked out in pleated trousers and a long, loose shirt, with a waistcoat and turbanlike headdress, and pointed shoes. The trident shape and other marks of sandalpaste from his face had gone, and his handsome features with their jet-black beard and moustache assumed a wonderful glow. Anyone seeing him now would take him for a young man of Moghul descent.” (167)

Observe the carefully crafted narration of each step of the disguise highlighting the specifics of the usual appearances of a Muslim man of office and the final approval of the author towards the Santan. The very black beard which had been an invocation of disgust and hatred assumes a wonderful glow here as its carrier is not a Muslim but a Hindu Brahmin disguised as one. For the reader will surely recall an earlier instance where Bhabananada had decapitated an English official and planned the release of an imprisoned Mahendra. Hence, the former's *Bahubol* being already established, his disguise received adequate legitimacy and probably even posed as a model for the Muslim to emulate.

Yet, the Muslims were not the only ones who got otherized in the process of rendering the Hindu body glorious. The famine in which the novel begins in medias res had famished the villagers into decrepit form and dacoity -- acute hunger driving them to consume even human

flesh. Towards the beginning of the novel itself Kalyani and her infant daughter are abducted by a band of dacoits whose form is described by Bankim as below:

“Utterly withered, gaunt, of the darkest hue, naked, something misshapenly human-like stood in the doorway. After a while the shadow seemed to lift a hand which was skin and bone, and with a long, shrivelled finger of that long, shrivelled hand made as if to summon someone. Kalyani was petrified. Then another shadow like the first -- withered, black, tall, naked -- came and stood by the latter’s side...The darkened room became as dreadful as a cremation ground at night”. (134)

Note the repeated use of words such as ‘withered’, ‘black’, ‘gaunt’, meant to evoke derision and repulsion for the dacoits. Their physical forms evoke death and ruin and make the readers suspicious of their humanness as well. Whatever seems human about their bodies are misshapen, withered, shriveled; they prevent these bodies to qualify as human. On the contrary, the first sight Kalyani has of Satyananda is described as follows: “Kalyani opened her eyes: there in the dim moonlight of the forest gloom she saw directly before her that very form of the sage—body, hair, beard and clothes shining bright!” (136)

Compared to the ghoulish figures of the bandits, that of Satyananda evoked Kalyani’s childhood memories of the Puranic sage Narada “body, hair, beard and robes shining white, vina in hand, chanting along the bright moonlit pathway of the deep blue sky: “O Hari, enemy of Mura, of Madhu and Kaitabha” (136). His super-human figure is almost a welcome sight after witnessing the horrors of subhuman acts of the dacoits.

Furthermore, there is a contrast between the order of the Bandits and that of the Santans. While the Bandits loot and kill, all rendering them demonic, they also kill their leader over a

disagreement and almost consume him as well. However, in the Brotherhood, supreme importance is given to the leader Satyananda whom they are trained to follow unquestioningly. In fact, even when Jibananda realises that Satyananda is in danger, he refuses to help release him as he had not been instructed by the latter to do so:

“Normally his first task would be to rescue the monk. But he realised that this was not what Satyananda had in mind. The first thing he had learnt from him was to follow instructions; this was even more important than saving his life. Therefore I’ll follow instructions, he thought” (160).

Such dilapidation was the order of the day as has been alluded to by the Bandits, the Muslim rule being held responsible for the same. This has been pointed out by Satyananda to Mahendra when he takes the latter through the various phases of the Mother Goddess. Referring to Goddess Kali, the Mother as she is now, Satyananda says:

“Blackened and shrouded in darkness. She has been robbed of everything; that is why she is naked. And because the whole land is a burning-ground, she is garlanded with skulls. And she’s crushing her own gracious Lord underfoot. Alas, dear Mother!” (150)

Notice that the descriptive words used for Kali echo that used for the dacoits as well. The dark aura around her and the disorder that she symbolizes can only encourage the proliferation of more disorder. It is no surprise then that the band of dacoits that Bankim speaks of are worshippers of Kali as well, for while roasting the body of their leader for consumption, they cry out: “Victory to Kali! Power to Kali! Today we’ll eat human flesh!” (135)

Hence the stark contrast between the Santans and both the Muslims and the dacoits has been made not only based on each of their ableist features but also by their physical appearance

which is believed to be a mirror of their inner attributes -- nobility, sloth, and degeneracy, respectively. The diseased body is held to be the physical manifestation of a corrupt ruler and was perceived to be the marker of administrative failure. For the novel begins not with a description of the Brotherhood directly but with detailed description of the famine-stricken village of Padacinha in 1770 where apart from desertion of ancestral property and horrid financial transactions, the outbreak of disease was held to be the most dangerous manifestation of all:

“Then disease had its day: fever, cholera, tuberculosis, smallpox. Smallpox was especially rampant. They started dying of smallpox in every house. No one dared to give water to any person or to touch anyone. No one was willing to treat or attend to anyone or to dispose of the dead. The most beautiful bodies were left to rot by themselves in mansions. As soon as smallpox entered a house, the inhabitants abandoned the sick and ran away in fear”. (132)

It was only later the order of the Santans get mentioned to provide an alternative to the painted picture of degeneracy that was the consequence of the Muslim rule.

Body as a Manifestation of One's Virtues

In *Rajani* as well, the body and its physical strength and appearance became a sure marker of one's caste and hence, one's worth. On his way to look for Rajani and restore her wealth, Amarnath stumbles upon a scene of a blind woman being harassed by a man: “One look and I could tell that the man was from a low caste, perhaps an untouchable; but he was built like a rock” (Chattopadhyay 7760). The ease with which he concludes that the attacker was indeed an untouchable is due to his appearance that Amarnath found “grotesque looking” (7756). Brute

force and unconventional looks of a man determine his class of birth; the model of masculinity that was being followed to answer the English's accusation of the Bengali being unmanly, according to Nandy, required the lower caste masculine self to be known as such. For a portrayal of the manly Bengali was based on the prerequisite of not only his capability to emulate the English masculinity but also a differentiation from brutal masculinity symbolized by the inhuman or 'demonic' conduct of the lower caste. As has been said before, the primary difference that a lower caste man was supposed to possess vis-a-vis a Kshatriya or a Brahman was control over the senses and abstinence. As a result, failure to cohere to either of these terms would automatically label the identity in question. One cannot help but wonder why Hiralal, another man of ill-repute, who had escorted Rajani till far, was portrayed to have made sexual advances towards her only verbally. Apart from the fact that he would have been defeated by her in case of a physical advance, is it possible such an activity of his is in conformity with the above binary? Despite being known for his inebriation and corrupt habits, his inability for sexual prowess enables him to not flout the above binary of a brutally strong upper caste man. It also must be remembered at this point that Rajani, who had displayed such ability with using a staff and also strength enough to break a palm wood staff is unable to defend herself when confronted with the above attacker. Her strength and resilience falls short when encountered with brutal strength that she had neither anticipated nor was capable of tackling. I argue that being, after all, an upper caste woman, her strength of arms, or her ableism (a marker of her inner virtue), only serves to shame Hiralal who displayed an absence of the same; and the brute strength of a lower caste can only be tackled by someone more able than Rajani -- Amarnath, in this case.

Body being an outward manifestation of one's inner self is not limited to Rajani only. The character of Amarnath plays an important and interesting role in this case. It is necessary to delve into his history a little before proceeding any further. Amarnath was born in high caste and possessed a great deal of material wealth. His marriage had been fixed with Labangalata, Sachindra's step-mother later, that got broken due to a well known scandal in his family. This initial despondence prevented him from seeking marriage anymore and he wandered about like a vagabond till he got to hear of Rajani's story and decided to help her in order to while his time. However, he is often haunted by a memory that had left a permanent mark on his body. He had once crept into the room of a sleeping Labangalata at night just to glance at her beauty. On being caught, Labangalata had branded his back with the word 'thief' that had left a permanent mark on both his body and conscience.

Mitchell and Snyder refer to disability and deviance as rendering abstractions tangible. Throughout the tale Amarnath is described as being cunning and wily. Take Sachindranath's first observation of him for instance:

"He was handsome, fair, a little short, neither fat nor thin, with large eyes and thin hair that lay in well-arranged waves; his clothes and habit were not overly ostentatious, but neat and clean. His manner of speech was very pleasant and his voice was very sweet. I also realized this was a very shrewd man" (7890)

Or Labangalata's caution before speaking to him: "I knew all about Amarnath. He was very cunning. A war with him meant extreme caution on all sides. I took every precaution and set to work" (8113)

What is condemned in his entry into Labangalata's room is the extreme stealth with which it was carried out; the word 'thief' that he is permanently branded with is a reminder to the readers and himself of the same. The aspect of secrecy gets implied in the reaction of other characters too in their first encounter with him, like that of Sachindranath. Apart from that, his tainted body also implies his selfishness of not being able to control his impulses. That he had not transformed entirely even after being penalized for his act is evidenced in his thought on the contemporary social turmoil that Bengal was undergoing. While introspecting about the reason for his constant dismay, he is advised by a friend to be charitable in order to achieve mental peace. For that, he speculates on the kind of act that would require his service:

"This disease (various social reforms) has one other aberration. Get the widow remarried, stop the high-caste Brahmin from being polygamous, prevent child marriages, do away with the caste system, the women who at present are tied to a pole like cows should all be let loose and left to graze on their own. I do not own any cattle and I have no interest in other people's cowsheds. I am not for abolishing the caste system, I am not yet that well educated. I am still unwilling to eat from the same plate as my sweeper, or to marry his daughter and the curses that I can willingly tolerate from the learned pandit, I am unwilling to take from my sweeper. Hence, my caste should stay untouched". (7711)

At a time when there was a furor over the above-mentioned issues and even the most conservative factions were forced to acknowledge the degradation of women in the religion, such a statement can be intended only kindle distaste for the said character even more.

Contrast with Amarnath the charitable nature of Sachindranath, a practitioner of Western medicine by profession. For instance, consider Rajani's description of him:

“I had heard that he was very proud of his education. Like many other fields in which he had acquired his skill, he had devoted himself to the science of medicine with equal dedication, *without any thoughts of gain to himself*. People even said that Sachindra Babu (the young master) was studying medicine only *to be able to treat the poor and needy free of cost*” (7308; emphasis added).

Coupled with this selfless aspect, none of the descriptions of his physique bore any note of negativity; on the contrary, he was described to be the most suitable character in the novel. Virtuous self, thus, became the reason for a perfect body without a trait of deviance. In other words, Sachindranath’s ableism was a manifestation of his selfless, charitable self and Amarnath’s corporeal blemish that of his inward corruption.

Amarnath’s transformation takes place due to two successive occasions: firstly, on being reminded of Labangalata of his bodily flaw; and, secondly, on being accepted by Rajani despite that. Labangalata’s reminder made Amarnath realize the jeopardy it might put his relationship with Rajani into, succeeding which he decided to confess his past misdeed to Rajani instead of Labangalata doing so. Further, he refuses to deceive the one person who had successfully re-kindled love in him after being rejected by Labangalata:

“The day Rajani’s fingers traverses those letters and she’ll ask me what they say, what will I say to her? Will I be able to say they mean nothing? She was blind, she’d never know. But how could I deceive the one person with whom I was planning to regain my paradise on earth? Perhaps some men can” (8385).

However, Rajani’s perception of him undergo no change even after his narration. She replies --

“Even if you have been looting, killing or pillaging all your life, you would still be a god to me. If you make room for me at your feet I am ever willing to serve you. But I am not worthy of you” (8404).

For Rajani, the greater crime than Amarnath’s was being in love with someone other than whom she was supposed to marry. As has been elaborated in the previous section, Rajani’s gratitude to Amarnath exceeded her wish to determine her own fate anymore. Unlike earlier, when she had the courage to run away to avoid an ill-fated marriage, Rajani, now had been weighed down by gratitude to Amarnath and loses her assertiveness in the process.

Labangalata, too, regrets having branded Amarnath in a moment of childish rage and asks pardon for the same as she was unaware of his virtues back then: “You are beyond compare. Please forgive me; I wasn’t aware of your virtues” (8458). If men were to indeed become the microcosmic representation of the World, as against the Domestic realm, it is only plausible that the best among them be held exemplary. Despite undergoing an eventual transformation, Amarnath is not held to be as deserving a person of Rajani’s affection as Sachindranath. The latter is unblemished of body, and hence of character, knowledgeable in Western medicine, and charitable in disposition, with not even the slightest degree of avarice in him. It is his own ableism that facilitates Rajani’s gradual cure for it his class position that had provided shelter to the hermit (who cures Rajani). For, even if it was meant on a lighter note, Rajani’s blindness is hinted at being incongruous with nuptial requirement, and simultaneously with marital harmony: “How will the auspicious first sight of bride and groom take place -- the girl is blind!” (8505)

Following which the hermit cures her congenital blindness that had failed even Sachindranath. Yet, by facilitating her cure, he paves the way to her inclusion into domestic realm as an ideal wife.

To sum up

The 19th century ethos demanded an immediate action to re-masculate the Bengali men, the Hindu Mela being an attempt in that. The figure of the Bharat Mata, instead of instilling the men with insecurity regarding their own worth, was meant to be a physical manifestation of their physical strength alone. In other words, the role of conjugality in the lives of the Bengali man would be to instill power in him to overthrow the Kalamka associated with them for being meek and effeminate. Swami Vivekananda's propagation of celibacy and renunciation, along with an emulation of the manliness of the colonial masters, were considered to be the major tools to acquire the desired ideal of masculinity. Following the Graeco-Roman model, physique was held to be nothing but the projection of one's inner self -- if virtue was to be mirrored in a healthy, untainted body, vice would be manifested in the contrary. Hence both *Anandamath* and *Rajani* are replete with examples of the vile men possessing decrepit forms- be it withered bodies of the dacoits, the slothful, bearded Muslims, the repulsive looks of a molester, or the tainted body of Amarnath. All these forms have been used in antagonism to the main characters -- the Santans and Sachindranath, in both the novels respectively, who possess the ideal bodies that is also indicative of their uncorrupt inward selves (and also of their castes). While in *Anandamath*, the unhealthy body the then Muslim leaders symbolizes their inability of self-care, disqualifying them from ruling the nation as well, in *Rajani*, the main contention of the marriage of the protagonist gets resolved as the suitor with an unblemished body would only get to marry her,

she being the epitome of virtue in the novel. Ruling out both Amarnath and Hiralal, Sachindranath emerges the rightful winner of the woman in question.

Conclusion

In both the sections, I have explored the ‘network of beliefs’ that were in operation in the 19th century Bengal that both shaped and got shaped by the ableist mentality of the social psyche. As could be seen, ableism did not exist in isolation; it depended for its articulation on the particularities of the age. As opposed to labor and market that drives the discourse of the post-industrial life, 19th Century ascribed a more militant role to gendered bodies that had to prove its worth. As can be seen from the example of the Hindu Mela, display of martial skills went hand in hand with a display of indigenous agricultural produce and handicraft. What was at stake there was the psyche of the colonized male that had been convinced of its temerity. Hence, the Mela served as both a spectacle for the colonizers to realize his mistake and also as a living proof to the colonized to recognize his dormant worth.

However, as has been said before, for Bankimchandra, physical strength was a given; what, according to him, the Bengali lacked was enterprise that would trigger him into action. Hence, evocation of past *bahubol* became only a way out for Bankimchandra to coax the Bengali male into unified action. For, according to him knowledge of his past *bahubol* would convince the present male of the importance of discipline in order to build a Hindu Rashtra. What is implied here is the transformation of physical power into political power, that is a singular characteristic of ableism. As Wolbring explains:

“(Ableism) has been used by various social groups to justify their elevated level of rights and status in relation to other groups (i.e. women were viewed as biologically fragile and emotional,

and thus incapable of bearing the responsibility of voting, owning property and retaining custody of their own children)” (Goodley 22).

We now realize why Shanti refuses to act upon her physical parity with her husband; it is precisely because of the fact that the political power that Bankimchandra alludes to, that is a function of one’s physical prowess is a domain exclusively reserved for men. However, the author, being known for the rather transgressive potential of his women characters, succeeds yet again to manipulate the same into conformity. So we find Shanti, having initially digressed into masculine adventures, returning to the domestic realm after realization of her burgeoning womanhood. Thereafter, she employs her martial knowledge and ability to further fulfill her conjugal duty alone.

Rajani’s ableism, in turn, is imbricated with her high caste status that enables her to transcend barriers of her disability and her current, mismatched profession of a flower girl. Her resilience, being initially viewed with sympathy garners even more support when the reader realizes her true origin of being a kayasta and not lower caste. Her refusal to bog down to fate gains even more strength now that we know that apart from being a blind woman, she is also from a higher caste. The reader’s initial sympathy swiftly transforms into a defence of Rajani and the act of her forceful marriage becomes even more horrifying. One is forced to wonder, therefore, what would have the denouement been like had Rajani indeed been a lower caste flower seller. Perhaps, the swiftness with which her escapade is forgiven would not have been so for it is her vulnerability as an upper caste, blind woman that shields her from any criticism from the all-knowing readers that she addresses from the start of the novel. In the end *Rajani* becomes

the story of an upper caste woman regaining her fortune and social position after a considerably hard life as a working class person. Her blindness becomes just a tool to symbolize her vulnerability as a woman who has lost her socio-economic status and hence her actual identity by a turn of fate: her eyesight is reinstated almost simultaneously with her caste identity. It highlights one crucial signposts of Ableism that views “impairment or disability... as inherently negative and should the opportunity present itself, be ameliorated, cured or indeed eliminated” (Campbell 2).

Ableism, thus, is perceived by Bankim both in terms of martial skills and also as bodily discrepancy and blemish. For the former category, he visualizes a Hindu past replete with instances of physical combats of victorious Hindus and it is this past that he wants the contemporary Bengali to keep in mind. Thus, he not only evokes ableism in the Hindu past but also the past he evokes could only be Ableist in nature, apart from also being communal. As for a blemished body, it stands as a metaphor for disorder (as the subhuman forms and acts of the dacoits in *Anandamath*), and also moral flaw (as Amarnath in *Rajani*). While the ruling out of Amarnath as a suitable groom for Rajani seems to enact a poetic justice, owing to his misdeeds, the Brotherhood’s aim to establish a Hindu rule is precisely to both clear the society of such blemishes and also prevent them from occurring further.

While my dissertation has attempted to locate the operation of Ableism in only two novels of Bankim, it has surely widened the scope for further research which would be beyond its present scope. For instance, a more detailed study of the ideologies of Swami Vivekananda would paint a better picture of the overall project of Hinduization that he had managed to

convince even the West of, the consequences of which are echoed even today in the extremely aggressive and militant masculinity displayed by caste Hindu men towards the imagined Other- be it the Muslim or the lower caste. Another area of further interest could be the exploration of the caste-based employment history of the labor force in 19th century Bengal. For the imaginary of what various ableisms constituted was based upon such a history. As pointed out before, lower caste men, unlike the upper caste babus were associated with ample physical strength, even brute, due probably to the physical-labor intensive nature of their jobs. Hence, the Bengali man that gets imagined by Bankimchandra, who he wishes to assume political power is too limited in scope, for he not only confines Bengali to mean a Hindu but also an upper caste Hindu in that the Ableism he would entail would also be enacted by a small section of the population.

Ableism and Gender: Reading Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s Rajani and Anandamath

ORIGINALITY REPORT

0%

SIMILARITY INDEX

0%

INTERNET SOURCES

0%

PUBLICATIONS

0%

STUDENT PAPERS

PRIMARY SOURCES

Exclude quotes On

Exclude bibliography On

Exclude matches < 14 words